

# PHIL 207: The Foundations of Ethics

Fall 2019, College of the Holy Cross

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## Contact Information

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Office hours: Mondays 2–4pm and Wednesdays 2–3pm, or by appointment on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays

## Course Information

*Class meeting times and location*

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, 1:00–1:50pm in Smith Hall 210 (*not* Smith Laboratories)

*Email Policy*

The best way to get in touch with me is by email. However, it's inefficient to conduct substantive philosophical discussion over email, so please come see me if you have substantive questions. Email is fine for logistical inquiries. But:

*Do not email me to ask a question that is already answered on the syllabus! It will make me grumpy. So if you have a question, check the syllabus first.*

*Office Hours*

Please come see me at office hours if you have questions or need help! My number one goal is for you to learn, and the material is difficult, so don't feel you need to go it alone. As a matter of policy, I do not read drafts of essays. However, I'm more than happy to talk to you about your essay at any stage of the process—if you are deciding which prompt to choose, if you have a vague idea, if you have an outline, etc. I'm also happy to answer questions about course material or go over things again that you are still unsure about.

Some people are nervous about going to office hours because they are unsure of themselves or are embarrassed when they don't understand something. Please don't let this be a barrier! I am a nice person and I just want to help you. So come see me if you need help or if you just want to talk.

I have listed my regular office hours above, but if you can't make those times, send me an email—but not the night before you would like to meet: I need a few days notice.

#### *Attendance policy*

Attendance at every class meeting is mandatory. I do this not to be obnoxious but because coming to class consistently is very important. How will you learn otherwise? Class time is essential not only to listen to what I have to say but also for you to ask questions and offer ideas and for us to discuss and learn together. Be there or be square.

For more information on the college's excused absence policy, see:

<https://www.holycross.edu/support-and-resources/office-registrar/policies>

## Course Description

This course is an exploration of some topics in normative ethics and meta-ethics. Ethics is the philosophical study of what we ought to do (and how we can live good lives). Normative ethics attempts to formulate our pre-theoretic ideas about which kinds of things are right and wrong into systematic principles which attempt to explain what makes all right actions right. We shall compare several of these theories, with a focus on what they take the fundamental moral concept to be and how they conceive of reasoning about what to do. Next, we will turn to meta-ethics, which is concerned with the status of theories in normative ethics; it is concerned with questions like: Are these theories true and false? If one is true, then must the others be false? And so on.

The material we will cover is fascinating but it is also quite difficult. Many of the texts you will be asked to read are difficult to understand. Please don't despair! I'm here to help. That said, this course will be difficult. That is on purpose. It is designed to stretch your ability to think about complex and abstract topics so that you can grow as a student of philosophy and as a critical thinker. You will almost certainly not do well unless you really put in the effort. If you do, though, I think that you will find the course rewarding.

There are no assigned books for this course; all assigned readings will be posted in electronic format on the course Moodle page. I expect you to carefully read *all* of the assigned texts. I have put a lot of work into selecting things that are interesting and rewarding, and you simply cannot get the maximum from this course without doing the readings. If you don't, you are doing yourself a disservice: you have invested time and money to be here, so get the most out of that investment by giving this course your best effort.

## Grading and Assignments

*Homework:*  $7 \times 5\%$  each = 35% total

Each homework assignment will consist of several questions or exercises that are designed to test your understanding of the readings or one of the critical thinking skills we are developing in this class.

*First writing assignment: 10%*

The first writing assignment for this course will be a short one: roughly 400–700 words.

*Second writing assignment: 20%*

The second paper will build upon the first and will be a bit longer, around 800–1000 words.

*Third writing assignment: 25%*

The final paper will be the culmination of work throughout the term, and will be around 1000–1500 words.

*Attendance: 10%*

Attendance at every class meeting is mandatory (this is for your own good). Up to two unexcused absences will be ignored, but more than that and points will be deducted.

All assignments will be submitted electronically through Moodle. (I'll explain how to do this in class.) There will be no final exam for this course; instead, you will have a final writing assignment that is due on the final exam date.

## Course Policies

### *Respect*

I expect you all to be respectful of me, and one another, and I consider it my duty to be respectful of you. One thing that this means is that I ask you to refrain from chit-chat with your classmates during class. It is very distracting to me and to the people around you, not to mention that if you are talking with one another, you aren't listening to what is going on in the class.

The requirement that you respect me and one another also means that you must not interrupt, speak over, or shout down other people in the class (or me). Philosophy (and academic investigation in general) requires a relatively dispassionate, rational engagement with the ideas and arguments of others—both living and dead. The careful but critical evaluation of ideas, arguments, and theories is essential and will be encouraged; insulting, condescending to, or otherwise attacking individuals in this class for their beliefs, views, theories, or for any other reason, will be quashed. Please remember to be courteous, humble, and open-minded.

