

Contemporary Ethical Theory

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Course Description

This upper-level seminar introduces students to some central texts and figures in twentieth and twenty-first century ethical theory, focusing on the theme of the relationship between *morality, language, and goodness*. In the first half of the twentieth century, many philosophers held that the key to understanding morality was to clarify the distinctive logic of *moral statements and terms*, offering linguistic analyses of imperatives and moral judgments, as well as special moral predicates like 'good' and 'right'. While this linguistic turn in ethical theory became extremely influential, it also had fierce critics, who argued that such analyses turned on narrow notions of both language and ethical life. Our aim in this course is to understand and think critically about this historical development of ideas leading from the early twentieth century to the present. As part of this exploration, we will spend an extraordinary amount of time trying to figure out what the word 'good' means.

Course Goals

- Students will become familiar with key texts and figures in twentieth century metaethics, from G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) to the present.
- Drawing upon the concepts of contemporary metaethics, students will be able to understand and assess competing theories of the relationship between morality and language.
- Students will improve their ability to read, interpret, and annotate difficult texts in the history of philosophy.
- Students will expand their understanding of the ethical theories covered in PHIL1005 (Intro to Ethics) by digging deeper into their conceptual and metaphysical foundations.

A Combination of Asynchronous and Synchronous Work

This is an entirely online course that combines **asynchronous activities** (written assignments, discussion boards, readings, collaborative annotations, and other activities completed on your own time between sessions) and **synchronous activities** (regular Zoom meetings for live discussion, with breakout rooms as needed, as well as schedule office hours via Zoom).

The asynchronous work for this course is laid out on the Brightspace page. For most modules, simply complete the tasks in the order that they are presented. It is important that you complete all assignments for each module prior to our Zoom meeting, as we will dedicate those sessions almost entirely to discussing your work on the assignments.

We will meet via Zoom once a week on Tuesdays at 4:35pm (Central Time) for about 75 minutes.

Assignments, Activities, and Assessment

Students will be guided through different assignments and exercises on Brightspace as part of each module of the class. In addition to attending our Zoom sessions, watching pre-recorded video lectures, and doing the assigned reading, students will be asked to complete the following types of assignment during the semester:

1. *"Pre-Philosophical" Writing Assignments:* At the beginning of each unit, students will be prompted on Brightspace to write a brief paragraph offering their first thoughts on a philosophical question *prior* to doing the assigned reading, video lectures, etc. The idea is to get you thinking about a concept or idea on your own terms before diving into the more structured material of that week. In answering these questions, you may draw upon ideas from other classes, experiences, etc. This assignment will be ungraded and your responses need not be brilliant or polished. You may be asked to reassess your own earlier answers later in the semester.
2. *Perusall Annotations:* After each reading, students will be asked to go back and reread the assigned text on Perusall, creating annotations and responding to classmates. I will pre-populate the PDF with a few annotations of my own to give you a guide, especially in the early weeks of the class. A minimum of three meaningful annotations per reading is required. Annotations are due on Tuesdays at noon so that your instructors have time to read through them before our synchronous sessions.
3. *Discussion Posts:* Over the course of the semester, students will be asked to post four short (usually 1 to 3 substantial paragraphs) commentaries on a text. Each commentary will involve a task that builds upon the previous commentary. The assignments for each commentary will go as follows (you will find more detailed instructions on Brightspace when you complete that week's module):
 - #1: Unpack a Quote
 - #2: Reconstruct an Argument
 - #3: Reconstruct an Argument and Pose an Objection
 - #4: Reconstruct an Argument, Pose an Objection, and Respond on the Author's Behalf

Early in the semester, you will be assigned to a Discussion Group (Group A, B, or C). Look for your group's letter on the Week-by-Week Schedule below to see when your posts are due. Note that discussion posts are due every Sunday evening (11:59pm), so that your instructors have time to read through them before our synchronous sessions.

Discussion Post Grading: You get a grade of "1" simply for completing the assignment satisfactorily, and "2" for an especially thoughtful response. If you submit all the discussion posts on time and get "1" on them all, you get a B for this portion of your grade. For every discussion post you fail to submit, your grade is lowered one increment; for every post on which you receive a "2," your grade is raised one increment.

4. *3CQ Responses to Discussion Posts:* Over the course of the semester, you will be asked to post four short responses to your classmates' commentaries. Unlike the original Discussion Post, which must be written, your 3CQ Response may be either written or you may upload a video response (using the "Insert Video Note" feature on Brightspace). Your response should follow the 3CQ rule. 3CQ stands for three "C's" and a "Q." Every Response should include four elements:

- *A Compliment:* What did you find helpful, illuminating, or insightful about your classmate's post?
- *A Comment:* Do you agree with everything in your classmate's post? Elaborate on why or why not.
- *A Connection:* What other ideas, concepts, texts, examples, etc., does your classmate's post bring to mind? Elaborate on the connection.
- *A Question:* What unanswered questions do you have, either about your classmate's post or about the assigned reading?

