

The Challenges of Living an Ethical Life

Ethics 101D/POLSCI 120D, Spring 2021

Instructor: Elliot Mamet
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Class Meetings: Monday and Wednesday, 10:15-11:30am, West Duke 101
Office Hours: Monday, 3-5pm over Zoom; sign up at calendly.com/emamet/office-hours
Course Sakai sakai.duke.edu/portal/site/EthicalLife



Course Description: At first glance, “doing the right thing” and “being a good person” seem like reasonable, even unambitious goals, but how many of us can say with complete confidence that we know what it is to lead a good life? This course will be framed by a number of familiar, but fundamental, questions: What is an ethical and worthy life? How does morality develop? Are there unique ethical challenges associated with each stage of life? What is the relationship between politics and morality, or power and ethics? Can we distinguish morality from moralism? To what degree are people independent actors and in what ways are they shaped by cultural forces outside their control and consciousness? What does it mean to be good?

We will approach these questions through quite different sources, drawing on the Hebrew Bible, novels and plays, writings by philosophers, political activists, psychologists, and more. These rich sources should give students some sensitivity to different modes of ethical inquiry and help the class develop a distinctive conversation.

Course Goals: The primary goal of the course is to give students a selective, introductory survey to different approaches to living a good life. The course aims to develop students' abilities to read, interpret, and respond to complex texts. Refining and developing interpretations of the texts we read is emphasized through four response papers, combined with three longer analytical papers to help students grapple with core ethical themes in our reading. Students will leave the course with a better understanding of different approaches to ethics, as well as a sense of how those approaches might implicate their own lives.

This course is the gateway course for the [Ethics & Society Certificate Program](#) offered by the Kenan Institute for Ethics. The Ethics & Society Certificate responds to the need felt by many students for a more thoughtful or reflective engagement with the complexity of the world—and to the ways in which values and principles can come into conflict. For more information on the Ethics & Society Certificate, please contact Manda Hufstedler at manda.hufstedler@duke.edu.

Course Requirements:

- *Writing.* There will be no exams in this course. Instead, students will complete four short (~500 word) critical responses reflecting on the assigned materials. These brief essays should not summarize the reading; rather, they should raise a challenge or critical question and explain why you think this challenge or critical question merits discussion or further reflection. There will also be three longer analytical papers (5-6 double-spaced pages). The point of these assignments is for you to thoughtfully consider ethical questions, to reflect on our course material, to develop your own thinking about ethics and the good life, and to improve as a writer. A rubric for the longer paper appears below.
- *Reading.* This course has a heavy yet rewarding reading list. Plan to spend a fair amount of time reading before attending class and, at times, re-reading after class. Because the class is meant to be a collective inquiry, it is essential to come to class having done the reading and with the readings annotated and in hand. In order to contribute to our conversation, please come to each class with a written page that contains 1) a list of the key concepts you have identified from the readings; 2) citations for passages in which each concept is discussed; and 3) reflections on what you think the concepts mean for how we should think about an ethical life. We will discuss the concepts you have identified in class, drawing on the text to reflect together on the concept's meaning.
- *Talking.* Instead of lectures, this class will be structured as a collective discussion, whereby we work together as a team to understand distinct approaches to living an ethical life—their merits and contradictions, their benefits and their pitfalls. Talk is essential to our work. Our aim is to foster a discussion about ethics, grounded in the text as well as your own perspective and experiences. In order to best facilitate a collective conversation, laptops and other electronic devices are not allowed, and students will be expected to bring hard copies of all reading material and notes if possible.
- *Showing Up.* As the class relies on our thinking through ethical questions together, students will be expected to attend class meetings consistently and punctually. Multiple unexcused absences and regular tardiness will negatively affect your participation grade.

Grading Policy:

1. First analytical paper (5-6 pages)	March 5	20%
2. Second analytical paper (5-6 pages)	March 24	20%
3. Third analytical paper (5-6 pages)	April 7	20%
4. Four response papers (~500 words)	Various	12%
5. Participation		<u>28%</u>
Total:		100%

Response Papers: Over the course of the semester, students will write four short, informal response papers of ~500 words. These are due by 8:00 am on the day of class. These papers should be divided into two parts: *summary*, identifying the main argument or point of a given reading, and *discussion*, containing your response to the reading—why it strikes you as compelling or misguided; why the author’s claims excite or repel you; why they have made you think of something in a new way; why they confuse you; why they have made you think of something in a new way; or why they seem to point to a dead end. These assignment lets you think aloud, as it were, and provides useful material for our discussion in class.

You are required to write a total of four response papers, one per unit. These papers are designed to be low-stakes and will be graded minimally: check, check/minus, or zero. Check: the paper is a serious effort that contains a reasonably accurate summary and a serious response.

Check/Minus: the paper lacks careful thought or is considerably inaccurate about the readings. Checks will gain full credit (3%), check/minus (1.5%) partial credit, and zeros no credit.

The response paper assignment is designed to further three other aims. First, it will give you a chance to work on mastering the readings. If there are parts of the readings that you don’t understand, then write about your confusion. I’ll try to address those problems, either directly, by commenting on your paper, or indirectly, in class. Second, these assignments are designed to give you some easy practice in writing clearly and coherently. The more you learn to clarify your thoughts on paper, the better off you will be as a writer and student. Third, your comments may provide fodder for class discussion as well as the the longer papers.

Office Hours and Communication: You are invited and encouraged to talk with me about your questions, thoughts, papers, or anything else. My office hours are on Mondays from 3-5pm over Zoom. You can sign up for an appointment at calendly.com/emamet/office-hours. I am also available via email at elliott.mamet@duke.edu. I check my email regularly during business hours; if you send me an email during evenings or weekends, I’ll respond as soon as possible after 9:00am the following weekday.

