



Virtues, Value, and Happiness: An Introduction to Moral Theory

Phil 161.001, SSI 2025

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



COURSE INFORMATION

Credit Hours: 3

Pre or Co-Requisites: N/A

Target Audience: This course is designed for students with all levels of familiarity with philosophy and regardless of major.

Instructional Format: Remote, Mostly Asynchronous

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Name: William Kanwischer (please call me Will).

Email Address: wkanwischer@unc.edu

Office Location: On Zoom at <https://unc.zoom.us/j/8117250588>

Office Hours: T 11:00AM-1:00PM, W 9:00AM-11:00AM, Tr 3:00PM-5:00PM, and by appointment.



COURSE CONTENT

Course Description

Everyday life is suffused with moral judgments. Whether consciously or not, we think certain actions are *right* and that others are *wrong*; we judge some things to be *good* while others are *bad*; and we regard some people as moral examples and some as moral monsters.

What are we doing when we make these judgments? When are they true? Is it even *possible* for our beliefs about morality to be true or false? Why should we care about morality at all?

In this course, we'll use the tools of philosophy to investigate these questions. Students will leave the course with an overview of the central disagreements of moral philosophy as well as its seminal figures and texts. Assignments will focus on developing skills like careful reading, persuasive argumentation, and clear and respectful communication about complex issues.

Course Texts & Materials

No textbook is required. All readings will be made available on our course Canvas site as PDFs.



Class Expectations

Students should expect to devote between 10 and 20 hours a week to the course. Most of this time will be spent completing our assigned readings. Reading philosophy can be difficult; philosophical texts are often filled with dense prose and complex arguments. Properly understanding our assigned texts will require reading slowly, carefully, and more than once.

Course Goals & Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

All our philosophy courses aim at the acquisition and nurturing of basic philosophical skills. One of the main goals of our philosophy curriculum is to instill and enable the development of skills that are distinct to philosophy, but which are foundational to all forms of knowledge.

These **basic philosophical skills** involve being able to:

- Think critically;
- Deploy philosophical concepts and terminology correctly, in either a historical or contemporary setting;
- Represent clearly and accurately the views or argument of particular philosophers, in either a historical or contemporary setting;
- Identify the premises and conclusion(s) of a philosophical argument and assess both its validity and soundness;
- Apply a philosophical theory or argument to a new topic, and being able to draw and defend reasonable conclusions about that topic;
- Develop an argument for a particular solution to a philosophical problem in either a historical or contemporary setting;
- Write clearly, precisely, and persuasively in defense of a philosophical thesis;
- Participate in respectful, critical, and reflexive dialogues about difficult philosophical positions;
- Read, interpret, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different philosophical texts and the philosophical positions presented them."

In addition, PHIL 161 satisfies our **value theory** requirement for the philosophy major and minor, and thereby aims at developing the following learning outcomes:

- Being familiar with some of the leading normative theories in philosophy such as utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics;
- Being able to identify and explain the various contexts in which philosophical questions of justification arise;
- Being able to assess ethical values in terms of the philosophical and non-philosophical reasons offered;
- Being able to evaluate ethical justifications for different ways of organizing civic and political communities;
- Being able to analyze and evaluate the differences between personal decisions and those bearing on the public and civic domains.

IDEAs in Action General Education Curriculum

Communicating Beyond Carolina (COMMBEYOND)

Student Learning Outcomes:

1. Ascertain the expectations, opportunities, and barriers to oral communication in distinct situations.
2. Tailor oral communications to different kinds of settings, including individual, small group, and public communication.
3. Tailor oral communications to different levels of expertise (inexpert, informed, expert), and to varying levels of alignments (resistant, ambivalent, supportive) and distinct contexts.
4. Make informed situation-and-audience-sensitive strategic choices in content and delivery.
5. Improve ability to move audiences, as measured by best practices, audience feedback, and instructor feedback.



