

PHIL 310

Philosophy and Contemporary Life

an introduction to ethics

Spring 2024
3:00-4:15pm MW
2920-137

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4:15-6:00pm W, and by appt
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email ahead advised,
but not required



Philosophy attempts to elucidate abstract topics at a fundamental level. It uses logic and reason to address big questions such as issues of existence, morality, and ethics that are essentially unanswerable in exact form. The classical work of major historical figures in philosophy is presented and discussed to help students sharpen their intellectual skills and form their own philosophy. (Catalogue Description)



Plato and Aristotle,
from Raphael's *School of Athens*

This is a class about ethics: the study of right action. But how do we decide on “right action” when that idea is so subjective?

That is what this class is really about: learning how to judge **soundness**, or how to make the best argument for a particular definition of ethical terms—harm and pleasure, right and wrong, good and bad, and so on—and the principles that both support that definition, and come from that definition.

Let's take a look at some of the major categories of knowledge that we'll learn in this class.

Axiology

The study of how we construct definitions of foundational categories—in other words, what we **value**. We'll ask: what is goodness? where do we derive that definition? from laws of the universe? authorities? our own heads? do we even *need* those definitions?

Normative Ethics

The study of how definitions of goodness lead us to right action—in other words, what we **should** do. We'll ask: given a particular definition of goodness, what are the rules we can learn about right action? what are some problems with those rules?

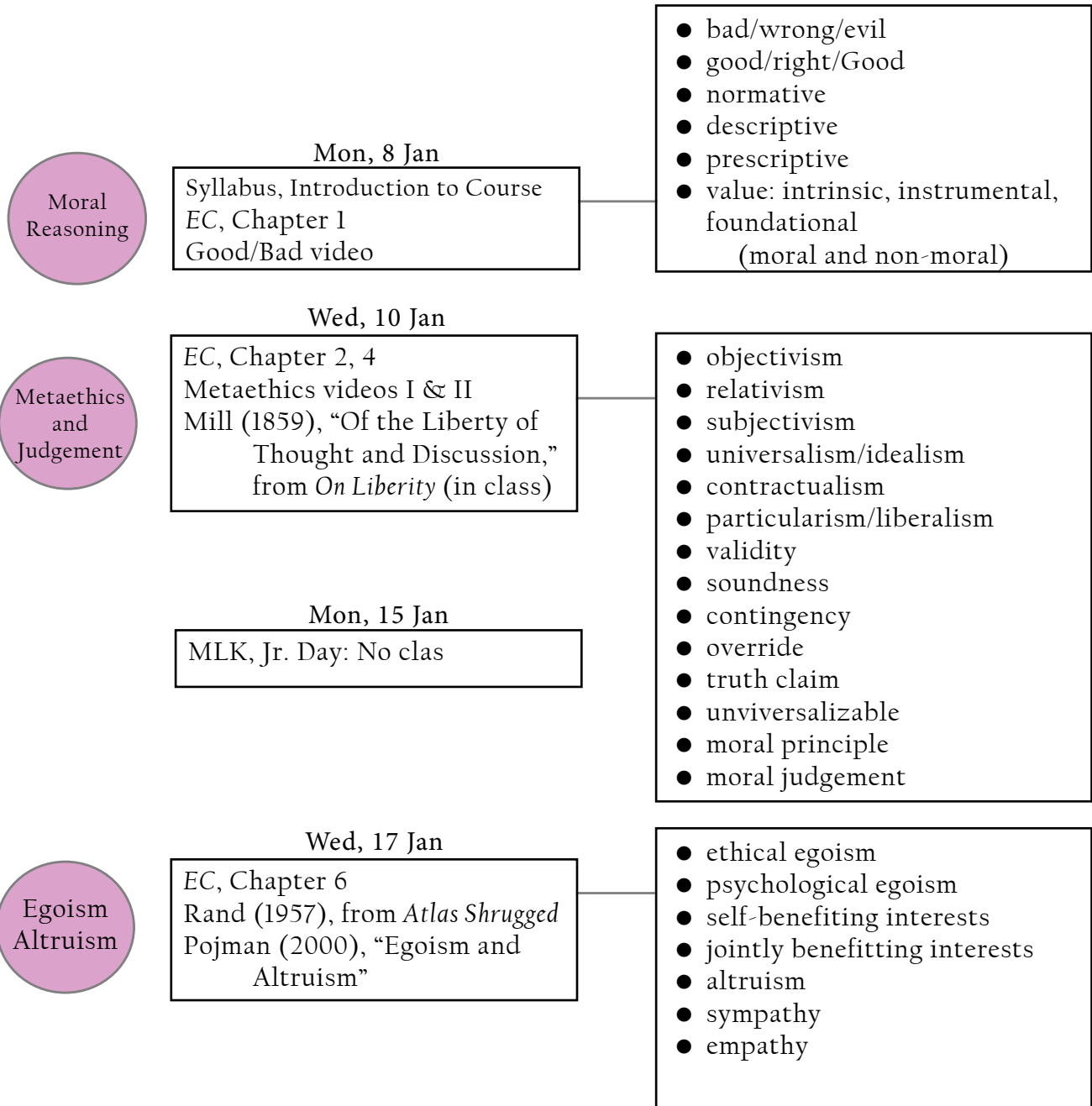
Applied Ethics

The study of how we apply our ethics in the world—in other words, what we should do to **confront problems**. We'll ask: how do we know which way is the best way to approach a problem? how do certain problems trouble our definitions of right action? how do we balance all the competing ways we can do right—and harm?

