

PHIL 110: Ethics
Fall 2025, Section 2
MWF 1:20-2:25pm
Goldspohn 20

Professor: Adam Kotsko, akotsko@noctrl.edu

Office: 5 S. Loomis St., Office 17 (in attic)

Office Hours: MWF, 12:00-1:10, 2:30-3:00 (see sign-in sheet on Canvas) or by appointment

Course Description

What is the right thing to do? We all ask ourselves that question every day. What makes ethics a philosophical pursuit, however, is that it goes beyond that initial question to ask *why*. What *makes* something the right thing to do? In this course, we will explore some of the most influential attempts to develop a systematic account of our ethical duties from the history of Western philosophy and weigh their insights and shortcomings. And along the way, each student will be required to make some small, but systematic effort to become a better person.

Course Objectives

Upon completing this course, students will be able to

- Analyze argumentative texts
- Write clearly and persuasively
- Understand and critically evaluate major ethical theories
- Apply ethical theories to real-life situations

This course also meets the objectives for the Cardinal Directions general education requirements in Humanities and Ethical Dimensions, for Community Engaged Learning.

Required Course Readings

Please buy, rather than rent, all course texts *in hard copy*, to facilitate underlining and note-taking. The additional cost will be rewarded with greater understanding, easier preparation for class discussion, and an advantage on exams (which are open book, but *only* for print books).

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Bartlett and Collins (U Chicago). ISBN: 9780226026756

Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Fretchman (Philosophical Library). ISBN: 9781480442801

The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill, ed. John Troyer (Hackett). ISBN: 9780872206496

Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Harvard). ISBN: 9780674445444

Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Ellington (Hackett). ISBN: 978-0872201668

Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, trans. Gruber, ed. Cooper (Hackett). ISBN: 9780872205543

Additional readings will be made available on Canvas or via handout.

Student Assessment

Each student's grade will be determined as follows:

- Class participation: 20%
- Annotation exercises: 20%
- Collaborative project: 10%
- Intermediate exams: 15% each, 30% total
- Final exam: 20%

Grades will be represented in Canvas on a scale of 1000 points total, with each Canvas point being the equivalent to one-tenth of one percent of the final grade. My grading scale is as follows:

930-1000: A	780-799: C+
900-929: A-	730-779: C
880-899: B+	700-729: C-
830-879: B	600-699: D (Merlin allows no D+ or D-)
800-829: B-	599 or below: F

I reserve the right to round up, though such mercy is not to be considered guaranteed. I will never round down.

Class participation presupposes careful and thorough preparation and serious intellectual involvement in class discussion. Students should come to class not only having read the text through, but having underlined, taken notes, and scanned over the marked text at least one additional time after the initial reading. Students should expect a mixture of lecture, small-group exercises, and whole-group discussion. The professor reserves the right to call on students at random at any time, with a preference for students who have not volunteered to speak recently.

The format of each class session will vary, and I recognize that in such a large class, it is not realistic that every individual will actively address the entire group every single class session, but every student should expect to participate actively in small groups, to contribute regularly to whole-group discussions, and to respond to the professor's questions most of the time when called on. (This semester, the first ten "participation points" will stem from a purely written response, due to the professor's travel plans.)

Participation grades will be posted on Canvas at intervals of two to three weeks. On average, each regular class session is worth 5 points, for a total of 200. Students who meet baseline expectations over a given grading period will receive a grade in the **B range** (4 points per session) for their participation portion. Students whose contribution is notably lacking—for instance, those who speak very little, who give no evidence of having done the reading carefully, who consistently change the topic in a disruptive way, or whose primary contributions are jokes or personal anecdotes—will receive a participation grade in the **C or D range** (3 or fewer points per session). Students who distinguish themselves through some particular service—such as consistently contributing new topics that shape the discussion, serving as a resource for navigating the text, or making a special effort to keep small groups on task—will qualify themselves for a participation grade in the **A range** (5 points per session). Active participation in a smaller break-out group qualifies for a B-range grade, but you must regularly contribute to the whole-group discussion if you want an A for participation.

