

INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS

SUMMER 2019 ♦ PHIL 010-10 ♦ MTWR 10:45AM-12:45PM ♦ WHITE-GRAVENOR 204

INSTRUCTOR: Michael Randall Barnes ♦ EMAIL: mrb238@georgetown.edu

OFFICE HOURS: location: New North 214 – time: TBD (and by appointment)

**NOTE: SYLLABUS SUBJECT TO CHANGE. CHECK BLACKBOARD REGULARLY FOR UPDATES. **

COURSE OVERVIEW

Philosophy, at its best, is a tool for helping us better understand and solve certain kinds of problems that emerge in concrete social and political contexts. As philosopher Elizabeth Anderson writes, the best philosophical reflection begins by considering any given problem “as it emerges in practice, in the experiences of the people who confront it.” To that end, this course serves as an introduction to a variety of philosophical topics in ethics, always with an eye to how these relate to the lived experience of real people.

Throughout, we will be reading three short books that explore how philosophical reflection can be helpful in addressing both personal and societal conflicts. These are John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* (1859), Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *Cosmopolitanism* (2006), and Lisa Tessman’s *When Doing the Right Thing is Impossible* (2017). These and supplemental texts will serve as opportunities to explore a variety of philosophical questions, both practical and theoretical. Some of these include: What is the nature of morality? How might we resolve disagreement across culture, within a country, and in ourselves? What is knowledge? How do we justify our beliefs and actions to others, as well as ourselves? What’s the relationship between the individual and society, emotion and rationality? When does speech constitute action? and more.

We’ll find that philosophical reflection and analysis is not only helpful for achieving a sharper understanding of the values at play in these various issues, but also that considering a concrete problem aids in the examination of theoretical questions.

In the course of investigating these questions, we’ll draw on work in moral philosophy, feminist philosophy, epistemology, and philosophy of language. We’ll also draw from a diverse set of materials, from traditional philosophical articles, to opinion pieces, documentaries, short films, and more.

COURSE GOALS

The course has several goals, three of the most important are:

- (1) To introduce you to important texts and ideas in the broad fields of ethics and philosophy.
- (2) To cultivate your own thinking about central problems in ethics, especially as they bear on issues that you may encounter in your own life and the lives of those around you.
- (3) To improve your analytical reading and writing skills, which for philosophy involves: (a) recognizing the parts of arguments; (b) understanding how these parts work together; (c) critiquing the reasoning, consistency, or validity of an argument, while remaining charitable.

DESCRIPTION OF ASSIGNMENTS:

ACTIVE CLASS PARTICIPATION: You are expected to participate regularly and thoughtfully. You should demonstrate that you have read the required material, and you should also engage with your classmates—active listening is an important component of this. Meetings with me outside of class may supplement, though not replace, participation in class discussions. **Participation, both its quantity and quality, is worth 15%.**

READING RESPONSES: To facilitate class discussion, you are expected to come to class most days with a **written reading response**. These will usually be in response to a specific prompt I provide in advance, but they should always be specific to at least one of the texts assigned for the day. Satisfactory completion of these reading responses **constitute 15% of your final grade.**

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS: You are required to write **two short papers** (4-6 pages) based on the prompt(s) that I provide. The prompt can be on any readings that we have done up to that point. The point of these papers is to help you build your philosophical writing skills. You must submit to SafeAssign. **Paper 1 is worth 20% of your final grade, and Paper 2 is worth 25%.**

REFLECTION PAPERS: Twice during the course, you will be asked to write an informal paper (1-2 pages) that connects an issue raised in this course to your life outside this classroom. **The first is worth 10% of your grade; the second 15%.**

SUMMARY OF ASSIGNMENTS:

- **Active Class Participation – 15%**
- **Short Reading Responses – 15%**
- **Paper 1 – 20%**
- **Paper 2 – 25%**
- **Reflection Paper 1 – 10%**
- **Reflection Paper 2 – 15%**

READINGS AND OTHER CLASS MATERIALS:

Lisa Tessman, *When Doing the Right Thing is Impossible*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, W.W. Norton & Co., 2006

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, John W. Parker and Son, West Strand, 1859. (Also available online)

All other readings and other materials will be available on Blackboard (<http://campus.georgetown.edu>).