We'll learn about these from our course text: *Ethical Choices*, edited by Richard Burnor and Yvonne Raley. Please have the **3rd edition** so we can be literally on the same page.

We'll also read excerpts from philosophers throughout history as we go along. More on that later.

Metaethics



Thesis Assignment
Mon, 22 Jan

Quotation Assignment
Wed, 24 Jan

Peer Work
Wed, 31 Jan

Essay #1
Mon, 5 Feb

Normative Ethics



Mon, 22 Jan

EC, Chapter 12
Aristotle (340 BCE), from
Nicomachean Ethics
Virtue Ethics video

Wed, 24 Jan

MacIntyre (1981), from
After Virtue
MacIntyre video

- teleology
- eudaimonia
- virtues
- the golden mean
- intrinsic good
- extrinsic good
- intrinsic motivation
- extrinsic motivation
- practice
- tradition
- paragon



Mon, 29 Jan

EC, Chapter 10
Frankena (1963), from *Ethics*
Frankena video

Wed, 31 Jan

Case study:
Ethics in Palliative Care

- natural value
- Doctrine of Double Effect
- moral principle condition
- means-end condition
- right intention condition
- proportionality condition



Mon, 5 Feb

EC, Chapter 9
Kant (1785), from *The Foundations*
Deontology video

Wed, 7 Feb

Fried (1978),
from *Right and Wrong*

Mon, 12 Feb

Ross (1930), from *The Right and the Good*
Intuitionism video

Wed, 14 Feb

Case study:
Privacy, Consent, Beneficence

- absolutism
- rationality
- a priori
- good in-and-of-itself
- individual
- autonomy
- will/volition
- Categorical Imperative
- rights
- duties (perfect, imperfect)
- ends not means

- Intuitionism
- prima facie duties
- actual moral duties
- stringency

Normative Ethics, Continued

Mon, 19 Feb
 President's Day: No class

Wed, 21 Feb
 EC, Chapter 11
 Rawls (1971),
 from *A Theory of Justice*

Social Contract

- justice
- social contract
- state of nature
- equality principle
- difference principle
- authority
- positive rights
- negative rights

Mon, 26 Feb
 EC, Chapters 7 & 8
 Utilitarianism video

Wed, 28 Feb
 Nielsen (1972), from
 "Against Moral Conservatism"

Mon, 4 Mar
 Williams (1973), from
Utilitarianism: For and Against

Wed, 6 Mar
 Case study:
 Malarone research

Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism
- pleasure
- pain
- utilitarian calculus
- optimific
- act utilitarianism
- rule utilitarianism
- quantitative utilitarianism
- qualitative utilitarianism
- negative responsibility

Mon, 11 Mar
 EC, Chapter 13
 Carol Gilligan,
In a Different Voice video
 Baier (1987), "The Need
 for More than Justice"
 Feminism video

Wed, 13 Mar
 Held (2005),
 from *The Ethics of Care*
 EoC video

Feminism/ Care

- female
- feminine
- patriarchy
- relationships (symmetrical, asymmetrical)
- particular others
- intersectionality
- emotions
- Ethics of Care
- justice/care

Thesis Assignment
 M, 18 Mar

Thought Experiment
 M, 25 Mar

Peer Work
 W, 27 Mar

Essay #2
 M, 1 Apr

Applied Ethics

Bioethics

Mon, 18 Mar

EC, Chapter 3

Wed, 20 Mar

Jonsen, Siegler & Winslade (2022),
from *Clinical Ethics*

- principlism
- principles of bioethics
- research (vs. treatment)
- clinical ethics
- box model

Pediatrics

Mon, 25 Mar

Thompson (1971),
“A Defense of Abortion”

Wed, 27 Mar

Grootens-Wiegers (2017),
“Medical decision-making in
children and adolescents”

Euthanasia

Mon, 1 Apr

Rachels (1975),
“Active and Passive Euthanasia”
Unexplainable (2022),
“Redefining Death”

Animals

Mon, 8 Apr

Singer (1975), from
Animal Liberation

Biotech

Wed, 3 Apr

Buchanan (2008),
“Human nature
and enhancement”

Disability

Wed, 10 Apr

McBryde Johnson (2003),
“Unspeakable Conversations”

Environment

Mon, 15 Apr

Hardin (1968),
“Tragedy of the Commons”

War

Wed, 17 Apr

Valls (2000), from
Ethics and International Affairs

Thesis Assignment
Mon, 17 Apr

Essay #3
Fri, 26 Apr

Exam - Finals Week (TBD)

Here is a general breakdown of the assignments that we will work on throughout this course.

Engagement 5%
(Formative)

Regular, punctual attendance; consistent, thoughtful participation in discussions; preparedness; appropriate behavior in class and in all communication. On most days, you will be invited to turn in at least one thoughtful question about the reading in-class on our Nearpod. I will release overall participation grades every 5 weeks.

Process 10%
(Formative)

For many of your writings, we will have drafts, peer review, or other required process work. These points cannot be made up if missed, since they are process-based. Each of these will be graded based on completion: a complete draft merits full points, no matter how in-process it might be.

