

## Philosophy 232: Classic Western Moral Theories

Professor Behrends

Stevenson Hall 350 A

Tuesday and Thursday from 12:35 – 1:50

### Course Description and Goals

This course is designed primarily to provide introductory instruction in the subject of ethics, or moral philosophy. The study of ethics is the study of issues concerned with some of the most fundamental questions that an individual is confronted with:

- What is the status of morality? When I claim that something is a good action, or decide not to do something because I think it's wrong, what kind of judgment am I making?
- Which actions am I permitted to perform? Which actions am I not permitted to perform? Are there any actions that I *must* perform, and, if so, which are they?
- What kinds of things make my life go better? Is pleasure the only good worth pursuing?
- How can we determine whether abortion, for example, is morally permissible?

These are just some of the questions we'll be interested in pursuing during the semester. We'll spend some time briefly examining four major areas of study within moral philosophy: Value Theory, Normative Ethics, Applied Ethics, and Meta-ethics. The first goal of the course, then, is to familiarize you with the major philosophical positions in each of these fields. Additionally, the course should familiarize you with the views of some major philosophical writers in ethics. As the title of the course suggests, our focus will be limited to broadly Western theories and thinkers.

The course is also designed for students who have little or no background in studying philosophy. Another goal of the course, then, is to provide some introduction in philosophical reasoning generally, and further, to help you begin reasoning philosophically on your own. For that reason, this class is as much about learning a *skill* as it is about gaining information. Reasoning well, and being able to clearly articulate your reasoning, will serve you well in whatever fields you pursue.

### Contact Information

Email: [jmbehre@ilstu.edu](mailto:jmbehre@ilstu.edu)

Office: 339 Stevenson Hall

Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday from 2:00 – 3:00, and by appointment

I'm usually quite quick to reply to e-mails. It's very rare that I will take longer than 24 hours to respond to an email, and it's usually much faster than that. You are of course welcome to email me with any questions or concerns you have, but you should be aware that I might respond by inviting you to set up a meeting to discuss the issue in person. Email is sometimes not well suited to philosophical discussion.

I know that my office hours will not be convenient for everyone. *Please* feel free to schedule appointments with me at different times if you'd like to come by.

## Required Texts

There is no text to purchase for this class. All required materials can be found on the course's ReggieNet page, under the Modules section.

## Course Requirements

The following requirements will determine your grade for the course:

### Exams: 40%

There will be two exams in this course, and each will be worth 20% of your final grade. The exams will consist entirely of essay questions. One week prior to each exam, you will be given a list of essay questions. I will choose a certain number of these questions to appear on the exam, and you will be required to answer all of them (I'll let you know how many will appear once I distribute the list). The dates for each exam are listed below. The second exam will not be cumulative.

### Critical Assessments: 45%

You will be required to hand in three critical assessments of any of the primary source articles we cover. Each will be worth 15% of the final grade. These assignments should be at least one page long, and no more than two. You may not turn in a critical assessment of an article that we have already discussed in lecture (I recommend planning on turning in your assessment on the day we're scheduled to discuss the article). For each assessment, you must do the following:

1. Identify one important thesis for which the author is arguing.
2. Reconstruct an argument that the author gives for the claim identified in 1.
  - a. The reconstructed argument must be valid.
3. Critically assess the argument.
  - a. To critically assess an argument is to say whether it is good or bad and why. Because the reconstructed argument must be valid, only the truth or falsity of the premises could make the argument good or bad. So, in this stage, you should either attack a premise in the argument, or defend a premise in the argument from a possible objection, or defend a premise by providing your own support for it (don't simply repeat the author's support).
4. Email me your assessment as an attachment. Please use the following format in titling the attachment: "Last Name Critical Assessment #" (So, if I were turning in my first assessment, I would title it "Behrends Critical Assessment 1"). **You must turn in the assessment prior to the class during which we're scheduled to discuss the relevant article. See the schedule below for "soft" due dates.**

Because this kind of writing may be new to many of you, you are permitted to hand in one "practice" critical assessment. I will provide comments and feedback on the practice assessment, but it will not count toward your Critical Assessment grade. If you hand in a practice critical assessment, you must indicate to me that it is a practice assessment.

