

PHIL 3000 – Philosophical Ethics

Dr Chris Malone

Tuesdays 4:30pm–7:30pm, Fordham University London Centre

Course Description

What makes something right or wrong, and why should we care? Are ethical values universal, or do they differ by time and place? Do the ends justify the means, or are there some lines that we should never cross? Is our conduct even a matter of choice in the first place? This course will shed light on these questions and more by considering some of the major topics and debates within philosophical ethics, introducing students to the distinctive nature of normative claims, the multiple levels on which moral philosophical investigation can be pursued, and the possible motivations for acting on the basis of ethical concerns. The course will consider the ideas of some of the leading thinkers and theories of moral conduct, including Mill's utilitarianism, Kant's deontology and Aristotle's virtue ethics, reflect on the contemporary framing of ethical discussions within the language of human rights and justice, as well as assess the important challenges to moral thinking provided by the issues of free will and cultural relativity. Along with reflection on the nature and incentive for normative inquiry, students will also be encouraged to apply this accumulated knowledge to a number of prominent ethical issues relevant to current affairs, considering what philosophical insight might reveal about the ethical acceptability of global poverty, war, terrorism and torture.

Course Objectives

- 1) To introduce students to ethical thinking, theory and debate. Centrally, to impart knowledge of the key claims and features of some of the major competing theories of ethical decision-making, while at the same time offering reasoned arguments for and against their plausibility. To mature students' awareness of some of the most pressing ethical issues in the world around them.
- 2) To help develop students' abilities to subject claims to critical philosophical evaluation, whilst constructing strong, reasoned and persuasive arguments of their own (both in discussion and in writing). This involves building the capacity to think logically, to distinguish between descriptive and normative assertions, and to employ thought experiments to help justify important points.
- 3) To encourage students to cultivate a deeper appreciation of their own ethical commitments and intuitions, to be comfortable in reflecting upon their personal views from a philosophical perspective, and to learn to express, scrutinise and apply such ideas in a systematic fashion, tying them into the theoretical frameworks discussed.

Teaching and Learning Methods

The course will be taught in weekly three-hour seminars (with several breaks during each). The seminars will be highly interactive: a mixture of material presented by the tutor, questioning and guided discussion amongst the class as a whole, student presentations, and opportunities for group-work. Lively discussion and debate are vital to philosophical inquiry, and facilitating this is the paramount aim of the seminars. The topics covered are intended to be challenging, and likely to provoke differing views and perspectives. As such, active participation from all students is a central requirement of this course and a key factor to it being a rewarding and enlightening experience. Students will be expected to do some preparatory reading as the basis for each class (see below).

Assessment

Students will be required to produce one short (3-4 pages) and one long (6-7 pages) essay during the semester, as well contributing fully to a group presentation during the second half of the semester (topics to be decided in advance with the tutor). The course will conclude with a written examination during the last week of term. In addition to these formal modes of assessment, students will also be graded on their general class participation throughout the course.

Schedule

Part I: Theorizing About Ethics

Week 1	09/02	Introduction to Ethics
Week 2	09/09	Free Will and Moral Responsibility
Week 3	09/16	Consequentialism
Week 4	09/23	Deontology
Week 5	09/30	Virtue Ethics
Week 6	10/07	Field Trip (British Museum)
Week 7	10/14	Cultural Values and Moral Relativism
Week 8	10/21	Mid-Semester Break

Part II: Contemporary Ethical Debates

Week 9	10/28	Ethics and Global Poverty
Week 10	11/04	Human Rights
Week 11	11/11	The Ethics of War
Week 12	11/18	Field Trip (Imperial War Museum)
Week 13	11/25	Terrorism and Torture
Week 14	12/02	Review Class
Week 15	12/09	Examination

Detailed Outline and Readings

Course readings are divided into ‘core’ and ‘assigned’ texts. The core readings are designed to give a broad overview of each week’s topic, as well as introducing the (often historical) sources in which they find their classic expression. Every student is expected to read the core literature in advance of each week’s class, as they are essential prerequisites for class discussion. In addition, there are a number of further ‘assigned’ readings which expand upon this basic understanding by presenting new critical avenues or problems to be considered. These readings will be divided up amongst the class for each week, with students focusing on one of a number of different works. In the seminar, students from each group will then be picked to summarise the argument put forward in their additional reading.