Questions for Students:

1. How can I engage with audiences through oral communication?
2. How do I best convey knowledge, ideas, and information effectively to different audiences in situations?
3. How can I best understand the views and ideas of others, both individually and collectively?
4. What are the best ways of strategizing and delivering oral communication for achieving my intended outcomes?
5. How can media or digital compositions extend my ability to communicate?

Focus Capacity: Ways of Knowing (FC – Knowing)

Student Learning Outcomes:

1. Recognize and use one or more approach(es) to developing and validating knowledge of the unfamiliar world.
2. Evaluate ways that temporal, spatial, scientific, and philosophical categories structure knowledge.
3. Interrogate assumptions that underlie our own perceptions of the world.
4. Employ strategies to mitigate or adjust for preconceptions and biases.
5. Apply critical insights to understand patterns of experience and belief.

Questions for Students:

1. What norms and expectations do I take for granted?
2. What categories and concepts frame my assumptions, experiences, and beliefs?
3. What practices of investigation or inquiry best challenge those assumptions and expectations?
4. How can I consider whether my beliefs might be wrong?

Focus Capacity: Ethical and Civic Values (FC – Values)

Student Learning Outcomes:

1. Explain the contexts in which questions of justification arise.
2. Assess ethical values in terms of reasons offered.
3. Recognize different ethical perspectives and the distinctive approaches these perspectives bring to questions of value, evaluating ethical justifications for different ways of organizing civic and political communities.
4. Analyze the differences between personal ethical decisions and those bearing on the public and civic spheres.

Questions for Students:

1. How can people think fruitfully (individually and together) about how they should live their lives?
2. What is required to judge a standard or value as worthy of support?
3. How should we distinguish between prejudices and reasonable grounds for value judgments?
4. What considerations—stories, reasons, testimony, documents, data, etc.—can justify our values and commitments, whether interpersonal or social?

Recurring Capacities

Every focus capacity course includes the following activities:

- Writing, totaling at least 10 pages in length or the intellectual equivalent
- Presenting material to the class, smaller groups, or the public through oral presentations, webpages, or other means
- Collaborating in pairs or groups to learn, design, solve, create, build, or research

These elements – referred to as “recurring capacities” – will help you repeatedly practice crucial skills for future study, life, and career success



COURSE ASSIGNMENTS & ASSESSMENTS

Assignment Descriptions



Reading Quizzes – 20% (20 points)

Each of our course readings will be accompanied by a reading quiz (usually three per week). Quizzes will be one multiple choice or true/false question due at the end of the relevant week on Canvas. The following is an example of what a reading quiz question might look like:

1. True or false? In *Utilitarianism*, J.S. Mill argues that pleasure and freedom from pain is the *only* thing that is good for its own sake. (Answer: True)

Reading quizzes are meant to be a low-pressure way to ensure that you are keeping up with course readings. The quizzes are untimed, but you will only have one try. Quizzes are also open-note and will be written with the expectation that you will look back at the pertinent text as you answer. I will drop two quizzes when I calculate their contribution to your final grade.

Reading quizzes (except for the last one) are due at 11:59pm every Friday

Weekly Office Hour Check-Ins(x4) – 10% (10 points)

This course is offered in the remote, mostly asynchronous instructional mode, so there are no mandatory course meetings. I will, however, require that you check in with me in office hours on a regular basis. Every week, starting on May 19th, students must attend one of my office hours (listed on the syllabus under “instructor information”) to discuss course readings, assignments, and lectures. To earn full credit, you must come to at least four meetings.

Students should come to the meeting having prepared in advance for our conversation. I encourage students to use office hours to prepare for their weekly group discussions (see below), so it would be a good idea to bring some notes about aspects of the reading that you find confusing or interesting for us to talk about.

I will post a link on Canvas to a page where you can sign up to reserve 20 minutes of my standing office hours. If you cannot attend one of the blocks of time I have scheduled each week, I am happy to arrange for individual meetings outside of those slots. Please try to set up these individual meetings as far in advance as possible, although I will try to be as flexible as I can.

