

Morals and Ethical Philosophy
Fall 2025
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Office Hours By Appointment



Course Overview

This graduate seminar explores the origins of moral reasoning through philosophy, theology, psychology, and political theory. Beginning with questions of innate morality in early childhood and foundational myths like the Genesis narrative, the course moves through major ethical frameworks—utilitarianism, deontology, and care ethics—before applying them to real-world issues such as war, justice, genocide, truth-telling, economic inequality, and artificial intelligence. Through close readings, interdisciplinary media, and interactive discussions, students critically examine whether morality is inherited, learned, or constructed, and develop their own frameworks for ethical engagement in contemporary society.

Course Requirements

1. *Completion of reading assignments:* You should plan to set aside sufficient time, space, and energy for reading and re-reading what are sometimes challenging materials. Each class session one or two students will be asked to do a short presentation (10-15 minutes) to frame class discussion.

2. *Active Participation and Punctual Attendance for Class Sessions*: Both are indispensable to your pleasure and learning, as well as that of your colleagues. Attend faithfully; participate vigorously. You cannot pass the course if you miss more than two classes.

3. *Discussion Posts*: Each week students are also asked to post **one short response on Moodle**. These reading reflections should be aimed at class discussion and should be posted by **9pm on Wednesday night**. Posts will help you prepare well for our class discussions. A post can serve several functions. A post should be at least **three paragraphs long**. Use your post to be sharp, polemical, and provocative, if you wish, but you must make arguments and give your reasons and evidence.

Posts can help you:

1. *Dissect the argument* presented in a reading: breaking it down into premises and conclusions.
2. *Raise questions* about what you don't understand in the reading.
3. *Critically evaluate* the argument of the reading.
4. *Make connections* with other readings or things you are encountering in this or other courses.
5. *Personalize material* by connecting it with your life.
6. *Use examples* to illustrate (and breathe life into) your points.
7. *Edit your entry* before you post it

4. *Assignments*:

- a. *Presentation*: Each student is asked to **choose one class** during which s/he will make a short presentation (10-15 minutes) of the class readings, helping to frame the class discussion. The presentation can be a video of the topic, a student-created "TED talk," a debate among several students, a student-curated website of the topic; a theatrical/dramatic performance; interactive and/or dynamic graphs of data with explanation. Be creative. Innovative.

- b. *Final Project* – Most often students write a **3750–4500-word research paper** on an issue from the course; however, the research paper can take many different forms – an ethnography, a survey with analysis, a literature review, a short student-created documentary, etc. Or as suggested above for the presentation, any of these formats. There will be more in class discussion of the final project.

- c. **Topic Proposals** must be submitted by **Tuesday, November 4, 2025**. Your proposal should be approximately 300 words, detailing your topic, your framing question(s), and what resources you will use to address your topic (i.e. first-person accounts, speeches, policies, etc.)

Final Paper: If you are writing a final paper, it should be between 3750 - 4500 words, double spaced, 12-point font, 1" margins. Footnotes are preferred to endnotes. See <https://www.bibliography.com/chicago/footnote-referencing-styles/> for style references as well as bibliography app for ease of citation. Please also include a full bibliography. Your **Introduction** should be specific to your topic, not a general overview of the issue. Make an argument, ensure you have a thesis. Marshall evidence to support your claim. Your **conclusion** can summarize the primary points of your argument, but it should also address any issues you think should be researched further or which you feel have been underdeveloped or less fully discussed in your own work. The conclusion can also gesture to additional research that you might pursue on this topic.

Due Monday, December 15, 2025

Grades:

Class Presentations: 25%
Seminar Discussion and Question Postings: 35%
Proposal: 10%
Final Paper/Project: 30%

Reading Schedule



Are We Born Moral or Do We Learn to be Moral?

WEEK ONE: September 18, 2025

(please note that this seminar begins a week later; we will schedule a convenient make-up sometime during the semester)

Class Introduction

“What Babies Know” Paul Bloom <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FRvVFW85IcU>

Core Topic: *Are we innately moral? What does infancy reveal about moral intuition?*

Discussion Questions

1. Bloom presents evidence that infants display early moral reasoning (e.g., preferring helpful puppets). Does this support the idea of an “innate” morality? Why or why not?
2. What are the implications of this research for the concept of *original sin* or *tabula rasa*?

3. How might culture reinforce, challenge, or reshape these inborn tendencies over time?
4. What does the presence of “ingroup preference” in infants suggest about the moral dangers of natural instincts?
5. Can we build ethical systems from instinct alone?