*Don't assume that other people are morons and that you know everything.*

### *Handouts*

At each class I will distribute a handout with an outline for the day's class and some important points that I will cover. *I will not upload these handouts to Moodle* so the only way to get a copy is to come to class or to come to office hours. I do this to provide an extra incentive for you to come to class.

It also serves a second purpose. Everyone learns differently but many people can find it helpful to make some notes during class. I am happy for people to take notes, as long as they are on paper—see the policy on technology below. For this reason, I have formatted the handouts with plenty of white space around the edges in which to write down questions or thoughts or make other annotations of the handout. You are also welcome to make notes in a (paper) notebook or on a piece of paper with a writing instrument of your choice.

### *Technology*

At the beginning of each class, I will ask everyone to put away all technological devices, including phones, laptops, and tablets. I'm not doing this to be mean, but rather to help you: scientific studies have demonstrated that, in general, students who do not have a laptop or phone in front of them during class learn more than those who do. This makes good sense because laptops and phones (and tablets) provide many opportunities for distraction. Learning requires focused attention. So:

*Phones, computers, and tablets must remain in your bag during class.*

I don't want to see them even sitting on your desk.

If for some reason you need to take notes on a computer because you cannot do so on paper, that is fine—but you need to let me know this as soon as possible. Note that being able to type faster than you hand-write is *not* a sufficient reason to being granted an exception to the no-technology policy.

### *Late Work*

It is important that you learn to produce work on time—in case this isn't already obvious, completing your assigned work on a set schedule, or for a set deadline, is a feature of succeeding in pretty much any sort of employment (and many other things besides). This is but one reason to insist that you turn in your writing assignments by the deadline (barring illness or other legitimate excuse, of course). Late assignments will lose 1/3 of a letter grade for each day (including weekend days and holidays) after the deadline *for up to seven days*. After that, the assignment will receive a grade of zero.

The late penalty for homework assignments is 1% per day, so after five days late you will be at zero points.

If you would like to request an extension (which may or may not be granted) please get in touch with me *in advance of* the due date of the assignment.

When I say something is due “by the end of the day” on some date, I mean that the time-stamp on your Moodle submission must be on that day, but it can be as close to midnight (which is when the next day starts) as you like. I caution you not to wait until the last possible moment, however, in case the internet is being slow or there is some other delay in your submission. If it's time-stamped midnight or after, it counts as one day late.

### *Academic Honesty*

All assignments for this class *including the homework assignments* are for you to complete on your own; they are not to be completed with the aid of other students. I am happy for you to talk about class material with your classmates—in fact, that’s a great way to learn—but when it comes time to answering homework questions and completing writing assignments, you must do your own work. This is to ensure that the assignments you turn in are giving me accurate information about how much (and what) you guys are learning.

Violation of this policy will result in disciplinary action.

More generally, your written work in this course must represent your own ideas and best efforts, not those of someone whose writings you have found on the internet (or in a book). If you use outside sources, you must cite them and give bibliographic information. When we get to the time of the first writing assignment, I’ll provide more detailed instructions about how to cite things. But for now, let me just say this: the college does not tolerate plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty.

You are responsible for following the rules, which can be found in the College Catalog (available via the website of the Registrar: <https://www.holycross.edu/support-and-resources/office-registrar>). Not knowing what constitutes academic dishonesty is not an excuse.

*If you are ever confused or unsure about how to paraphrase, quote, cite, etc. the work of others, please come and see me. I’m happy to help!*

If you come by with a draft of your paper and you want to ask if you are paraphrasing properly or citing properly, that’s great. Please do so.

### *Accommodations*

Any student who needs accommodation such as extended time on exams should contact the Office of Disability Services to discuss available support services. Once the office receives documentation, the student meets privately with Disability Services to discuss reasonable and appropriate accommodations, and the course instructor is then notified of the arrangements. Because this process has multiple steps, it’s really important that you get in touch with Disability Services as soon as possible. Please don’t wait until right before the first assignment! If you have any questions or need any help with this, please let me know.

### *Mental Health*

Finally, let me just urge you to seek help if you ever find yourself suffering from mental health issues. As someone who has struggled with depression and anxiety since I was about your age, I know how difficult it can be to seek professional support, but I also know how important it can be to getting better. Your friends and family can certainly support you and by all means you should tell them how you are feeling, but unless they have dealt with mental illness, they most likely won’t know how to help you get better. So seeking the help of a professional is crucial.

