

# Philosophical Ethics

## I Instructor Information

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**Name:** Dr. Bradley Rettler

**Office:** Collins B25

**Office Hours:** Monday 1-2, Tuesday 2-4, and by appointment

**E-mail:** rettlerb@gmail.com

**Mailbox:** Collins 101

**Course Website:** <http://ethics.bradleyrettler.com>

## II Course Description

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Most of want to be good people, and to do the right thing. But being a good person is complicated, and the situations in which we act have a dizzying number of particularities that make figuring out what to do very complicated. The field of ethics is dedicated to thinking hard about what makes actions right and wrong, and about what features of the situations are morally relevant.

Ethics is comprised of three subfields. Meta-ethics asks about the nature of rightness and wrongness. Normative ethics asks us about the features of actions that make them right or wrong. And applied ethics asks us what we ought to do in particular domains of actions.

This course focuses on the three main normative ethical theories – utilitarianism, virtue ethics, and deontology. We will discuss what they are and the arguments for and against each. I hope that by the end of the course you will lean toward a certain normative ethical theory, and have ideas about how to apply it in particular cases.

## III Readings

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You are required to purchase the following books. They are available in the bookstore, and I'm sure there are hundreds of copies on Amazon.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*

Mill, *Utilitarianism*

You might find the following books helpful:

Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics*

Timmons, *Moral Theory: An Introduction*

## IV Evaluation

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**Participation:** 20% of your grade. This includes coming to class, having (i) carefully done the reading, (ii) prepared an outline of the argument, (iii) prepared questions about anything you didn't understand, and (iv) prepared objections to or arguments for the premises of the author's argument. It also includes being involved in class discussion by sharing your thoughts, and by listening to your colleagues' thoughts.

**Critical Papers:** 30% of your grade (10% each). Three times during the semester you will write a one to two page paper and email it to me by 11:59pm the night before the class for which the reading is assigned. You must write one paper on utilitarianism, one on deontological ethics, and one on virtue ethics. The papers will contain a brief summary of the argument of the reading for the day (half a page to a page), and then an objection to a premise of that argument (half a page to a page). Late papers will be 10% off per day late.

**Final Paper Outline:** 10% of your grade. You will write a half-page to 1 page outline of the argument for your final paper. It is due November 16. I will return it to you with comments, and may suggest (or require) that you meet with me to discuss it. Late outlines will be 10% off per day late.

**Final Paper:** 20% of your grade. You will write an approximately 2000 word final paper in which pick some issue in applied ethics that we didn't talk about in class and compare and contrast how two of the normative ethical theories should treat that issue. Possible issues include, but are not limited to: affirmative action, anarchism/government, capital punishment, college athlete monetary compensation, copyright, drone warfare, drug pricing, euthanasia, gambling/lotteries, genetic engineering, global warming, government surveillance/privacy, gun control, immigration, legacy admissions, legalization of drugs, offensive humor, paid surrogacy/organ donation, performance enhancing drugs, population control, pornography, racial profiling, redistributive taxation, same-sex marriage, sex workers, testing on animals, torture, vegetarianism/factory farming, and war. If you would like to write about an issue that's not on the list and you're worried it might not count, check with me. Papers are due on the last day of class. Late papers will be 10% off per day late.

**Final Exam:** 20% of your grade. You will have a final exam comprised of 4-6 short essay questions on the readings. It will take place on the regularly scheduled exam day and time. If you cannot make it or have a conflict with the scheduled exam time, you must alert me two weeks in advance so that we can make alternate arrangements.

**Extra Credit:** You may write one extra critical paper for one of the applied ethics topics, and I will substitute the grade you receive for the lowest of your critical paper grades (assuming it is higher). The extra critical paper must be emailed by 11:59pm the night before we discuss the paper to which it is a response. Late extra credit critical papers will not be accepted.

## V Honor Code

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All students are expected to abide by the University Honor Code. Students are not allowed to write papers together, although verbal discussion of papers (with anyone) is not only permitted but encouraged. Any use of outside sources for specific ideas or arguments must be properly cited. Plagiarism is easily detectable and will absolutely not be tolerated. You are **strongly encouraged** to read Fordham's Undergraduate Academic Integrity Policy. If you have any doubt about the appropriateness of any action, please check with me.

## VI Students with Disabilities

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I am happy to accommodate students with disabilities. Students desiring accommodations on the basis of physical, learning, or psychological disability for this class should contact the Office of Disability Services. They are located in the Lower Level of O'Hare Hall, and can be reached by email at [disabilityservices@fordham.edu](mailto:disabilityservices@fordham.edu) or by phone at 718.817.0655.

## VII Title IX Office

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If you or someone you know would like help related to an experience of sexual violence including sexual assault, harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking or other type of non-consensual sexual conduct, please contact Anastasia Coleman, the Title IX Coordinator at Fordham, by email at [TitleIX@Fordham.edu](mailto:TitleIX@Fordham.edu) or phone at 718.817.3112. I am (along with all faculty and staff members) a mandatory reporter; if I learn of any incident of sexual violence or misconduct, I am legally required to report it.

## VIII Expected Schedule

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SEE COURSE WEBSITE FOR THE UP-TO-DATE SCHEDULE AND LINKS TO PAPERS!

### INTRODUCTION

Aug 31: Introduction, Euthyphro

Sept 4: NO CLASS (Labor Day)

### META-ETHICS

Sept 7: Divine Command Theory, "Good Minus God" by Louise Antony

Sept 11: Relativism, "Why our Children Don't Think there are Moral Facts" by Justin McBrayer

Sept 14: Meta-ethics, concluded

### UTILITARIANISM

Sept 18: Utilitarianism, Book I

Sept 21: Utilitarianism, Book 2

Sept 25: Utilitarianism, Book 3  
Sept 28: Utilitarianism, Book 4  
Oct 2: Utilitarianism, Book 5  
Oct 5: Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism"  
Oct 9: NO CLASS (Columbus Day)  
Oct 12: Utilitarianism, Concluded

DEONTOLOGY

Oct 16: Groundwork, Book 1  
Oct 19: Groundwork, Book 1 Continued  
Oct 23: Groundwork, Book 2  
Oct 26: Groundwork, Book 2 Continued

VIRTUE ETHICS

Oct 30: Nicomachean Ethics, Book I  
Nov 2: Nicomachean Ethics, Book II  
Nov 6: Nicomachean Ethics, Book III  
Nov 9: Nicomachean Ethics, Book IV  
Nov 13: Nicomachean Ethics, Book VII  
Nov 16: Nicomachean Ethics, Book X  
Nov 20: Virtue Ethics, Concluded  
Nov 23: NO CLASS (Thanksgiving)

APPLIED ETHICS

Nov 27: Thomson, "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem"  
Nov 30: Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"  
Dec 4: Marquis, "Why Abortion is Immoral"  
Dec 7: Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"