It is of course impossible to participate in class if you are not present. Absences not only affect the individual student, but the entire group, and the same is true of habitual lateness. Punctual attendance should be regarded as mandatory. Lateness will count against a student's participation for that session, and in extreme cases will be treated as the equivalent of an absence.

Absences may be considered excused if the student supplies a valid excuse; examples of such excuses would include the following:

- You have suffered an illness or medical emergency that prevents attendance
- The death or illness of a family member requires you to be elsewhere during class time
- You are celebrating a religious holiday and have received approval for this before missing class
- You are representing the college in an official capacity and have made me aware of your responsibilities before missing class; these absence notifications and must be accompanied by a note or email from a relevant NCC employee (e.g., coach, faculty mentor, dean, etc.)

Students are responsible for notifying the professor absences as soon as possible, ideally beforehand.

Unexplained no-shows will result in the loss of participation points for that session, with no possibility of make-up. For a limited number of excused absences, the professor will award points equivalent to the student's average participation level, but if the number of excused absences become excessive, either across a short period or the semester as a whole, the professor reserves the right to require an individual meeting with the student to review missed material (which may be conducted via Zoom if needed). Failure to attend such a meeting in a timely fashion will result in the loss of participation points even for excused absences.

Students requiring additional accommodations are urged to discuss this matter with the professor as early as possible in the semester and to devise a formal written plan in consultation with the relevant institutional offices. In line with the Shimer School (my home department)'s policies on attendance, accommodations will be made with the aim of allowing a student to attend at least 80% of class sessions and without placing undue burdens on either the accommodated student or the faculty member.

Annotation exercises will provide the professor with additional evidence of your careful reading of the course materials. Students will be expected to upload photos of certain pages from the reading with their notes and underlining, sometimes with an additional written response. Responses will be due before class on the day for which the reading is assigned; I recommend checking for reading questions prior to doing the reading. Please note that reading questions cannot be submitted late, even if the student has an excused absence for that class. All annotation exercises are listed on the syllabus alongside the reader to which they apply. Each annotation exercise will be worth 20 points. Since one main purpose of this assignment is to help you prepare for class discussion, 2 points will automatically be deducted from any student who does the wrong passage—please pay attention to the reading schedule.

Your *collaborative project* will track your progress in consciously cultivating an ethical virtue of your choice, together with an accountability group of other students. Grading will be based on your effort and serious reflection, not on your moral caliber as a person. A short paper will make up 5% of your grade and a group presentation will make up 5%. An assignment sheet providing more details will be passed out in class on the date listed below.

The *exams* will be made up of a mixture of short-answer and essay questions. All tests are open-book, but **only for students with print copies**—the use of laptops or other electronic devices during exam sessions will not be permitted (with the exception of students with disability accommodations). Note that this means you will need to **actually print out** PDF readings. The two tests will cover only a portion of the class content; the final exam will primarily focus on the segment of the class after the second test, but will also include a review element.

Note on Institutional Policies

Please note that the college-wide policy on plagiarism holds for this class and that student assignments may be run through plagiarism-detection software at the professor's discretion. Plagiarism is a very serious academic and ethical offence that can lead to failure of the assignment or course—or, after multiple instances, expulsion from college. Please consult the Student Handbook for more details of the plagiarism policy. Note that the professor considers the use of AI text-generation software, for any reason, a form of plagiarism.

Class and Reading Schedule

*This calendar provides the schedule for assignments and readings for our time together this semester. Students should be aware that the schedule may change. All students will be alerted as soon as possible via email and Canvas announcement. **Failure to check email regularly is no excuse for missing these updates.** Readings from PDFs or handouts are marked as follows: (**). All other readings are from the assigned course texts. Note that the assignment listed for each day is what you need to do **before** you come to class.*

