

PHIL 204: Ethics

King 327, Tu/Th 3:00-4:15

Professor Amy Berg

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Office: King 120A

Office Hours: Tuesdays 11-1 (or on Zoom by request); other times by appointment

Course Prerequisite: One previous philosophy course (or instructor consent)

Zoom for office hours: <https://oberlin.zoom.us/j/84559948719> (passcode: office)

What this course is about

Most of us have ideas about the answers to big moral questions—whether we should give money to charity, when it’s okay to have children, why cheating is wrong. But how do we know whether our answers to those moral questions are right? To solve this problem, philosophers have defended different ethical theories, ways we can systematically get the right answer to not just one but all our questions about morality.

In this course, we’ll discuss three very influential ethical theories: consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. We’ll talk about the arguments philosophers have made in favor of those theories, we’ll apply those theories to real-life issues, and we’ll assess criticisms of those theories. We’ll put each theory to the test in our own lives, trying them out and seeing whether they give us the right answers. We’ll conclude by asking whether those theories can really tell us what to do—what happens when being a good person conflicts with living a fulfilling life? Moral questions are complicated, and we won’t solve them all—but by the end of the course, you’ll be armed with the skills you need in order to decide how you ought to live your life.

By the end of this course, you will be able to

- Explain how each ethical theory we study determines the right thing to do
- Assess the arguments for and against each theory
- Compare the strengths and weaknesses of each theory
- Apply each theory to real-life situations
- Argue, in discussion and in writing, for the theory you think is the closest to getting the right answers
- Use that theory to make moral decisions in your own life

Course policies

What you’ll need to have

- You’ll need to have the readings. Complete each day’s assigned reading before coming to class, and bring your **hard copy** of the reading with you to class. We will be using one book and some other readings:
 - The book is *Introducing Ethics* (eds. Justin McBrayer and Peter Markie, Oxford University Press 2014, ISBN 978-0-19-979378-5). The book is available to rent or buy at the Bookstore and elsewhere, and you must get it as a hard copy (not an e-book). **There are many books with similar titles—please make sure you get the right one!**
 - The rest of the readings you will need are available in a packet; pick this packet up during business hours at my office during the first week of the semester.

- If you are having difficulty getting your own copy of the book (for any reason, including cost), please let me know as soon as possible, so I can make sure you have the resources you need to be successful in this class.
- You will also need access to Blackboard:
 - It's where I will post the most current version of the syllabus.
 - You'll turn in some of your work on Blackboard.
 - It's also where you can find links to the materials we will be using in class—handouts, assignment instructions, Zoom for remote office hours, and so on.
 - I encourage you to send me videos, articles, and anything else you come across that's relevant to our course, and I may post them to Blackboard so other students can see them too.

What you'll need to do

Assignments and assessment

Throughout this course, you will be putting the moral theories we are studying into practice, by spending a week living by each theory. In doing so, you'll reach a better understanding of the reasons in favor of and against each theory. By the end of the course, you'll be able to explain which theory you've come to think gets closest to getting it right. The assignments you'll be completing this semester are designed to help you complete this project. There are seven assignments, and (except in very rare circumstances) you must complete all of them in order to pass the course.

- **Guidebooks:** The readings for this course examine many facets of each ethical theory: what the theory says about right and wrong, why it says this, how it applies to real-life situations, and what criticisms it faces. As you prepare to live by each theory, you will need to keep these lessons from the readings in mind. These assignments, which you will complete partly in class and partly out of class, will ask you to use the readings and your notes from our discussions to create the guidebook (2-3 pages long) you'll need as you live by each theory. These guidebooks are due by 5 pm on October 29, December 3, and January 3.
- **Reflections:** During and after the week you're living by each theory, you will record, in 2-3 pages per assignment, what happened: what decisions you made and how you made those decisions. You will also analyze your decision-making: do you think that these decisions were the right ones? Why or why not? These reflections are due by the start of class on November 16, December 21, and January 15.
- **Final project:** Drawing on the readings, our discussions, and your guidebooks and reflections, your final project asks you to render a verdict. Which moral theory do you think is the closest to being correct, and why? How do you expect that this theory will guide your future decision-making? You'll include excerpts of your previous work, compare and contrast the experiences you had, and analyze the arguments we've studied to support your conclusion. This project is due on Blackboard by 9 pm on January 23.
- All assignments will be graded anonymously; you should put your T number, *not* your name, on them and submit them on Blackboard. Before you submit any assignments, you must sign and return the Honor Pledge.
- As you have seen, the assignments for this course build on each other: the reflections require you to use your guidebooks, and the final project requires you to include excerpts from your other written work. For that reason, **it is critically important that you keep all notes and assignments until you turn in your final project.**
- **Extension policy for written work:** It is also critically important that you turn in your assignments on time, since you will need to have completed some assignments in order to complete others. Assignments must be turned in at the time and date they are due. I am happy to consider requests for extensions if you ask me before the assignment is due. I generally approve extensions due to unforeseeable events (for example, a family or medical