The readings listed below are widely available across University of London libraries or are available online through Fordham’s subscription to JSTOR. Students are not required to purchase a central course text, but if they wish to a significant proportion of the assigned articles and extracts are compiled in the following edited volume:

— George Sher, *Ethics: Essential Readings in Moral Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2012)

Asterisked numbers in the schedule below refer to the chapters of this text, e.g. [*12].

The following are also useful resources that students may wish to reference throughout the course:

- The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/>
- The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://iep.utm.edu/>
- Peter Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell Reference, 1993)
- David Copp (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)
- James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (London: McGraw-Hill, 2003 and other editions)

PART I: THEORIZING ABOUT ETHICS

1) Introduction to Ethics: Egoism vs. Altruism

This introductory seminar will begin by considering the nature of ethical inquiry itself – what makes something a matter of morality, as opposed to one of law or etiquette? What is the difference between normative, applied and meta-ethical approaches? Furthermore, what does it mean for something to be an ethical dilemma, rather than simply a difficult choice or test of integrity? The second half of the seminar will move to the question of why we ought to *be* moral, using the classic discussion of Plato's *Republic* as a starting point for debating the opposing merits of egoism versus altruism.

CORE READING

- Plato, *The Republic*, Book II 357a-368c [*1]
- James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (2003), Chapters on 'Psychological Egoism' and 'Ethical Egoism'
- Bernard Williams, *Morality* (1972), Chapter 1

2) Free Will and Moral Responsibility

This second seminar will reflect upon what appears to be a foundational requirement for establishing meaningful moral appraisal: that the actions people perform are freely chosen. We hold people morally responsible for the conduct they undertake of their own free will, not for things they are forced to do or which could not be avoided. The challenge confronting this understanding is the apparent truth of determinism – the theory that every occurrence, including our own seemingly 'free' choices, are in fact completely determined by the causal nature of the Universe, the end products of a chain of cause and effect extending back to the start of time. If determinism is true, then it seems that the actions we perform are the actions we were *always* going to perform, and that we never really had the freedom to do otherwise. This claim, and its ethical implications, will be examined and scrutinised. How should we define free will in the first place? Are all occurrences really causal in the way determinism suggests? Are the two notions really as incompatible as they first seem? And can our ethical practices withstand this classic philosophical challenge?

CORE READING

- Thomas Pink, *Free Will: A Very Short Introduction* (2004)

— Peter van Inwagen, 'The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism', *Philosophical Studies* 27 (1975)

— Kevin Timpe, 'Free Will', *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2006)

ASSIGNED READING

— P. F. Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48:1-25 (1962) [*55]

— Harry Frankfurt, 'Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility', *The Journal of Philosophy* 66:23 (1969)

— Harry Frankfurt, 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', *The Journal of Philosophy* 68:1 (1971) [*53]

3) Consequentialism: The Ends Justify the Means

The first of three seminars outlining the leading contemporary approaches to normative moral theory, this session will focus on one of the discipline's most influential normative theories: consequentialism. Tracing its historical foundations in the work of Bentham and Mill, the seminar will focus on the idea that producing good outcomes is the overriding goal of moral decision-making. Discussion will specifically focus on the most prominent form of this account, *utilitarianism*, which argues that right action is that which impartially produces the most happiness overall. This theory will be analysed and important objections raised. How much intuitive appeal does its central notion have? Can it lead to implausible recommendations? Are there situations in which its demands might come into conflict with other moral concerns? And are human beings actually capable of living in the way the theory demands?

CORE READING

— Jeremy Bentham, 'Pleasure as the Good' [*45]

— John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapters 1 and 2 [*22]

— Robert Nozick, 'The Experience Machine' [*46]

ASSIGNED READING

— John Rawls, 'Classical Utilitarianism', in *A Theory of Justice* (1971) [*24]

— Bernard Williams, 'A Critique of Utilitarianism' in J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (1973) [*23]

— Brad Hooker, 'Rule-Consequentialism', in *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory*, ed. Hugh LaFollete (2000) [*26]

4) Deontology: Duty to the Moral Law

Having discussed the consequentialist approach in the preceding session, this seminar will go on to assess what is often considered its diametric competitor: deontology. Using the knowledge garnered from the previous week as a point of contrast, discussion will focus on deontology's central emphasis on absolute rules of conduct, rules that cannot be overruled by the pressure of any consequences. The classic expression of deontological thought, the work of the philosopher Kant, will provide the theoretical touchstone for analysis of such an approach. How successful is the distinctive method of Kant – the

Categorical Imperative – in providing an objective moral law based on reason alone? Is the notion that we should act for the sake of duty to this law a commendable or disturbing feature of his account? Finally, are there really *no* circumstances in which breaking a moral rule would be justified?

