

PHIL 210: Ethics

Section 3: TR, 10:30am to 11:45am
Room 5E.438

Ted Parent, PhD

Email: ted.parent@nu.edu.kz

Office: Room 1.263 [second floor of Block 1]

Office Hours: TR, 12noon to 1pm, and by appointment

This is a class in **ethical theory**, the sub-discipline of philosophy that asks about what we should do, how we should be, and in general, what has practical value. As an introductory course, we will mainly study the “big three” in Western ethical philosophy: Utilitarianism, Virtue Ethics, and Kant’s Deontology. The last part of the course covers further selected topics in ethics.

Course Learning Outcomes

Students completing the course will have increased skill in:

- (a) Communicating complex arguments, especially on ethical matters;
- (b) Analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of such arguments;
- (c) Reading texts with greater attention to detail;
- (d) Designing and writing arguments to defend an original thesis;
- (e) Deploying philosophical thinking, a style of thinking that emphasizes clear and rigorous argumentation, so to maximize the acuity of one’s judgments in philosophy and elsewhere.

Another hope is that the course helps you *develop ethical sensitivity*. This is an ability to recognize morally relevant situations in daily life, and to respond to these situations in ways that accord with the moral principles that you endorse upon reflection.

Texts: All readings will be posted on the course website.

Teaching Modes

- (A) Seminars. For seminars, you will be divided into groups of (approximately) 25 students. You will already have read a pre-assigned text that explores some ethical topic in detail. I will be guiding us through the reading by asking questions about what the author says. I will be expecting you to know the answers, and will make detailed notes on who is participating, and on how well you are participating. This is a primary way that you will earn your participation grade, which is 15% of your final grade (see below).
- (B) Asynchronous Lectures. Each week before Monday morning, I will post on Moodle one or more video files for that week. These will be lectures on some ethical topic, closely related to that week’s seminar reading. (For example, a lecture might provide background or a general overview of some topic, while the reading argues for a more specific thesis; or the lecture might discuss one important aspect of a topic, while the reading addresses another.) It is recommended that you view the video lecture(s) before reading the text for the seminar.

Course Assignments

- (1) Participation is worth 15% of the final grade!!! How much should you participate? Well, if you don’t participate *at all*, don’t expect to get a passing grade for participation! Yet it is possible to earn an ‘A’ here without talking at every chance. Indeed, *quality matters much more than quantity* and you certainly should avoid dominating the discussion. Also, note that there are a variety of ways to participate, including:

- Emailing me or visiting office hours with questions/comments,
 - Sharing videos, websites, other content that are relevant to the course,
 - Summarizing a reading in a handout for your classmates (email me first).
- (2) Short-Essay Exam, worth 25% of the final grade. This exam will cover the *seminar readings only* from week two to week six. For this exam, you will write two short essays (based on prompts) during a class period. I will provide study questions to help you prepare for this exam, at least 2 weeks in advance. The exam will be closed book, closed notes.
 - (3) Multiple-Choice Exam, worth 25% of the final grade. This exam will cover the *lectures only* from week one to week six. You will answer several (20?) multiple choice questions during a class period. The exam will be closed book, closed notes.
 - (4) Final Exam, worth 35% of the final grade. This exam will cover just the seminar readings and the asynchronous lectures that were *not* covered on the previous two exams. In other words, it concerns the readings and lectures for weeks seven through fourteen. During a two-hour period, you will write two short essays (based on prompts) about the seminar readings and answer some multiple-choice questions about the lectures. I will provide study questions to help you prepare for the short essays. The exam will be closed book, closed notes.

Course Policies

- During class, *do not use your laptop/phone for anything other than class work*. Please resist the temptation to check your email/texts or visit random websites. (If you are buying stuff online, that will distract everyone sitting behind/beside you.) Philosophy often requires a LOT of concentration, and distractions can be quite harmful.
- Relatedly, please do not arrive late and remember to turn off your phone.
- SEMINAR ATTENDANCE. The following thresholds will result in precise penalties:
 - Upon your *fourth* unexcused seminar absence, 40% of your participation grade will be deducted.
 - Upon your *fifth*, an additional 10% of your participation grade will be deducted.
 - Upon your *sixth*, your participation grade falls to 0.
 - Upon your *seventh*, you **fail the entire course**.

