

# Introduction to Ethics

## SAMPLE SYLLABUS

**Instructor:** Dr. Lindsay Rettler  
**Contact:** lindsayrettler@gmail.com  
**Office Hours:** By appointment

### Course Description and Goals

This course is an overview important philosophical views in the topic of ethics, including meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics. We'll start with meta-ethics, during which we'll be considering the nature and ground of moral norms. The main views here are divine command theory, moral realism, non-cognitivism, and moral relativism. We'll then turn our attention to normative ethics, during which we'll discuss what makes an action right or wrong. In this section we'll cover consequentialism, deontology, contractarianism and virtue theory. We'll end the course by considering two issues in applied ethics: abortion and charitable giving.

By the end of the course you will have a grasp of the central issues that interest moral theorists, the views they hold, and some of the best arguments for and against those views. You should also see significant improvement in your ability to analyze arguments and critique them, and hopefully you will come to some views of your own.

### Required Texts

- *The Fundamentals of Ethics* by Russ Shafer-Landau (3rd edition, Oxford, 2014)
- Additional articles supplied by the instructor.

### Course Requirements

**Participation and Reflection Papers (15%):** You are expected to come to class regularly and participate in class discussion. The articles we're reading are difficult and dense and you will almost certainly not get what you need out of them by simply reading them by yourself. You should take notes on what you read and be prepared to talk about the readings. On various days throughout the semester I will have you write short one-page reflection papers at the end of class.

**Two Critical Papers, 2-3 pages, 15% each (30%)** In these papers you will articulate the argument of a particular author and then critically engage with that argument. You should spend approximately half of the paper reconstructing the author's argument and the other developing your critique. These papers are practice for your final paper.

## Course Requirements, continued...

**Final Paper Outline, 1 page (5%):** This is a full outline of your final paper (more instructions below). In it you should state the thesis for which you will be arguing, as well as descriptions of the arguments you plan to give. This will involve responding to at least one author that we've read this semester. We will discuss expectations for the outline and final paper in class.

**Final Paper, 4-5 pages (25%)** In this paper you will argue for your preferred position on one of our topics. You need to clearly present the arguments in favor of your view, show that you understand how people might object to it, and explain how you can respond to their objections. Make sure to engage and reference the authors and arguments we've read in class, but do your best to go beyond them in some significant way. Make your *own* contribution.

**Final Exam (25%)** The exam will cover all of the material for the course, and will be in the form of short answer and short essay questions. I will provide a study guide.

## Administrative Issues

**Classroom Conduct:** Please be respectful of others in this course. This means you should arrive to class on time and be an active participant. Pay attention to people when they are speaking. Of course people will disagree with one another in this course—one of the goals of the class is to explore such disagreement in a critical and structured manner. However, in presenting your thoughts make sure you speak with respect and professionalism. Anything that might be perceived as insulting or a personal attack will not be tolerated. Put your phones on silent or vibrate—texting and answering your phone in class are not acceptable.

**Late Assignments:** All papers are due at the beginning of class. Late papers will be penalized one partial grade per day starting with the due date. I understand that emergencies happen, so come talk to me if you encounter a problem that prevents you from turning in your papers on time. If, however, you do not bother to make arrangements with me within 24-hours of the due date there is no way to avoid the penalty. *Note:* you must turn in all assignments to pass the course.

**Office Hours:** I am always available during office hours to discuss any questions about the course or philosophy in general, or anything else of importance to you, including personal issues. I'm also a good resource for working through paper ideas, including questions about how to get started. You will benefit the most if you come talk to me early on about anything confusing and if you discuss written work at least several days *before* it's due. I'm also happy to answer questions via email. If my scheduled office hours don't work for you, then please contact me to schedule a different time.

## Administrative Issues continued...

**Academic Integrity:** I will enforce the university's policy on academic integrity and report all academic misconduct. You are responsible for making yourself aware of the relevant policies and procedures in the undergraduate catalog. Offenses include cheating, fabrication, falsification and forgery, multiple submission, plagiarism, complicity and computer misuse. Please refer to the student code of conduct for more information.