CORE READING

- Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Parts I and II [*29]
- J. David Velleman, 'Reading Kant's *Groundwork*' [*30]
- James Rachels, 'Are there absolute moral rules?', in his *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (2003)

ASSIGNED READING

- Marcia Baron, 'The Alleged Moral Repugnance of Acting from Duty', *The Journal of Philosophy* 81:4 (1984)
- Christine Korsgaard, 'The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 15:4 (1986) [*31]

5) Virtue Ethics: Character and Living Well

The final seminar on normative moral theory will discuss the resurgence of the Aristotelian-inspired tradition of virtue ethics, contrasting its central focus on a person's *character* with the dissimilar aims of the previous approaches. Drawing from Aristotle's classic account, discussion will outline the key distinction between moral virtues and vices, consider their postulated role in leading a happy or 'flourishing' life, and assess the theory's central emphasis on the notions of contextual judgement and experiential learning. What does reflection on the virtuous or vicious motivations of an agent add to our ethical understanding? Is virtue ethics right to concentrate on life more broadly over difficult single cases? Is character as robust as the theory presumes? And how plausible is its account of how we develop and mature as ethical decision-makers?

CORE READING

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II [*37]
- Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Normative Virtue Ethics', in *How Should One Live?: Essays on the Virtues*, ed. Roger Crisp (1996) [*43]
- Julia Annas, 'Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing', *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 78:2 (2004)

ASSIGNED READING

- John McDowell, 'Virtue and Reason', *The Monist* 62:3 (1979)
- Susan Wolf, 'Moral Saints', *The Journal of Philosophy* 79:8 (1982) [*42]
- John Doris, 'A Situationist Theory of Character' [*44]

6) Field Trip to the British Museum

This week's usual class will be replaced by a visit to the British Museum in London, where – linking into our earlier discussions of Socrates and Plato, and last week Aristotle – we will firstly tour the museum's extensive Ancient Greek collection. Students will be encouraged to explore the distinctive features of this historical period, reflecting in particular on how the culture, education and political organisation of Ancient Greek society may have influenced the great ethical philosophers that flourished within it. Overviews of the museum's collections can be found here:

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/cultures/europe/ancient_greece.aspx

<http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk/>

During the second half of the trip, students will be free to explore the museum's other collections as they wish. Taking advantage of the museum's world-class status as one of largest and most comprehensive records of human history and culture, this will provide a chance for the class to reflect more broadly on the tremendously varied ways of living that have existed throughout human civilisation. The museum's collection of world cultures is overviewed here:

<http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/cultures.aspx>

This exploration will build important awareness of the multitudinous ethical variations that have persisted in different cultural circumstances, providing a broad base of knowledge on which to confront the topic of the next seminar.

7) Cultural Values and Moral Relativism

The final seminar of this section centres on the recalcitrant challenge of moral relativism, and its potential to undermine ethical dialogue and appraisal across different communities. Building on the findings of last week's field trip, what follows philosophically from the apparently great variation in ethical outlooks across time and place? Is it significant if an Ancient Greek virtue is a modern-day vice? Does this demonstrate the complete lack of an objective foundation for morality? To what extent can we uphold our values as truly universal, as opposed to a culturally-confined set of principles? Is an attempt to impose these standards worldwide a case of 'cultural imperialism', ignorant of the equally-valid values of different cultures and nations? And how, ultimately, can we seek to engage with those who hold fundamentally different views about morality? The debate over moral relativism will be better clarified by close analysis of its descriptive, meta-ethical and normative flashpoints, a consideration of shared human features and conditions, and from this, reflection on how far the relativist challenge might be contained.

CORE READING

— James Rachels, 'The Challenge of Cultural Relativism', in his *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (2003) [*15]

— Gilbert Harman, 'Moral Relativism', in Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (1996)

— Chris Gowans, 'Moral Relativism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2008) OR Emrys Westacott, 'Moral Relativism', *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2012)

ASSIGNED READING

— Judith Jarvis Thomson, 'Response to Harman', in Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (1996)

- David B. Wong, 'Pluralistic Relativism', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy: Moral Concepts* 20 (1996)
- Martha Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach', in *Moral Relativism: A Reader*, eds. Paul K. Moser and Thomas L. Carson (2001) [*38]

8) Mid-Semester Break – No class this week.