The check-in assignment is graded pass/fail: if you make a good-faith effort to prepare for the meeting and engage with course material, you will get full credit for each meeting.

Weekly Discussions(x4) – 20% (20 points)

At the beginning of the semester, I will divide the class into groups of 2 or 3 students. Each week, this group of students must meet via Zoom (the time is up to you) to discuss the week's assigned readings. These discussions are an opportunity for you to practice active listening skills and effective oral communication. I will note your participation in these discussions and send you feedback as the semester progresses.

Students are responsible for scheduling and re-scheduling these meetings. However, **if your partner is not communicating or fails to show up to your meetings, let me know immediately**. I will assign you a new group.

Every student is responsible for compiling **one page** of notes in preparation for these meetings. Your notes should do the following two things:

- Raise one **substantive question** about the assigned texts.
 - o Substantive questions engage seriously with the intellectual content of our readings. “What year did this book come out?” is an example of a *non-substantive* question.
 - o Examples of substantive questions include: “What does the author mean by the word ‘autonomy’ on page 14?” “What is the conclusion of Thomson’s argument?” “Do the rest of you think Dworkin is right that paternalistic coercion is wrong if there is at least one less restrictive alternative?”
 - o Questions about the meaning of a passage or sentence should be accompanied by the relevant quotes.
- Raise one potential **objection** to an argument in the week’s readings.
 - o Objections are points of potential disagreement with one of our authors.



- o Simply reporting disagreement does not count as raising an objection: you need to accompany your report of disagreement with *reasons*. You need to say *why* you think a philosophical argument or position is mistaken.

During the week's meeting, each student will share their two items for discussion, and the group will attempt to answer the questions and determine whether the objections are successful. If someone asks about a passage in the text, spend time re-reading it, and talk about what the best interpretation of the passage might be. If someone raises an objection, discuss how the author might respond if they were in the call with you.

At the end of the Zoom meeting, one of the group members is responsible for turning in a video recording of the discussion on Canvas. Then, each student will turn in their one-page notes document individually. Both portions of the discussion assignment will be due at 11:59PM on Friday for each of our four full weeks.

These discussions are graded pass/fail: if you make a good faith effort to complete each part of the assignment, you will receive credit. There is no minimum discussion length, but it should be long enough for a serious and in-depth discussion of each group-member's notes. I would advise aiming for between 15 and 20 minutes total. Please don't hesitate to email me if you have questions about what is required of you in weekly discussions or how to effectively prepare.

This assignment satisfies both the writing and collaboration requirements of the IDEAs in Action curriculum. In total, notes prepared for weekly discussions will count as the intellectual equivalent of 4 pages of writing.

Moral Disagreement Assignment – 10% (10 points)

Part of my goal in this course is to help you see that you already engage in moral reasoning, whether you recognize it or not. Our first assignment asks you to reflect on a time that you and another person (a friend, parent, sibling, teacher, etc.) came to different and opposing conclusions about what morality requires. By the end of the first week of class (May 18th), I will ask you to write a very short assignment (500 words or 2 double-spaced pages max) that does the following things:

1. Drawing from your own experiences, give an example of a time when you and someone you know disagreed about the moral permissibility of some action.
2. Explain your own point of view: why did you judge the action to be permissible/impermissible/required?
3. Explain, to the best of your ability, the other person's point of view: why did they disagree with you?

Try to choose a case in which the disagreement is not the result of obvious ignorance or misunderstanding. The more difficult it is to say who is right, the more interesting your assignment will be. Moreover, when you reconstruct the other person's reasoning, try to be as *charitable* as possible. Do not present them to your reader as stupid or unreasonable: try as hard as you can to occupy their perspective and see what motivated them to disagree with you.

This assignment satisfies the writing requirement of the IDEAs in Action curriculum.