Wednesday	August 20	NO CLASS—Professor Travelling for Conference
Friday	August 22	NO CLASS—Professor Travelling for Conference
Monday	August 25	Course intro and syllabus Written response to Heinz's Dilemma due
Wednesday	August 27	Plato, <i>Euthyphro</i> (in <i>Trial and Death of Socrates</i>)
Friday	August 29	Plato, <i>Apology</i> (in <i>Trial and Death of Socrates</i>) and "Allegory of the Cave" (**)
Monday	September 1	NO CLASS—Labor Day
Wednesday	September 3	Plato, <i>Crito</i> and selection from <i>Phaedo</i> (in <i>Trial and Death of Socrates</i>) Annotation Exercise #1 Due
Friday	September 5	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Book 1, ch. 1-5
Monday	September 8	Aristotle, Book 1, ch. 7-11
Wednesday	September 10	Aristotle, Book 1, ch. 12-13; Book 2, ch. 1-3 Annotation Exercise #2 Due
Friday	September 12	Aristotle, Book 2, ch. 4-9

Monday	September 15	Aristotle, Book 3, ch. 1-5 Annotation Exercise #3 Due
Wednesday	September 17	Aristotle, Book 3, ch. 6-9 Introduction of virtue project
Friday	September 19	Aristotle, Book 3, ch. 10-12; Book 4, ch. 3
Monday	September 22	Aristotle, Book 5, chs. 1-5 Annotation Exercise #4 Due
Wednesday	September 24	Aristotle, Book 8, ch. 1-5
Friday	September 26	Aristotle, Book 10, ch. 6-9
Monday	September 29	Plato and Aristotle review day
Wednesday	October 1	Test 1: Plato and Aristotle
Friday	October 3	Kant, <i>Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals</i> , First Section
Monday	October 6	Kant, Second Section (pp. 19-27, up to “The question now arises...”) Annotation Exercise #5 Due
Wednesday	October 8	Kant, Second Section (pp. 27-38, up to “In the previous formulations of imperatives...”)
Friday	October 10	Kant, Second Section (pp. pp. 38-48)
Monday	October 13	NO CLASS—Fall Break
Wednesday	October 15	Virtue Papers due; Virtue Presentations in-class
Friday	October 17	Bentham, <i>Principles of Morals and Legislation</i> , chs. 1, 2, and 4; “The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number” and “Push-Pin Versus Poetry” (<i>Classical Utilitarians</i> [hereafter <i>CU</i>], pp. 8-22, 92-94)
Monday	October 20	Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> , chs. 1-2 (<i>CU</i> , pp. 95-115) Annotation Exercise #6 Due
Wednesday	October 22	Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> , chs. 3 and 4 (<i>CU</i> , pp. 115-127)
Friday	October 24	Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> , ch. 5 (<i>CU</i> , pp. 127-145)
Monday	October 27	Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism” (**)
Wednesday	October 29	Kant and Utilitarians Review Day
Friday	October 31	Test 2: Kant and Utilitarians
Monday	November 3	Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion” (**)
Wednesday	November 5	Gilligan, <i>In a Different Voice</i> , Introduction, start ch. 2 (pp. 1-4 and 24-45, up to “Freud...”)
Friday	November 7	Gilligan, rest of ch. 2 (pp. 45-63) Annotation Exercise #7 Due

Monday	November 10	Gilligan, start ch. 3 (pp. 64-85, up to “Although from one...”)
Wednesday	November 12	Gilligan, rest of ch. 3 (pp 85-105)
Friday	November 14	Gilligan, ch. 6 (pp. 151-174) Annotation Exercise Due #8
Monday	November 17	Beauvoir, <i>Ethics of Ambiguity</i> , first half of ch. 2 (pp. 37-58, up to “But this will to negation”)
Wednesday	November 19	Beauvoir, rest of ch. 2 (pp. 58-78) Annotation Exercise #9 Due
Friday	November 21	Beauvoir, ch. 3, section 2 (pp. 84-103)
Monday	November 24	NO CLASS—Professor Travelling for Conference
Wednesday	November 26	NO CLASS—Thanksgiving break
Friday	November 28	NO CLASS—Thanksgiving break
Monday	December 1	Beauvoir, ch. 3, section 3 (pp. 103-124) Annotation Exercise #10 Due
Wednesday	December 3	Beauvoir, ch. 3, start section 5 (pp. 139-155, up to “One might first wonder...”)
Friday	December 5	Final review day
Monday	December 8	FINAL EXAM (1:30-3:30pm)