

# Misericordia University Philosophy Department

## Course Information:

**Course Number:** PHL 200-01  
**Course Title:** Ethical Theory  
**Course Credits:** Three (3)  
**Semester:** Spring 2021  
**Prerequisites:** PHL 100 or 151  
**Format:** Online, Asynchronous

**Faculty:** Jordan Rodgers  
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**Office Hours:** By appointment  
(through Blackboard Collaborate Ultra)

**Course Description:** This course investigates the basic issues and problems encountered in the field of ethical theory. These issues include the prescriptive/descriptive distinction, the motivation for morality, virtue vs. rule-based ethics, deontological vs. consequentialist theories, moral psychology, and meta-ethical analysis. As a philosophical reflection upon our moral experience, special emphasis is placed upon rational justification for the stances we take in these issues.

One of the most interesting features of human life is a particular way in which we evaluate our actions, and the actions of others. We say that they are “right” or “wrong,” that we “ought” to have done this or avoided doing that. Perhaps most interestingly, we seem often to disagree about these evaluations. Should I give money to the homeless when they ask? If I get pregnant, ought I to bring the fetus to term no matter what, since it is a human life, or is it acceptable to abort if I am not in a good position to care for a baby? Is eating animal meat acceptable, given that the way in which we produce it causes serious agony for millions of animals? If a hospital has more COVID-19 patients who need ventilators than they have ventilators, how should they decide who lives and who dies? These are *moral* or *ethical* questions (for us, these words will be largely interchangeable), and they are among the most difficult we face in life. We will deal with some of these directly, but our primary focus will be on taking a step back from the questions themselves, and trying to understand what it could mean to deal with them properly. What does it mean for an action to be right or wrong? When we disagree about what ethics requires of us, are we just stating different preferences, or does one of us have to be correct? Is it possible to be perfectly ethical? Should we *want* to be perfectly ethical? These are questions of moral philosophy, or “ethical theory.”

After a few initial weeks of introduction to some of the basic ideas and questions of moral philosophy, we will look at the three most prominent historical approaches to it – the *deontological* theory of Immanuel Kant, the *utilitarianism* of John Stuart Mill, and Aristotle’s *virtue ethics*. After that, we will read a more contemporary and less theoretical attempt to grapple with these problems (by Todd May), and look a little more closely at some particular, applied ethical problems related to distant others, animals, and politics.

**Required Texts (listed in order of use in class):**

- Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, tr. James W. Ellington (Hackett, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, 1993)
- John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher (Hackett, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2002)
- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Lesley Brown (Oxford World’s Classics, 2009)
- Todd May, *A Decent Life: Morality for the Rest of Us* (University of Chicago Press, 2019)
- PDFs of all other class readings will be provided on Blackboard

These editions should be easy to find at Amazon and other online vendors. The Kant, Mill, and Aristotle books are available in lots of editions, but please do get these, in **physical** copies. In course lectures and discussions, I’ll frequently refer to page numbers, which may not be the same with e-books. I’ve worked hard to make sure the cost of the physical texts is not too high – as I look now new copies of all 4 run about \$60 on Amazon. Cheaper used copies (at least of the Kant, Mill, and Aristotle books) should be relatively easy to find.

**Course Objectives:**

<b>Course Objective:</b>	<b>After completion of this course, the student will:</b>	<b>Assessment Method</b>	<b>Program Learning Outcome</b>	<b>University Learning Outcome (as applicable)</b>
1. Evaluation of philosophical arguments	Be able to understand and evaluate philosophical arguments both in terms of logical structure and broader personal/social relevance	-Assigned readings/media  -Participation in discussion forums (especially in the role of discussion leader)	PLO #1: Develop and apply the skills necessary to critically analyze philosophical and ethical arguments.	N/A
2. Writing about philosophical arguments	Be able to write coherently and persuasively about ethical topics of philosophical concern	-Participation in discussion forums  -Writing assignments (reflective blog posts, essay, final exam)	PLO #2: Develop and apply the skills necessary to effectively write about philosophical arguments.	N/A
3. Understand the main figures/approaches in the history of moral philosophy	Be able to speak/write in an informed manner about the major historical approaches to the field	-Assigned readings/media	PLO #3: Understand the main historical figures and movements in philosophy.	N/A

## Course Delivery:

### Structure of the Course

This is an online, asynchronous course, structured into 13 “Units.” The Spring 2021 semester has 14 weeks, and so we will do one Unit per week until the final week (April 26-30), which will be a review period with no new assignments.

