

# PHILOSOPHY 631A: ETHICAL THEORY

Prof. Jason Hanna

## Course Description

This course will provide a broad overview of normative moral theory. It addresses questions such the following: Are there any general features in virtue of which acts are right or wrong? If so, what are these features? Do an act's consequences wholly determine its moral status, or are there other relevant considerations? How should we morally evaluate traits of character? How is the evaluation of a person's character traits related to the evaluation of a person's behavior? What makes a person's life go best, and what goods are important from the prudential point of view?

## Introduction

There are three main traditions in normative moral theory: consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. According to consequentialism, the moral status of an act (or other object of moral evaluation) is solely determined by the value of its consequences. Deontology, as we will understand it, rejects this claim, but maintains that we can nonetheless assess the morality of acts by appealing to general rules or principles. Virtue theories claim (roughly) that the moral status of an act is in some way determined by its relation to traits of character. We will begin the discussion of each of these three theories by considering the views of one historical proponent (Mill for consequentialism, Kant for deontology, and Aristotle for virtue ethics) and then turning to contemporary developments.

## Student Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate:

1. Knowledge of ethics by writing essays that:
  - a. Demonstrate knowledge of an appropriate body of relevant literature in ethics
  - b. Provide clear, accurate, and thorough explanations of the philosophical views discussed.
2. Proficiency in philosophical writing by composing essays that:
  - a. Provide strong and cogent arguments in support of philosophical theses
  - b. Critically engage opposing views and arguments
  - c. Make an original contribution to the literature discussed.

## Course Format

Each class session will be a mixture of lecture and discussion. If I am spending a lot of time talking without anyone's having something to say, we've got problems.

## Required Texts

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Irwin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999).

Ben Bradley, *Well-Being* (Malden, Mass.: Polity, 2015).

Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. Paton (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Sher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001).

*Other editions of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill are acceptable.*

## Course Requirements

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|---|-----------|
| 1. 8 (out of 11 assigned) reaction papers | 30%       |
| 2. Paper draft/term paper                 | 70%       |
| 3. Class participation                    | see below |

*Reaction papers:* You will be expected to write eight brief (700-800 word) papers responding to the past week's readings. *I will accept reaction papers on 11 Thursdays (and only on those 11 Thursdays): each Thursday except for 8/25, 11/10, 11/24 (Thanksgiving), and 12/1. Reaction papers must be submitted on Blackboard by 11:00 a.m. on the due date, and late reaction papers will not be accepted.* In the reaction paper, you may address any issues that pique your philosophical interest from the relevant batch of readings. The paper need not be formal—for instance, you do not need a thesis and need not develop a single line of argument. You could discuss why you find a certain argument or claim puzzling, or mistaken, or extremely plausible. You could criticize a philosopher, or come to her aid. You should not simply summarize the reading, however: the reaction paper is not a book report. Each reaction paper will be graded according to the following scale: A (95), A- (90), B (85), B- (80), and so on.

*Paper draft/term paper:* The term paper should offer a sustained line of argument for a clearly stated thesis and will require some outside research (= reading beyond course texts). In order to complete the paper, you will need to identify and take a position on some fairly specific issue. Here is an example of a bad paper topic: "I will write about utilitarianism." This topic just is not specific enough: what particular elements of the theory will you discuss, and what particular conclusions will you reach? A better topic would be this: "I will argue that Smith's objection to utilitarianism is unconvincing because..." *Any specific topic within ethics is acceptable, though you should clear your topic with me before beginning the draft.*

After identifying your topic, you should do some research. When you submit your paper draft, you should include a list of four outside sources you consulted, along with a one-paragraph summary of each source. (The sources should either be articles in professional philosophy journals or books/book chapters.) The paper draft should be around 3000 words. I will not assign numeric grades to the paper draft, but it will affect your final paper grade as follows: if you never submit a draft, or if your draft is woefully inadequate, you may lose up to ten points off the term paper grade. The term paper, which should be around 4000 words, will largely be evaluated by how well it responds to my comments on the draft.

*Class Participation:* I will not assign a numeric grade to class participation. If you regularly attend and are engaged in class discussions, your course grade will be the weighted average of the paper grades. If your contributions in class are exceptionally valuable, I may boost your course grade by up to 1/3 of a letter grade. Conversely, if you often miss class, fall asleep, etc., that may push your course grade down by up to 2/3 of a letter grade.

### *Grading Scale:*

A 93-100	B+ 88-89	C+ 78-79	D 60-69
A- 90-92	B 83-87	C 73-77	F <60
	B- 80-82	C- 70-72	

I will round to the nearest whole percentage point.

## Miscellaneous Policies

*Extensions and Late Assignments:* If you would like an extension for a paper, you must request it by e-mail at least four days before the paper is due. Late term papers will receive a five point penalty for each day they are late. I will not accept paper drafts that are more than one week late (unless you have an extension), and a late paper draft may result in your term paper grade being lowered by ten points. Late reaction papers will not be accepted.