Quizzes 10%
(Formative)

We will have quizzes regularly on our reading materials. These will test for understanding and also help me to know what we need to cover more thoroughly. If you get an answer incorrect on a quiz, you may write a short explanation of how you arrived at the answer you did; if your logic is valid, you may earn partial credit back.

Exam 20%
(Summative)

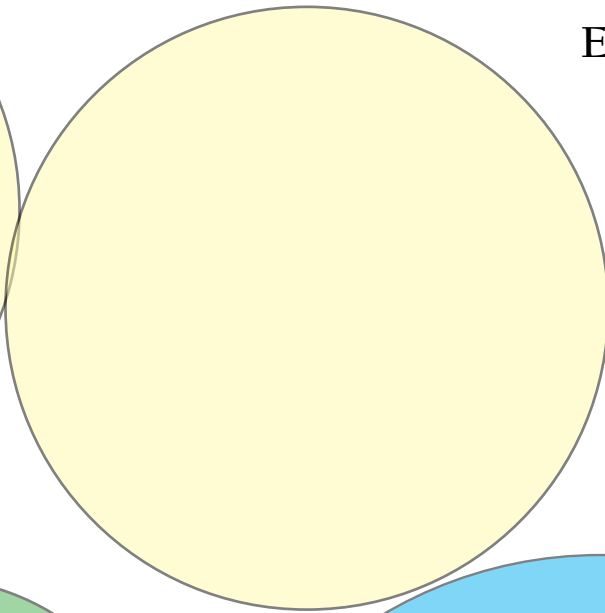
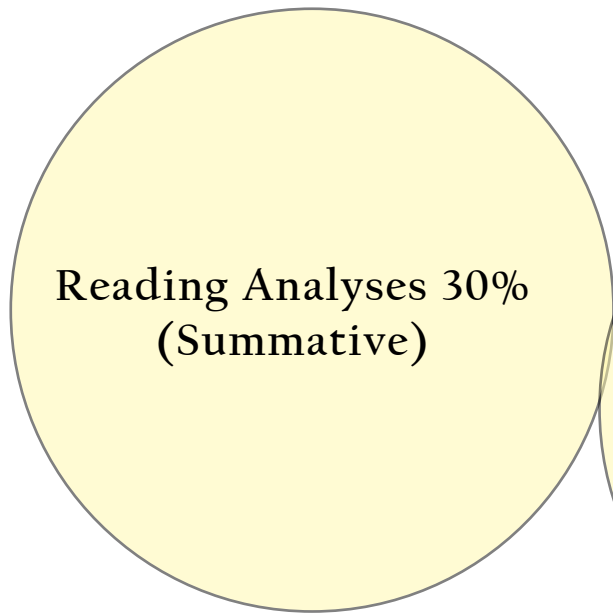
We will have one major exam over the Key Concepts List about two-thirds of the way through the semester. There will also be a review day. These questions will test your understanding of the terms, not simply their definitions.

Reading Analyses 25%
(Summative)

