

Philosophy 192
2025

Introduction to Moral Theory

Fall

Professor Jan Dowell

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Lecture: Asynchronous, online

Office Hours: Zoom by appointment.

Note: I do not answer emails on weekends. Please plan accordingly!

Course Description:

This course is a general introduction to ethical theory and theories of justice. We will consider, among other topics, the relationship between God and morality, the relationship between one's own interests and morality, challenges to morality's authority, as well as the factual status of moral claims. A few prominent general theories of what makes an act right or wrong will be considered. Attention will also be given to ethical issues of special contemporary concern. Roughly, the first half of the class will address timeless issues in ethics and several general understandings of what makes actions morally right will be considered and assessed. The second half of the class will address issues of ideal and corrective justice. In the last section, we will address the question of what, as a matter of justice, the United States owes to those it subjected to (or descendants of those it subjected to) anti-Black racial injustice.

Course tags: Critical and creative thinking, Communication skills.

Course goals: Our goals throughout are to (a) gain a basic understanding of core concepts and distinctions in value theory, (b) develop skills in the critical reading of philosophical texts, and (c) gain a facility for grappling independently with ethical issues in an articulate and informed manner.

Course Readings and Assignments: All readings and assignments will be posted on Blackboard.

Weekly Structure: Each week I will post lecture video, typically on Tuesdays, as well as the lecture slides. These lectures introduce you to the week's readings and assignments. Watching these in order are necessary to comprehend the material and doing well in the course.

You'll then have the remainder of the week, until midnight the following Monday (Eastern Standard Time), to complete both readings and assignments, unless otherwise specified.

Note: Students are responsible for keeping on top of the course schedule and assignments by consulting course emails and this syllabus.

Final Grade Breakdown

Two short writing assignments: 20% each. Total: 40%

Three discussion posts: 10% each. Total 30% (Exact dates to be announced on Blackboard)

Final paper: 30% (30 points)

Course Policies

Academic Integrity: Students must submit their own papers onto Turnitin on Blackboard. Assignments not submitted to Turnitin will not count as completed. (For more on academic integrity, see **University Policies**, below.)

Artificial Intelligence: All generative-AI tools are prohibited in this course because their use inhibits achievement of the course learning objectives. This policy applies to all stages of project and writing processes including researching, brainstorming, outlining, organizing, and polishing. Do not use Generative-AI tools to create any content (i.e., images and video, audio, text, code, etc.). If you have any questions about a feature and whether it is considered Generative-AI, ask Professor Dowell.

Late work: Students will lose one-third of a letter grade for each day that an assignment is late, except when an extension has been granted *prior to the due date* (e.g., An A to an A-, a B+ to a B). Any work more than two weeks late will receive no credit. This policy is non-negotiable. If you don't think you will be able to turn your assignment in on time, you will need to contact me at least 24 hours in advance of the due date to receive an extension or accommodation. (In some true emergency situations, an extension may be granted even if I have not been contacted in advance of the due date.)

THERE ARE NO EXTRA CREDIT OR MAKE UP ASSIGNMENTS.

University Policies

Academic Integrity: <http://academicintegrity.syr.edu> You are responsible for familiarizing yourself with the university's academic integrity policy. Violations of this policy will result in a failure for the assignment and report of the violation to the dean. Second offenses will result in course failure as well as a second report to the dean.

Religious Observances: See

http://supolicies.syr.edu/emp_ben/religious_observance.htm

Note: If you plan to avail yourself of the university's policy regarding religious observances, you **MUST** notify Professor Dowell a week prior to the day of observance.

Disability Services: If you believe you need accommodation for a disability, please see the Office of Disability Services (ODS) <http://disabilityservices.syr.edu> for an appointment to discuss your needs. ODS is responsible for coordinating disability-related accommodations. *Since accommodations require early planning and are generally not offered retroactively, please contact the ODS* (phone: 315-443-4498, location: 804 University Avenue) *as soon as possible*.

Student Mental Health: Mental health and overall well-being are significant predictors of academic success. For this reason, it is important that you develop the skills and resources to effectively navigate stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health concerns during your college years. Please familiarize yourself with the range of resources the Barnes Center makes available (<https://experience.syracuse.edu/bewell/>) and seek support for health concerns as needed. Counseling services are available 24/7, 365 days/year at 315-443-8000. Resources are also available through the Wellness Leadership Institute (<https://experience.syracuse.edu/bewell/well-being/wellness-leadership-institute/>).