In case of a medical excuse, you must submit your *spravka* to the relevant office. I do not grant excused absences for extra-curricular activities. Attendance is determined by the instructor's records, not by students' recollection of their attendance.

- MAKE-UP EXAMS. If you are absent for an exam, you are allowed ONE opportunity for a make-up exam. Any further missed exams will receive a grade of zero. All make-up exams will be held on Saturday, November 16th. The exact time/location will be announced later.
- If you have special needs because of a disability (psychological or physical), I am very happy to make exceptions to these policies. But please contact me about such arrangements ASAP.
- Discussions must proceed in a respectful and well-mannered fashion. Philosophy can be difficult, and no one should be made to feel stupid. Relatedly, taking an aggressive tone is inappropriate. It usually signals that the goal is to "win" a dispute, rather than to co-operate in a mutual endeavor to seek the truth. You will be asked to leave the classroom if you violate these basic norms of courtesy.
- Be forewarned that the majority of my feedback on your work will be critical. But *please* do not take any of my criticisms personally! Loads of critical feedback is simply how academic

philosophy operates. And in this class, the purpose of this is *certainly* not to belittle or discourage you, but to hone your writing/thinking skills.

- The Student Code of Conduct is in effect for this class. See <https://nu.edu.kz/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/NU-Student-Code-of-Conduct.pdf>. Plagiarism is sometimes unintentional—visit the following tutorial from Cornell University to learn how to recognize plagiarism: <https://plagiarism.arts.cornell.edu/tutorial/exercises.cfm>. You will be held responsible in this class for knowing what constitutes plagiarism.
- You are prohibited from plagiarizing AI-generated content. But this is not to say that AI is never relevant to this course. See “Statement on AI Usage” below for more details.
- The grading scale at Nazarbayev University, as set by the Registrar, is as follows (raw scores will be rounded):

Percentage	Letter Grade	G.P.A. scale
95-100	A	4.0
90-94.9	A-	3.67
85-89.9	B+	3.33
80-84.9	B	3.0
75-79.9	B-	2.67

70-74.9	C+	2.33
65-69.9	C	2.0
60-64.9	C-	1.67
55-59.9	D+	1.33
50-54.9	D	1.0
49.9 and below	F	0.0

- Please, do not ask me to raise your grade arbitrarily or ask for special opportunities for extra credit. These are requests for favoritism, pure and simple, and are quite inappropriate.

Advice on Reading

Reading philosophy is hard. That’s why I recommend reading the weekly material *twice*. BUT! As a first reading, it is sufficient to skim the texts, just to get a sense of the main ideas. Usually, *this takes less than five minutes!!* After that, read the material again *carefully*. Your earlier skimming should provide a basic “framework” that allows you to process better what you read.

During your second reading, it’s best to *read with a pen and note the points of interest*. I do NOT recommend mere underlining/highlighting. Rather, it’s best to read as if you were engaged in a conversation with the author: Raise questions, ask for clarification, and levy criticisms in the margins. This practice effectively prepares you for class discussion and the assignments. (Of course, this assumes that you have hard copies of the readings. I would recommend this anyway: Studies show that we learn better by reading hard copies versus reading a computer screen.¹)

Recommended Resources

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://iep.utm.edu/>

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (more advanced): <https://plato.stanford.edu>

¹ See, e.g., Clinton, V. (2019). Reading from paper compared to screens: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Research on Reading* 42(2): 288-325.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

*indicates a week where seminars do not meet.