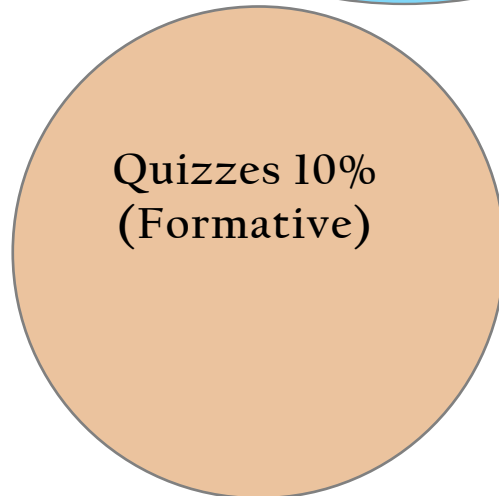
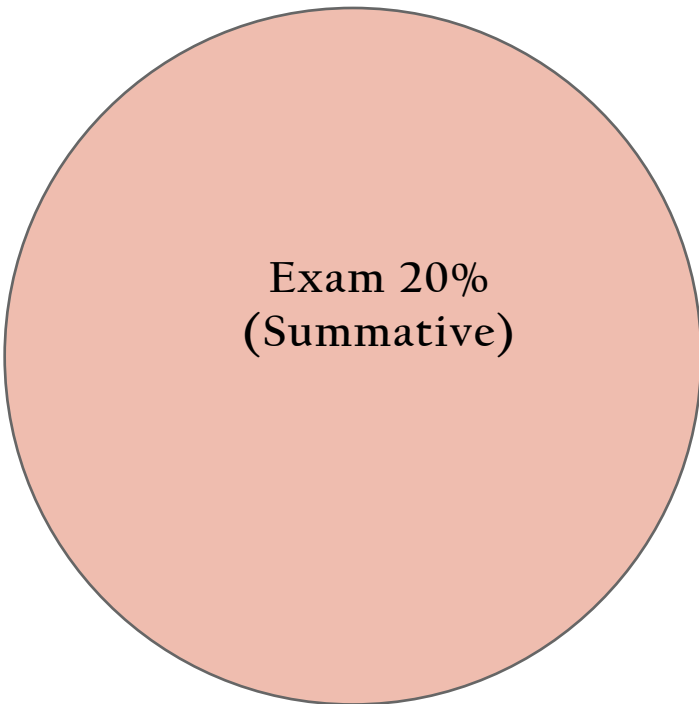
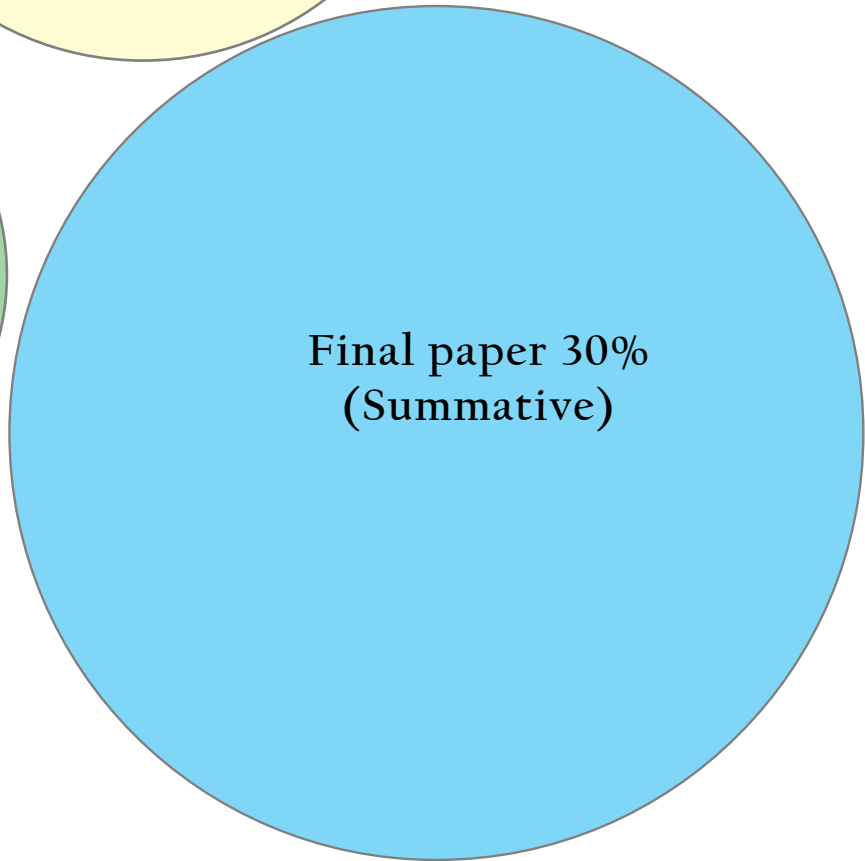
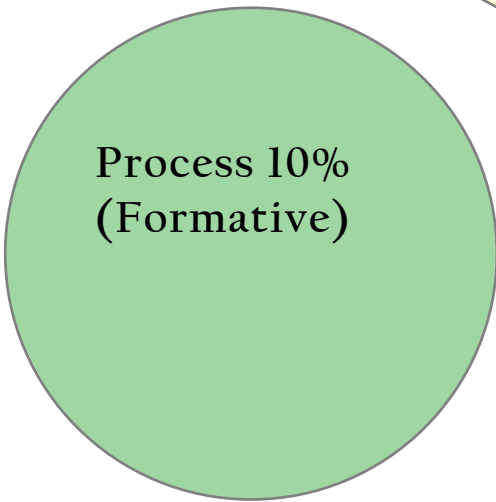
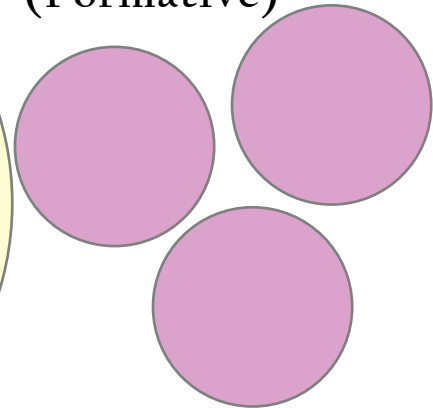
We will have two short essays throughout the semester that focus on the readings from the last few weeks, as well as one of the supplemental readings—which one is up to you!

Final paper 30%
(Summative)

Your signature assignment will be a substantial essay that will tackle a complex ethical issue through multiple philosophical perspectives. This will involve all three of our categories: metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics.



Engagement 5%
(Formative)



Grade Percentages

Letter grades are based on the following percentages:

If admitted Spring 2022
or earlier

If admitted Summer 2022
and later

97-100% = A+	97-100% = A+
90-96.99% = A	94-96.99% = A
	90-93.99% = A-
87-89.99% = B+	87-89.99% = B+
80-86.99% = B	84-86.99% = B
	80-83.99% = B-
77-79.99% = C+	75-79.99% = C+
70-76.99% = C	70-74.99% = C
60-69.99% = D	60-69.99% = D
Below 60% = F	Below 60% = F

Weighting

I use a method of grading called “grade weighting.” This means that all of your assignments contribute a relative “weight” up to the 100% total of the class. A point on one assignment is not equal to a point on another assignment; it’s all proportional!

There are two main categories of work that we will do in this class:

Formative assignments are process-oriented.

These help you gauge where you are in your learning trajectory (and help me to know as well!), and reward effort and development.

This accounts for 30% of the work in this class.