Due dates for Responses to Commentaries will also be determined by your Commentary Group (A, B, or C). See the Week-by-Week Reading Schedule below for the full schedule. Note that Responses to Commentaries are due every Tuesday by noon, so that your instructors have time to read them before our synchronous sessions. 3CQ Responses will follow the same grading system as Discussion Posts.

5. *Midterm and Final Project:* The discussion posts are all meant as preparation for creating the midterm and final projects. You have options for completing this assignment: (a) a traditional term paper or (b) a pre-recorded PowerPoint video presentation. I request a written transcript in the case of (b). I will provide rubrics and tips for completing the assignments as the due dates approach.

Grading

10% Participation (factors determining this portion of your grade include participation in synchronous sessions, pre-philosophical writing assignments, and Perusall annotations)

30% Discussion Posts

10% 3CQ Responses

25% Midterm Assignment

25% Final Project

Typical Weekly Schedule, including Recurring Due Dates

Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday
Sign into Brightspace and begin the new module. Read assigned text(s), watch videos lectures, post on discussion boards, schedule office hours if desired, and complete any other module activities.				<i>11:59pm CT:</i> deadline for Discussion Posts	Finish up module activities.	<i>Noon CT:</i> deadlines for both Perusall annotations and 3CQ Responses <i>4:35pm CT:</i> Zoom Meeting

Honor System

All students are expected to complete the course requirements while fulfilling the Vanderbilt Honor System. Information on the Honor System can be found here: www.vanderbilt.edu/student_handbook/the-honor-system/. All cases will be handled through the Undergraduate Honor Council, and depending on severity may result in failure of the assignment, failure of the course, suspension, or expulsion.

Course Texts

Students should obtain copies (physical or digital) of the following two books, both of which have been ordered to the university bookstore:

1. Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford University Press: 2001).
2. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge: 1971).

All other readings will be provided as PDFs via Brightspace.

Schedule

Week	Zoom Meeting (Tuesdays at 4:35pm CT)	Module Title	Reading(s)	Discussion Post Schedule (Due Sundays by 11:59pm CT; 3CQ Responses due Tuesdays by noon CT)
1	8/25	What Is This Class About?		
2	9/1	Can 'Good' Be Defined?	G.E. Moore, <i>Principia Ethica</i> , chap. 1 (1903)	A: Post #1 B: 3CQ Response C: Week off
3	9/8	Is Writing About Ethics Impossible?	Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics" (1929)	A: Week off B: Post #1 C: 3CQ Response
4	9/15	Where Do Values Come From and Why Is It Us?	Alain Locke, "Values and Imperatives" (1935)	A: 3CQ Response B: Week off C: Post #1
5	9/22	Does 'X is Good' Just Mean 'Yay X'?	A.J. Ayer, <i>Language, Truth, and Logic</i> , excerpt (1936) Charles Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms" (1937)	A: Post #2 B: 3CQ Response C: Week off
6	9/29	Does Being Free Mean Having to Define One's 'Good' For Oneself?	Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946) Simone de Beauvoir, "What is Existentialism?" (1947)	A: Week off B: Post #2 C: 3CQ Response
7	10/6	Is There a Logic to the Language of Morals?	R.M. Hare, <i>The Language of Morals</i> , chap. 1 (1952)	A: 3CQ Response B: Week off C: Post #2
Midterm Project Due on Friday, 10/9 by 11:59pm				

8	10/13	Is Goodness a Matter of Choice or Vision?	Iris Murdoch, <i>The Sovereignty of Good</i> , chap. 1 (1971)	A: Post #3 B: 3CQ Response C: Week off
9	10/20	Does 'Good' Mean 'God'?	Iris Murdoch, <i>The Sovereignty of Good</i> , chap. 2 (1971)	A: Week off B: Post #3 C: 3CQ Response
10	10/27	Is 'Good' Sovereign Over Other Concepts?	Iris Murdoch, <i>The Sovereignty of Good</i> , chap. 3 (1971)	A: 3CQ Response B: Week off C: Post #3
11	11/3	Does Goodness Have a Distinctive Grammar?	Philippa Foot, <i>Natural Goodness</i> , Introduction and chap. 2	A: Post #4 B: 3CQ Response C: Week off
12	11/10	Is Being a Good Person Like Being a Good Plant?	Philippa Foot, <i>Natural Goodness</i> , chap. 3	A: Week off B: Post #4 C: 3CQ Response
13	11/17	(Why) Should We Care About Being Good Humans?	Philippa Foot, <i>Natural Goodness</i> , chap. 4	A: 3CQ Response B: Week off C: Post #4
<i>Thanksgiving Break</i>				
14	12/1	Final Project Workshop	Choose One of the Following Readings: <i>Option A:</i> Cora Diamond, "Murdoch the Explorer" <i>Option B:</i> Michael Thompson, "Three Degrees of Natural Goodness"	

Final Projects Due Friday Dec. 11 by 11:59pm