

Introduction to Ethics

PH 150 A1

Lecture:

Monday, Wednesday, and Friday 1:00PM-2:00PM in CAS 313

Discussion Sections:

A2 Monday 11:00am-12:00pm in PSY B49

A3 Tuesday 2:00-3:00pm in PSY B37

A4 Wednesday 4:00-5:00pm in CAS 228

A5 Thursday 3:30-4:30pm in STH B22

Course description:

Many of us want to have meaningful lives. But what is it for a life to be meaningful? What makes some lives better or more meaningful than others? Can life as a whole have some significance or meaning? In exploring these questions, we'll ask whether the happy life is different than the meaningful life; we'll study the nature of happiness and satisfaction; and we'll look at the way in which questions about meaning relate to questions about value.

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Books:

We will read the following books, which are available in the BU bookstore. Note that the first three books can be read for free online.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (ISBN 9780486400969)

Or use this online version: <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>

Epictetus, *Enchiridion* (ISBN 9780486433592)

Or use this online version: <http://classics.mit.edu/Epictetus/epicench.html>

Joseph Butler, *Five Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel* (ISBN 9780915145614)

Or use this online version: <http://anglicanhistory.org/butler/rolls/>

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (ISBN 9780394719856)

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (ISBN 9780300115468)

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (ISBN 9780679733737)

Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha* (ISBN 9780553208849)

Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope* (ISBN 9780674027466)

In addition to these books, we'll be reading a number of articles or book chapters that are posted on the course website (learn.bu.edu).

Grading and course requirements:

- (1) Seven short papers, 500-750 words each (each paper counts for 10% of your course grade)
- There are paper topics listed below most of the readings on the syllabus. **When readings occupy more than one day, the paper is due on the first day.** You must submit a total of seven papers, grouped into the following periods:

Due dates:

Paper one: Jan. 27 or Feb. 1 (Aristotle)

Paper two: Feb. 5, 8, 10, 12 (Epictetus, Aurlieus, Butler, Wolf)

Paper three: Feb. 16, 17, 19, 22, 24 (Bentham, Mill, Nozick, Buddha, Hesse)

Paper four: Feb. 29, March 2, 14, 16 (Schopenhauer, Nietzsche)

Paper five: March 21, 25 or 28 (Velleman, Wolf, Sartre)

Paper six: April 6, 11, 13 (Camus, Taylor, Suits)

Paper seven: April 15, 20 or 25 (Nozick, Lear, Williams)

- You can choose which paper you'd like to write for each of these seven periods. However, **papers are due at 1:00pm on dates specified.** For example, if you choose to write on the topic listed under the Jan. 27 readings, you must submit that paper by 1:00pm on Jan. 27.
 - **Late papers will not be accepted.** If you fail to submit a paper, or submit a late paper, you will receive an F on that assignment.
 - Please format your paper in the following way: double spaced; 12-point Times or Garamond font; 1 inch margins; maximum 750 words (with the specified formatting, 750 words is approximately 2 pages).
 - **Submission instructions:** bring a printed copy of your paper to class and give it to your TF.
- (2) Final exam (20% of course grade)
- The exam is scheduled for Saturday, May 7th from 12:30-2:30. The exam will be comprehensive, covering material from the entire semester. It will require you to explain philosophical positions, concepts, and arguments.
- (3) Participation (10% of course grade)
- You are *required* to participate in section.
 - You are *encouraged* to participate in the main lecture.
- (4) Attendance (affects course grade as described below)
- You must attend both the lectures and the discussion sections.
 - You are allowed a total of *four* unexcused absences over the course of the semester. This includes lectures and discussion sections.
 - Each additional unexcused absence from either lectures or discussion sections will lower your course grade by one step. For example, suppose your average on components (1)-(3) is a B+. With four or fewer unexcused absences, your course grade would be B+; with five unexcused absences, your course grade would be B; with six, your course grade would be B-.

Students are encouraged to ask questions and visit the instructor during office hours. Students have a responsibility to understand the provisions of the CAS Academic Conduct Code as described at <http://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/academic-conduct-code/>. All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be referred to the Dean's Office.

Policy on laptops and other electronics:

Some students prefer to use laptops to take notes. However, there are two significant problems with this:

- First, in controlled studies, students who use laptops during class do *worse* than students who take notes without computers. (One such study: Helene Hembrooke and Geri Gay (2003), "The Laptop and the Lecture: The Effects of Multitasking in Learning Environments." *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*. Vol. 15(1))
- Second, laptop use may interfere with other students' ability to learn. Several studies have shown that students rate *other students' laptop use* as the single factor that most interfered with their ability to learn. (One such study: Carrie B. Fried (2008), "In-class laptop use and its effects on student learning," *Computers & Education*. Vol. 50(3): 906-914.)

In light of these problems, I adopt the following policy: *laptop use is prohibited unless you secure prior approval.*

That is: *I strongly recommend* that you do not use laptops. However, if you have some reason for thinking that, despite the above studies, laptop use would be beneficial for you, I am willing to make accommodations. You must first meet with me during office hours and explain your reason.

Schedule

Problems of meaning

- Jan. 20 Introduction, no reading
- Jan. 22 Nagel, "The Absurd"
- Jan. 25 Plato, *Euthyphro*
Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, pp. 585-594

First response: be virtuous

- Jan. 27 & 29 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I and II
Paper topic (Jan. 27): Aristotle argues that we can determine the best life for a human being by thinking about the human function. Reconstruct and explain this argument. Be sure to identify all the premises in the argument and to explain all of the technical terms (for example, what does Aristotle mean by "function"?).
- Feb. 1 & 3 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books VI and X
Paper topic (Feb. 1): reconstruct and explain Aristotle's arguments concerning the most complete form of happiness. What is this form of happiness, is it attainable, and, if so, what is our best strategy for attaining it?