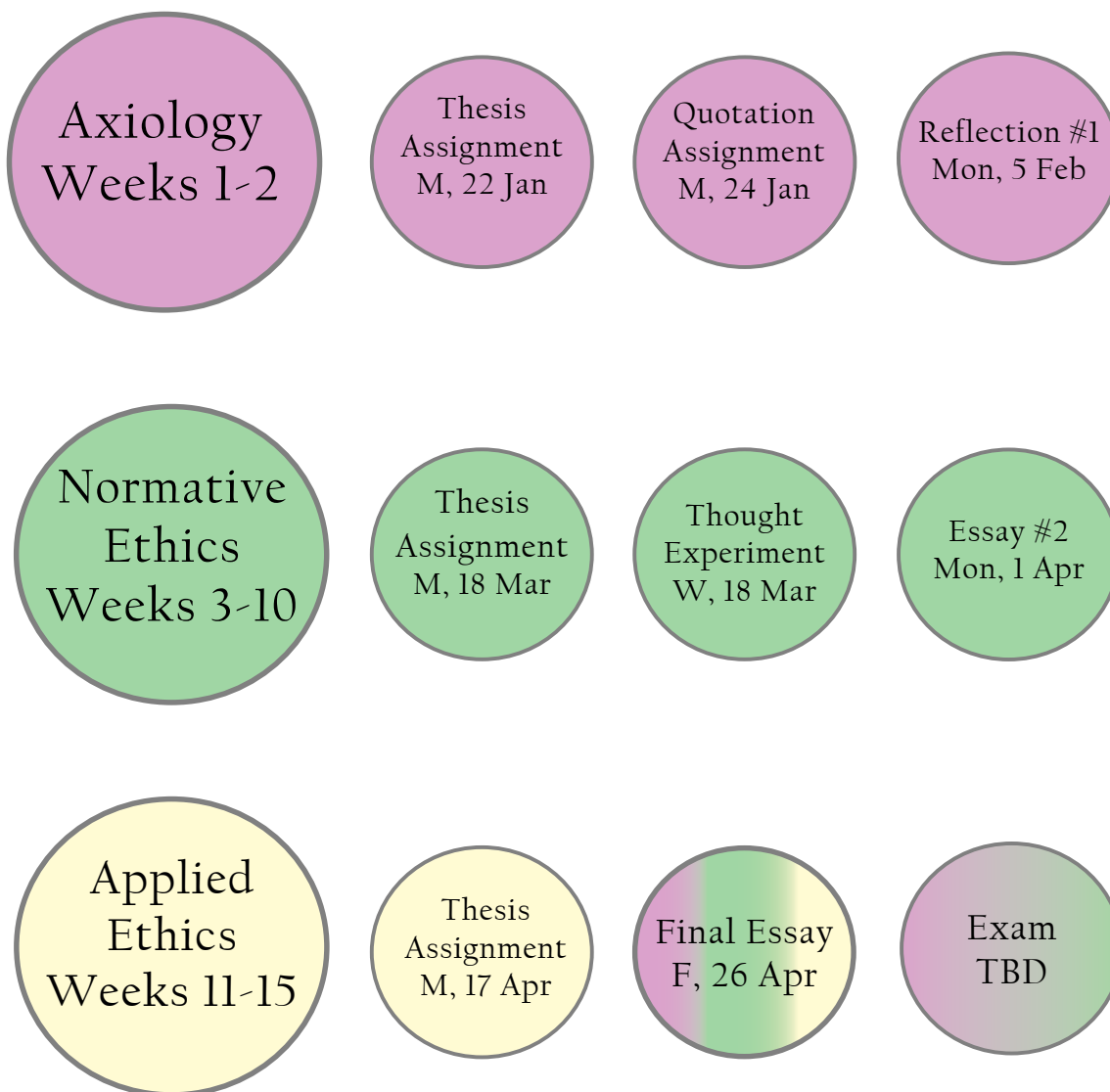
Summative assignments are goal-oriented.

These ensure for both of us that you have reached a particular level of understanding for the course learning objectives.

This accounts for 70% of the work in this class.

In this class, we practice collaborative grading. For summative writing assignments, you and I fill out our own rubric to assess the work. You assign yourself the grade you believe you’ve earned, and our rubrics are in conversation with one another for the final grade. (This means that what you assign yourself is not necessarily the final grade; however, your final grade is a product of conversation and not fiat.)

Course Overview



The detailed guide below will let you know which readings are due, and when. These readings can be difficult, and may be different than other kinds of readings you've done before. To get the most from them, I recommend that you:

1. Watch the video guide, if one is available
2. Pre-read the assignment and attend to major arguments before the day listed below
3. Come to class with questions for the start of class check-in
4. Take notes and use your Key Concepts List during lectures/discussions
5. Use the check-in at the end of class to ask questions about any Key Concept or other term/idea you're still unpacking
6. Listen to the podcast if there is one
7. Read the assignment as closely as you can before the day listed below
8. Come to office hours if you still have questions

Canvas will always be our most up-to-date and accurate course schedule. If there is a conflict between the pdf syllabus and Canvas, Canvas is the correct source.

Primary Readings, Reflection #1

For every philosophy or problem we address, there is at least one primary reading available on our Canvas page (Files -> Supplemental Readings). As you will see later, each Essay Assignment requires that you engage substantively with one primary reading of your choice for the relevant assignment. Feel free to ask if you need more help to choose, and know that I'm always excited to talk to you about any and all of them.