Video Presentations – 20% (20 points)

After our units on normative ethics, students will record themselves giving three presentations providing an overview of the debate between consequentialists and deontologists. The difference between the three presentations will lie in their target audience. The first presentation should be appropriate for children aged 10-13, the second for high school students, and the third for an adult unfamiliar with our class. There are no length requirements: part of the assignment is to think carefully about how much detail will be required to explain the debate to people with differing levels of expertise. Presentations will be graded on the basis of accuracy, clarity, and appropriateness for their audience. More detailed instructions and a rubric will be posted on Canvas. I will give bonus points to anyone who actually gives their presentation to a live audience of the relevant type (i.e. a younger sibling or parent).

This assignment satisfies the presentation requirement of the IDEAS in action curriculum.

Final Exam – 20% (20 points)

Our final exam will be held virtually on June 20th from 3-6PM. At the start of the exam, I will release a list of five short answer questions on Canvas. Students will need to choose three from this list to answer. Answers should be no more



than 500 words (2 double-spaced pages) each. The exam is open-book, but using the internet or the assistance of a large-language model (LLM) like Chat-GPT is prohibited and will be considered cheating. Each answer will receive a letter grade and the three letter grades will be averaged to arrive at a total.

The final exam satisfies the writing requirement of the IDEAs in Action curriculum, and each answer counts for 2 pages toward the 10-page total.

Assignment	Grade Proportion (Pts)	Grade Proportion (%)
Reading Quizzes	20	20%
Office Hour Check-Ins	10	10%
Weekly Discussions	20	20%
Moral Disagreement Assignment	10	10%
Video Presentations	20	20%
Final Exam	20	20%
TOTAL	100	100%

Grading Scale & Schema

Late Work

All late work will incur a 1/3rd letter-grade penalty every day it is late unless a student has secured a deadline extension with me in advance. For example, a paper that is two days late and would have gotten a B+ will get a B-. Extensions will usually be granted, but arrangements need to be made **well before** the relevant deadlines. I will not grant last-minute (i.e. day of or day before) extensions barring extraordinary circumstances. If you request extensions for group assignments, you must secure the permission of your partners *in advance* of asking me.

Anonymous Grading

Both the moral disagreement assignment and your final exams will be graded anonymously. Please turn your papers and exams in on Canvas as a PDF or .docx file with *only* your PID in the header and no other identifying information. Make sure the file you submit is (i) correct, and (ii) readable. Blank files or files in the wrong format will incur a late penalty.

Re-grading Policy

I will not re-grade assignments. Doing so de-anonymizes the grading process, which is unfair to other students. If you suspect your grade is the result of a clerical or numerical error (i.e. I added points incorrectly or read the wrong file), please bring it to my attention. Do not send me emails asking me to change your grade for other reasons: I will say no. I am happy to meet with students to discuss their work and my feedback, but this will not result in a changed grade, and the focus of our conversation should be the *content* of your work, not my numerical evaluation of it. If you wish to formally contest one of your grades for a reason other than clerical/numerical errors, we can arrange a meeting with the chair of the philosophy department.

Rubrics

I will post detailed rubrics on Canvas for the disagreement assignment and video presentations. The weekly check-ins and discussions are graded pass/fail: if you make a good-faith effort to complete all parts of the assignment listed in the syllabus, you will get an "A."

Grading Scale

I will round your final grade **if and only if** it is within $\frac{1}{4}$ of one percent of the next highest letter grade. I.e. 89.75 (B+) $\square$ 90 (A-), 76.9 (C) $\square$ 77 (C+), etc. Please do not ask me to round your grade for any other reason. I will say no.



Numerical Grade (%)	Letter Grade
93+	A
90-92	A-
87-89	B+
83-86	B
80-82	B-
77-79	C+
73-76	C
70-72	C-
67-69	D+
65-66	D
65 and below	F

Table a: Grading Scale Table

COURSE SCHEDULE

Assignments are due every week on Friday at 11:59pm unless otherwise noted on the schedule.

