

Professor Jan Dowell

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Lecture: 5:00-6:20, Whitman 003

Office Hours: Zoom by appointment.

Course Description:

This course is an advanced introduction to contemporary issues in ethics, broadly construed. We will consider, among other topics, the relationship between one's own interests and morality and challenges to morality's universal authority. A few prominent general theories of what makes an act right or wrong will be considered. Attention will then turn to ethical issues of special contemporary concern. Roughly, the first third 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 two-thirds of the class will address issues of justice, both ideal and corrective, and free speech. In the last section, as part of our discussion of corrective justice, we will address the question of what the United States owes to those it subjected to (or descendants of those it subjected to) anti-Black racial injustice.

Course tag: Critical and creative thinking.

Course Goals:

Our goals throughout are to (a) gain some appreciation of the rich variety of topics discussed in contemporary ethics, (b) gain a firm understanding of core ethical concepts and distinctions, (c) develop skills in the critical reading of philosophical texts, and (d) gain a facility for grappling independently with ethical issues in an articulate and informed manner, both orally and in writing.

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

Weekly Structure: Most classes will be part lecture and part discussion. In three classes, there will be a group discussion assignment to be completed in class.

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

Final Grade Breakdown

One short writing assignments: **20%**

Four discussion assignments: Total **40%** (10 points each, exact dates to be announced on Blackboard)

- Three assignments will be in-class, one will be take-home.

Participation: The participation grade includes 5 points for perfect attendance and 5 points for discussion contributions (including questions). *Demonstrated* medical absences will be excused. Total: **10%**

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 your instructor.

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:

As a pre-eminent and inclusive student-focused research institution, Syracuse University considers academic integrity at the forefront of learning, serving as a core value and guiding pillar of education. Syracuse University's Academic Integrity Policy provides students with the necessary guidelines to complete academic work with integrity throughout their studies. Students are required to uphold both course-specific and university-wide academic integrity expectations such as

crediting your sources, doing your own work, communicating honestly, and supporting academic integrity. The full Syracuse University Academic Integrity Policy can be viewed by visiting the Syracuse University Policies website.

Upholding Academic Integrity includes the protection of faculty's intellectual property. Students should not upload, distribute, or share instructors' course materials, including presentations, assignments, exams, or other evaluative materials without permission. Using websites that charge fees or require uploading of course material (e.g., Chegg, Course Hero) to obtain exam solutions or assignments completed by others, which are then presented as your own violates academic integrity expectations in this course and may be classified as a Level 3 violation. All academic integrity expectations that apply to in-person assignments, quizzes, and exams also apply online.

Students found in violation of the policy are subject to grade sanctions determined by the course instructor and non-grade sanctions determined by the School or College where the course is offered. Students may not drop or withdraw from courses in which they face a suspected violation. Any established violation in this course may result in course failure regardless of violation level.

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 & 28

Central Questions:

1. Introduction to Moral Theory.
 - How should we live?
 - What are our rights?
 - What do we owe each other?
2. Are we capable of acting rightly, even when it is not in our interests?
3. Is Psychological Egoism true?

Readings:

- Joel Feinberg

Week 2: 9/2 & 4

Central Questions:

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

Readings:

- Russ Shafer-Landau, "Ethical Relativism".

First In-class Discussion Due

Moral Theories

Week 3: 9/9 & 11

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?
3. Applications: What would Mill say about free-riding?

Readings:

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

Week 4: 9/16 & 18

Central Questions:

1. What makes an action morally right or morally wrong? Kant's answer.

2. What are some reasons to accept Kant's answer?
3. Applications:
 - (a) Is free-riding permissible, according to Kant? Why or why not? Compare Kant's answer to Mill's.
 - (b) Is cutting in line permissible, according to Kant? Why or why not?

Readings:

- Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (excerpts)

Second In-class Discussion

Justice

Week 5: 9/23 & 25

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?
5. What is Rawls's method for discovering the principles of justice?
6. How might Rawls's method help resolve the Prisoner's Dilemma?

Readings:

- *Note:* There will be new material presented in class on 9/23 for which there is no reading. You are responsible for this in-class material.
- John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, excerpts

Week 6: 9/30 & 10/2

Central Questions:

1. What are Rawls's principles of justice?
2. Do you think his principles avoid the Prisoner's Dilemma? Do you think they are principles that could fairly govern a stable society?

Readings:

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

Free Speech

Week 7: 10/7 & 9

Central Questions:

1. Is speech fully free and unfettered in a Rawlsian society? If not, what are some examples of its limits?
2. What is Yong's Free Speech Principle?
3. What is hate speech, according to Yong? What are the distinctions between kinds of hate speech that he marks?
4. Which kinds of speech does he think are covered vs uncovered and protected vs unprotected?
5. Do you agree with his conclusions? Why or why not?

Readings:

- Caleb Yong, "Does Freedom of Speech Include Hate Speech?"

Injustice

Week 8: 10/14 (Fall Break) & 16

1. In what respects, if any, does our own society (now or in the past) fail to live up to Rawls's principles?

Readings:

- No new readings.

Third, Take-home Discussion Due 10/17 on Blackboard

Corrective Justice

Week 9: 10/21 & 23

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

Week 10: 10/28 & 30

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

Readings:

- Tommie Shelby

Racial Justice and Reparations: Applied, Corrective Justice

Week 11: 11/4 & 6

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. What is Darby's answer?
4. What is your answer?

Readings:

- Derrick Darby, excerpts

Short Paper due 11/10 on Blackboard

Week 12: 11/11 & 13

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 (now or in the past)?
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 it require reparations for those harmed by state sanctioned or supported racial discrimination, for example, in housing and education?
4. Does it require reparations for descendants of the Tulsa massacre? Why or why not?

Readings:

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

Week 13: 11/18 & 20

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: 12/2, 4, & 9

Central Questions:

1. What does corrective justice *in general* require, according to our best theory?
2. What is Boxill's theory of corrective justice?
3. What are some of its advantages?
4. Is Boxill's theory of corrective justice more plausible than Morris's?
5. Why or why not?

Readings:

- Bernard Boxill.

Fourth In-class Discussion Due 12/4

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