

# PHIL 18 - Human Ethics: A Brief History

*Instructor:* Seth Robertson

*Time:* MW 1:30-2:45PM

*Instructor Email:*

*Location:* Sever 208

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*Course Page:*

*Office:* 320 Emerson Hall

<https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/62784>

*Office Hours:* Wednesdays 3-4 PM and by appointment

## Course Description

Does might make right? Should a person focus on achieving immortality or on living a simple, happy mortal life? Is morality simply a matter of convention? Why be moral when being immoral could provide access to more wealth, fame, and power? What is the relationship between etiquette and morality? What do people owe a society that has failed in its obligations to its people? How can we identify and resist oppression, marginalization, and injustice? Human beings all over the world have been thinking about, discussing, and debating questions like these for thousands of years. This course aims to look at this history of ethics and moral philosophy from a genuinely inclusive perspective by focusing on ethical thought both from all over the world, with special emphasis on that of members of traditionally marginalized groups and from areas of the world that typically receive much less attention in academic philosophy and ethics.

## *Learning Objectives*

1. Develop the ability to infer more general ethical frameworks and theories from more narrowly-focused discussions in particular texts
2. Develop the ability to infer ways in which the ideas, claims, and arguments in historical ethical texts are morally relevant for one's own life.
3. Learn a variety of ethical views from sources throughout history and across the world

## Required Texts

There is no required text for this course. All readings are posted on the course website.

## Course Requirements / Grading

1. *Response Papers* (20%; 5% each): For this course, you must complete four 1-page response papers. Due dates: 9/27, 10/11, 11/1, 11/22 at 11:59 PM
  - a. *(2) Application*: Take a claim, argument, or idea in the text that you found interesting and provocative and apply it to a discussion about some current issue.
  - b. *(2) Critique/ Defend (They say / I say)*: Identify and articulate an important claim in a text. Introduce with an opposing view. Consider how defenders of the initial claim might object to your view, and offer responses to each of those objections.
2. *Essay* (30%): One 4-5 page essay. Take your most interesting response paper and convert it into a full essay.
3. *Tests* (40%; 20% each): There will be two tests (a midterm and final). The tests are divided into a multiple-choice section and a short essay section.
4. *Participation* (10%): Scored by completing in-class group activities.

## Late/Missed Work Policies

Exams may be rescheduled if the student provides an acceptable excuse but must be taken as soon as possible. In-class activities cannot be made-up, but every student is allowed to miss 2 without penalty.

## Electronic Devices

Laptops are not permitted for use in class. Exceptions will be made only where there is some documented need for the device.

## Academic Integrity

Students are expected to do their own work. If you violate standards of academic integrity, I will seek to impose the severest penalty the university permits.

## Statement on Student Success and Reasonable Accommodation

My hope is that you are able to do your best work in this course to achieve success. There are many resources available here that you should not hesitate to utilize if needed:

<https://advising.college.harvard.edu/academic-support-resources-0>.

Any student in this course who has a disability that may prevent them from fully demonstrating their abilities should contact me personally as soon as possible so that we

can discuss accommodations necessary to ensure full participation. For more information, please see <https://accessibility.harvard.edu/student-accommodations>.

## Syllabus Policy

This syllabus is subject to change. The most updated version of this syllabus will be posted on the course page.

## Schedule

Date	Topic	Reading
9/4	Introduction	
9/6	Ancient Egyptian & Mesopotamia	Excerpts from <i>The Instructions of Shuruppak</i> Excerpt from “Autonomous Machines, Moral Judgment, and Acting for the Right Reasons” (Only Sections 1-3)
9/9		Excerpts from <i>Gilgamesh</i> Tablet X; (optional) <i>Ecclesiastes</i> 2, 3, 9 Meister excerpt on Pascal’s Wager
9/11		Herbjørnsrud “The Radical Philosophy of Egypt” DeLapp, “The Metaethics of Maat”
9/16	Ancient India	Upanishads (Isha, Katha, Chandogya, Mundaka, Brihadaranyaka)
9/18		Bhagavad Gita, Books 1-2
9/23	Ancient China	Excerpts from the <i>Analects</i> (Books 1-3, 9-12)
9/25		<i>Mozi</i> Chapters 16, 17, 20
<b>9/27: Response Paper 1 Due</b>		
9/30		<i>Mengzi</i> Books 1-4; <i>Xunzi</i> Ch. 19
10/2		<i>Zhuangzi</i> Chapters 1, 4, 17, 18, 20, 24
10/7	Ancient Greece	Thucydides, <i>The Melian Dialogue</i> ; excerpts from Plato, <i>Republic</i> , Book 1
10/9		Plato, <i>Euthyphro</i>
<b>10/11 Response Paper 2 Due</b>		
10/14	NO CLASS: INDIGENOUS PEOPLE’S DAY	
10/16		Aristotle, <i>Nichomachean Ethics</i> Book 1 Chapters 1,2,3,4,5,7,13; Book 2 Chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 8
10/21	Indigenous American	Maffie “Weaving the Good Life in a Living World”

		Purcell “What the Aztecs can teach us about happiness and the good life”
10/23		Len Miller, “Etemeyaske Pokat”
<b>10/25 MIDTERM</b>		
10/28	Modern Ethics	Bewaji, “Ethics and Morality in Yoruba Culture” Metz, “The African Ethic of Ubuntu”
10/30		Gyeke “Ethics and Character”
<b>11/1 Response Paper 3 Due</b>		
11/4		Maimonides, Eight Chapters (especially Chapters 1-4) Sor Juana, Excerpt from “Reply to Sor Filotea de la Cruz”
11/6		Douglas “What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?”
11/11		Excerpts from <i>Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals</i> ; O’Neill “A Simplified Account of Kant’s Ethics” Grimke, “Letter 12”
11/13		Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> Chapter 2 Le Guin “The Ones Who Walked Away From Omelas”
11/18	Contemporary Ethics	Anscombe “Modern Moral Philosophy”; King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”
11/20		Young “Structure as the Subject of Justice” Mills “White Ignorance
<b>11/22 Response Paper 4 Due</b>		
11/25		Adichie “We Should All Be Feminists” Manne, “Down Girl” Chapter 1
11/27	NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING	
12/2		Barnes, “The Minority Body” Chapter 2
<b>12/10 Essay Due</b>		