

PHIL1005
Spring 2026
Lecture: MW 10:10–11am
Lecture Hall: Wilson 126

Dr. Matthew Congdon
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Office Hours: M 11am–12pm
Office: Furman 015

Introduction to Ethics

What does it mean to live well, act rightly, and flourish? This is an introductory survey of important figures and themes in ethics, the branch of philosophy concerned with questions concerning how we should live. The course is divided into three parts: (I) In the first, we will discuss some philosophical questions regarding the nature of morality, including the relation of morality to law, religion, culture, and evolution. (II) The second part is devoted to the three most influential traditions in the history of moral philosophy: Utilitarianism, Kantian Ethics, and Virtue Ethics. (III) In the third and final part of the course, we will discuss some issues concerning ethical life and the social sphere, including the ethics of testimony, struggles for recognition, and the idea of moral progress.

Friday Discussion Sections			
02	10:10–11am	Wilson 113	Makaelan Bond
03	11:15am–12:05pm	Wilson 121	Makaelan Bond
04	10:10–11am	Wilson 115	Gates Ely
05	11:15–12:05pm	Furman 217	Gates Ely
06	10:10–11am	Buttrick 101	Jena Khasawneh
07	12:20–1:10pm	Furman 007	Jena Khasawneh
08	10:10–11am	Wilson 126	Christopher Quasti
09	12:20–1:10pm	Buttrick 304	Christopher Quasti

Required Texts (Available at the University Bookstore)

1. John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, *Utilitarianism and Other Essays*, ed. Alan Ryan (London: Penguin Classics, 2004).
2. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Revised Edition, trans. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
3. Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2009).

Course Requirements

Below are the major assignments you will complete in this course. More details about each assignment will be distributed later, but here is an overview:

Response Posts:

One of your principal week-to-week commitments this semester will be in the form of response posts. Beginning in Week 2, we'll set up weekly forums on Brightspace under the 'Discussions' menu. Eight times during the semester (and at least four times by Spring Break) you are required to post roughly 200 words on that week's materials. You can post more than the required eight times for extra credit (see Specification Grading policy, below). You can post anytime during the week, but the week "closes" at 5 p.m. on Saturdays. We will send out specifications for discussion posts during the first week of class.

Paper #1: Preliminary Issues and Utilitarianism

The first formal writing assignment for our course will prioritize the philosophical topics concerning morality in either the "Preliminary Issues" portion of the class (see Reading Schedule, below) or the texts by the classical utilitarians (Bentham and Mill). We will provide additional guidelines for this assignment in the weeks ahead. This paper is due Friday, Feb. 13 by 5 p.m.

Paper #2: Kantian Ethics and Virtue Ethics

The second writing assignment for our course will prioritize the two remaining traditions in ethics that we cover in Part II of the class (Kantian ethics and Aristotle's virtue ethics). We will provide additional guidelines for this assignment in the weeks ahead. This paper is due Friday, March 27 by 5 p.m.

Paper #3: Ethical Life and the Social Sphere

The third writing assignment for our course will prioritize the readings from Part III of the class, "Ethical Life and the Social Sphere." We will provide additional guidelines for this assignment in the weeks ahead. This paper is due **Friday, April 17 by 5 p.m.**

Specification Grading

This course aims to inspire deep engagement with readings, assignments, and discussions without over-emphasizing grades. As a result, your work on the above-listed assignments will be evaluated as "meets expectations" or "does not yet meet expectations." Assignments will not receive letter grades (A/B/C/etc.), although you will receive a final letter grade at the end of the semester (see the table below).

The wording of the categories “meets expectations” and “does not yet meet expectations” is intentional. This course aims to cultivate a learning environment in which you feel comfortable taking risks and see learning as an incremental process. Expectations will be high because you are capable of meeting high expectations with appropriate support and effort.

Do not take “does not yet meet expectations” as a sign of failure. It’s not equivalent to an “F”! It means that there is potential for you to take instructor feedback and revise your work, thereby meeting expectations at a school like Vanderbilt. Indeed, this is the point of all your college classes—not to be perfect from the beginning but to engage in, even struggle with, the work of the course and to improve along the way.

By the end of the semester, you will have earned a final letter grade, which will be based on the following factors:

	A	B	C	D
Response Posts	8 meet expectations	7 meet expectations	6 meet expectations	5 meet expectations
Three Major Assignments*	3 meet expectations	2 meet expectations	1 meets expectations	None meet expectations
Participation	Meets expectations by the end of the semester	Meets expectations by the end of the semester	Does not meet expectations by the end of the semester	Does not meet expectations by the end of the semester

* Three major assignments include: Paper #1, Paper #2, and Paper #3. All three assignments must be submitted in order to receive a passing grade.

