

Phil 241: Introductory Ethics

(Current as of 6/2/2024)

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Canvas Page:

<https://canvas.wisc.edu/courses/406050>

Office Hours Link:

<https://uwmadison.zoom.us/j/94795242201>

Office Hours: Mon, Fri 10-11am or by appointment

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

What, if anything, makes an action right or wrong? How can we know what is right or wrong? Why should we be moral? Is it possible to be blamed for something you couldn't control? Does morality require that we be perfect? These are some of the questions we'll be examining in this class in introductory ethics. We will be developing the skills to answer these questions through discussions with your peers and through short writing assignments.

This course may be different from other courses you've taken. We will not be learning "content" in the usual sense. Rather, we'll be investigating reasons for the various answers to questions covered in this course. This course is not aimed at changing your mind or filling it up with facts

and you will never be graded on what you believe. You should, however, come away with a better understanding of what you do believe, why you believe it, and how to discuss it with and communicate your reasons to others.

Learning Outcomes

- Ability to think critically about arguments.
- Ability to interpret complex texts accurately and analyze them logically.
- Ability to communicate precisely and concisely in both writing and speech.
- Ability to exchange reasons about controversial matters respectfully and with the aim of uncovering the truth.
- Interpretative charity and intellectual honesty, which includes appropriate attribution to others of their ideas, and recognition and frankness about the limitations of one's own ideas

Required Texts

Metaethics from a First Personal Standpoint, Catherine Wilson (2016). This book is available for free in multiple formats from <https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0087> and will also be available as a pdf on the class [Canvas](#) site.

All required texts will be available via either the [library](#) or the course [Canvas](#) site.

Instructional Mode

Online asynchronous

Credit Hour Explanation (3 credits)

The credit standard for this course is met by an expectation of a total of 135 hours of student engagement with the course learning activities (at least 45 hours per credit), which include regularly scheduled instructor/student meeting times, reading, writing, problem sets, studio time, labs, field trips, and other student work as described in the syllabus.

There are no prerequisite courses, but sophomore status is required.

DISCUSSION BOARD NORMS

- Read actively and with an eye to understanding others' views.
- Criticize ideas, not individuals. We all can learn something from each other, even if our views don't necessarily align.

- If you think something is missing from the conversation, don't wait for someone else. Make the contribution yourself!
- Ask questions when you do not understand. Chances are that others also do not understand.
- Try not to silence yourself out of concern for what others may think. So long as your contribution is sincere (i.e. not trolling), your perspective is likely useful.

ASSIGNMENTS

Reading Quizzes (4 x 3 pts = 12 pts)

Each week there will be a short reading quiz on Canvas. These will be due on Thursday by 11:59 pm and are designed to make sure you're keeping up with the readings. They should not be difficult *if you are doing the readings!*

Canvas Discussion Questions (4 x 1 pts = 4pts)

Each week you will be required to post a question to your assignment group for discussion on Canvas. These will be due Wednesdays at 11:59 pm.

Discussion questions demonstrate an effort at understanding the assigned reading and engage with the text in some significant way. They are more than a generic one-line question. Good discussion questions will be about 100 words in length and explain why the question is relevant in some detail. Some possible question types are:

- What does the text say? (Be specific about what you don't understand.)
- How does the author argue for their conclusion?
- Draw out some consequences of the text and raise a worry.
- Present a problem for the author's argument or conclusion.
- Other question types are possible!

Discussion questions will be graded for completion only, but will be used to structure my video comments, so the more engaged your questions, the more compelling and useful class discussion will be!

Canvas Discussion Replies (4 x 2pts = 8 pts)

Each week you will be required to reply to **two** discussion questions, at least **one of which is not your own**. These will be due Fridays at 11:59 pm.

Replies demonstrate an effort at understanding the assigned readings and engage with the question in some significant way. They are more than a generic one-line answer or affirmation. Good replies will be about 100 words in length.

These discussion questions will be graded for completion only, but will be used to structure my video comments, so the more engaged your replies, the more compelling and useful class discussion will be!

Critical Response Papers (4 x 3 pts = 12 pts)

Each week you will write a journal entry that engages in a critical reflection on the week's material (due the following Sunday). A critical reflection takes as its starting point some idea we studied or passage from a reading, and your thoughts about it. These entries are not a stream of conscious expression of your feelings about the material, neither are they a summary of what we read or discussed in class. These responses provide you with an opportunity to explore what matters to you in some depth and on a consistent basis.