Week 1 (May 14th - 16th): Introduction

Readings/Lectures	Assignments/To Do
Read: Syllabus Read: Pryor – “Guidelines on Reading Philosophy” Watch: Syllabus and Assignment Video Watch: What are Arguments? Watch: What is Moral Philosophy?	Discussion Groups: Contact group, begin planning meetings. Disagreement Assignment: Due May 18 th at 11:59pm

Week 2 (May 19th – 23rd): Practical Ethics and Controversial Issues

Readings/Lectures	Assignments/To Do
Watch: Practical Ethics Overview Read: Singer – “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” Watch: Singer Lecture Read: Thomson – “A Defense of Abortion” Watch: Thomson Lecture Read: Norcross – “Puppies, Pigs, and People” Watch: Norcross Lecture	Reading Quiz: Singer Reading Quiz: Thomson Reading Quiz: Norcross Weekly Discussion 1 Check-in 1



Week 3 (May 26th- 30th): Normative Ethics Part One: Consequentialism

Readings/Lectures	Assignments/To Do
Watch: Normative Ethics Overview	Reading Quiz: Mill
Watch: Consequentialism Primer	Reading Quiz: Smart
Read: Mill – <i>Utilitarianism</i> (excerpts)	Reading Quiz: Williams
Watch: Mill Lecture	Weekly Discussion 2
Read: Smart – “Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism”	Check-in 2
Watch: Smart Lecture	
Read: Williams – “Against Utilitarianism” (excerpts)	
Watch: Williams Lecture	

Week 4 (June 2nd - 6th): Normative Ethics Part Two: Deontology

Readings/Lectures	Assignments/To Do
Watch: Deontology Primer	Reading Quiz: O'Neill
Read: O'Neill – “A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics”	Reading Quiz: Korsgaard
Watch: O'Neill/Kant Lecture	Reading Quiz: Nagel
Read: Korsgaard – “The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil”	Weekly Discussion 3
Watch: Korsgaard Lecture	Check-In 3
Read: Nagel – “Moral Luck”	
Watch: Nagel Lecture	

Week 5 (June 9th – 13th): Meta-Ethics

Readings/Lectures	Assignments/To Do
Watch: Meta-Ethics Overview	Reading Quiz: Midgley
Read: Midgley – “Trying Out One's New Sword”	Reading Quiz: Mackie
Watch: Midgley Lecture	Reading Quiz: Enoch
Read: Mackie – “The Subjectivity of Values”	Weekly Discussion 4
Watch: Mackie Lecture	Check-In 4
Read: Enoch – “Why I Am an Objectivist About Ethics (And Why You Are, Too)”	Video Presentations: June 14 th at 11:59pm
Watch: Enoch Lecture	



Week 6 (June 17th-18th) – Wrapping Up: Morality and the Other Values

Readings/Lectures	Assignments/To Do
Read: Wolf – “Moral Saints” Watch: Wolf Lecture	Reading Quiz: Wolf

Final Exam

Readings/Lectures	Assignments/To Do
Watch: Final Exam Review	Final Exam: June 21 st 3-6pm



POLICY STATEMENTS

Academic Policies

University Class Attendance Policy

University Policy: As stated in the University's [Class Attendance Policy](#), no right or privilege exists that permits a student to be absent from any class meetings, except for these University Approved Absences:

1. Authorized University activities: [University Approved Absence Office \(UAAO\) website](#) provides information and [FAQs for students](#) and [FAQs for faculty](#) related to University Approved Absences
2. Disability/religious observance/pregnancy, as required by law and approved by [Accessibility Resources and Service](#) and/or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#) (EOC)
3. Significant health condition and/or personal/family emergency as approved by the [Office of the Dean of Students](#), [Gender Violence Service Coordinators](#), and/or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#) (EOC).

Honor Code Statement

All students are expected to follow the guidelines of the UNC honor code. In particular, students are expected to refrain from “lying, cheating, or stealing” in the academic context. If you are unsure about which actions violate that honor code, please consult the [Student Conduct website](#).

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Policy

Use of generative AI tools of any kind is not permitted in this course. Any use of these tools will be considered an instance of academic dishonesty and will be referred to the Honor System.