Additional Notes on Specification Grading Policy

1. Each grade bundle (the columns on the table above) is jointly required to receive a grade in that range. All specifications in a bundle must be met in order to earn that grade. In other words, the lowest level you complete in each category sets the ceiling for your grade. For example, if you earn 2 “meets expectations” out of three on your major papers, you cannot earn more than a B+ in the course, even if you have otherwise completed most of the A bundle.
2. Students may earn a “plus” on a letter grade by demonstrating exceptional growth, engagement, exceeding expectations on assignments, or showing special commitment to the course, including by writing extra Response Posts or revising an essay that already received a “Meets Expectations.” A student may earn a “minus” on a letter grade by consistently meeting only the basic requirements of coursework, by showing little evidence of growth over the semester, submitting late work, or repeated violations of classroom policies.

3. Participation includes being clearly prepared for and engaging in class discussions and seizing opportunities to learn, collaborate, and find support. It requires (but goes far beyond) attendance. Excessive absences (see the policy below) can result in failure in the course, regardless of performance in other grade categories. Participation will be evaluated at the end of each unit, at the same time that your major papers are returned to you with comments. Students who do not meet expectations on participation must meet with their instructor to revise their participation goals and be re-evaluated later in the term. Particularly excellent or particularly poor engagement in the course can earn a plus or minus on the letter grade at the end of the semester.

Revisions Policy

As you can see from the grading policy above, your assignments will fall into one of two categories: “meets expectations” or “does not yet meet expectations.” Any assignment that falls into the second category can (and should) be revised so that it meets expectations. Note that the deadline for revising any major assignment is *two weeks* after you receive feedback from your instructor and *one week* after receiving feedback for response posts. That will help you remain focused on the continuous work of the class instead of playing catch-up at the end of the semester.

An exception is the Group Project: In-Class Debate. Due to the nature of this project, which both takes place at the end of the semester and requires collaboration with others, there will not be an opportunity to revise your performance on this assignment. In lieu of the opportunity to revise, we will make a special effort to recognize student effort on the front end of the debate preparation process (including, but not limited to, speaking with us in office hours), and take this into account in our evaluation of this final assignment.

Classroom Policies

Attendance. Attendance is essential for doing well in this course, and your instructors will take attendance every class. However, because conflicts sometimes arise, you may miss two class periods (equivalent to one week of class) without question and without negatively affecting your final grade. After two absences, your contributions to class will be considered below “meets expectations,” unless you have a legitimate, instructor-accepted excuse. Especially excessive absences can result in failure in the course, regardless of performance in other grade categories. Whether you are present or not, you are responsible for all materials covered in class.

Reading Assignments. You should have the reading assignment for each day finished by the time our class meeting begins. Always bring the assigned reading and your notes to class,

since we will often spend significant portions of our discussion working through important passages, and it will be imperative that you have the material in front of you.

Food and Drink. Please do not eat in class. Drinks are fine.

Laptops, Phones, and other Electronic Devices. Please silence and store out of sight all such devices during our class sessions. An exception will be on days when our readings are on the course Brightspace site.

AI, Plagiarism, and the Honor Code. Turning to AI text-generation tools can all too easily degrade the quality of a student's learning experience in thinking through the material for themselves and creating their own work. It also tends to result in subpar writing, at least for the sort of writing you will be asked to do in this class. As such, use of generative AI is not permitted for completing the assignments in this class. This prohibition includes not only the creation of paper drafts, but also its use in the planning stages of writing (such as constructing an outline) and in the editing stages (if you need a second set of eyes on your paper to go over your style, grammar, or spelling, swap drafts with a friend, a classmate, roommate, etc., rather than running your paper through AI).

Beyond that, 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 of plagiarism or cheating 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.

Accommodations and Accessibility. We encourage any students with accommodations needs to submit requests for accommodations in accordance with the guidelines set out by Vanderbilt's Center for Student Access Services. Information, including the "Reasonable Accommodations Request Process," can be found here: <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/student-access/>.

Religious Holidays. Students who expect to miss classes or any other assignments as a consequence of their religious observance should provide us with notice of the dates of religious holidays on which they will be absent in the first two weeks of the semester.

READING SCHEDULE

"PDF" = on Brightspace.