I mention this for several reasons. One is that many people first develop mental health problems when they are around your age (18–24 or so), even if they have never had any issues up to that point. So you may find yourself feeling bad but also not sure of what is wrong or what to do about it. If you are feeling bad, or as though something is off, or even if you notice that your own behavior puzzles or concerns you (for instance, that you seem to sleep much more than you were previously or that you react angrily to small annoyances), please seek help, at the Counseling Center, for example.

Another reason I mention this in the syllabus is that there is a very strong stigma attached to mental illness, the result of which is that people don't understand what it is like and are less likely to seek help (or to know how to ask for help). I am trying, in my small way, to break that stigma by talking about my own mental health problems as openly as I can. I have never wanted to talk about it particularly, but I've tried to train myself to be as open as possible about it, to play my part in dispelling the stigma.

If you have any questions about this or just want to talk please do stop by my office hours or send me an email.

The Counseling Center is located at Hogan 207. To make an appointment you can call them at 508-793-3363 or just stop by in person.

## List of Readings

- Anscombe, G.E.M. 1958. "Modern Moral Philosophy". *Philosophy* 33 (124): 1–19.
- Aristotle. 1999. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Second edition. Ed. and trans. by Terence Irwin. Hackett.
- Ayer, A.J. 1936. *Language, Truth and Logic*. Second edition. Dover, 1952.
- Foot, Philippa. 2001. *Natural Goodness*. Oxford University Press.
- Geach, P. T. 1956. "Good and Evil". *Analysis* 17 (2): 33–42.
- Hare, R.M. 1979. "What Is Wrong with Slavery". *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8 (2): 103–121.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1785. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Ed. and trans. by Allen W. Wood. Yale University Press, 2002.
- Korsgaard, Christine. 1996. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge University Press.
- Mill, John Stuart. 1861. "Utilitarianism". In *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*, Second edition, ed. by Mary Warnock, 181–235. Wiley-Blackwell, 2003.
- Moore, G.E. 1903. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nozick, Robert. 1974. *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. Basic Books.
- Papineau, David. 2012. *Philosophical Devices: Proofs, Probabilities, Possibilities, and Sets*. Oxford University Press.
- Rachels, James. 1971. "Egoism and Moral Skepticism". In *Moral Philosophy: An Introduction*, ed. by Jack Glickman, 167–176. St. Martin's, 1977.
- Shields, Christopher. 2007. *Aristotle*. Routledge.

## Schedule of Topics, Readings, and Assignments

### *Introductory*

4 September: no reading

6 September: *Critical Reasoning Toolkit*, §1–6

9 September: no new reading

11 September: no new reading

**Homework 1 due by the end of the day on 11 September**

13 September: Rachels, “Egoism and Moral Skepticism” (1971)

### *Consequentialism and Deontology*

16 September: Mill, *Utilitarianism* (1861), §1–3

18 September: Mill, *Utilitarianism*, §4–5

20 September: no new reading

23 September: Hare, “What is Wrong with Slavery” (1979)

25 September: Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (1974), pp. 28–33; Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), §I

**Homework 2 due by the end of the day on 25 September**

27 September: no new reading

30 September: Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, §II, pp. 22–25, 28–42, 45–48

2 October: no new reading

### *Virtue Ethics*

4 October: Shields, *Aristotle* (2007), §7.2; 8.1–8.3

**First writing assignment due by the end of the day on 6 October**

7 October: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (1999), Book I, §1–5, 7–10, 13

9 October: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II, §1–4, 6, 7, 9

**Homework 3 due by the end of the day on 9 October**

11 October: no new reading

FALL BREAK

21 October: Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958)

23 October: no new reading

**Homework 4 due by the end of the day on 23 October**

25 October: no new reading

*Cognitivism and Noncognitivism*

28 October: *Critical Reasoning Toolkit*, §7

30 October: Geach, "Good and Evil" (1956)

1 November: no new reading

4 November: no new reading

6 November: Moore, *Principia Ethica* (1903), Ch. 1

8 November: no new reading

11 November: Papineau, *Philosophical Devices* (2012), Ch. 4

13 November: Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936), Ch. I

15 November: Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, Ch. VI

**Second writing assignment due by the end of the day on 17 November**

18 November: no new reading

*Agency and Rationality*

20 November: Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (1996), Prologue and Lecture I

22 November: no new reading

**Homework 5 due by the end of the day on 24 November**

25 November: Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Lecture II

THANKSGIVING BREAK

2 December: Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Lecture III

4 December: no new reading

**Homework 6 due by the end of the day on 4 December**

6 December: Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Lecture IV

*Neo-Aristotelian Naturalism*

9 December: Foot, *Natural Goodness* (2001), Ch. 1

11 December: Foot, *Natural Goodness*, Ch. 2

13 December: no new reading

**Homework 7 will be five free HW points**

**The third writing assignment due by the end of the day on 17 December**