Syllabus Changes

The instructor reserves the right to make changes to the syllabus including project due dates and test dates. These changes will be announced as early as possible.



Acceptable Use Policy

By attending the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, you agree to abide by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill policies related to the acceptable use of IT systems and services. The Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) sets the expectation that you will use the University's technology resources responsibly, consistent with the University's mission. In the context of a class, it's quite likely you will participate in online activities that could include personal information about you or your peers, and the AUP addresses your obligations to protect the privacy of class participants. In addition, the AUP addresses matters of others' intellectual property, including copyright. These are only a couple of typical examples, so you should consult the full [Information Technology Acceptable Use Policy](#), which covers topics related to using digital resources, such as privacy, confidentiality and intellectual property. Additionally, consult the [Safe Computing at UNC](#) website for information about data security policies, updates, and tips on keeping your identity, information, and devices safe.

Data Security & Privacy

UNC-Chapel Hill is committed to fulfilling its responsibilities of transparency as a state-sponsored institution of higher learning, protecting certain types of information, and using information Carolina collects only for appropriate purposes. Consult the [UNC-Chapel Hill Privacy Statement](#) for additional information.

Services & Student Support Policies

Accessibility Resources & Services (ARS)

[Accessibility Resources and Service](#) receives requests for accommodations, and through the Student and Applicant Accommodations Policy determines eligibility and identifies reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities and/or chronic medical conditions to mitigate or remove the barriers experienced in accessing University courses, programs and activities. ARS also offers its Testing Center resources to students and instructors to facilitate the implementation of testing accommodations.

Counseling & Psychological Services (CAPS)

UNC-Chapel Hill is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body. The [Heels Care Network](#) website is a place to access the many mental health resources at Carolina. CAPS is the primary mental health provider for students, offering timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services. Go to the [CAPS website](#) or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health building for an initial evaluation to learn more. Students can also call CAPS 24/7 at 919-966-3658 for immediate assistance.

Title IX Resources

Any student who is impacted by discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking is encouraged to seek resources on campus or in the community. Reports can be made [online to the EOC](#) or by contacting the University's Title IX Coordinator ([Elizabeth Hall](#)) or the [Report and Response Coordinators](#) in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office. Confidential resources include Counseling and Psychological Services and the [Gender Violence Services Coordinators](#). Additional resources are available at [Safe at UNC](#).

Policy on Non-Discrimination

The University is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and to ensuring that educational and employment decisions are based on individuals' abilities and qualifications. Consistent with this principle and applicable laws, the University's [Policy Statement on Non-Discrimination](#) offers access to its educational programs and activities as well as employment terms and conditions without respect to race, color, gender, national origin, age, religion, genetic information, disability, veteran's status, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Such a policy ensures that only relevant factors are considered, and that equitable and consistent standards of conduct and performance are applied. If you are experiencing harassment or discrimination, you can seek assistance and file a report through the Report and Response Coordinators (email the [Report and Response Coordinators](#) or see additional contact info at [Safe at UNC](#)) or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](#).

Undergraduate Testing Center

The College of Arts and Sciences provides a secure, proctored environment in which exams can be taken. The [Undergraduate Testing Center](#) works with instructors to proctor exams for their undergraduate students who are not registered with ARS and who do not need testing accommodations as provided by ARS. In other words, the Center provides a proctored testing environment for students who are unable to take an exam at the normally scheduled time (with pre-arrangement by your instructor).



Learning Center

Want to get the most out of this course or others this semester? Visit UNC's [Learning Center](#) to make an appointment or register for an event. Their free, popular programs will help you optimize your academic performance. Try academic coaching, peer tutoring, STEM support, ADHD/LD services, workshops and study camps, or review tips and tools available on the website.

Writing Center

For free feedback on any course writing projects, check out UNC's [Writing Center](#). Writing Center coaches can assist with any writing project, including multimedia projects and application essays, at any stage of the writing process. You don't even need a draft to come visit. To schedule a 45-minute appointment, review quick tips, or request written feedback online, visit the [Writing Center's website](#).