

Michael Schwarz
Summer 2021
M/W 10am-12.30pm CST

michaelschwarz2021@u.northwestern.edu
Office hours: by appointment

PHIL 260 // Introduction to Moral Philosophy

Course description

This course will introduce students to some of the fundamental questions of moral philosophy. We will critically examine questions about (1) the *nature of morality*: Are there objective and universally valid truths about what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad, or are our moral judgments ultimately subjective and relative much like judgments of taste? Is there a difference between morality and ethics, between matters of justice and conceptions of the good? (2) The *substance of morality*: Are there certain actions that are absolutely forbidden, no matter what the consequences? When morally evaluating a person's action, in what way do the agent's motives matter? How can we justify moral duties? And (3) the *scope of morality*: Which beings have moral status? Do moral considerations pertain to all actions or events or do some lie outside the moral realm?

The course consists of three parts. Part I introduces students to three of the most influential moral theories: deontology, utilitarianism, and contractualism. We will read and discuss the writings of some of their most notable proponents (Kant, Mill, Scanlon) in light of the questions about the nature and substance of morality. Part II focuses on some of the most pressing critiques of moral theories that challenge their claim to objectivity and universal validity. To this end, we will engage with various thinkers from diverse traditions such as critical race theory, feminist theory, decolonial theory, and postmodernism. In part III we will look at matters of global justice, artificial intelligence, and animal rights to map the scope of morality and ask whether or not moral theories justifiably perpetuate speciesism.

Course materials

All readings and course materials will be posted on Canvas. Readings should be done *before* the lecture indicated. I find this to be a helpful resource to learn how to read philosophical texts: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>

Though the relevant parts will be uploaded, you might consider getting these books:

- Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (CUP)
- Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Hackett)

Date Coursework // Readings

The permanent Zoom link for this course is:

<https://northwestern.zoom.us/j/92108164023?pwd=TVJmUkMrS0xXWVBLWCt4bW5Nc0ZOUT09>

Introduction

6/21 Scanlon, *What is Morality?*
Habermas, *On the Pragmatic, Ethical, and Moral Employment of Practical Reason*
Activity: <https://www.moralmachine.net/>

Suggested reading: Appiah, *What will future generations condemn us for?*
(Further reading: Engber, *The kids are all right* – [slate.com](https://www.slate.com))

Part I: Moral theories

- 6/23 #Deontology I
Kant, *Groundwork*, section 1 and Introduction by Ch. Korsgaard
- 6/28 #Deontology II
Kant, *Groundwork*, section 2 (4:406 – 4:439)
Nover, *The reignited debate over dwarf tossing* and/or watch this [video](#)
(Further Reading: Korsgaard, *Kant's formula of humanity*)
- 6/30 #Utilitarianism
Mill, *Utilitarianism* (ch. 2-5)
Williams, *A critique of utilitarianism* (excerpts)
- 7/5 Extended Fourth of July holiday weekend, no class
- 7/7 #Contractualism
Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (chapter 5, sect. 6-9)
Focus: Philosophical argumentation and how to write a philosophy paper

no reading response due for 7/12

Part II: Critiques of morality and moral universality

- 7/12 #Power and the historicity of morality
Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (excerpts)
(Further reading: Foucault, *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*)
- 7/14 #Critical race theory and feminist theory
Atkins, *Black lives matter or all lives matter?*
Degen, *The harmful effects of responding 'All lives matter' to 'Black lives matter'* ([link](#))
Benhabib, *The Debate over Women and Moral Theory Revisited*
- 7/19 #De-colonial theory and postmodernism
Diagne, *On the Postcolonial and the Universal*
Hountondji, *Constructing the Universal*
Butler, *Restaging the Universal*

Mid-term paper due 7/13 (11:59pm CST)

Part III: The scope of morality and moral status

- 7/21 #Artificial Intelligence
Schwitzgebel/Garza, *A Defense of the Rights of Artificial Intelligences*
Bostrom/Yudkowski, *The Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*

Final paper topic and outline due 7/23

7/26 #Animals
Korsgaard, *Fellow Creatures: Kantian Ethics and our duties to animals*
Singer, *Equality for animals*
(Further reading: Donaldson & Kymlicka, *Zoopolis* (chapter 2))

7/28 #Bringing it all to bear
Watch this short [video](#) on the Trolley problem
Jarvis Thomson, *Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem*
Activity: <https://www.moralmachine.net/>
Activity: workshopping final paper ideas

Final paper due 8/1 (11:59pm CST)

Assignments and grade distribution

Your final grade for this course will be determined by

(1) a *mid-term paper* (25 per cent), due on 7/11 by 11:59pm CST, 900-1200 words, on an assigned topic, we will have a special section on philosophical argumentation and how to write a philosophical paper on 7/7 to prepare you for this.