PART II: CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL DEBATES

9) Ethics and World Poverty

The second part of the course challenges students to apply their accumulated theoretical knowledge to a range of prominent contemporary ethical debates, demonstrating the real-world relevance of ethical investigation while further reinforcing their grasp of competing normative approaches. This section will begin with a discussion of ethics and global poverty, a topic that is at the forefront of much international normative discourse, and which demands serious philosophical reflection. What do people in more developed countries owe to those who suffer from poverty, famine or oppression in other parts of the world? Do we hold responsibilities to help remedy their predicament, no different from those we hold to family, fellow nationals, or those in our immediate vicinity? Are national boundaries largely irrelevant, as 'cosmopolitans' argue? The seminar will consider some of the leading arguments for such a position before bringing in alternative, non-cosmopolitan arguments that seek to challenge its claims. Whilst seemingly enlightened, how intuitive do we actually find the idea of unbounded obligations to help others around the world? Do we not instead have special obligations to our own political community and fellow nationals, because of the important role they play in our lives? Is the call to help those suffering in far-off places a call for *charity*, rather than duty? The seminar will evaluate which set of arguments is ultimately the stronger.

CORE READING

- Peter Singer, 'Famine, Affluence, and Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1:3 (1972) [*62]
- Thomas Pogge, 'Moral Universalism and Global Economic Justice', in *World Poverty and Human Rights: Cosmopolitan Responsibilities and Reforms* (2002), Chapter 4
- Simon Caney, *Justice Beyond Borders: A Global Political Theory* (2006), Chapter 4

ASSIGNED READING

- Garrett Cullity, 'International Aid and the Scope of Kindness', *Ethics* 105:1 (1994)
- John Kekes, 'On the Supposed Obligation to Relieve Famine', *Philosophy* 77:4 (2002)
- David Miller, 'Responsibilities to the World's Poor', in *National Responsibility and Global Justice* (2007), Chapter 9

10) Human Rights

Human rights claims – and indeed violations – are fast becoming the *lingua franca* for public ethical discourse, providing the backdrop for much contemporary political discourse and acting as the

foundational values for important international agreements (e.g. the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). But what are human rights, how do they differ from other kinds of entitlement, and how might we understand their force? This seminar will first assess the competing ‘traditional’ and ‘political’ notions of what human rights actually *are* – timeless values possessed in virtue of our humanity, or standards that come into play only within the context of particular practices and institutions? Following this conceptual discussion, the main arguments put forward for such rights’ distinctive authority will then be outlined. Why are human rights so important? Is it because they safeguard human dignity, autonomy or self-ownership? Because they allow people to best pursue their own happiness and flourishing? Or are they just minimum standards of decency that particular societies can agree to mutually accept?

CORE READING

- Andrew Clapham, *Human Rights: A Very Short Introduction* (2007)
- John Tasioulas, ‘Human Rights, Universality and the Values of Personhood: Retracting Griffin’s Steps’, *European Journal of Philosophy* 10:1 (2002)
- Pablo Gilabert, ‘Humanist and Political Perspectives on Human Rights’, *Political Theory* 39:4 (2011)

ASSIGNED READING

- Onora O’Neill, ‘The Dark Side of Human Rights’, *International Affairs* 81:2 (2005)
- Joseph Raz, ‘Human Rights without Foundations’, in *The Philosophy of International Law*, eds. Samantha Besson and John Tasioulas (2010)
- Laura Valentini, ‘In What Sense are Human Rights Political? A Preliminary Exploration’, *Political Studies* 60:1 (2012)

11) The Ethics of War

Given the widespread death and destruction that inevitably result from it, war must be regarded as one of the most pressing arenas for ethical appraisal, but it is an arena in which traditional moral prohibitions appear either difficult to maintain philosophically, or else are subject to perennial and egregious violation. When, if ever, can armed conflict be morally justified? What are the ‘Just War’ criteria, how are they grounded and applied, and are we right to draw ethical distinctions between decisions to go to war and the actual conduct within them? Does intending a death and merely foreseeing that it will occur as a result of our actions represent a significant moral distinction, or is all killing in war equivalent to murder? Is pacifism a defensible position, or in times of war do the pressures of power and survival overrule all moral constraints? This seminar will engage with each of these important issues through considering some seminal contributions to the ethics of war, and by drawing upon the multiple moral perspectives considered in the first half of the course.

