

Philosophy 210: Ethical Theory
Dr. Erica L. Neely
Fall 2007

Place and Time: 302 Lincoln Hall, MWF 1-1:50
Email address: elneely@uiuc.edu
Office Location and Hours: 105 I Gregory Hall; MW 12-12:45 p.m. and by appointment.
See note about office at end of syllabus
Office Phone: 333-4677
Text: *Ethical Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Fifth Edition),
ed. Louis P. Pojman

This class fulfills a general education requirement in historical and philosophical perspectives.

Aims and Objectives

This course examines problems in ethical theory, with an eye to understanding what theoretical issues a reasonable set of moral principles must address. We do not spend time studying particular ethical theories (e.g., utilitarianism or virtue theory), nor do we focus on problems in applied ethics (such as abortion or the death penalty), although clearly any solutions to these problems must accommodate our basic ethical intuitions. An introductory ethics course, such as Philosophy 105, may be useful but is not required.

There are three parts to this course. The first unit addresses questions of relativism and skepticism – are there universally valid moral principles, or is morality always relative to a culture or individual? What is the relation between facts and values; how do we move from a factual description of a situation to saying what we should do in that situation? Are there such things as moral facts and, if so, what are they? Do we have reason to believe that any of our moral theories and judgments are true?

The second unit focuses on contractarianism and egoism – how do moral obligations arise? Do we only have obligations if we have entered into an explicit agreement with others? Morality sometimes seems to require us to act against our own self-interest – why would I do that? Are moral rules a natural product – or precondition – of society? Even if we concede that it is beneficial for people in general to be moral, why should *I* be moral, rather than simply pretending to be moral and profiting from others who abide by the rules?

The third unit considers the relationship between ethics and religion and between ethics and evolutionary theory; it also touches upon questions of free will. Hence we may ask whether morality depends on religion and whether religious ethics are essentially different from secular ethics. Do moral standards depend on God for their validity? Or are moral standards autonomous – would even God be subject to them? Can secular ethics provide sufficient reason for living a moral life? Are ethical standards simply an evolutionary trait, i.e., is what we view as ethical simply those traits that were naturally selected for? Can we reduce ethical questions to biological questions? Or does ethics have an independence which evolutionary ethicists fail to see? If our activities are determined by genetics or evolution – or God – how can we be held responsible for our actions? Does moral responsibility require free will?

Grading and Homework

Three take-home exams:	25% each
Homework:	10% total
Participation:	15%

Exams – Exams are take-home essay exams, in which you will have some choice of what questions you want to answer. Note that you are not permitted to work with or consult other people while completing them; they must be entirely your own work. Plagiarism will not be tolerated, so be certain to credit any sources that you use. With the exception of the final, all exams are due at the **beginning** of class on the day scheduled.

Homework – You will notice that there are three homework assignments marked on your schedule, labeled TT1-TT3; these are the Three Things assignments and together form the homework portion of your grade. Homework is due at the **beginning** of class. Late assignments will not be accepted except in extraordinary circumstances; if you know that you will be absent on a day homework is due, please make arrangements to have a classmate hand it in or leave it in my mailbox in 105 Gregory Hall. I will only accept homework via email if the answers are contained within the text of the message; **please do not send me any attachments.**

The TTs are essentially mini-response papers about the reading; full guidelines are given on the next page. They are graded check-plus, check, check-minus; this works out roughly to A+, B+, C+. Please note that a check-minus is still much better than receiving a zero for not doing the assignment, so I recommend completing all the TTs, even if you are confused by the readings. (In fact, that's part of the purpose of the TTs, as you'll see from the guidelines.)

A further explanation of the homework assignments is given on the next page; read it carefully.

Participation – An important part of any philosophy course is discussion. While attendance is not mandatory, it is hard to participate if you are not there. Similarly, attendance alone is not sufficient – you need to contribute to the class discussions. **Note that if you are shy about speaking in whole-class discussions you may share your thoughts with me through email, after class, or on the on-line discussion board.**

Other info – I grade on the plus/minus scale, but please note that it is not possible to receive an A in this class without completing the homework assignments and participating in discussions; taking the exams is not sufficient.

