

# PHIL 306: Contemporary Ethical Theory

Craig-Lee 112, Mo/Th 12:00-1:20

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**Office:** Gaige 225

**Office Hours:** Tuesdays 2:00-4:00 (or by appointment)

## 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, what it means to respect other people. But how do we know whether our answers to those moral questions are right? To solve this problem, philosophers have tried to develop 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 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
- 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

- The readings. Complete each day’s assigned reading before coming to class, and bring your copy of the reading with you to class. We will be using one book and one course reader:
  - 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 RIC Bookstore and elsewhere. **There are many books with similar titles—please make sure you get the right one!**
  - The rest of the readings you will need are collected in a course reader, which is only available at the Bookstore.
  - We will be using the book and reader regularly in class, and because of this course’s technology policy (see below), you will need a hard copy of both (not an e-book or online PDFs).
  - If you are having difficulty getting your own copy of the book or the reader (for affordability or for any other reason), 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 every piece of paper I hand out in class, including a current version of the syllabus, handouts, and assignment instructions.
- You are welcome 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.
- You'll use Blackboard too--it's where you'll turn in your written work for this course, and it's where I'll post feedback on that work.

## **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. They come in three types.

- **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 moral problems, 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 on Blackboard by 5 pm on October 1, October 29, and November 26.
- **Reflection assignments:** In order to know which theory is closest to correct, it helps to try them out. For each of the ethical theories we are studying, you will live like someone who accepts that theory. You will then record, in 3-4 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 on Blackboard by the start of class on October 10, November 7, and December 5.
- **Final project:** Drawing on your previous written work for this class, 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 5 pm on December 17.
- All assignments will be graded anonymously; you should put your student ID number, *not* your name, on them. Submit all assignments via Blackboard, where they will be checked using SafeAssign. **You must turn in all assignments in order to pass the course.**
- 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 by the start of class on the day they are due. I am happy to consider requests for extensions if you ask me before the assignment is due. 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 the day

it's due any time after the start of class and three percent for each day after that that the assignment is late (so, for example, an assignment that would have gotten 100% if it were turned in on time on Monday would get 91% if turned in on Wednesday).

- 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 hearing others' views, reactions to readings, and experiences living by these theories. And your classmates and I will benefit from hearing your take.

- To participate, you need to attend. You are allowed **two absences**, no explanation needed, over the course of the semester. If you're absent more than twice, it will become more and more difficult for you to keep up with the work, and we'll lose your voice in our discussions. For that reason, I will deduct one percent from your participation grade for each additional absence, unless you receive prior permission or can provide documentation which I believe justifies excusing an additional absence.
- To show respect for your peers and for me, avoid coming late to class or leaving early. 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 prior permission. 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.
- But participation is more than just attendance! In order to receive full participation points, 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 are not comfortable participating in 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 assessment at midsemester of how you've done so far. When I grade participation, here's what I'm looking for:
  - *A range*: You attend all (or almost all) class sessions, 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 least every other class session, and/or you come to office hours at least a couple of times.
  - *B range*: You attend most class sessions, your comments demonstrate that you've usually done the reading, you participate in most group activities, you ask questions or offers comments sporadically. You are never a distraction.
  - *C range*: You attend only occasionally, your comments demonstrate a lack of familiarity with the reading, you do not participate very actively in class (or else are a distraction), and you never come to office hours.
  - *D or F range*: You rarely if ever attends class, 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.
- ***Technology policy***: 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). If you need to use a RIC computer to print, view documents, or upload your assignments to Blackboard, there are computers available at Adams Library.

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

- **Guidebooks:** 5% per guidebook; 15% overall
- **"Live like a" 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%		

## What I'll need to do

My responsibilities in this course include:

- Working with you to make sure you have what you need to succeed. This may include helping you access the readings (see above), talking with you about extensions (see above), and making sure you have the accommodations you need to succeed (below). I know you've got other things going on in your life besides this course, but I can't know what those other things are unless you tell me. I strongly encourage you to communicate early and often with me about your situation.
- 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 RIC email (including your spam folder) every day.
  - Please note: 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@ric.edu](mailto:aberg@ric.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.