Each Unit will have the same basic elements. They will all be posted before the end of the day on the Sunday before the corresponding week. They are as follows:

- Information on Readings – this will consist either in page numbers (if the reading for the week is in one of our textbooks), or links to other PDFs/articles.
- Lecture Videos – these will be narrated powerpoint presentations, recorded over Blackboard Collaborate Ultra. Typically, it will be best to do the relevant readings *first* before watching the corresponding lecture video.
- Recommended media – these will be outside media of various kinds (blogs, articles, podcasts, videos, etc.) that are relevant to the week’s topic. Anything marked “Recommended” is not required for the course, but do check these out if the week’s topic interests you personally.
- Discussion Forums – these will be small-group forums for discussing the topics of the week respectfully and productively with your peers. You will post (at least) once before noon on Wednesdays, and once before 5PM on Fridays. See below for more details.
- Quiz – each Unit culminates in a quiz (primarily multiple choice or true/false questions) covering the material of that Unit. You will need to complete these before Sunday of the week at midnight. Again, see below for more details.
- Due Date Reminders – these will be reminders of upcoming due dates for reflective blog posts and the essay. For details on these assignments, see below.

### Grading Elements

Your performance in the class will be assessed based on five (5) components: participation in small-group discussion forums, Unit quizzes, reflective blog posts, an essay, and a final exam. They are all explained below:

Small Group Discussion Forums (20%) – I will be splitting you all up into smaller groups for online discussion. **Every student is required to post at least twice** to discussion forums every week. **At least one of these posts must be posted before noon on Wednesday, and both must be posted before 5PM on Friday.** Posts should be at least one paragraph (3-5 sentences). Shorter posts are obviously allowed, but won’t count toward your required total for the week. These are minimums, and you should all feel free to participate more if you want. And you should want to, not just because it’s fun to discuss tough philosophical questions, but also because the material we’ll cover in class is difficult, and talking through it with your peers will really help you understand it. Ask your group questions if you’re struggling, and try to help others if they have questions. And feel free to engage in arguments and disagreements – this is what philosophy is all about, as we shall see. But make sure to keep your discussions **civil and respectful**.

I'll contribute in two ways: **first**, my lecture videos will include questions/issues you might want to talk about in discussion forums. But you don't need to, if your group finds something else more worth talking about. **Second**, I'll jump into the actual discussions from time to time myself, especially if students have questions and their fellow group members are struggling to answer. I'll keep a light touch, since these are primarily for you to discuss with each other, but I'll also make sure to intervene if there is misinformation or if group members aren't staying civil and respectful.

Quizzes (10%) – At the end of every Unit, there will be a brief quiz to test your retention of the key information from that Unit. Quizzes will be 10 questions long, with predominantly multiple choice and true/false questions. You will need to score 8/10 to pass the quiz; anything less counts as a failing grade. Each quiz is worth 1% of your final grade. There will be 13 total quizzes, so you will only need to pass 10 out of the 13 in order to get the full 10% of your grade. Quizzes are due **the Sunday of the Unit's week, before 11:59 PM** (see schedule below).