emergency) that significantly affect your ability to complete assignments on time; I generally do not approve extensions due to foreseeable events (for example, work in other courses or extracurricular activities). If you turn in an assignment late, and you have not made prior arrangements with me, I will deduct three percent of your grade on an assignment if that assignment is turned in late on the day it's due and three percent for each day after that (so, for example, an assignment that would have gotten 100% if it were turned in on time on Tuesday would get 91% if turned in on Thursday).

- In this course, **your writing is a public act**. I will occasionally use anonymized and (sometimes) edited versions of your work in class and in future courses in order to generate discussion, share viewpoints, ask questions, and so on.

Participation

Philosophy is a collaborative, discussion-based discipline. Your writing and thinking will benefit from considering others' views, reactions to readings, and experiences living by these theories. And your classmates and I will benefit from hearing your take.

- I want you to come to class and participate, but it's more important for you to stay safe and healthy. **Do not come to class if you feel even a little bit sick!**
- That said, this class is discussion-based, and it's important to attend whenever you're able to and to participate when you attend. Your first **two absences** are free: you can miss those classes for any reason. If you're absent more than twice, I'll apply the same policy as for late work. If you miss class because of an unforeseeable event, and you communicate with me about that absence, I will generally excuse that absence; absences due to foreseeable events, or absences you don't communicate with me about in a timely way, will generally not be excused. **Absences because you're sick never count against you**, as long as you communicate with me in a timely way. You count as absent if you are not present when I take attendance, even if you show up later in the class period; you also count as absent if you leave early without checking in with me. You'll lose two percentage points from your participation grade for each unexcused absence (beyond your first two). If at any point in the semester, you believe you are in a situation for which I should make an exception to this policy, please talk with me outside of class.
- In order to receive the highest participation grade you can, come ready to make active, serious, charitable contributions to class discussion. To make sure our discussion is productive and includes a wide variety of voices, I may sometimes call on students at random. If you have to miss class, I will count active, serious, charitable visits to my office hours toward your participation grade. To help guide your participation, I will give you an evaluation at midsemester (separate from your midterm grade) of how you've done so far. When I grade participation, here's what I'm looking for:
 - *A range*: Your comments demonstrate that you've done the reading, you actively and positively participate in all group activities, you ask questions or offer comments at every class session, you listen to and respond to others, and/or you come to office hours at least a couple of times. You are never a distraction.
 - *B range*: Your comments demonstrate that you've usually done the reading, you participate in most group activities, you ask questions or offer comments sporadically, and/or you generally listen and respond to others. You are never a distraction.
 - *C range*: Your comments demonstrate a lack of familiarity with *B range*: Your comments demonstrate that you've usually done the reading, you participate in most group activities, you ask questions or offer comments sporadically, and/or you generally listen and respond to others. You are never a distraction.

- *C range:* Your comments demonstrate a lack of familiarity with the reading, you do not participate very actively in class (or else are a distraction), you talk over others, and/or you never come to office hours.
- *D or F range:* You either do not participate or are an active distraction in class, and you never come to office hours or communicate with me via email.
- Because philosophy is done best when it's done collaboratively, my goal is to create a space where productive conversations can happen. Research on classrooms and workplaces consistently supports the conclusion that, for most people, technology is a barrier to these productive conversations. (Ask me if you're curious about this research!) For that reason, **electronic devices (laptops, tablets, phones, etc.) are generally not allowed in class.** I will ask you to put these devices in your bag at the beginning of class and leave them there until the end of class. There are, however, exceptions to this rule. **If you need an electronic device in order to be successful in this course (because of a disability, a life situation, or some other reason), please speak with me during the first two weeks of the course.** If I give you permission to use technology, it's your responsibility to work to minimize your distractions to other students (a good way to do this is to sit in the back or to the side of the classroom, so that your screen will not be visible to others).