## 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 need an accommodation under the ADA

and/or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, RIC'S Disability Services Center (Fogarty 137, 456-2776) is here to work with you. To receive accommodations for this class, visit Disability Services to receive an accommodation form and meet with me during the first two weeks of the course to discuss how we can implement them. (If something comes up over the course of the semester, it's your responsibility to let me know as soon as you can.) If you have questions, or if you need an accommodation of another type (athletic, religious, etc.), please let me know as soon as possible.

- **Academic honesty is critical to your success in this course.** In order to learn in this course, and to show mastery of the subject, the work you turn in must be the product of your own effort. That doesn't mean you can't get help—from me, the Writing Center, OASIS, and other resources—but this help cannot be a replacement for your own careful thinking, writing, and revising. The following behaviors violate RIC policies:
  - **Cheating** includes receiving unauthorized assistance on an exam or assignment.
  - **Plagiarism** involves the theft of intellectual property. The college policy against plagiarism bans word-for-word plagiarism, patchwork plagiarism, unacknowledged paraphrasing, and unacknowledged facts. I also do not allow self-plagiarism (that is, you may not turn in work you have written for a previous class).
  - **Other dishonest behaviors** include anything else that provides an unfair advantage over other students or that sabotages another student's efforts.
  - I am happy to talk to you if you have any questions about academic integrity, or you can consult the Academic Standards section of the RIC Student Handbook (<http://www.ric.edu/studentlife/documents/RICStudentHandbook.pdf>). If you have questions as you're completing your work for this class, ask! Before you've turned your work in, I can help you to make sure that your work meets RIC's and my academic-honesty standards. Once you've turned your work in, you will not be allowed to redo it if it turns out that you haven't met those standards.
  - If I find that you have violated academic-integrity standards, the minimal consequences will be a zero for the assignment, and you will not be allowed to redo it. Additional consequences may include your failing the class and/or being brought before the Academic Integrity Board. I will also report you to the Vice President of Academic Affairs.
- There are lots of resources at RIC to support you during your time here. OASIS (Adams Library, lower level; <http://www.ric.edu/oasis/>) is here to help you succeed academically. Learning For Life (Adams Library, level 1; <http://www.ric.edu/learningforlife/>) can connect you to resources on- and off-campus to support you with non-academic needs you may have while you're at RIC. Project ExCEL (Roberts 303; <http://www.ric.edu/esl/>) has a variety of programs and classes for multilingual students. If you'd like information on how to access and use these resources, please don't hesitate to talk with me.
- 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**

**[Readings \*\*\*with asterisks around their names\*\*\* are in the course reader; all other readings are in *Introducing Ethics*]**

