

# Philosophy 010-130: Introduction to Ethics



Georgetown University

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Office Hours: By appointment via Zoom.

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

We're all familiar with giving reasons to others in order to justify our actions - why did you pick this major? Why didn't show up at our dinner last night? Why are you working on X instead of Y right now? We also tend to have a fine nose for detecting when something wrong has been done to us personally - they had no business treating me that way; my professor's grading is way too strict; how dare that officer give me a parking ticket when I've been here less than two hours! Many of us, however, are far less comfortable bringing these two things together and giving reasons to justify moral action in general. What are the criteria for deciding what is right and what is wrong? How does one decide what is right for themselves, for others, or for an entire community? What are our moral obligations with regard to one another? What makes a good life and what are the limits we

ought to recognize in our individual pursuit of the good life? Why should one be moral?

This class will be a substantive introduction to the philosophical study of ethics. In thinking about morality, perhaps you're one of those who's satisfied simply going with your gut. If so, this class will demand that you explain *why* you think it's okay to just go with your gut—and what should we do when your gut disagrees with other people's gut, especially when the stakes are existential? That is, rather than each of us simply going with our gut feelings, we're going to think about the role that reason and reflection play in figuring out what morality is and why we ought to care about morality.

In addition to reading and arguing over classic texts (Aristotle, Kant, and Mill, together with brief examinations of some contemporary extensions of their theories), we'll take Georgetown's campus as our case study. As a class we will look closely at Georgetown's current response to its slave-trading past, our response to climate change, issues of mental health and flourishing on campus, and student-led solidarity movements. Individually, you'll analyze the moral variables involved and ultimately select a contemporary Georgetown (or specific to your current locale) issue as the focus of your final project.

## **COURSE GOALS**

1. Come to see and wax eloquent on the fact that **you are always already doing philosophy** and that philosophical and ethical claims are embedded in all forms of media that you consume
2. **Read and argue:**
  1. Recognize and be able to differentiate rational argumentation from the "convince by any means available" style arguments on the street;
  2. Demonstrate your ability to analyze key positions and rhetorical strategies, as well as explicate arguments in the academic and non-academic texts we read;
  3. Demonstrate your ability to abstract, fill in, and explicate the arguments and philosophical positions that underlie current movements and debates on campus;
  4. Create your own arguments and candidly evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.
3. **Learn to a sufficient degree some of the major animating questions, themes, and frameworks that moral philosophers have been exploring for millennia** in such a way that you can:
  1. Recognize those same questions, themes, and frameworks in your everyday life and in the pressing public debates on campus;

2. Make use of them to help you intellectually and pragmatically navigate your life here as a student; and
3. Make use of them to participate in a moral dialogue several millennia old.
4. **Empathize with others.** Specifically,
  1. Reflect on your own positionality and how this positionality grants you certain privileges and carries certain constraints;
  2. Recognize your interdependence with others and identify ways in which your actions impact (positively and negatively) others, both locally and globally;
  3. Come to either give a damn or give more of a damn, and strive to be less selfish.
5. **Reflect seriously on:**
  1. **What it means to be authentic and to flourish as a Georgetown university student;**
  2. The concrete practices in which you're currently engaged in order to promote your overall well-being, both in your individual life and as a member of our Georgetown community; and
  3. On changes you would like to make in order to further promote your own and our community's flourishing.

## TEXTS

*Required:*

- James Rachels: *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* **edition 5 or later**
- Charles Taylor: *The Ethics of Authenticity*
- Doyle & Zakrajsek: *The New Science of Learning: How to Learn in Harmony with Your Brain*
- Immanuel Kant: *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals* (internet options available; Hackett Edition recommended)
- Aristotle: *Nichomachean Ethics* (internet options available; Martin Ostwald translation recommended)

Other texts will be made available in the course files. If the total price for purchasing these items is genuinely beyond your ability to pay, please contact me.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

*Note: In addition to what's below, additional instructions and guiding rubrics are available in Canvas in each course module.*

Our course goals privilege two basic themes that show up in the types of assignments required in this class: first, those that keep you engaged, wrestling at the intersection of course themes and your life; and second,

develop the skills needed to read and write philosophy. In designing the assignments for this course, I've tried to be dynamic, intermingling these two themes and multiple course goals in each assignment. That said, many of the assignments lean more heavily in one or the other direction, and a correlative grading method accrues—certain assignments receive participation points for completion, while the various written papers will be evaluated on the standard A-F scale.