Here's how the work in this course contributes to your final grade:

- **Guidebooks:** 5% per guidebook; 15% overall
- **Reflections:** 10% per reflection; 30% overall
- **Final project:** 40%
- **Participation:** 15%

The grade scale is:

	A: 93-100%	A-: 90-92%
B+: 87-89%	B: 83-86%	B-: 80-82%
C+: 77-79%	C: 73-76%	C-: 70-72%
D+: 67-69%	D: 60-63%	D-: 60-62%
F: below 60%		

COVID-19 policies

- Stay healthy and keep others healthy! Follow the ObieSafe requirements at all times, inside and outside our classroom. **Do not come to class if you feel even a little bit sick.**
- Please wear your mask in the classroom at all times, unless and until Oberlin changes the mask policy.
- If you have to miss class for illness, I'll work with you to figure out what's best on a case-by-case basis. This may include joining our class meetings via Zoom, receiving extensions on your assignments, or even being excused from some assignments altogether.
- Some material and images in this course may be considered sensitive or interpreted as illegal outside of the United States (US). These materials are being presented and distributed for purposes of educational use in the US. They do not represent the views of Oberlin College and Conservatory. Materials in this course, including but not limited to PDFs and images of any kind, may not be downloaded, displayed, distributed, reproduced, published, transmitted, or broadcast (including and especially via any social media) outside of the educational framework of this course, without prior written permission of the faculty member. Class lectures and discussions may not be recorded or reproduced in any way (including screenshots), unless necessary to comply with approved accommodations.

What I'll need to do

My responsibilities in this course include:

- Making sure our discussions are productive. If at any point you're not feeling that our discussions are respectful and charitable, please come talk to me.
- Grading your work quickly and fairly. I will return all graded work no later than two weeks from the day you turn it in.
- Communicating with you over email.
 - My responsibility is to email you whenever there are time-sensitive announcements about this course; your responsibility is to check your Oberlin email (including your spam folder) every day.
 - I use Blackboard when I need to send announcements to the entire class. Replies to emails I send through Blackboard do not go to me, and I have no way to see them. **If you need to contact me over email, please make sure you're emailing my email address, aberg@oberlin.edu.**
 - Our emails to each other in this course are professional documents, and it is my and your responsibility to write them professionally. For tips on how to write a professional email, check the email rubric posted to Blackboard. I will respond to your email no later than 5 pm on the next business day; in the rare case I do not, please feel free to follow up with me after that.
- Holding office hours, which you can use to talk to me about course content, what you've missed if you have to miss class, and so on. (This semester, office hours will be in person by default, but I'm also happy to meet over Zoom—just let me know ahead of time.) I'm happy to discuss questions about assignments and to provide feedback on your work before you turn it in; if you want me to read a complete draft of an assignment, send it to me at least one week before it's due.

Some ways to succeed in this course

- I am committed to making sure that you can succeed in this course, regardless of whether you have a disability (visible or invisible). If you have a disability that may impact your work in this class and for which you may require accommodations, please see me and Disability Resources at the Center for Academic Success so that we may arrange appropriate accommodations. If you have questions, or if you need an accommodation of another type (athletic, religious, etc.), please let me know as soon as possible.
- **Every student is expected to adhere to the honor code.** This means in very general terms that you only submit work that is yours. More specifically, it means that you will not plagiarize; that is, you will not appropriate the work or ideas of someone else—whether written or not—without acknowledgement, using the conventionally agreed-on scholarly practices for quoting and citation, and that you will not cheat, fabricate, collaborate on a project that is meant to be done individually, or submit the same work for multiple classes or assignments without the prior approval of all instructors involved. While you are allowed and encouraged to ask for advice and help from the instructor, librarians, or official writing tutors, you are, in the end, to submit work produced by you. Some assignments may be collaborative in nature; those will be clearly identified as such. Everyone in the campus community is required to report all suspected violations of the honor code to the student honors committee. Following college-wide policy, you will sign a statement at the beginning of the semester to certify that you will adhere to the honor code. For more information, see the Academic Integrity section of the Dean of Students website (<https://www.oberlin.edu/dean-of-students/student-conduct/academic-integrity>).
- I encourage you to use the Writing Center (<https://www.oberlin.edu/arts-and-sciences/resources-and-support/wap>); appointments available at

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dGrwegnHC1Q0dkfxF228cdBB6zOviTLtjuOn910IU/RA/edit>) as you work on your assignments in this course.