### Philosophical Living: 10%

In this assignment, you are required to describe and reflect upon an instance in which you employed philosophical reasoning this semester in a situation that is unrelated to the other requirements for the course. You should take a very broad view of when this might occur: during

a late-night conversation with a friend or roommate, while watching The Daily Show, while conducting research for another class, while watching a YouTube clip of Richard Dawkins, while attending a meeting of the Philosophy Club . . . As we'll see throughout the term, the heart of philosophy is a methodical, reflective approach to argumentation, and this approach can be deployed in a wide array of circumstances. For the assignment, you are required to do each of the following:

1. Describe the situation. Provide me with an understanding of the circumstance in which you found yourself approaching a topic philosophically, so that I can understand the context for the remaining features of the assignment.
2. Explain why you believe that you took a distinctively philosophical approach to the situation. What philosophical skills or methods did you employ, and how?
3. Critically assess your philosophical approach. What, at the time, did you do particularly well? How might you have better deployed philosophical skills or methods? You must provide at least one piece of self-criticism.
4. Critically assess the philosophical approach of others. What, at the time, did others do particularly well? How might someone else in the situation have better deployed philosophical skills or methods? You must provide at least one piece of other-criticism. (Depending on the scenario, you may want to keep the identities of your interlocutors private).

The assignment should be approximately 3 pages in length. In terms of grading, I will be most interested in points 2 – 4, above. **There is no hard due date for this assignment. You may hand in the assignment, via email, at any point in the semester prior to our final class meeting.** If, as the term draws on, you just can't imagine how to complete this assignment, please speak with me.

*Attendance and Participation: 5%*

Acquiring a new skill requires practice, and much of that practice will be available only during our meetings. You are allowed up to four absences during the semester, no questions asked. Except in exceptional circumstances, missing more than four meetings will negatively impact this portion of your grade. Your involvement in class discussions will also be taken in to consideration, as will any discussions during office hours.

### **Grading Scale**

Final grades will be calculated as follows:

A	100 – 90%
B	89 – 80%
C	79 – 70%
D	69 – 60%
F	<59%

Grades that fall in between these divisions will be rounded up or down at my discretion. There will be no opportunity for extra credit in the course.

***Cheating of any kind, including plagiarism, will not be tolerated.*** If you are found to be in violation of the University's policies governing academic dishonesty, you will be penalized in

accordance with University guidelines. For information concerning the University's policies concerning academic dishonesty, Section V.B of the [Code of Student Conduct](#). See also <http://deanofstudents.illinoisstate.edu/students/get-help/crr/academic-dishonesty.shtml> and the relevant links contained therein.

## **Schedule of Readings and Assignments** (subject to revision)

All readings are available on ReggieNet

### Week 1 (8/20 – 8/22): Course Introduction and Logic

No readings. I'll provide a logic handout in lecture

### Weeks 2 – 4 (8/27 – 9/12): Value Theory

Mill, "Hedonism"

Nozick, "The Experience Machine"

Kazee, "Necessities"

***First Critical Assessment due prior to class on 9/12***

### Weeks 5 – 9 (9/17 – 10/17): Normative Ethics

Mill, "Utilitarianism"

Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism"

Ross, "What Makes Right Acts Right?"

Rawls, "Justice as Fairness"

Aristotle, excerpt from *Nicomachean Ethics*

***Second Critical Assessment due prior to class on 10/10***

***First Exam on 10/17***

### Weeks 10 – 12 (10/22 – 11/7): Applied Ethics

The class will vote on which issues we will cover. I'll announce the options as we get closer to the end of the term. We will cover (probably) two applied issues, and there will be two readings for each issue.

### Weeks 13 – 15 (11/12 – 12/5): Meta-ethics

Gensler, "Cultural Relativism"

Mackie, "The Subjectivity of Values"

Ayer, "A Critique of Ethics"

Plato, *Euthyphro*

***Third Critical Assessment due prior to class on 11/14***

***No class on 11/26 or 11/28, Thanksgiving Break***

***Philosophical Living Assignment due ANY TIME prior to class on 12/5***

***Last Exam on 12/5***

## **Special Needs**

Any student needing to arrange a reasonable accommodation for a documented disability should contact Disability Concerns at 350 Fell Hall, 309-438-5853, [www.disabilityconcerns.ilstu.edu](http://www.disabilityconcerns.ilstu.edu)