### ***Participation Assignments:***

*Practice Quizzes:* Learning to read analytically (or get better at it) is one of the main goals of this course, and one of the main things that society expects of a college graduate. We will work together through the readings in a variety of means (including online lecture) and with each writing assignment. To do serious philosophical work with any text requires not simply re-reading the text, but learning to carve up the text, identifying its structure and extracting its key concepts and arguments. I find that most students are genuinely interested in the topics we discuss and enjoy doing the readings. However, I also find that most students are human and afflicted with Georgetown's culture of over-busy. Consequently, in an effort to assist students get the most out of their online environment, I'm posting timed practice quizzes for most of the readings in each module. They will be short, straightforward, ungraded, and contain questions designed to help you remember key themes from the readings.

*Summaries:* Similar to the reading quizzes, these assignments are meant to help you read analytically and begin digesting the course material, as well as lead to great retention. These are also intended to help prepare you for the written papers. In addition to summarizing in one paragraph the key themes from the paper (including your own articulation of the reading's main thesis), you will list in bullet-point fashion at least two moral insights that you gained from the reading—insights that you find relevant to your own life. You will write a summary on readings of your choice during each of the Modules 2-6. In Module 1 the summary assignment is slightly different; you will write three summary assignments answering three specific questions. (Note: I'm explicitly assuming that each reading for this course contains multiple moral insights that will be personally relevant to you, should you read and reflect on your life carefully; and I look forward to you proving my assumption correct!)

*Engagement points:* You can earn as many as two engagement points in each of the course modules by keeping an ethics journal, writing a reflection on a recommended film, or writing a reflection on an activist/movement meeting or rally that you attend. While I perhaps consider it to be our most important course goal, it's very difficult to design assignments that help



students empathize with others. What can I have you do that will reliably lead you to give (more of) a damn? To be candid, I don't know. But I hope that these engagement points, together with the reflection papers, will at least create a clearing wherein empathy can occur and be developed.

*Comments:* You will comment on the papers of two of your peers for each of the Reading Analyses, Synthesis/Evaluation, and Philosophical Argument papers.

*Term Paper Outline:* You will draft and hand in an outline of your term paper prior to writing the paper itself.

### ***Written Papers:***

*Reflection papers:* As noted in the course goals, philosophy in general and ethics in particular permeate your life. It's a major element in nearly every class you take at Georgetown, a constant companion in all of your relationships, and accrues to every decision of any consequence that you make. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately), life doesn't allow us to carefully reflect on and analyze the moral import of everything we do. Sometimes, however, we have no choice but to do so. This course is not designed to convert you to a given ethical theory. It is, however, designed to help you better understand, analyze, and evaluate the ethical waters in which you cannot help but swim. One serious benefit is that this class will afford you the opportunity to think rigorously about ethics in your own personal (and public) life. To help facilitate this, you are going to write six short reflection papers on the following prompts:

- Discuss a moral choice you have recently made.
- Are you authentic?
- What does Georgetown's involvement in slavery mean for you?
- In what ways are you personally obligated with regard to climate change?
- Discuss a time when someone not "in your community" had empathy for you as an individual or for your community.
- Discuss an intersection between a course topic of your choice and some element of your life.

*Reading Analyses:* You will write two of these papers, articulating an argument from a course reading.

*Synthesis/Evaluation:* You will make use of the "Reconciliation" reading to analyze and evaluate the Working Group Report on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation. I intend for this to help you when writing the term paper, wherein you will use a reading of your choice in order to analyze and evaluate something happening now at Georgetown or in the location where you presently reside.

*Philosophical Argument:* This will be your opportunity to develop and articulate your own ethical argument, with clear premises leading to a conclusion.

*Term Paper:* This paper will put together each of the other analytical papers from the term. You will explicate moral arguments or frameworks from the readings, synthesize these with a current event, and then leverage that explication and synthesis to write your own argument on the subject. While you are free to make your term paper an entirely original product, I encourage you to make use of the materials you've created in earlier papers to the degree that it's helpful. The term paper will be oriented around something happening now at Georgetown or in the location where you presently reside.