**Accommodation for Disabilities:** Individuals who have any disabilities, either permanent or temporary, that might affect their ability to perform in this course are encouraged to inform me at the beginning of the semester. I will work in conjunction with the Office for Disability Services to adapt or modify methods, materials, and testing to ensure that everyone can participate equally.

## Course Schedule

The following is an outline of topics and readings for the course, all of which I will provide. I reserve the right to change this schedule at any time, though I will notify you at least a week in advance. RSL refers to Russ Shafer-Laundaus *The Fundamentals of Ethics*, and page numbers in parentheses are from the 3rd Edition (Oxford 2014). All other readings will be supplied electronically by the instructor. Please complete the readings before class on the days for which they are listed.

### META-ETHICS

#### Introduction (Week 1)

RSL Introduction

#### Divine Command Theory (Week 2)

Plato – excerpt from the *Euthyphro*

RSL Ch 5 – Morality and Religion (58-70)

*Optional:* Bertrand Russell – A Free Man's Worship

*Optional:* George Mavrodes – Religion and the Queerness of Morality

#### Natural Law (Week 3)

RSL Ch 6 – Natural Law (71-85)

Aquinas – Objectivism: Natural Law (excerpts from the Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas)

#### Moral Realism (Week 4)

J.L. Mackie – The Subjectivity of Values

Jonathan Harris – A Critique of Mackie's Error Theory

Michael Smith – A Defense of Moral Realism

#### Moral Relativism (Week 5)

RSL Ch 19 – Ethical Relativism (275-291)

Ruth Benedict – A Defense of Ethical Relativism

Louis Pojman – A Critique of Ethical Relativism

**Moral Nihilism** (Week 6)

RSL Ch 20 – Moral Nihilism (292-304)

*Optional:* Gilbert Harman – Moral Nihilism

**NORMATIVE ETHICS**

**Consequentialism** (Week 7-8)

RSL Ch 9: Consequentialism: Its Nature and Attractions (112-124)

John Stuart Mill – Utilitarianism (excerpt)

J.J.C. Smart – Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism

RSL Ch 10 – Consequentialism: Its Difficulties (125-143)

Bernard Williams – Against Utilitarianism

**Deontology** (Week 8-9)

RSL Ch 11 – The Kantian Perspective: Fairness and Justice (144-157)

Immanuel Kant – The Foundation for the Metaphysic of Morals (excerpt from

*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*)

RSL Ch 12 – The Kantian Perspective: Autonomy and Respect (158-175)

Thomas Nagel – Moral Luck

**Contractarianism** (Week 10)

RSL Ch 13 – The Social Contract Tradition: The Theory and Its Attractions (176-189)

RSL Ch 14 – The Social Contrast Tradition: Problems and Prospects (190-201)

**Virtue Theory** (Week 11)

RSL Ch 17 – Virtue Ethics (240-247)

Aristotle – The Ethics of Virtue (excerpt from *Nicomachean Ethics*)

RSL Ch 17: Virtue Ethics (249-258)

Susan Wolf – Moral Saints

*Optional:* William Frankena – A Critique of Virtue-Based Ethics

**PAPER DISCUSSION** (Week 12)

James Pryor – Guidelines for Writing Philosophy

**APPLIED ETHICS**

**Abortion Part I** (Week 13)

Don Marquis – Why Abortion is Immoral

Critiques of Marquis Argument from Paske, Norcross and McInerney

**Abortion Part II** (Week 14)

Judith Jarvis Thomson – A Defense of Abortion

Critiques of Thomsons Argument from Brody and Beckwith

**Charitable Giving** (Week 15)

Peter Singer: Famine, Affluence, and Morality

Onora O'Neill: Ending World Hunger

Thomas Crisp: Jesus and Affluence