The course as a whole is not curved, but individual assignments will be – that means if I'm totally incomprehensible on a subject to everyone, you won't suffer. (Of course, it doesn't help if I'm only incomprehensible to you...) This is the grade scale for the class:

100-98	97-94	93-91	90-88	87-84	83-81	80-78	77-74	73-71	70-68	67-64	63-61	60-0
A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F

If something extraordinary prevents you from turning an assignment in on time, please contact me as soon as possible; I will make reasonable accommodations.

The Three Things Assignments

This course is fairly reading-intensive and you need to stay on top of it in order to do well. Furthermore, in order to understand philosophy you have to read actively – you can't just skim through it. Instead, you have to think about what the author is saying and question whether it is correct. Although we will do a certain amount of this, both in lecture and in the discussion sections, you still will need to do some of it on your own. This is where the Three Things assignments come in.

If you look at how the assignments are spread out, you'll see that they tend to occur as we have completed a large chunk of reading (generally a chapter of the book). Your job in these assignments is to write three things about the reading to show me what your thoughts on it are. Of course, it's not quite that simple – there are some guidelines you need to follow. So what are they?

1. You need to provide three things on the readings we have been covering – i.e., the readings since the previous TT – each about a page (or a couple of very long paragraphs); this should end up around 800-900 words total, although don't worry overly much about it.
2. You cannot write all of them on the same article; you must cover at least two of the readings, although you are encouraged to look at multiple readings or themes which span several readings.
3. These need to be your own work – feel free to talk your thoughts over with your classmates, but you each need to write your own (different) homework reflections.
4. These are graded check-minus, check, check-plus. (This works out roughly to A+, B+, C+.) So you shouldn't write primarily with grades in mind; that's not what I'm looking for. Whether I agree with what you say doesn't matter; what matters is whether you're seriously thinking about the reading.
5. So, more specifically, what *am* I looking for?
 - *Your* thoughts. **I don't need you to tell me what the book says.** I've already read it. I want *your* reaction.
 - Your *arguments* – but they have to be actual arguments. Don't just tell me “Oh this article sucks” or “This author is completely wrong.” **Tell me *why* it sucks or is wrong.**
 - **Don't be afraid to admit you're confused.** You don't have to have all the answers – it's perfectly acceptable to talk about some puzzle you're having trying to understand the reading. Do you think the author contradicts herself? Are you not sure how this relates to something else we've talked about? Write it down! Just make sure it's clear that you're thinking about it, not that you got confused and gave up.
 - **Feel free to tie what you're reading to earlier articles or outside information.** Do you think the author's argument implies something abhorrent (for instance, that killing people is fine)? Tell me about it! Does it tie into something else you're studying (in history, political science, or whatever)? Tell me about it! This is your chance to let me know what you're thinking.
 - I will not be grading you on your writing style, but you should **make sure that your homework is legible**, coherent (I need to be able to follow your arguments), and at least fairly grammatical.

Day-by-Day Reading and Homework Assignments

August

- W 8/22 Introduction
F 8/24 Preface: xi-xii
I 1: Socratic Morality: Crito (Plato): 1-14

Unit One: What are Moral Standards, Anyway?

- M 8/27 II 1: Custom is King (Herodotus): 15-20
II 2: Objectivism: Natural Law (Thomas Aquinas): 20-33
W 8/29 No new readings
F 8/31 II 3: A Defense of Ethical Relativism (Ruth Benedict): 33-38
II 4: A Critique of Ethical Relativism (Louis Pojman): 38-51

September

- M 9/3 **No Class**
W 9/5 II 5: Moral Relativism Defended (Gilbert Harman): 52-61
F 9/7 II 6: The Objective Status of Human Rights (Alan Gewirth): 62-74
II 7: A Critique of Gewirth and the Notion of Rights (Alisdair MacIntyre): 75-78
M 9/10 No new readings
TT1 Due
W 9/12 X Introduction: 495-497
X 3: Moral Nihilism (Gilbert Harman): 517-526
F 9/14 X 4: Moral Explanations (Nicholas Sturgeon): 526-537
M 9/17 No new readings
W 9/19 X 5: Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Bernard Williams): 538-549
F 9/21 X 6: Two Forms of Ethical Skepticism (Bruce Russell): 549-561
M 9/24 X 7: A Defense of Moral Realism (Michael Smith): 562-572
W 9/26 No new readings
Receive First Exam

Unit Two: Why Should I Be Moral?