Reflective Blog Posts (25%) – This assignment asks you to process what you've learned in specific Units in the course by writing a minimum 500-word blog post about the Unit. The format of the paper is the same as a blog entry, that is to say it can be informal, written in first-person, and you do NOT have to worry about including proper citations. There are a number of ways to do this well. Pick out a quotation from the reading you find meaningful, and say why. Try to isolate what you think is the most important idea of the Unit content, and say why it's important. Or talk about an aspect of the content that was troubling, or challenging, or enlightening, and say why. Try to compare the content of this Unit with the content of past Units, exploring possible connections or contradictions. (Doing this last one will likely help you in preparing for the final; see below.) Feel free to incorporate and discuss pictures/videos or links to other websites in your posts, just as a blogger would. You can even submit this assignment as a 4-7 minute vlog (video log) if you're interested (though if you want to do this you should alert me in advance). Try to have fun with these, and (as in a real blog), don't hesitate to make them personal. I'll be in touch soon with a rubric explaining how these will be graded.

You must submit 5 such blog posts, worth 5% of your final grade each. There will be a blog post due **every other Sunday, before 11:59 PM** (see schedule below), at which time you can submit blog posts on either (or both) of the previous two Units. You should be done with blog posts by the end of Unit 10, after which our writing focus will shift to the essay.

Essay (20%) – You will be required to write one formal, argumentative essay, of 1500-2000 words. It will be due on **Sunday, Apr. 25 before 11:59 PM**. You will also have the opportunity to submit a rough draft in advance of the due date, and receive constructive criticism for your revisions. I will have more to say about the topic and format of the paper, and the rubric for its grading, when the due date is closer.

Final Exam (25%) – The final exam will be up to you to complete at any time during the final exam period. The exam will be predominantly made up of essay questions, which ask you to reflect back on the course as a whole and make connections between Units. You will be able to consult any course material or notes you wish while you take the final. Again, I'll have more to say about specifics when we get closer to exam week.

## Evaluation Method

<i>Item</i>	<i>Amount</i>
Small Group Discussion Participation	20%
Unit Quizzes	10%
Reflective Blog Posts	25%
Essay	20%
Final Exam	25%
<b>TOTAL:</b>	100%

## Grading System:

A 94-100      A- 90-93      B+ 87-89  
B 84-86      B- 80-83      C+ 77-79  
C 74-77      C- 70-73      D 60-69  
F less than 60

## Course and Academic Policies:

All Misericordia University Courses follow standard academic policies, described [here](#), or on the myMU portal under the Students tab. Policies include: Credit Hour Statement, Disability Statement, Tutorial Assistance, Laptop Policies, Equipment requirements and support. Credit hour statements are specific to course format.

Students are awarded 3 (three) credits for this course requiring a minimum of 42 hours of classroom instruction or equivalent activities as set forth by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PA Code 31.21b.) The online course will include (roughly, per week) 2 hours of instruction via lecture videos (narrated powerpoint presentations), .5 hours of student participation in small group discussion forums, and .5 hours for the taking of Unit quizzes. This course meets online for 14 weeks (i.e., the full semester). To ensure that course objectives and academic standards are met, students should expect to participate in a minimum of 2 hours outside of class time for every one hour of instructor facilitated instruction in learning activities such as discussion board posts, on-line quizzes, writing assignments, or other activities as deemed appropriate by the faculty and the philosophy department.

## Tentative Schedule:

**\*NOTE: Please also make sure to check the table of contents of the Units themselves, where all that is required of you will be clearly explained. Those Units will be always be posted before Monday morning of the corresponding week. \***

Unit	Dates (MTWThF)	Description	Key Readings/ Due Dates
<b>1</b>	Jan. 25-29	Introduction to Ethical Theory – What is it? What does Philosophy Have to Contribute?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Read syllabus carefully</li> <li>-James Rachels, “What is Morality?”</li> <li>-David Foster Wallace, “This is Water” (video)</li> <li><b>-Ethics Questionnaire (ungraded) due Tuesday, Jan. 26 before 11:59 PM</b></li> <li><b>-Quiz 1 due Sunday, Jan. 31 before 11:59 PM</b></li> </ul>
<b>2</b>	Feb. 1-5	Is Morality for Chumps? The Problem of Moral Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine”</li> <li>-Selections from Plato, <i>Republic</i> (books I-II)</li> <li>-Bernard Williams, “The Amoralist”</li> <li><b>-Quiz 2 and Reflective Blog Post 1 due Sunday, Feb. 7 before 11:59 PM</b></li> </ul>
<b>3</b>	Feb. 8-12	Do ethical questions have right answers? Objectivity, Relativism and Confidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism”</li> </ul>