### ***Grade Breakdown:***

29% Participation Assignments:

- Summaries = 10 points (1 pt per summary)
- Engagement points = 12 (0.5 pts per journal entry; 2 points per movie reflection; 2 points per meeting/rally reflection)
- Comments on peers' papers = 5 points (.5 pt per comment)
- Term paper outline = 2 points

71% Written Papers:

- Reflection Papers = 24 points (4 pts per paper)
- Reading Analyses = 8 points (4 pts per paper)
- Synthesis/Evaluation = 8 points
- Philosophical Argument = 10 points
- Term Paper = 21 points

*Grade scale:*

95.0-100 A

90.0-94.9 A-

86.7-89.9 B+

83.3-86.6 B

80.0-83.2 B-

76.7-79.9 C+

73.3-76.6 C

70.0-73.2 C-  
66.7-69.9 D+  
63.3-66.6 D  
60.0-63.2 D-  
Below 60.0 F

### **NOTE ON PARTICIPATION:**

Studies show that participation and personal engagement is critical both to your ability to do well in the class and also to enjoy our time together. This is particularly important to keep in mind given that this is an online and entirely asynchronous course (we will never meet all together at the same time). Consequently, I recommend two strategies:

1. Designate an ethics friend. Literally. This will work best with someone with whom you already talk on a regular basis, and commit them to checking in with you every few days (at least three times a week), to find out how things are going in the ethics class. You can discuss the readings, lectures, assignments, and any of the course themes that you see cropping up in life.
2. Stay on top of things. In the past, the students who have been most successful in my online classes are those who have treated it like a job, with regularly scheduled work hours and a plan for completing each module and each module's assignments. This level of rigidity won't be possible for some of you (either because of the erratic nature of your schedule or your personality). But please keep in mind that this is a full semester course, demanding the same amount of time as taking a normal, face-to-face class at Georgetown.

Also, given that this is an ethics class, we will explore topics that are by their nature controversial and concerning where passions can run high—some of these topics might be central to your own or your peers' sense of identity. When commenting on your peers' writing or interacting during the modules, it is critical that you work to always engage others with genuine respect and charity. I consider this to be a moral obligation—but it is also necessary for constructive, rational dialogue.

### **Note on Academic Integrity:**

I care a great deal about increasing your intellectual capacities and general knowledge base and am concerned overall with helping you to flourish as a

human being. That means I also care very much about your academic integrity and very little about how the grade you receive in this one class impacts your future. Because I care about you and your flourishing, I won't hesitate to fail students caught plagiarizing on their papers and will not tolerate dishonesty in any form. I highly encourage students to review **Error! Hyperlink reference not valid.** (found on an external website), and want you to note that plagiarism can be unintentional. We will discuss this more in class. If you have any questions please visit with me or the Writing Center.

### **Campus Resources:**

**Academic Resource Center:** Students seeking tutoring, study tips, helps with writing, concerns over what constitutes plagiarism, or students requiring services on account of disabilities or athletic or other sponsored activity accommodation should visit ARC. In particular, all students might benefit from the academic skills workshops offered (schedule available on-line). I'm a believer in Universal Design in order to make this classroom as accessible as possible to all without intentionally granting advantage to any one group. That said, I'm also human, finite in my understanding of individual needs, and consequently I struggle to do so effectively. If you have ideas for improvement please do not hesitate to share them with myself or the TA.

**Counseling and Psychiatric Services:** Your mental health is just as real and important as your physical health. And just as in the normal course of things several of you will likely benefit from our medical services this semester, so also some of you will likely benefit from our psychiatric services. There is a wide range of services offered, from group to individual care, including types of care for those who cannot afford normal counseling services. Please take advantage of these as needed to maintain your optimal health.

**Title IX:** Rape and other forms of sexual misconduct are tragically common in our society. Please note that there are services available for students who have been exploited. Also, please note that while I am always happy to speak with students, even about topics as difficult as these, I am also required by federal law to report any indication I receive of sexual misconduct to Georgetown's Title IX coordinator. If you are looking for confidential guidance I recommend contacting Jen Schweer (Associate Director, Health Education Services, Sexual Assault Response and Prevention) at jls242@georgetown.edu or 202.687.0323.

**Your Dean:** Students tend to forget that the main function of their dean is to ensure the success and well-being of university students. They are completely informed not only about the resources on campus, but also the



policies and ways in which the university can assist students struggling in any way.