- **The entries are due Sunday** (by 11:59 pm) and must be submitted on Canvas.
- **Journals should be approximately 600 words.** You may find it easier to think of these as short response papers rather than journals
- **Journals will be graded out of 3 points.** The basis for grading is whether they exhibit clarity, depth of critical reflection, relevance to the ideas we study. Grades will be given as follows:
 - Clearly adequate (full credit) = 3
 - Neither clearly adequate nor clearly inadequate (partial credit) = 2
 - Clearly inadequate (minimal credit) = 1

Sample Kinds of Critical Response Paper:

- **Argument** – A careful examination of the reasons why one agrees or disagrees with an idea discussed in class. A good argument will explain the reasons offered in favor of the idea as discussed in class/reading. Next, it will offer necessary supplements, or counter arguments. If you are thinking about majoring in philosophy, you should get comfortable writing this kind of paper.
- **Relation** – A careful explanation of how some idea that we studied relates to an idea studied in another class, or that you have encountered elsewhere. A strong relation response will carefully explain both ideas, and the relationship between those concepts.
- **Application** – An application of a concept to a problem or event in one's life, in the world more broadly, or what happens in a book or movie. This requires a careful explanation of the concept, an account of how the concept applies to the problem, and why it has the implication that it does.

- **Reflection** – An exploration of how one and why one thinks about the concepts, with a particular emphasis on how and why your thinking has changed, developed (or not) in light of what we study. This again requires a clear explanation of the idea we studied, your thoughts about it, and a careful explanation of how and why you think as you do.

GRADES

Grade	A	AB	B	BC	C	D	F
%	100-93%	92-88%	87-83%	82-78%	77-70%	69-60%	Below 60
Points	36-34	33-32	31-30	29-28	27-26	25-22	21-0

With this grading scheme and assignment structure, you turn in all assignments to do well. If you find yourself falling behind or getting many 1s on graded assignments please [reach out to me](#) as soon as possible so that we can discuss options for getting you back on track.

COURSE SCHEDULE

(Subject to change. See [Canvas](#) for the latest version.)

Dates	Readings	Lectures/Videos	Assignments
Week 1: Is there any such thing as morality?			
6/3-6/9	Wilson <i>Metaethics</i> Chapters I-III Case, "Why be Moral? Plato's 'Ring of Gyges' thought experiment" Lewis <i>Mere Christianity</i> , Chapters 1-3	Monday: Introduction and preview of readings Sunday: Matt answers your questions	Wednesday: discussion question due Thursday: reading quiz due Friday: replies due Sunday: Journals due
Week 2: Is morality just about us?			
6/10-6/16	Wilson <i>Metaethics</i> Chapters IV, V Nozick, "The Experience Machine" Nagel, "Moral Luck"	Monday: Preview of readings Sunday: Matt answers your questions	Wednesday: discussion question due Thursday: reading quiz due Friday: replies due Sunday: Journals due
Week 3: What does morality require?			
6/17-6/23	Wilson <i>Metaethics</i> Chapters VI-VIII Wolf, "Moral Saints" Pojman, "In Defense of Moral Saints"	Monday: Preview of readings Sunday: Matt answers your questions	Wednesday: discussion question due Thursday: reading quiz due Friday: replies due Sunday: Journals due
Week 4: Freedom, Responsibility, and Blame			
6/24-6/30	Wilson <i>Metaethics</i> Chapters IX, Summary Strawson "Freedom and Resentment" Srinivasan "Does anyone have the right to sex?"	Monday: Preview of readings Sunday: Matt answers your questions and gives some reflections on the semester.	Wednesday: discussion question due Thursday: reading quiz due Friday: replies due Sunday: Journals due

ACCOMMODATIONS

While some discomfort is expected when discussing difficult topics, harm is never a positive outcome. Some of the material in this course may be extremely personal or otherwise distressing to some students. If this is the case for you, please [reach out to me](#) so that we can make adjustments or devise alternatives as necessary.

If you have learning accommodations through the McBurney Center, please [let me know](#) as early in the semester as possible. More information is available at <https://mcburney.wisc.edu/>

ACADEMIC STATEMENTS & POLICIES

Additional statements and policies regarding this course are available at <https://guide.wisc.edu/courses/#syllabustext>