[Readings in square brackets are recommended only]

*WEEK ONE: **Philosophy and Ethics**

Aug. 12-16 4 Handouts: Pessimism about Arguments, Introduction to Arguments, Some Common Argument Fallacies, Basic Distinctions in Ethical Theory

WEEK TWO: **Realism and Anti-Realism**

Aug. 19-24 Russ Shafer-Landau, "Ethical Subjectivism" (selection)
[Plato, "Euthyphro" (selection)]

WEEK THREE: **Utilitarianism**

Aug. 26-30 Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"
[John Stuart Mill, ch. 2 of *Utilitarianism*: "What Utilitarianism Is"]

WEEK FOUR: **Utilitarianism II**

Sept. 2-6 Robert Nozick, "The Experience Machine" from his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*;
Henry Sidgwick, "Pleasure and Desire;" Daniel Haybron, "Happiness and
Pleasure" (selection)

WEEK FIVE: **Virtue Ethics**

Sept. 9-14 Julia Annas, "Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing"

WEEK SIX: **Virtue Ethics II**

Sept. 16-20 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Bk I, chs. 7, 13; Bk II, chs. 1-9
[Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Bk I, chs. 1-5, 9; Bk III, chs. 1, 5; Bk. IV, ch. 3;
Bk. X, ch. 6. Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy" (selections)]

*WEEK SEVEN

Tuesday, Sept. 24: Short-Essay Exam

*WEEK EIGHT

Sept. 29-Oct. 4 FALL BREAK

*WEEK NINE:

Thursday, Oct. 10: Multiple-Choice Exam

WEEK TEN: **Kantianism**

Oct. 14-18 Onora O'Neill, "Consistency in Action" (selections); Immanuel Kant, "The
Categorical Imperative"

WEEK ELEVEN: **Kantianism II**

Oct. 21-25 Immanuel Kant, "Pure Practical Reason and the Moral Law" and "The Formula of
Humanity"

WEEK TWELVE: Justice

Oct. 28-Nov. 1 John Rawls, "A Theory of Justice"

WEEK THIRTEEN: Feminism

Nov. 4-8 Marilyn Frye, "Oppression" and "Sexism" from *The Politics of Reality*
[Simone de Beauvoir, selections from *The Second Sex*; Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion" (selections)]

WEEK FOURTEEN: Moral Status/Rights

Nov. 11-15 Joel Feinberg, "The Rights of Animals and Unborn Generations" (edited)
[Mark Rowlands, "I Wag; Therefore, I Am. The Philosophy of Dogs"]

WEEK FIFTEEN: Environmentalism

Nov. 18-22 Rachel Fredericks, "Courage as an Environmental Virtue"
[*Handout*: Coping with Ecological Despair]

Final Exam occurs during finals week; exact date/time TBD

Statement on AI Usage

It is plagiarism to copy or paraphrase text (without citation) from an LLM (Large Language Model) like ChatGPT. It is dishonest and violates the university honor code. Suspected infractions will be investigated thoroughly.

Yet the most important thing (besides the issue of morality) is this.

Whatever job you get, you will want to succeed at it—you will want to get promoted, earn prestige, and so forth. These things depend very much on your ability to invent and communicate new and compelling ideas. Innovation is often what makes for success. For that purpose, it is in your own long-term interest to develop your brain as much as you can—to develop your skills at thinking, analyzing, debating, etc., for creating and refining ideas that can withstand scrutiny. And it seems that *higher education is the best way humans have devised to develop those skills*. So, it is in your own long-term interest to maximize the opportunities that higher education offers. Obviously, that means not simply copying from ChatGPT.

Developing your brain is not just good for your career, moreover. It is also good for developing yourself as a person—for becoming a good parent, spouse, friend, and/or a good contributor to your community. Being able to develop new and insightful approaches, problem-solving, etc., are important qualities in all these aspects of life. Again, higher education provides serious opportunities to develop such qualities. So, for the sake of your own personal development as well, please maximize the educational opportunities in this class and in all your classes.

BTW, you are allowed to use AI to help generate ideas and brainstorm. However, you should note that the material generated by such tools may be inaccurate, incomplete, or otherwise problematic. Indeed, *philosophical* remarks from ChatGPT are often not good. It is usually unable to offer probing, insightful analysis, and to debate both sides of an issue fairly, which are important to this course.