Many other issues can and do arise for students, and there are also other resources that the university provides. **For additional services related to health and wellbeing of any kind on campus, please see “GU Safety Net Contacts” under “Documents” in the course files.**

## COURSE OVERVIEW

Unit	Readings	Formal Assignments
<b>I:</b> <b>Normative Ethics</b> (June 5-16)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think: Introduction</li> <li>• Rachels: What is Morality?</li> <li>• <i>Recommended: Perry, et al: Reading Philosophically</i></li> <li>• Mill: Utilitarianism Chapter 2</li> <li>• Rachels: “The Utilitarian Approach”</li> <li>• Rachels: “The Debate Over Utilitarianism</li> <li>• Kant: First Section; 406-4-9; 421; 427-432; 446-447</li> <li>• <i>Recommended: Kant: 413-4-35 and Supplement</i></li> <li>• Rachels: “Are There Absolute Moral Rules?”</li> <li>• Rachels: “Kant and Respect for Persons”</li> <li>• Aristotle: Book I sec. 1-4, 7, 10; Book II sec. 1-6; Book III sec. 5</li> <li>• Hursthouse: Intro &amp; Chapter 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summary: How do I figure out what to do? Posts x3</li> <li>• Reading Quiz</li> <li>• Two engagement points (recommended film: Les Mis)</li> <li>• Reflection 1: A moral choice</li> <li>• Reading analysis</li> </ul>
<b>II:</b> <b>Relativism &amp; Authenticity</b> (June 17-25)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benedict: A Defense of Moral Relativism</li> <li>• Midgley: Trying Out One’s New Sword</li> <li>• Rachels: The Challenge of Cultural Relativism</li> <li>• Rachels: Subjectivism in Ethics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summary x2</li> <li>• Reading Quiz</li> <li>• Two engagement points (recommended film: While We’re Young OR Captain Fantastic)</li> <li>• Reflection 2: Are you authentic?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Rachels: Ethical Egoism</li> <li>· Taylor: Chapters 1-3</li> <li>· Taylor: Chapters 4-6</li> <li>· Taylor: Chapter 10</li> <li>· <i>Recommended: Taylor 7-9</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Reading analysis</li> </ul>
<b>III:</b> <b>Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation</b> (June 26-July 2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· SEP: Reconciliation</li> <li>· Working Group Report: Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation</li> <li>· Perception Institute: Science of Equality Vol. 1</li> <li>· Bowen &amp; Bok: The Meaning of "Merit"</li> <li>· Thernstroms: Does Your "Merit" Depend Upon Your Race?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Summary</li> <li>· Reading Quiz</li> <li>· Two engagement points</li> <li>· Recommended: Dear White People</li> <li>· Reflection 3: What does GU's slavery mean for you?</li> <li>· Synthesis &amp; Evaluation of WGR on SM&amp;R</li> </ul>
<b>IV:</b> <b>Climate Change</b> (July 3-9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Gardiner: A Perfect Moral Storm, Intro &amp; Ch 1 (pgs 3-48)</li> <li>· Sinnot-Armstrong: It's Not My Fault</li> <li>· Hourdequin: Climate, Collective Action, and Individual Ethical Obligations</li> <li>· Jamieson: When Utilitarians Should Be Virtue Ethicists</li> <li>· Skim Pope Francis: "On Care for Our Common Home"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Summary</li> <li>· Reading Quiz</li> <li>· Two engagement points (recommended film: The Island President)</li> <li>· Reflection 4: In what ways are you personally obligated with regard to CC?</li> <li>· Note: no analytical paper</li> </ul>
<b>V:</b> <b>Responsibility &amp; Solidarity</b> (July 10-17)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Singer: Rich and Poor</li> <li>· Cassidy: Women Shopping and Women Sweatshopping</li> <li>· Young: Responsibility for Justice Ch 4</li> <li>· Young: Responsibility for Justice Ch 5</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Summary</li> <li>· Reading Quiz</li> <li>· Two engagement points (recommended film: Cesar Chavez)</li> <li>· Reflection 5: Another's empathy for you</li> <li>· Philosophical argument</li> </ul>
<b>VI:</b> <b>Capabilities &amp; Flourishing</b> (July 18-24)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Doyle &amp; Zakrajsek: <i>The New Science of Learning</i></li> <li>· Nussbaum: <i>The Capabilities Approach</i> Chapters 1-2</li> <li>· Powers &amp; Faden: <i>Social Justice Ch</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Summary</li> <li>· Reading Quiz</li> <li>· Two engagement points (recommended film: The Queen of Katwe)</li> </ul>

	2 (Justice and Well-Being) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhancement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflection 6: Topic of your choice</li> <li>Term paper outline</li> </ul>
<b>VII:</b> <b>Conclusions: (Y)Our</b> <b>Life at Georgetown</b> (July 25-28)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Nussbaum: Education for Citizenship in an Era of Global Connection</li> <li>Walker: Hope's Value</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summary</li> <li>Reading Quiz</li> <li>Term paper</li> </ul>