*Accessibility Statement:* “If you need an accommodation for this class, please contact the Disability Resource Center [DRC] as soon as possible. The DRC coordinates accommodations for students with disabilities. It is located on the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of the Health Services building, and can be reached at 815-753-1303 (v) or [drc@niu.edu](mailto:drc@niu.edu). Also, please contact me privately as soon as possible so we can discuss your accommodations. The sooner you let us know your needs, the sooner we can assist you in achieving your learning goals in this course” ([http://niu.edu/disability/accessibility\\_statement/index.shtml](http://niu.edu/disability/accessibility_statement/index.shtml)).

*Academic Integrity Statement:* “Good academic work must be based on honesty. The attempt of any student to present as his or her own work that which he or she has not produced is regarded by the faculty and administration as a serious offense. Students are considered to have cheated if they copy the work of another during an examination or turn in a paper or an assignment written, in whole or in part, by someone else. Students are responsible for plagiarism, intentional or not, if they copy material from books, magazines, or other sources without identifying and acknowledging those sources or if they paraphrase ideas from such sources without acknowledging them. Students responsible for, or assisting others in, either cheating or plagiarism on an assignment, quiz, or examination may receive a grade of F for the course involved and may be suspended or dismissed from the university” ([http://catalog.niu.edu/content.php?catoid=20&navoid=605#othe\\_acad\\_poli](http://catalog.niu.edu/content.php?catoid=20&navoid=605#othe_acad_poli)). In this course, academic dishonesty will result in a course grade of F.

### Tentative Schedule of Readings and Topics

(I reserve the right to move or substitute readings with reasonable notice.)

#### Introduction to the Course (8/23)

#### Theories of Well-Being (8/25; 8/30; 9/1; 9/6)

- Mill, *Utilitarianism*, pp. 1-15.
- Bradley, chapter 1.
- Bradley, chapter 2.
- Feldman, “The Good Life: A Defense of Attitudinal Hedonism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 65 (2002): 604-28.
- Bradley, chapter 3.
- Heathwood, “The Problem of Defective Desires,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 83 (2005): 487-504.
- Bradley, chapter 5.
- Fletcher, “A Fresh Start for the Objective-List Theory of Well-Being,” *Utilitas* 25 (2013): 206-20.

#### Mill’s Utilitarianism (9/8; 9/13)

- Bradley, chapter 6-sec. 7.1.
- Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 2 (pp. 18-26), Chapters 4-5.

### Integrity and Demandingness (9/15; 9/20)

- B. Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," excerpts (<http://homepage.westmont.edu/hoeckley/PHI006SP12/documents/Williams.pdf>)
- Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*, pp. 7-13, 41-79
- *Optional*: Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality"

### Rule-Consequentialism (9/22; 9/27)

- Brandt, "Some Merits of One Form of Rule Utilitarianism," from *Morality, Utilitarianism, and Rights* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 110-36.
- Hooker, "Rule-Consequentialism," *Mind* 99 (1990): 67-77.
- Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World*, pp. 32-3, 93-102.

### Kant's Deontology (9/29; 10/4; 10/6)

- Kant, *Groundwork*, Section 1.
- Kant, *Groundwork*, Section 2.

### Deontological Constraints: Intending Harm vs. Foreseeing Harm (10/11; 10/13; 10/18)

- Quinn, "Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Double Effect," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 18 (1989): 334-51.
- Bennett, *The Act Itself* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), chapter 11.
- Thomson, "Self-Defense," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 20 (1991), pp. 292-96 only.
- Nelkin and Rickless, "Three Cheers for Double Effect," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 89 (2014): 125-58

### Deontological Constraints: Doing Harm vs. Allowing Harm (10/20; 10/25; 10/27; 11/1)

- Foot, "Killing and Letting Die," in *Killing and Letting Die*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., ed. Bonnie Steinbock and Alastair Norcross (New York: Fordham UP, 1994), pp. 280-289.
- Quinn, "Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing," *Philosophical Review* 98 (1989): 287-312.
- Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), chapter 3.
- McMahan, "Killing, Letting Die, and the Withdrawal of Aid," *Ethics* 103 (1993): 250-279.
- Woollard, "If This is My Body..." *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 94 (2013): 315-41.
- Thomson, "The Trolley Problem," in *Rights, Restitution, and Risk*, ed. William Parent (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1986).
- *Optional*: Thomson, "Turning the Trolley," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36 (2008): 359-74.

### Aristotle's Virtue Ethics (11/3; 11/8)

- Aristotle, *NE* I, skip section 6
- Bradley, Sec. 4.1-4.4
- Aristotle, *NE* II and V

### Contemporary Virtue Ethics (11/10; 11/15; 11/17; 11/22; 11/29; 12/1)

- Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), chapters 1-2.
- Doris, "Persons, Situations and Virtue Ethics," *Noûs*, 32 (1998): 504-530.

- Kamtekar, "Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character," *Ethics* 114 (2004): 458-91.
- Baier, "What Do Women Want in a Moral Theory?" *Nous* 19 (1985): 53-63.
- Held, "Feminist Transformations of Moral Theory," *PPR Supp.* 1 (1990): 321-44.