WEEK TWO: September 25, 2025

Read Genesis 1:1-4:22, Creation Story, and Story of Adam and Eve, NRSV

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%201&version=NRSVUE>

Core Topic: *Does the Genesis story depict morality as innate, learned, or imposed?*

Discussion Questions

1. In what way does the Genesis narrative suggest that knowledge of good and evil is dangerous—or necessary—for human beings?
2. Is Adam and Eve’s disobedience better understood as a moral failure or a coming of age?
3. How does God's reaction to Cain after Abel's murder reflect divine justice or moral instruction?
4. Is morality in Genesis portrayed as external law (commandments) or internal compass (conscience)?
5. How might the story relate to Bloom's findings about early moral cognition?

Is the Greatest Good for the Greatest Number Just?

WEEK THREE October 2, 2025

“Utilitarianism,” and “On Liberty” J.S. Mill

Core Topic: *Is maximizing happiness a just way to decide what’s right?*

Discussion Questions

1. Mill insists that happiness must be “qualitative” not just “quantitative.” What does this distinction mean, and how does it complicate utilitarian calculations?
2. Does Mill provide an adequate account of minority rights in a system that privileges the majority’s happiness?
3. Mill ranks certain pleasures as “higher” than others (e.g., intellectual vs. physical). On what basis? Do you agree?
4. Can suffering ever be justified in the pursuit of a greater good? How do we know when it is or isn’t?
5. How would Mill’s utilitarianism judge the actions of Eve? Of God? Of Cain?



"It doesn't *matter* that you never got caught!"

Can Emotions Be Ethical? The Ethics of Care

WEEK FOUR: October 09, 2025

Nell Noddings, “The Ethics of Care”

Core Topic: *Can Emotions Be Ethical?*

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Noddings argue that men and women approach moral decisions differently?

2. What role do empathy and relationship play in moral reasoning according to Noddings?
3. Is the ethics of care less 'rational' than traditional ethical theories—or just differently grounded?
4. Should care ethics be applied to public policy, or is it limited to private morality?
5. How do cultural norms shape what is considered 'feminine' or 'masculine'?

Power vs Justice: Does Might Make Right?

WEEK FIVE: October 16, 2025

Read: The Mytilene Dialogue and the Melian Dialogue (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*)

Chapter 5: pgs.84-116 & Chapter3: pgs.2-50)

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/History_of_the_Peloponnesian_War/Book_3

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/History_of_the_Peloponnesian_War/Book_5

Watch: Chomsky- Foucault Debate on Power v Justice (12 minutes)

<https://youtu.be/xpVQ315P0A4>

Core Topic: *Does Might Make Right?*

Discussion Questions

1. How do the Athenians justify their power in the Melian dialogue? What assumptions about justice are implied?
2. Are the Melians naïve idealists—or courageous moral actors? Why?
3. How does Chomsky's understanding of justice differ from Foucault's understanding of power?
4. In what ways do modern states echo the rhetoric of the Athenians today?
5. Can power ever be used justly, or does it always corrupt?

*JUST WAR THEORIES:
IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE GOOD DURING WARFARE?*



WEEK SIX: October 23, 2025

Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Examples, Michael Walzer, Part One Moral Reality, pgs. 3-44. (Available for free on Internet Archive.org)

Walzer's "The Drones"

Discussion and Debate of *Eye in the Sky* (available on Netflix and Amazon)

<https://archive.org/details/justunjustwarso0000walz/page/n7/mode/2up>

Core Topic: *Is It Possible to Be Good During Warfare?*

Discussion Questions

1. What are the three components of just war theory, and how do they function together?
2. Why does Walzer think it is important to follow ethical rules even in war ('war is hell' vs. just war)?
3. Can drone warfare ever be consistent with just war theory? Why or why not?
4. How does 'Eye in the Sky' challenge or reinforce the idea of military ethics?
5. What does it mean to fight 'like us, not like them'? What are the ethical costs and benefits?

Beyond the Law? Beyond Justice? Genocide, Crimes against Humanity and Punishment

WEEK SEVEN: October 30, 2025

Listen to Podcast Ezra Klein: When is it Genocide? (1 hr., 43 minutes)
<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/when-is-it-genocide/id1548604447?i=1000721783741>

Watch *Judgement at Nuremberg* (1961) with Spencer Tracey (3 hours, if pressed for time, watch beginning at 2hr:19minutes)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFcvs5YzRqo&rco=1>

Core Topic: *Can international justice address crimes that exceed the law?*

Discussion Questions

1. What distinguishes genocide from other forms of mass violence?
2. How do we judge those who claim they were 'just following orders'?
3. Is there a moral responsibility to intervene in or punish atrocities outside one's own nation?
4. What role do trials like Nuremberg play in shaping international law and memory?
5. How do emotional responses—grief, outrage, vengeance—interact with ethical frameworks of justice?