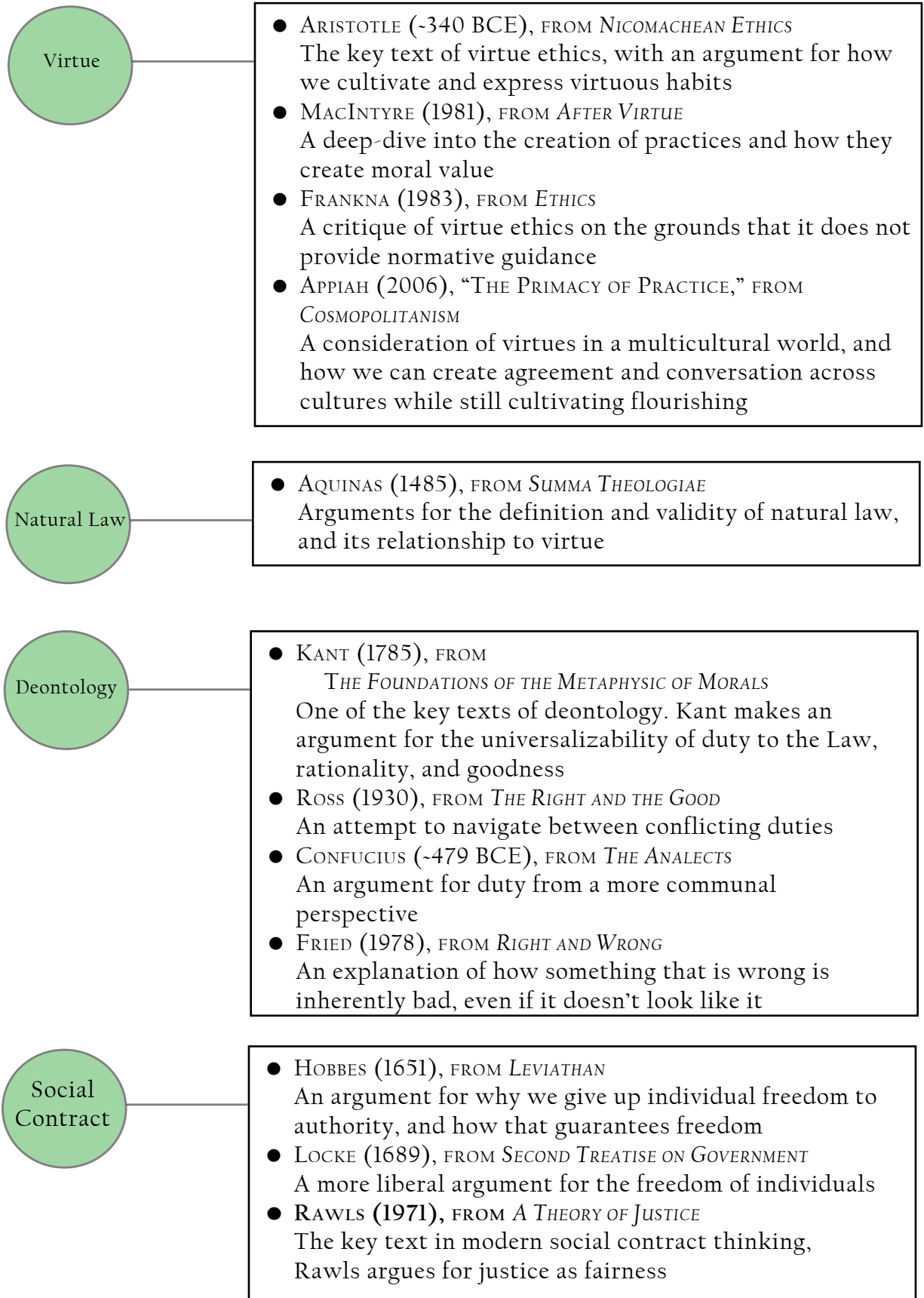
Axiology

- PLATO (375 BCE), "THE RING OF GYGES," FROM *THE REPUBLIC*
Socrates debates with a student about whether people are inherently good or inherently selfish, and what good means
- NIETZSCHE (1886), FROM *BEYOND GOOD AND EVIL*
Neither "good" nor "evil" are real categories; all that matters is power
- NAGEL (1979), "MORAL LUCK," FROM *MORTAL QUESTIONS*
Most of our moral judgments come after the fact, and a lot of how we define an action as good or bad comes down to luck
- MILL (1859), FROM *ON LIBERTY*
An absolutely central text of modern liberalism, Mill argues for the value of conversation and the need for every opinion to have a voice, even and especially wrong opinions
- ARNOLD (1869), FROM *CULTURE AND ANARCHY*
A conservative rebuttal to Mill, that argues for the intrinsic value and superiority of some voices in a conversation.

Egoism Altruism

- POJMAN (2000), "EGOISM AND ALTRUISM"
Egoism includes its own paradoxical rejection, and altruism is actually more natural
- SMITH (1759), FROM *THE THEORY OF MORAL SENTIMENTS*
Sympathy is the most important social emotion, and helps us to imagine what others are going through

Primary Readings, Essay #2



Primary Readings, Essay #2 cont.