Second response: seek tranquility

- Feb. 5 Epictetus, *Enchiridion*
Paper topic: reconstruct and explain Epictetus' arguments concerning the aim of philosophy.
- Feb. 8 Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, Books 2-5
Paper topic: In Books 2 and 12, Aurelius claims that "All is as thinking makes it so" (if you have a different translation, such as the online edition, that exact phrase may not occur; alternative translations include "everything is opinion" and "all is based in judgment"). Drawing on Books 2-5, explain, as clearly as you can, what Aurelius means by this and how it informs his approach to life.

Third response: devote yourself to others

- Feb. 10 Butler, *Upon the Love of Our Neighbor*
Paper topic: Early in his sermon, Butler claims that most of us think that there's a conflict between self-love and benevolence (or love of others). Explain what this conflict is. Then explain how, according to Butler, self-love and benevolence are actually related.

- Feb. 12 Wolf, “Moral Saints”
Paper topic: what is a moral saint? What is Wolf’s argument for the claim that we shouldn’t treat moral sainthood as an ideal?

Fourth response: seek happiness

- Feb. 16 Bentham, *Introductory Principles of Morals and Legislation*, Chapters I and IV
Paper topic: explain what the principle of utility is and construct an example of the way in which it can be used to evaluate actions.
- Feb. 17 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapters 1 and 2
Paper topic: what is the swine objection to utilitarianism, and how do Mill’s reflections on qualitative differences among pleasures and pains help us to respond to it?
- Feb. 19 Nozick, “The Experience Machine”
Paper topic: what is Nozick’s experience machine? How might it serve as a counterexample to the idea that happiness is the only thing we value for its own sake?

Fifth response: withdraw

- Feb. 22 Buddha, *The Dhammapada*
Paper topic: in Sutra 203, Buddha claims “hunger is the worst disease, conditioned things the worst suffering. Knowing this as it really is, the wise realize Nibbana [nirvana], the highest bliss.” Explain, drawing especially on Sutras 210-217.
- Feb. 24 & 26 Hesse, *Siddhartha*
Paper topic (Feb. 24): at the end of the novel, Siddhartha reaches a form of contentment. Describe, as clearly as you can, the nature of this life. What are its central features? How does it differ from his earlier attempts at enlightenment?

Sixth response: repudiate willing

- Feb. 29 Schopenhauer, ““On the Sufferings of the World” and “On the Vanity of Existence”
Paper topic: Schopenhauer argues that “human life must be some kind of mistake.” Identify, reconstruct, and assess what you take to be his best argument for this conclusion.
- Mar. 2 & 4 Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* (selection)
Paper topic (Mar. 2): Schopenhauer writes, “Life swings like a pendulum to and fro between pain and boredom, and these two are in fact its ultimate constituents.” Explain what Schopenhauer means by this claim. Then reconstruct his argument for it.

Seventh response: affirm life

- Mar. 14 Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, Preface and Sections 1-13, 19, 21, 23, 26, 29, 43-4, 56-58, 76, 98, 107, and all of Book III (i.e., sections 108-275)
Paper topic: what does Nietzsche mean by the “death of God”? What are the consequences of the death of God?
- Mar. 16 & 18 Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, Book IV (276-342) and 343-347
Paper topic (Mar. 16): what is the eternal recurrence thought experiment supposed to show? How might it relate to Nietzsche’s thoughts about the death of God?

Eighth response: seek narrative unity

- Mar. 21 & 23 Velleman, “Well-being and Time”
Paper topic (Mar. 21): why, according to Velleman, does the narrative shape of one’s life matter? Reconstruct and explain his argument.

Ninth response: bestow meaning through freely adopted projects

- Mar. 25 Wolf, “The Meanings of Lives”
Paper topic: what, according to Wolf, makes a human life meaningful? Explain her criteria for a meaningful life and reconstruct her arguments in defense of these criteria.
- Mar. 28 & 30 Sartre, *Existentialism is a humanism*
Paper topic (Mar. 28): Sartre writes “I can neither seek within myself the true condition which will impel me to act, nor apply to a system of ethics which will permit me to act.” What does he mean by this? What is his argument?
- Apr. 1 & 4 No class
- Apr. 6 & 8 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*
Paper topic (Apr. 6): what does Camus mean by “the absurd”? What does Camus regard as the appropriate response to the absurd?

Tenth response: value the process rather than the end

- Apr. 11 Taylor, "The Meaning of Life"
Paper topic: explain Taylor's thought experiment concerning Sisyphus. How is the modification of the Sisyphus story supposed to render Sisyphus' life meaningful? Explain and evaluate the argument.
- Apr. 13 Suits, "Is Life a Game that We are Playing?"
Paper topic: What, according to Suits, is the nature of a game? What is his argument for the claim that life may be a game? What is supposed to follow from this argument?
- Apr. 15 Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, pp. 594-619
Paper topic: Nozick investigates the idea that meaning might involve transcending limits. Explain this claim and reconstruct Nozick's arguments for it.

Meaning and cultural devastation

- Apr. 20 & 22 Lear, *Radical Hope*
Paper topic (Apr. 20): what, according to Lear, is the difference between optimism and radical hope? How do Sitting Bull and Plenty Coups embody these responses? Why is radical hope supposed to be superior to optimism?

Does death matter?

- Apr. 25 & 27 Williams, "Reflections of the Tedium of Immortality"
Paper topic (Apr. 25): reconstruct and explain Williams' argument for the claim that an immortal life would be undesirable. What conditions would an immortal life be unable to fulfill?

April 29: concluding lecture; no reading

May 7: final exam (12:30-2:30)