- F 9/28 VII 1: The Leviathan (Thomas Hobbes): 319-335

October

- M 10/1 No new readings
W 10/3 VII 2: Why Contractarianism? (David Gauthier): 336-345
VII 3: Liberal Contractualism: Justice as Fairness (John Rawls): 346-358
First Exam Due
F 10/5 No new readings
M 10/8 VII 4: Contractualism and Utilitarianism (T. M. Scanlon): 358-369
W 10/10 No new readings

- F 10/12 III 1: Why Be Moral? (Plato): 79-88
 III 2: On the Socratic Dilemma (Richard Taylor): 88-93
 M 10/15 No new readings
 W 10/17 III 3: Morality and Advantage (David Gauthier): 93-100
 III 4: A Reconciliation Project (Gregory Kavka): 101-113
TT2 Due
 F 10/19 No new readings
 M 10/22 III 5: Later Selves and Moral Principles (Derek Parfit): 113-126
 W 10/24 III 6: Persons, Character, and Morality (Bernard Williams): 127-137
 F 10/26 **No Class**
 M 10/29 **No Class**
 W 10/31 No new readings
Receive Second Exam

Unit Three: Whence Morality? Of God, Darwin, and Free Will

November

- F 11/2 XI 1: Morality and Religion (Plato): 575-579
 XI 2: God and Immortality as Necessary Postulates of Morality (Immanuel Kant): 580-584
 M 11/5 XI 3: Religion and the Queerness of Morality (George Mavrodes): 584-592
 W 11/7 XI 4: Ethics Without God (Kai Nielsen): 592-597
Second Exam Due
 F 11/9 XII A.1: Ethics and the Descent of Man (Charles Darwin): 599-615
 M 11/12 No new readings
 W 11/14 XII A.2: Sociobiology and Ethics (E.O. Wilson): 615-618
 XII A.3: Evolution and Ethics: The Sociobiological Approach (Michael Ruse): 618-633
TT3 Due
 F 11/16 No new readings
 M 11/19 **No Class – Thanksgiving Break**
 W 11/21 **No Class – Thanksgiving Break**
 F 11/23 **No Class – Thanksgiving Break**
 M 11/26 XII A.4: Prospects for an Evolutionary Ethics (Elliot Sober): 634-645
 XII A.5: The Law of the Jungle: Evolution and Morality (J.L. Mackie): 645-652
 W 11/28 No new readings
 F 11/30 XII B.1: The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility (Galen Strawson): 654-663

December

- M 12/3 XII B.2: Free Will, Determinism, and Moral Responsibility (Louis Pojman): 663-671
 W 12/5 XII B.3: Libertarianism: Defense of Free Will (Richard Taylor): 671-678
 F 12/7 No new readings
Receive Third Exam
 F 12/14 **Third Exam Due, 4 p.m.**

Important Dates

M	9/3	No Class
M	9/10	TT1 Due
M	9/24	Receive First Exam
M	10/1	First Exam Due
M	10/15	TT2 Due
F	10/26	No Class
M	10/29	No Class
W	10/31	Receive Second Exam
W	11/7	Second Exam Due
W	11/14	TT3 Due
M	11/19	No Class – Thanksgiving Break
W	11/21	No Class – Thanksgiving Break
F	11/23	No Class – Thanksgiving Break
F	12/7	Receive Third Exam
F	12/14	Third Exam Due, 4 p.m.

Important Notes

- My office is under construction and I am currently in a temporary office (105 I). It is somewhat complicated to reach, since you need to enter either through the Philosophy Department main office (105) or through the Departmental lounge (107) and wend your way through the chaos to find me. **Unfortunately, the main office closes for lunch from 12-1, which means if you are coming to office hours you must enter through 107.**
- I am rarely in my office outside of office hours. You are better off trying to reach me by email than by phone.
- I am happy to make appointments to see people if they are unable to make my office hours. However, if you have to miss an appointment, please let me know in advance if possible. (Even if you call my office at the last minute, it is better than nothing.)
- The web page for the course can accessed at: **<https://compass.uiuc.edu/webct/logon/55583462171>**. (You can also log in through the Illinois Compass/Blackboard link on the CITES web page.)
- **Please bring your textbook to class, as you may wish to reference the articles we are discussing.**