CORE READING

- Thucydides, ‘The Melian Dialogue’, in *History of the Peloponnesian War* (431 BC, multiple editions), http://www.shsu.edu/~his_ncp/Melian.html
- Brian Orend, ‘War’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2005), especially ‘Just War Theory’ section
- Michael Walzer, ‘Against Realism’ and ‘Supreme Emergency’, in *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (1977 and later editions), Chapters 1 and 16

ASSIGNED READING

- G. E. M. Anscombe, 'War and Murder', in *Nuclear Weapons: A Catholic Response*, ed. Walter Stein (1961)
- Jan Narveson, 'Pacifism: A Philosophical Analysis', *Ethics* 75:4 (1965)
- Thomas Nagel, 'War and Massacre', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1:2 (1972)

12) Field Trip to the Imperial War Museum

This session will build directly upon the previous week's work with a visit to the Imperial War Museum in London. Details of exhibits can be found here:

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/>

This trip will give students the opportunity to consider the changing nature of war in the contemporary age, and in particular the new ethical challenges presented by modern warfare technology and tactics. How does the advent of total war, area bombing, chemical and biological weapons, nuclear confrontation and drone warfare fit into the traditional ethical schemas of a Just War? Does the reality of life on the front line, the civilian costs of conflict and the mass slaughter of Passchendaele and the Somme put paid to any philosophical argument that war can be anything short of a moral disaster? It is hoped that through exposure and reflection on the actuality of war, students will be better equipped to come to a more balanced and grounded conclusion as to its ultimate ethical nature.

13) Terrorism and Torture

The penultimate seminar of the course will tackle two of the most prominent – and indeed divisive – ethical issues of recent times, the moral status of terrorism and torture. The first part of the seminar will analyse the phenomenon of terrorism as a particular form of political violence. What is the nature of terrorism – should we define it as an ideology or a tactic? Does it count as warfare? What distinguishes a terrorist from a freedom fighter? And, considering the range of ethical perspectives reflected on during the course, can it *ever* be justified? The second part of this seminar will move to consider an issue that has become increasingly intertwined with terrorism and our response to it, that of torture. As with the former, our instinctive reactions to the practice of torture seem to paint it as a particularly abhorrent wrong, a type of moral violation going beyond the mere infliction of suffering. Why is this? What features of torture are of particular normative significance? Its violation of an individual's autonomy and rights? The apparent powerlessness of the victim? Or how treating individuals as mere means impacts upon the humanity of the perpetrator? The issue of torture also raises a classic dilemma for ethicists to consider – the so-called 'ticking-bomb' scenario. How strongly can we hold to our ethical principles in the face of extreme consequences? Can we really balance a prohibition against torture against a threat to millions of lives? The seminar will conclude with a short visit to the 7/7 London Bombings Memorial, a brief walk from Fordham's London Centre in adjacent Hyde Park. Here students can reflect upon the reality of terrorism outside of classroom discussions.

CORE READING

- Michael Walzer, 'Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2:2 (1973)

— Alan M. Dershowitz, 'Should the Ticking Bomb Terrorist Be Tortured? A Case Study in How a Democracy Should Make Tragic Choices', in *Why Terrorism Works: Understanding the Threat, Responding to the Challenge* (2002), Chapter 4

— C. A. J. Coady, 'Terrorism, Morality, and Supreme Emergency', *Ethics* 114:4 (2004)

ASSIGNED READING

— Saul Smilansky, 'Terrorism, Justification, and Illusion', *Ethics* 114:4 (2004)

— Seamus Miller, 'Is Torture Ever Morally Justified?', *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 19:2 (2005)

— Igor Primoratz, 'A Philosopher Looks at Contemporary Terrorism', *Cardozo Law Review* 29:1 (2007)

14) Revision Session

This final seminar will bring together the material covered in the preceding sessions, overviewing the exploration of different moral perspectives in a comparative manner whilst considering their application to the range of contemporary debates considered. What are the main features and contrasts between the leading ethical theories? Do they have any areas of overlap or potential reconciliation? Conversely, in what circumstances are there likely to be the greatest tensions between their values and prescriptions? Students will be encouraged to come to their own conclusions about which theory they find most convincing in the abstract, and to reflect upon how strongly these intuitions can be maintained when such values are applied to concrete issues and dilemmas.

15) Final Examination

The course will end with a written examination containing questions on each of the topics covered in the course.