- You are welcome and encouraged to come to my office hours or make an appointment with me whenever you want to talk about the course material, your assignments, or any other philosophy-related concerns you have.

Schedule of readings and assignments

Complete each day's assigned reading *before* coming to class. Readings ***with asterisks around their names*** are in the packet, which you should pick up at my office (King 120A) as soon as you can; all other readings are in *Introducing Ethics*. This schedule is provisional, and you are responsible for learning about any changes we make to it; you can always find the most current syllabus on Blackboard.

Date	Topic	Reading	Assignments
Tuesday 10/5	What are we doing in this course?	None	
Thursday 10/7	What is consequentialism?	McBrayer and Markie, "Introduction" (p. 192) AND Mill, "Utilitarianism"	
Tuesday 10/12	What is consequentialism?	Nielsen, "Against Moral Conservatism"	
Thursday 10/14	How do consequentialists make moral decisions?	***Rulli, "Preferring a Genetically-Related Child"***	
Tuesday 10/19	How do consequentialists make moral decisions?	Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"	
Thursday 10/21	How has consequentialism changed over time?	***Hooker, "Rule-Consequentialism"***	Guidebook and reflection assigned
Tuesday 10/26	What are some criticisms of consequentialism?	***Kapur, "Why It Is Wrong to Be Always Guided by the Best: Consequentialism and Friendship"***	
Thursday 10/28	What is it like to live as a consequentialist?	None (bring the readings and your guidebook draft to class)	
Friday 10/29			Guidebook due on Blackboard by 5 pm
9 AM MONDAY 11/1 - 9 AM MONDAY 11/8: LIVE AS A CONSEQUENTIALIST WEEK			
Tuesday 11/2	What is it like to live as a consequentialist?	None (bring the readings and your guidebook to class)	
Thursday 11/4	What is deontology?	McBrayer and Markie, "Introduction" (p. 239) AND Kant, "The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals"	

Tuesday 11/9	What is deontology?	***O'Neill, "A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics"***	
Thursday 11/11	How do deontologists make moral decisions?	***Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil"***	
Tuesday 11/16	How do deontologists make moral decisions?	***Carol Hay, "The Obligation to Resist Oppression"***	Reflection due in hard copy at the start of class
Thursday 11/18	How has deontology changed over time?	Ross, "What Makes Right Acts Right"	Guidebook and reflection assigned
NO CLASS TUESDAY 11/23 - THURSDAY 11/25: THANKSGIVING BREAK			
Tuesday 11/30	What are some criticisms of deontology?	***Mills, "Kant's Untermenschen"***	
Thursday 12/2	What is it like to live as a deontologist?	None (bring the readings and your guidebook draft to class)	
Friday 12/3			Guidebook due on Blackboard by 5 pm
9 AM MONDAY 12/6 - 9 AM MONDAY 12/13: LIVE AS A DEONTOLOGIST WEEK			
Tuesday 12/7	What is it like to live as a deontologist?	None (bring the readings and your guidebook to class)	
Thursday 12/9	What is virtue ethics?	McBrayer and Markie, "Introduction" (p. 306) AND Aristotle, "Virtue"	
Tuesday 12/14	What is virtue ethics?	Hursthouse, "Aristotle on Virtue"	
Thursday 12/16	How do virtue ethicists make moral decisions?	***Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion"***	
Tuesday 12/21	How has virtue ethics changed over time?	Held, "The Ethics of Care as Moral Theory"	Reflection due in hard copy at the start of class; guidebook and reflection assigned; final paper assigned
NO CLASS THURSDAY 12/23 - THURSDAY 12/30: WINTER BREAK			
Monday 1/3			Guidebook due on Blackboard by 5 pm
5 PM MONDAY 1/3 - 5 PM MONDAY 1/10: LIVE AS A VIRTUE ETHICIST WEEK			
Tuesday 1/4 ON ZOOM	What is it like to live as a virtue ethicist?	None (bring the readings and your guidebook to class)	

Thursday 1/6 ON ZOOM	What are some criticisms of virtue ethics?	***Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error"***	
Tuesday 1/11 ON ZOOM	Is it bad to be too moral?	Wolf, "Moral Saints"	
Thursday 1/13 ON ZOOM	Are we wrong about what morality is?	Nietzsche, "Master and Slave Moralities"	
Saturday 1/15 ON ZOOM	Wrap-up	None	Reflection due on Blackboard by the start of class
Sunday 1/23			Final project due on Blackboard at 9 pm