**Monday, August 26:** What are we doing in this course?

**Reading:** None

**Thursday, August 29:** What is it like to live by a code?

**Reading:** \*\*\*Evans, selections from *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*\*\*\*

**Can we figure out the right thing to do by looking at the consequences of our actions?**

**Monday, September 2:** LABOR DAY – NO CLASS

**Thursday, September 5:** What is consequentialism?

**Reading:** McBrayer and Markie, “Introduction” (p. 192) AND Mill, “Utilitarianism”

**Monday, September 9:** What is consequentialism?

**Reading:** Mill, “Utilitarianism”

**Thursday, September 12:** What is consequentialism?

**Reading:** Nielsen, “Against Moral Conservatism”

**Monday, September 16:** How do consequentialists make moral decisions?

**Reading:** Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”

**Thursday, September 19:** How do consequentialists make moral decisions?

**Reading:** \*\*\*Rulli, “Preferring a Genetically-Related Child”\*\*\*

**Monday, September 23:** How has consequentialism changed over time?

**Reading:** Brandt, “Some Merits of One Form of Rule-Utilitarianism”

**Thursday, September 26:** What are some criticisms of consequentialism?

**Reading:** Thomson, “Turning the Trolley”

**Consequentialism guidebook and reflection assignments distributed in class**

**LIVE AS A CONSEQUENTIALIST WEEK**

**Monday, September 30:** What is it like to live as a consequentialist?

**Reading:** None (bring the readings to class)

**Consequentialism guidebook due by 5 pm Tuesday, October 1**

**Thursday, October 3:** What is it like to live as a consequentialist?

**Reading:** None (bring the readings and your guidebook to class)

**Can we figure out the right thing to do by using a set of rules?**

**Monday, October 7:** What is deontology?

**Reading:** McBrayer and Markie, “Introduction” (p. 239) AND Kant, “The Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals” (optional: \*\*\*Shafer-Landau, “The Kantian Perspective: Fairness and Justice”\*\*\*)

**Thursday, October 10:** What is deontology?

**Reading:** \*\*\*Shafer-Landau, “The Kantian Perspective: Autonomy and Respect”\*\*\*

**Consequentialism reflection due**

**Monday, October 14:** COLUMBUS DAY – NO CLASS

**MAKE-UP DAY Wednesday, October 16:** How do deontologists make moral decisions?

**Reading:** Hill, “Self-Regarding Suicide: A Modified Kantian View”

**Thursday, October 17:** How do deontologists make moral decisions?

**Reading:** Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion”

**Monday, October 21:** How has deontology changed over time?

**Reading:** Ross, “What Makes Right Acts Right”

**Thursday, October 24:** What are some criticisms of deontology?

**Reading:** \*\*\*Stocker, “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories”\*\*\*

**Deontology guidebook and reflection assignments distributed in class**

**LIVE AS A DEONTOLOGIST WEEK**

**Monday, October 28:** What is it like to live as a deontologist?

**Reading:** None (bring the readings to class)

**Deontology guidebook due by 5 pm Tuesday, October 29**

**Thursday, October 31:** What is it like to live as a deontologist?

**Reading:** None (bring the readings and your guidebook to class)

**Can we figure out the right thing to do by figuring out what it is to be a good person?**

**Monday, November 4:** What is virtue ethics?

**Reading:** McBrayer and Markie, "Introduction" (p. 306) AND Aristotle, "Virtue"

**Thursday, November 7:** What is virtue ethics?

**Reading:** Hursthouse, "Aristotle on Virtue"

**Deontology reflection due**

**Monday, November 11:** NO CLASS – VETERANS DAY

**Thursday, November 14:** How do virtue ethicists make moral decisions?

**Reading:** \*\*\*Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion"\*\*\*

**Monday, November 18:** How has virtue ethics changed over time?

**Reading:** Held, "The Ethics of Care as Moral Theory"

**Thursday, November 21:** What are some criticisms of virtue ethics?

**Reading:** \*\*\*Harman, "Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology: Virtue Ethics and the Fundamental Attribution Error"\*\*\*

**Virtue ethics guidebook and reflection assignments distributed in class**

**LIVE AS A VIRTUE ETHICIST WEEK**

**Monday, November 25:** What is it like to live as a virtue ethicist?

**Reading:** None (bring the readings to class)

**Virtue ethics guidebook due by 5 pm Tuesday, November 26**

**Thursday, November 28:** THANKSGIVING – NO CLASS

**Should we care about doing the right thing?**

**Monday, December 2:** Is it bad to be too moral?

**Reading:** Wolf, "Moral Saints"

**Final project instructions distributed in class**

**Thursday, December 5:** Are we wrong about what morality is?

**Reading:** Nietzsche, "Master and Slave Moralities"

**Virtue ethics reflection due**

**Monday, December 9:** What have we learned about how to live?

**Reading:** None

**Finals week**

**Final project due Tuesday, December 17 at 5 pm**