Unit	Dates (MTWThF)	Description	Key Readings/ Due Dates
			-David Enoch, "Why I Am an Objectivist about Ethics (And You Are Too)" -Mary Midgely, "Trying Out One's New Sword" -Kwame Anthony Appiah, "What Will Future Generations Condemn Us For?" <b>-Quiz 3 due Sunday, Feb. 14 before 11:59 PM</b>
4	Feb. 15-19	Utilitarianism I: Bringing about Good Consequences, Avoiding Bad Ones	-Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> , pp. 1-26 (chapters I-II) -Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" <b>-Quiz 4 and Reflective Blog Post 2 due Sunday, Feb. 21 before 11:59 PM</b>
5	Feb. 22-26	Utilitarianism: For and Against	-Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> , pp. 27-41 (chapters III-IV) -Bernard Williams, "Against Utilitarianism" -Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" <b>-Quiz 5 due Sunday, Feb. 28 before 11:59 PM</b>
6	Mar. 1-5	Kantianism: Will and Duty	-Kant, <i>Grounding</i> , pp. 1-17 (preface and first section) <b>- Quiz 6 and Reflective Blog Post 3 due Sunday, Mar. 7 before 11:59 PM</b>
7	Mar. 8-12	Kantianism: Universal Laws, Means and Ends	-Kant, <i>Grounding</i> , pp. 23-33, 35-37

Unit	Dates (MTWThF)	Description	Key Readings/ Due Dates
			-selections from Rae Langton, "Duty and Desolation"  <b>-Quiz 7 due Sunday, Mar. 14 before 11:59 PM</b>
8	Mar. 15-19	Aristotle's virtue ethics: Humanity and Happiness	-Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , pp. 3-22 (Book I)  <b>-Quiz 8 and Reflective Blog Post 4 due Sunday, Mar. 21 before 11:59 PM</b>
9	Mar. 22-26	Aristotle's virtue ethics: The Virtues	-Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> (pp. 23-37, 192-198)  <b>-Quiz 9 due Sunday, Mar. 28 before 11:59 PM</b>
10	Mar. 29-Apr. 2	Altruism and "Decency"	-May, <i>A Decent Life</i> , pp. vii-viii, 1-69 (preface and chapters 1-2)  <b>-Quiz 10 and Reflective Blog Post 5 due Sunday, Apr. 4 before 11:59 PM</b>
11	Apr. 5-9	Do We Have Obligations to People We Don't Know?	-May, <i>A Decent Life</i> , pp. 71-106 (chapter 3)  <b>-Quiz 11 due Sunday, Apr. 11 before 11:59 PM</b>
12	Apr. 12-16	Do We Have Obligations to Non-Human Animals?	-May, <i>A Decent Life</i> , pp. 107-136 (chapter 4)  -David Foster Wallace, "Consider the Lobster"  <b>-Quiz 12 due Sunday, Apr. 18 before 11:59 PM</b>



Unit	Dates (MTWThF)	Description	Key Readings/ Due Dates
13	Apr. 19-23	Morality and Politics	<p>-May, <i>A Decent Life</i>, pp. 137-193 (chapter 5 and conclusion)</p> <p>-Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail"</p> <p><b>-Quiz 13 due Sunday, Apr. 25 before 11:59 PM</b></p> <p><b>-Final Draft of Essay due Sunday, Apr. 25 before 11:59 PM</b></p>
Review	Apr. 26-30	Review	-No new readings
Exam Week	May 6-12	Final Exam	<b>-Asynchronous, Open-Note Final Exam due Wednesday, May 12 before 5:00 PM</b>