Utilitarianism

- BENTHAM (1789), FROM *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PRINCIPLES OF MORALS AND LEGISLATION*
The key text in quantitative, act-utilitarianism, Bentham explains how to calculate happiness
- MILL (1861-1863), FROM *UTILITARIANISM*
The key text in qualitative, rule-utilitarianism, Mill argues why some happinesses are more valuable
- NIELSEN (1972), FROM “AGAINST MORAL CONSERVATISM”
A critique of deontology on the grounds that utilitarianism does not shy away from difficult choices
- WILLIAMS (1973), FROM *UTILITARIANISM, FOR AND AGAINST*
A critique of utilitarianism on the grounds that it demands the agent violate their own moral integrity for other people’s projects

Feminism

- JAGGAR (1992), “FEMINIST ETHICS” FROM *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF ETHICS*
A history and definition of the aims and principles of feminist ethics
- HELD (2005), FROM *THE ETHICS OF CARE*
A definition of the aims and principles of the ethics of care
- BAIR (1987), “THE NEED FOR MORE THAN JUSTICE”
Integrates the ethics of care with philosophies of justice to go beyond mere fairness

Bioethics

- NCPHSBBR (1979), *THE BELMONT REPORT*
The foundation of modern bioethics, this document outlines the core principles that continue to guide biomedical research.
- SANDEL AND WALSH (2020), “WHY SOME AMERICANS REFUSE TO SOCIAL DISTANCE AND WEAR MASKS”
A consideration of the relationship between politics and ethics in contemporary America

Let's talk more about ...

**Engagement 5%
(Formative)**

Score	Description
Exemplary (5)	Consistent, active engagement and attendance
Proficient (4)	Consistent attendance with less engagement (or vice-versa)
Emerging (3)	Inconsistent attendance or engagement
Initial (2)	Many absences or days with no engagement

Active engagement means asking question during lectures, conversing during discussions, and consistent effort to be present and grow together.

Philosophy invites us to explain our positions, hold them up to scrutiny, and adjust our views in the face of criticisms. I encourage all of us—myself included—to change our minds or modify our position about at least one thing by the time this course is completed.

You may sometimes disagree not only with each other, but also with me. This is what I love about philosophy, so please feel safe and welcome to do so. Differences in our opinions and beliefs enhance our learning and create an atmosphere where we will practice thinking critically and deeply together. In these engagements, we will all adopt an attitude of good-will and compassion—in both our assertions and our responses.

In our disagreements, we are all adults and will act accordingly. Sometimes, someone might say something that makes us uncomfortable; discomfort is healthy. But sometimes, someone may say something that is hurtful, whether to ourselves or someone else. If you ever feel unsafe or unwelcome because of something that a student or myself has said, please tell me (or Student Affairs, if you would prefer to keep it anonymous).

We will regularly encounter difficult topics that may touch scars or unhealed wounds. To show the most respect for our classmates' and fellow humans' dignity, we will always treat these issues with the gravity and care they deserve. If you need support, please come talk to me and/or reach out to the university counselling services. If for whatever reason, a topic is too much for you right now, please care for yourself and reach out to me for an alternate topic. You never need to tell me why.

Even despite our best intentions, learning is messy and filled with opportunities for growth. While we should never be unkind, it is almost obligatory that we should be incorrect at times. Never be ashamed if you say something incorrect, or struggle with an assignment, or make a suboptimal choice. Just learn from the experience and try something else next time.

More pragmatically: come to class ready to engage in discussion. I advocate remaining present and receptive, unencumbered by distractions on phones or laptops (outside of notetaking). Otherwise, we're all adults. Eat if you need to eat, go to the bathroom, take care of emergencies, whatever life requires—just be discreet.

In the case of illness, please provide documentation (doctor's notes, etc.) to the office of student affairs (chs.studentaffairs@cnsu.edu). You never need to tell me why or what is going on.

Some of this grade includes in-class discussion notes from group conversations. These cannot be made up. If you have an excused absence, you may come meet with me to chat during office hours instead within one week of your return.

Let's talk more about ...

**Process 10%
(Formative)**

Score	Description
Exemplary (5)	Completed draft/otherwise fulfilled assignment
Proficient (4)	Mostly completed draft/assignment, some gaps
Emerging (3)	Partial draft, some planning (or equivalent)
Initial (2)	Proposal or outline-level only (or equivalent)

Thesis
Assignment
M, 22 Jan

For this assignment, you will craft a scaffolded thesis for Essay #1 using the Refining Thesis Statements handout, using all five stages (this will make more sense when we get there). Then, you will write an intro paragraph for that thesis using the Introductions handout.

Quotation
Assignment
W, 24 Jan

For this assignment, you will use the Using Sources handout to write a paragraph built around a quotation from our primary readings

Thesis
Assignment
M, 18 Mar

Same as the first one :)

Thought
Experiment
M, 25 Mar

For this assignment, you will create a thought experiment to demonstrate your argument for Essay #2. We will work on this in class as well.

As this work is process-oriented, it cannot be made up after the final draft has been turned in. If you need extensions, we may need to limit the length of that extension so that you can move forward on the essay.

Let's talk more about ...

**Quizzes 10%
(Formative)**

We will have quizzes regularly on our reading materials. These will typically be on Wednesdays (the excerpt days) at the beginning of class after the check-in. You will have 10 minutes, and can use your Key Concept List, and work together. These will test for understanding and also help me to know what we need to cover more thoroughly.

The questions will *not* be definition questions. Rather, they will ask you to demonstrate your understanding of how to deploy terms and concepts. If you get an answer incorrect on a quiz, you may write a short explanation of how you arrived at the answer you did in a comment on the exam; if your logic is valid, you may earn partial credit back.

