

McGill University
Winter 2019

PHIL 334: Ethical Theory

Tues & Thurs, 4:05-5:25
Arts Building, room W-120

Contact information

Instructor: Éliot Litalien
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Office hours: Thursdays, 10:00-12:00 or by appointment, in LEA 926

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Description

Normative ethics is concerned with the content of morality. Its central questions are of the following sort: What are the conditions under which an action is morally right (or wrong) or motives and intentions morally good (or bad)? How should we define good, bad and other normative concepts? What are the aims, practical and theoretical, of ethical theorizing? What are the best methods of ethical theorizing? With what objects should ethical evaluations be concerned?

This course will address many of the central questions in normative ethics through the study of some prominent (and less prominent) approaches in the analytic moral philosophy literature. After discussing some general background issues in moral philosophy, the first half of the semester will be dedicated to the presentation of the three major normative ethical theories: *consequentialism*, *deontological ethics* and *virtue ethics*. In the second half of the semester, we will turn our attention to normative ethical approaches that may be less prominent but that have gained support and attention in the last few decades: *contractarianism*, *care ethics* and *pragmatism*. Finally, we will consider two approaches, *particularism* and *relativism*, that cast doubts on the possibility of arriving at any kind of general truths in ethics.

Prerequisite

One of PHIL 230 (Introduction to Moral Philosophy), PHIL 237 (Contemporary Moral Issues), PHIL 242 (Introduction to Feminist Theory), PHIL 343 (Biomedical Ethics), or written permission of the instructor.

Readings

The instructor will make all readings available on myCourses.

Recommended introductory readings:

Kagan, Shelly. *Normative Ethics*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998.

Timmons, Mark. *Moral Theory. An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman and

Littlefield, 2013.

Other recommended reference works:

Baron, Marcia W., Philip Pettit and Michael Slote. *Three Methods of Ethics. A Debate.* Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997.

Scheffler, Samuel (ed.). *Consequentialism and Its Critics.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Evaluations

Weekly reading assignments	20%
Midterm paper	30%
Final paper	50%

The final mark comprises weekly reading assignments (20%), a short midterm essay (30%) and a final paper (50%). In order to pass the course, students must submit all of the required assignments. All work must be submitted, and will be returned, through myCourses.

Starting on the second week of the semester, students will have to submit a **weekly reading assignment**. The goal of each of these assignments is to identify and explain, in the student's own words, the central argument of one of the week's readings: what claim is the author making or defending and what reason, argument or evidence is the author offering in support of that claim? Each assignment should be **300-500 words** long. The weekly assignments are due by **11:59 PM on the Monday preceding the week of lectures dealing with the reading** about which the assignment is. Out of the twelve submitted assignments, four will be randomly selected for assessment. Each of the graded assignments is thus **worth 5%** of the final grade. The **deadline** for submission of the weekly reading assignments is strict. **Late submissions will receive a zero.**

The **midterm paper**, which is **worth 30%** of the final grade and which must be **1500-2000 words** long, is due by **1 March, 11:59 PM**. The **final paper**, which is **worth 50%** of the final grade and which must be **2500-3000 words** long, is due by **18 April, 11:59 PM**, that is, one week after the course's conclusion. In both papers, students will have to explore in detail a topic of their choice from each half of the course. Students will be expected to defend a particular thesis in their own words, with their own arguments. A list of possible topics will be made available on myCourses. For the final paper, students can choose a topic that is not on the list, but the instructor must first approve it.

Group Discussion

Group discussion will be an important component of the course. Although students will be encouraged to ask questions or raise discussion points in each class, there will also be reserved time for group discussions. Starting on Thursday, 17 January, the class will be divided up into small groups of five for the biweekly in-class group discussions and will proceed to discuss two questions, posted by the instructor, on the readings for the past two weeks' theme. There will be five of these sessions during the term and attendance at them is mandatory. Each group will have to select a spokesperson who will speak for the group in a following class-wide exchange. Each student will have to serve as a small group's spokesperson at least once during the term.

Course Policies

Extensions to deadlines will be granted in **exceptional** circumstances only, such as a medical emergency, provided that the student can produce a medical note or other appropriate documents. **Late papers**, excluding the weekly reading assignments (see above), **will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a grade per calendar day of lateness**. For example, an essay that would have been otherwise given a B+ will be given a B if one day late.

The use of cellphones, earbuds and headphones in class is forbidden. The use of a computer or tablet in class is permitted, but only for academic purposes. The recording of lectures is not permitted without the express consent of the instructor.

McGill Statements of Policy

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see http://www.mcgill.ca/files/integrity/Code_of_Student_Conduct.pdf for more information).

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.