Date	Topic	Readings & Assignments
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M 1/5	Introductory Remarks	
PART 1: PRELIMINARY ISSUES		
W 1/7	Morality and Law: Socrates in Athens, Martin Luther King in Birmingham	Plato, <i>Crito</i> & excerpt from <i>Phaedo</i> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"
F 1/9	Discussion of Plato and King	
M 1/12	Morality and Religion	Steven M. Cahn, "God and Morality" Plato, <i>Euthyphro</i>
W 1/14	Morality and Cultural Norms: Cultural Relativism	James Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"
F 1/16	Discussion of morality, religion, and cultural relativism	
M 1/19	No Class – MLK, Jr. Day	
W 1/21	Morality and Evolution	Sharon Street, "Does Anything Really Matter or Did We Just Evolve to Think So?"
F 1/23	Discussion of Morality and Evolution	
PART II: MORAL THEORIES		
M 1/26	UTILITARIANISM Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) The Greatest Happiness for the Greatest Number	Jeremy Bentham, <i>An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation</i> , in <i>Utilitarianism and Other Essays</i> , pp. 65-69 and 83-97.
W 1/28	J.S. Mill (1806-1873) Utilitarianism Revised	J.S. Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> , Chapters I and II, in <i>UOE</i> , pp. 272-298 Julia Driver, "Contemporary Utilitarianism" in <i>EE</i> , pp. 109-117
F 1/30	Discussion of Bentham and Mill	
M 2/2	The Sanctions of the Principle of Utility	J.S. Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> , Chapter III, in <i>UOE</i> , pp. 298-307

W 2/4	Mill's "Proof" of the Principle of Utility	J.S. Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> , Chapter IV, in <i>UOE</i> , pp. 307–314 Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" (PDF)
F 2/6	Discussion of Mill and LeGuin	
M 2/9		Writing Day
W 2/11		Writing Day
F 2/13		Writing Day – Paper #1 Due
M 2/16	KANTIAN ETHICS Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) Kant's Attempt to Discover the "Supreme Principle of Morality"	Immanuel Kant, <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i> , Preface, pp. 3-8 Christine M. Korsgaard, "Introduction" (in your copy of the <i>Groundwork</i>), pp. ix-xiii
W 2/18	Kant on the Good Will	Kant, <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i> , First Section, pp. 9-20 Korsgaard, "Introduction," pp. xiii-xvii
F 2/20	Discussion of <i>Groundwork</i> I	
M 2/23	Kant's Categorical Imperative: Formula of the Universal Law (FUL)	Kant, <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i> , Second Section, pp. 21-37 (up to margin number 4:425) Korsgaard, "Introduction," pp. xvii-xxiii
W 2/25	Kant's Categorical Imperative: Formula of Humanity (FH)	Kant, <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i> , Second Section, pp. 37-52 (up to margin number 4:441) Korsgaard, "Introduction," pp. xxiii-xxviii Onora O'Neill, "A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics,"
F 2/27	Discussion of <i>Groundwork</i> II	

M 3/2	VIRTUE ETHICS Aristotle (385-322 BCE) <i>Eudaimonia</i> (Happiness) & Aristotle's "Function Argument"	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Book I, Chapters 1-8 and 13 (pp. 3-14 and 19-22). Julie Driver, "Virtue Ethics"
W 3/4	The Doctrine of the Mean & Virtues as States of Character	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Book II, pp. 23-37
F 3/6	Discussion of Aristotle	
3/9-13	SPRING BREAK	
M 3/16	Voluntary vs. Involuntary Action, Choice, Deliberation, & Practical Wisdom	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Book III, Chapters 1-5, pp. 38-49 Book VI, Chapter 5, pp. 105-107
W 3/18	<i>Akrasia</i> (Incontinence)	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Book VII, Chapters 1-4, pp. 118-126
F 3/20	Discussion of Aristotle	
M 3/23		Writing Day
W 3/25		Writing Day
F 3/27		Writing Day – Paper #2 Due
PART III: ETHICAL LIFE AND THE SOCIAL SPHERE		
M 3/30	Epistemic Injustice Testimonial Injustice	Miranda Fricker, <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> , chap. 1 (PDF)
W 4/1	The Virtue of Testimonial Justice	Miranda Fricker, <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> , chap. 4 (PDF)
F 4/3	Discussion of Fricker	
M 4/6	Recognition Theory	Axel Honneth, "Between Aristotle and Kant: Recognition and Moral Obligation" (PDF)

W 4/8		P.F. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment” (PDF)
F 4/10	Discussion of recognition theory	
M 4/13	Moral Progress A Case Study in Moral Change	Elizabeth Anderson, “Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies from Britain’s Abolition of Slavery” (PDF)
W 4/15	Can There Be New Moral Concepts?	Michele Moody-Adams, “The Idea of Moral Progress” (PDF)
F 4/17	No Class	
M 4/20	No Class	

End of Semester Paper Schedule

- Paper Due: April 17
- Comments back to students who need to revise by: April 23
- Revisions Due: April 30
- Grades Due: May 2