A Rational and Universal Ethic



WEEK EIGHT: November 6, 2025

Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Preface and First Section) pgs. 74-84; Kant, Second and Third Section; Sandel, "What Matters is the Motive?"

Core Topic: *A Rational and Universal Ethic*

Discussion Questions

1. What is the categorical imperative, and how does it differ from utilitarian logic?
2. Why does Kant argue that motives, not consequences, determine moral worth?

3. Can Kant's principles be applied to ambiguous real-world moral problems? Why or why not?
4. How would Kant judge lying to protect someone, or disobedience to unjust laws?
5. What are the strengths and limitations of basing ethics solely on reason?

WEEK NINE: November 13, 2025

O'Neill, "Treating Others as Persons," pdf

Why Do We Lie?

<http://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour/311863205/why-we-lie>

Core Topic: *The Ethics of Lying*

Discussion Questions

1. According to Kant (via O'Neill), why is lying always morally wrong?
2. What are common reasons people lie, and how do they rationalize it?
3. Are there morally permissible lies? If so, what justifies them?
4. To whom do we lie more often—strangers or friends? Why might that be?
5. How does the act of lying affect our moral identity and social trust?

Wealth and Justice



WEEK TEN: November 20, 2025

Read: Andrew Carnegie, “The Gospel of Wealth”

https://media.carnegie.org/filer_public/ab/c9/abc9fb4b-dc86-4ce8-ae31-a983b9a326ed/ccny_essay_1889_thegospelofwealth.pdf

C. Wright Mills, “The Power Elite,” <https://www.marxists.org/subject/humanism/mills-c-wright/power-elite.htm>

Read, “Introduction: Markets and Morals” and “Chapter 1: Jumping the Queue,” in *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, Michael Sandel.

Core Topic: *What is the moral relationship among wealth, power, and justice?*

Discussion Questions

1. What ethical responsibilities do the wealthy have toward society?
2. Does Carnegie’s philanthropic model remain relevant today, or is it a form of control?
3. How does Mills describe the structure of power, and in what ways might this structure be invisible to most people?
4. When does market logic cross a moral line, according to Sandel?
5. Should all goods and services be available for purchase? Why or why not?

Thanksgiving November 27 – No Class

Natural Law and the Science of a Created Order



WEEK ELEVEN: December 4, 2025

Read, Summary Thomas Aquinas (pdf)

Read D. DeGrazia, “What’s Wrong with Enhancement Technologies?”

“Working in Asia’s Largest Slum,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ku237i8oGJI>

Core Topic: *What role does natural law play in shaping ethical boundaries in medicine, environment, and society?*

Discussion Questions

1. What is meant by 'natural law' in the classical tradition, and how does Aquinas distinguish between natural and divine law?
2. How can natural law be applied to emerging ethical challenges like genetic enhancement or environmental degradation?
3. What assumptions about human dignity underlie critiques of enhancement technologies?
4. Does extreme poverty challenge or affirm the assumptions of natural order?

WEEK TWELVE: December 11, 2025 (Last Class)

Read Introduction, and Part II pgs. 81-182; *Genesis: Artificial Intelligence, Hope and the Human Spirit*, Henry Kissinger, Craig Mundie, and Eric Schmidt

Read “I failed two captcha tests this week. Am I Still Human?” Meghan O’Gieblyn, <https://www.wired.com/story/failed-captcha-test-am-i-still-human/>

Listen to the first 2 episodes of the podcast, Flesh and Code
<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/flesh-and-code/id1817383627>

Core Topic: *How do artificial intelligence and automation challenge our notions of moral agency, consciousness, and personhood?*

Discussion Questions

1. What do Kissinger and his co-authors mean by a 'philosophy of technology'?
2. Is it possible to encode ethical reasoning into AI systems? If so, whose ethics?

3. How does O’Gieblyn’s experience with CAPTCHA reveal deeper anxieties about selfhood in the digital age?
4. Does AI force us to redefine what it means to be human—or simply remind us of it?
5. At what point does AI companionship become ethically ambiguous, i.e. comforting versus manipulative?
6. Is emotional fulfillment via AI fundamentally different from that with humans? Why or why not?

WEEK THIRTEEN: *Make up Class TBD*

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