

Introduction to Philosophy through Ethics

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Course Objectives

This course has two main aims. The first is to introduce you to the field of philosophy through recent philosophical writing on issues in ethics. Ethics encompasses all kinds of questions having to do with what is good, bad, right, wrong, obligatory, permissible, impermissible, just, unjust, virtuous, and vicious. Ethics is also concerned with fundamental questions about human nature: Do we have free will? Are we really responsible for anything we do? Are we fundamentally selfish?

In this course we will read philosophers whose work grapples with such questions. And in doing so, we will also learn about core issues in other areas of philosophy, including metaphysics (the study of the fundamental nature of reality), epistemology (the philosophical study of truth, knowledge, and justification), philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, philosophy of science, and more.

The second aim of the course is to use this work to improve your philosophical skills: your ability to recognize, reconstruct, develop, and criticize arguments.

- **Recognize:** Identify the central argument of a text, identifying the key premises and the final conclusion.
- **Reconstruct:** Restate arguments in a way that makes their content and structure clear.
- **Develop:** Define technical terms with precision and devise examples to illustrate concepts and principles.
- **Criticize:** Suggest where an argument may be weak, in need of clarification, or just plain wrong, and explain.

These skills go beyond philosophy: working on them will help you to clarify and express your own thoughts, make you a better at rationally convincing others, and protect you from bad arguments.

What to Expect in Class

Each week will consist of two phases: exegesis and symposium.

In the exegesis phase, we will work together in class to extract the central argument from the day's reading, break it down premise-by-premise, get a handle on its key terms, and discuss its philosophical background. We will only be reading one journal article, book chapter, or excerpt per week (with one exception; see the schedule of readings below), so we will be able to dig deep.

In the symposium phase, each student will submit a one-page criticism, question, or comment on the reading for the week. I will anonymize these responses, compile them, and make them available to the whole class. Before the next meeting, each student will vote (confidentially) on which response would most like to discuss. The top vote-getter each week will receive a bit of extra course credit—as long as they show up to class that day!

Assignments and Grading

Outside of symposium participation, the only assignments in this class are five short papers. So your course grade will break down like this:

- Symposium participation (response and voting): 10%
- Papers 1 and 2 (two pages): 10% each
- Papers 3 and 4 (three pages): 20% each
- Paper 5 (up to five pages): 30%

Each paper will require you to recognize, reconstruct, develop, and criticize an argument from one of the assigned readings, and offer critical comment of your own devising. You will have the option of resubmitting your first two papers, with revisions, for a higher grade.

Course Readings

<u>Week</u>	<u>Reading</u>
1	None; course overview and the three critical strategies for responding to arguments.
2	Peter Singer "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" (1972)
3	Onora O'Neill "Kantian Approaches to Some Famine Problems" (1980)
4	Judith Jarvis Thomson "The Trolley Problem" (1975)
5	Jeff McMahan "Death and the Value of Life" (1988)
6	Shelly Kagan "The Limits of Well-Being" (1992)
7	Eden Lin "How to Use the Experience Machine" (2016)
8	Elliott Sober "Psychological Egoism" (1989)
9	Derk Pereboom "Why We Have No Free Will and Can Live Without It" (2007)
10	Gideon Rosen "Skepticism About Moral Responsibility" (2004)
11	Gilbert Harman "Ethics and Observation" (1977)
12	Gilbert Harman "Moral Relativism Defended" (1975)
13	Russ Shafer-Landau "Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism" (2006)
14	Susan Wolf "Moral Saints" (1982)