Tentative Course Schedule (*subject to changes announced on Blackboard*)

Skepticism about Morality and Moral Theorizing

Week 1: 8/26-9/1

Central Questions:

1. Introduction to Moral Theory.
 - How should we live?
 - What are our rights?
 - What do we owe each other?
2. What is the source of morality? God? Or something else?

Readings:

- Plato's *Euthyphro*

Week 2: 9/2-9/8

Central Questions:

1. Are we capable of acting rightly, even when it is not in our interests?
2. Is Psychological Egoism true?

Readings:

- Joel Feinberg

First Discussion Post Due

Week 3: 9/9-15

Central Questions:

1. Is morality just a matter of social convention or personal preference?

Readings:

- Russ Shafer-Landau, "Ethical Relativism".

Moral Theories

Week 4: 9/16-22

Central Questions:

1. What makes an action morally right or morally wrong? Mill's answer.
2. What are some reasons to accept Mill's answer?

Readings:

- John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chapters 2 & 4

Second Discussion Post Due

Week 5: 9/23-29

Central Questions:

1. What are some reasons to accept Mill's theory?
2. What makes an action morally right or morally wrong? Kant's answer.
3. What are some reasons to accept Kant's answer.

Readings:

- Finish Mill, chapter 4
- Start Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (excerpts)

Week 6: 9/30-10/6

Central Questions: Continued discussion of questions 2 & 3 from Week 5

Readings:

- Finish Kant

First paper due

Justice

Week 7: 10/7-13

Central Questions:

1. What makes an action, policy, or institution just or unjust?

2. How can we answer that question? What do we need to think about to answer it?
3. What are social contract theories?
4. What is a Prisoner's Dilemma?

Readings:

- Ann Cudd & Seena Eftekhari, "Contractarianism"

Week 8: 10/14-20

Central Questions:

1. What is Rawls's method for discovering the principles of justice?
2. What are Rawls's principles of justice?

Readings:

- John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, excerpts

Week 9: 10/21-27

Central Questions and Topics:

1. What is the difference between ideal justice and corrective justice?
2. Does Rawls' ideal theory help us answer questions about repairing racial injustice?
3. Evaluation and discussion of Rawls on corrective justice

Readings:

- Charles Mills

Third Discussion Due

Week 10: 10/28-11/3

Central Questions: Continued discussion of Week 9, question 2 and topic 3.

Readings:

- Tommie Shelby

Racial Justice and Reparations: Corrective Justice Applied

Week 11: 11/4-10

Central Questions:

1. What does corrective justice require, according to our best theory?
2. Does it require reparations for descendants of enslaved people in the US?
- 3.

Readings:

- Derrick Darby, excerpts

Week 12: 11/11-17

Central Questions: Black Chattel Slavery, the Tulsa Massacre, and Institutional Racism

1. What are some examples of state-sanctioned or state-supported racial injustice in the US?
2. Does the US now owe victims or descendants of victims of such injustices any form of compensation as a matter of corrective justice?
3. Does corrective justice require reparations for descendants of the Tulsa massacre?
4. Does it require reparations for those harmed by state sanctioned or supported racial discrimination, for example, in housing and education?

Readings:

- More from Darby
- Tulsa massacre (various sources)
- Institutional racism in housing and education. (various sources)
- Black Chattel Slavery (the NJ Bar Association)

Second Paper Due

Week 13: 11/18-21

Central Questions:

1. What is Morris's theory of corrective justice?
2. Is that theory correct?
3. If it isn't, what are his faulty assumptions?
4. If it isn't, what is the true theory of corrective justice?

Readings: Christopher Morris

Week 14 & 15: 12/2-9

Central Questions:

1. What is Boxill's theory of corrective justice?
2. What are some of its advantages?
3. Is Boxill's theory of corrective justice more plausible than Morris's?
4. Why or why not?

Readings:

- Bernard Boxill.

Final Paper Due: 12/15/25 by 11:59 p.m. on Blackboard