(2) a *final paper* (40 per cent), due on 8/1 by 11:59pm CST, 1500-1800 words, on any topic in this course; in conversation with the instructor, you will be asked to propose a paper topic of your choice and present an outline by 7/23; we will reserve half a class to workshop your paper drafts on 7/28.

(3) *reading responses* and *class participation* (35 per cent), due by 10pm the day before each class (no reading reports due on 6/21 and 7/12), 200-250 words each. Students may drop the three lowest scores (including grades of N/C).

In your reading responses, you are asked to engage (a) with at least one of the readings for the current class and (b) with the views of one of your peer's reading responses for the previous class. Your engagement with the readings for each class should take the form of a critical reflection. You may pick one of the arguments/ideas/claims proposed in the reading and state why you agree or disagree with it. The reading response is an opportunity for you to articulate what you take to be important about a philosopher's argument/claim and why. Since this also serves as a guide for our class discussions, please feel encouraged to indicate what you find interesting about a piece – both in terms of what is present and what is absent in it (e.g. concepts you'd like to have clarified, questions about the texts you would like to discuss, something you find lacking in it, further points of connection you see to other literatures we've discussed, etc.). With respect to your engagement with your peers, feel free to treat this as a casual exchange. You are asked to engage with their thoughts and share your ideas with them on the reading responses they provided for the previous class (or even a comment they made in class that caught your attention). For instance, if one student has an interesting reflection on a reading from the previous week or, for example, is pondering whether or not a particular question would make a good topic for a paper, let them know what you think and drop them a comment or make a suggestion. Your responses will be graded on a 5-point scale, with 4 as excellent, 3 as good, 2 as adequate, 1 as deficient (or late), and N/C as not deserving of credit.

Grade scale

A 93-100	B 83-86	C 73-76	D 63-66
A- 90-92	B- 80-82	C- 70-72	D- 60-62
B+ 87-89	C+ 77-79	D+ 67-69	F 59-0

Course policies

Attendance: Attendance to online lectures is both required and essential. Students are permitted one unexcused absence. Excused absences include, for example, illness or a family emergency. For every additional unexcused absence, the final grade in the course will be reduced by two percentage points.

Zoom etiquette and online learning: During our Zoom meetings, please try to stay on task and be present! Do not spend our class time checking email or browsing other windows on your screen. I know that Zoom meetings can be tiring and staying focused can be difficult. We will try to take breaks as needed. In addition, do what you can to make our experience and that of others on Zoom conducive to learning. For example: stay muted when not speaking, be patient with others in the occasion of technical difficulties.

If you struggle with online learning, you may consult Northwestern's Student Resources for Remote Learning website (<https://digitalllearning.northwestern.edu/keep-learning>), as well as the page for learning during COVID-19: <https://www.northwestern.edu/academic-support-learning/academicstrategies/learning-during-covid-19.html>

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism: Plagiarism is the presenting of someone else's thoughts, ideas, or work as one's own, regardless of whether this is what is intended, and will not be tolerated. All cases of alleged violation of academic integrity will be referred to the Assistant Dean for Advising and Academic Integrity. It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with what plagiarism consists in. For more information on Academic Integrity and plagiarism, see: <http://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/index.html> and <http://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/how-to-avoidplagiarism.html>.

Accommodations

Students requesting accommodations related to disability or other condition are required to register with AccessibleNU (accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; 847-467-5530) and provide professors with an accommodation notification from AccessibleNU, preferably within the first two weeks of class. All information will remain confidential.

Resources for Well-Being

As a student, you can find useful resources for safety and security, academic support, and mental and physical health and well-being at the [NUhelp](#). If you are facing challenges with any of these issues, know that you are not alone and please reach out for help.