**Exam 20%
(Summative)**

We will have one major exam over the Key Concepts List at the end of the semester. The questions will be the same format and kind of questions as you see on your quizzes (not the same questions, alas). You may use the Key Concepts List, and work together after part of our time has elapsed.

Sample question:

Rami, an ER doctor, is flying on a plane when a fellow passenger has a heart-attack. He leaps into action and keeps the passenger alive until the plane can land. When reporters ask him why he did it, he says, "I have the ability to alleviate pain. If I just sat in my seat, his suffering would be my fault."

Rami is using the concept of:

- a) beneficence
- b) the moral principle condition
- c) stringency
- d) negative responsibility**

Right now, you probably have no way of answering this question other than to see that d is in bold. But what you *can* notice is that it requires you to understand 1) what **negative responsibility** is, and more importantly 2) what it looks like in practice compared to the other options (which, for the record, are all close but not-quite-correct). The story also contains some key terms that will tip you off as to which philosophy we're using, which will also help (d is the only utilitarian term, and "pain" and "suffering" are both key in Utilitarianism).

If you get good at these, the CARS section of the MCAT will be easy.

Quizzes and exams cannot be made up. If you have an excused absence from the Office of Student Affairs, they will make arrangements for you.

Life happens. O-Chem happens. Sometimes, even with the best of intentions and time-management, we just can't find the motive or inspiration to write. In any and all of these cases, please reach out for extensions; I am always happy to grant them for writing assignments, as long as it is before the due date.

When you need an extension, you **do not** need to tell me any personal details about what you're facing. While I'm happy to talk about the extension in person, please follow-up by filling out the Extension Form (which will be linked on Canvas). It will ask you for your new date.

In most cases, this will be sufficient (and I'll respond as such), though we may need to talk about the date you set. If you find yourself needing repeated extensions, I may ask to meet just to ensure your success in the course. We will stay in touch as you're finishing up any extended work to make sure that you stay on-track to succeed in the course.

All late work without an extension will receive a 20% penalty per day, as will any late work after your extension deadline. Written assignments are due on the date specified at 11:59pm. Extensions granted after a due date will incur late penalties up to the point that the extension was granted (eg., if due Monday and extension granted on Tuesday, still 20% penalty for Monday), so ask sooner, rather than later. Quizzes and process work cannot be made up.

Integrity

If I cheat in my ethics class,
but I don't get caught,
do I still fail?
(Yes)

The nature of philosophy is discussion and conversation. I do not mind if you talk about your papers with your classmates; in fact, I'd encourage it! Writing, as well, is collaboration. You will even be required to read one another's papers and offer feedback. Everyone must, however, write their own version of their argument.

Plagiarism becomes complicated in these collaborative settings. If I really, really like a phrase that you use in a comment, can I use it? Do I have to cite you? This is often what acknowledgements are for, or even footnotes if someone influences you significantly and you want to thank them.

At the risk of being too reductive, let's follow W.D. Ross's intuitionism for plagiarism in this class. If you feel a little unsure or like you have to justify something as not-plagiarism, it's probably plagiarism. But also, let's practice the ethics of care: reach out to your peers, and please reach out to me! I will never penalize you for asking if something is plagiarism, even if it is. If you're panicking, come to me instead of cheating; we can figure out how to make the experience caring, ethical, and edifying rather than judgmental and punitive.

Actions that are definitely plagiarism include the obvious (copy-pasting a peer's work or an online source), the less obvious (patchworking, or copying a sentence from a source and just changing some of the words), and the not-obvious (reading a claim or evidence from another source and not citing them). Everything will be turned in on Canvas and run through Turnitin.

Let's talk more about ...

Artificial Intelligence Dos

You are welcome to use AI as a tool to assist your writing. Please feel free to use AI for:

Editing tips

- “How would you describe this writing? // How would you make it more [good qualities]?
How would you make it less [qualities that need fixing]?”
- “How would you transition between these two paragraphs to emphasize [argument link]?”

Thought experiment ideas

- “What are five thought-experiments that would help to demonstrate the following argument: [your main claim]” (though you should edit these and make them your own)

Clarifying major concepts

- “Explain Kant's Categorical Imperative on an undergraduate level”

Finding foundational sources

- Always double-check sources that AI suggest, especially more recent sources. But it's a great resource for the major sources.
- “What are the most important sources on virtue?”

Breaking through writer's block

- Ask for multiple suggestions, and think critically about them. “Based on these paragraphs, what are four ideas that would make sense as next steps for this essay that aims to argue [your argument]?”

Please do not use AI for:

First drafts

- Struggling with ideas is part of the process. We do some of our best work when we make surprising or uncommon connections that a predictive language model will not make. If we let statistical language model AI define our arguments, we're only going to make predictable and mundane arguments.

Uncritically accepting too-general starting paper ideas

- If we ask the AI “what is an argument I could make about utilitarianism?”, those arguments may not be claims you would normally make, or that you feel passionately about, or that you are equipped to or interested in following through.

Just straight-up writing your essay

- AI can help us to refine our writing, find sources, or break out of writer's block. But simply telling it to write an essay about why deontology is more sound than utilitarianism in the case of euthanasia 1) will not really teach us anything and 2) will produce a mediocre essay at best.

Please include your ChatGPT (or other AI) chat logs as a separate file in your essay submission. We are all coming to understand what this technology means for education, and I hope to use this as an opportunity to improve all of our learning.

Do nots