COURSE POLICIES:

ACADEMIC HONESTY: When it comes time to write your papers, you must use the skills you have developed by thinking through the relevant issues on your own. You have all signed the **Georgetown University Honor pledge** and have agreed to be honest in your academic endeavors. I expect you to be familiar with both the letter and the spirit of the pledge. **The Honor Council** adjudicates cases of suspected academic dishonesty. I will submit any and all suspected cases of academic dishonesty to the Honor Council. Confirmed academic dishonesty will result in automatic failure of the assignment and/or course.

ATTENDANCE: Students are permitted only one “free passes” where they can miss class without excuse. Any unexcused absences after that bring your participation grade down 1/3 a letter grade. *Students who have more than five unexcused absences cannot pass the course.*

ACADEMIC RESOURCE CENTER AND ADA ACCOMMODATIONS: If you have a disability or believe you might and would like to receive accommodations in this course, then you should contact the Academic Resource Center (arc@georgetown.edu) to register as a student with a disability or for an evaluation referral. You should do this at the beginning of the term. The Academic Resource Center is the campus office responsible for reviewing documentation provided by students with disabilities and for determining reasonable accommodation in accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and University policies.

If you find over the course of the term that additional accommodations are necessary, let me know so we can work together to make this course a beneficial experience. In general, students are encouraged to contact the instructor with suggestions, requests, or comments about how to best support their learning styles or needs.

TITLE IX: Please note: while I am available to discuss both academic and personal matters with students, if I am made aware of discrimination, harassment, or other crimes occurring at or in relation to Georgetown University, I am bound by Title IX’s mandatory reporting rules. Under Title IX representatives of the University are required to report violations within 24 hours of being made aware of the problem. Georgetown’s confidential resources can be found here: <http://sexualassault.georgetown.edu/counselors>.

LATE PAPERS: You are responsible for turning in your work on time. Each 24 hours that a piece of written work is late will result in the subtraction of 1/3 letter grade.

WRITING CENTER: Please consider taking advantage of the resources of the Writing Center. The Writing Center provides one-on-one peer tutoring focused on improving your writing skills. I encourage you to take your paper drafts to the Writing Center. Visit <http://writingcenter.georgetown.edu> for more information. You can also schedule an appointment with a Writing Center tutor online on the center’s website.

GRADE APPEALS: if you believe the work you submitted deserves a different grade than it received, you may ask in writing for reconsideration. Your request must be submitted *within one week*, but no sooner than *two days* after the assignment is returned. Your written request must *explain why* you believe the work deserves a different grade. It is expected that most appeals will not result in a change of grade, but if a change is made please note that the grade may be either higher or lower.

Instructional continuity: In the case of adverse weather preventing our class from meeting, I will send out an email with detailed instructions about what you should do in place of the class meeting. Unless prevented by weather conditions, you are responsible for checking your email before the scheduled start of class.

IN-CLASS BEHAVIOR: You are responsible for comporting yourself in an appropriate manner. This includes treating other members of the class with respect and courtesy. While philosophy is best done collectively and collaboratively, the questions we will be discussing are likely to generate contentious claims, spirited discussions, vehement disagreements, and trenchant criticisms. In discussing, disagreeing, criticizing, and arguing, we must always make an effort to remain courteous and respectful to one another.

I promise to do my best to raise issues and to start discussions in ways that are as sensitive as possible to the variety of viewpoints and opinions that we are sure to find among the members of this class. But, I will only be able to do this if each of you helps me to create an atmosphere where we can develop ideas in a friendly and welcoming environment where we all learn from one another.

Perhaps more importantly, if you want to disagree with someone, or if you want to offer a criticism of their viewpoint, be sure to offer reasons for the approach that you are suggesting. If we reason through things together, we can help each other have a great class.

Lastly, you are responsible for being prepared for class. This includes reading assigned material, thinking about it so that you can ask intelligent questions, and arriving on time.