Safety, Health, and Wellness: The [Duke Compact](#) recognizes our shared responsibility for our collective health and well-being. Please be reminded that by signing your name to this pledge, you have acknowledged that you understand the conditions for being on campus and taking this in-person class, including wearing appropriate face coverings, maintaining physical distancing, and adhering to other safety guidelines. Should you have any questions or concerns about safety or accessibility within our class, please let me know as soon as possible.

Diversity, Inclusion, and Accessibility: I strive to make the classroom as inclusive as possible to students of different backgrounds, learning styles, and interests. It is my intent that students from all diverse backgrounds and perspectives be well-served by this course, that students' learning needs be addressed both in and out of class, and that the diversity that students bring to this class be viewed as a resource, strength and benefit. Please let me know if you have any comments or suggestions. Additionally, if you need specific learning accommodations, please let me know as soon as you can so that I can accommodate you in a timely and confidential fashion.

Duke Community Standard: Students will be expected to abide by the [Duke Community Standard](#). Among other things, the Duke Community Standard specifies that you will be responsible for producing all of your own work and that you will always cite the works or ideas of others used in your work. However, discussing your ideas and your writing with others is not a violation of the Community Standard. In fact, it is a good idea to compare your ideas and writings with those of others and to ask others for criticisms of your work. Using other people's ideas can also be a good idea—if their ideas are good and you credit the authors for developing the ideas. We will talk more in class about how to credit other people's ideas in your writing.

Required Texts:

Unit I: Introduction to Ethical Inquiry

- Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. Robert Bagg (Harper). ISBN: 0062132121. (\$5 used, \$9 new)
- *The Book of Job*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Harper). ISBN: 9780060969592. (\$6 used, \$15 new)

Unit II: Moral Development in the Species and the Individual

- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. Donald A. Cross (Hackett). ISBN: 0872201503. (\$7 used, \$10 new)
- Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Hackett). ISBN: 087220166X. (\$8 used, \$12 new; on [online reserve](#) with Duke Library)
- Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufman (Vintage). ISBN: 0679724621. (\$8 used, \$13 new, on [online reserve](#) with Duke Library)

Unit III: Principles and Politics

- Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Harvey Mansfield (Chicago). ISBN: 9780226500447. (\$5 used, \$10 new; [available via HathiTrust](#) on Duke Library website)

Unit IV: Ethical Challenges of Everyday Life

- Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (Penguin). ISBN: 9780140481341 (\$5 used, \$9 new; on [online reserve](#) with Duke Library)
- August Wilson, *Fences* (Penguin). ISBN: 9780452264014 (\$5 used, \$12 new; on [online reserve](#) with Duke Library)

Please purchase the editions indicated so that we can refer to the same editions in our discussion. All other course material will be available on Sakai. If affordability is a barrier to your acquiring these course material, please let me know so we can make alternative arrangements.

Class Schedule

Introduction

- Jan. 20: Introduction: what is a good life?
Ursula Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"

Unit I: Introduction to Ethical Inquiry

What does the ethical life look like from a religious point of view? A philosophic point of view? Why seek to live an ethical life at all? Is obedience or duty a virtue in itself or is it good only when something good comes from it?

- Jan. 25: Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and the "Statement by Alabama Clergymen"
Jan. 27: Sophocles, *Antigone*
Feb. 1: Plato, *Apology*, 17a-28b
Feb. 3: Plato, *Apology*, 28b-41e
Feb. 8: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, selections from Books I and II
Feb. 10: *The Book of Job*
⇒ Response paper due for Unit I

Unit II: Moral Development in the Species and the Individual

How do people become good? or corrupted? What is the source of evil? Should we expect moral progress in the human species over time? What does the ethical life look like, and what are its challenges, at different life stages? How much is ethics a matter of intellectual or rational judgment and development and how much is it a matter of "gut reactions" established at an early age? How does moral development occur in an unjust society?

- Feb. 15: Rousseau, *Discourse On the Origin of Inequality*, Exordium, Preface, pt. 1
Feb. 17: Rousseau, pt. 2
⇒ First paper assignment available
Feb. 22: Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Preface, Section 1
Feb. 24: Kant, "On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns"
⇒ Writing workshop
Feb 26: ⇒ First paper due by 9:00am.
March 1: Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Preface, First Essay, Sections 1-6
March 3: Nietzsche, First Essay, Section 6-17
March 8: Paul Bloom, "The Moral Life of Babies," Jonathan Haidt, "The New Synthesis in Moral Psychology," Jeanette Kennett and Cordelia Fine, "Will the Real Moral Judgment Please Stand Up?"
⇒ Response papers due for Unit II
March 10: No classes held

Unit III: Principles and Politics

Is it possible to be too good? What is a principled compromise as opposed to an opportunistic sell-out? What is the difference between moralism and morality or principle and fanaticism? Why is so much evil done in the name of the good? What is the ethical status of violence as a political means? Do the same rules apply in political life as in private life?

- March 15: Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Dedicatory Letter, chaps. 1-3, 6-9, 15
March 17: Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chaps. 15-19, 21, 25, 26
⇒ Second paper assignment available
- March 22: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Forethought, Chs. 1-3; Ida B. Wells, "Booker T. Washington and His Critics"
March 24: Michael Walzer, "The Problem of Dirty Hands," George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi"
⇒ Writing workshop
- March 29: Thoreau, "On Civil Disobedience," Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown"
March 31: **Class meeting at Duke Gardens**
Olson, "The Freshness of Fanaticism"
⇒ Response paper due for Unit III
- April 2: ⇒ Second paper due by 9:00am.

Unit IV: Ethical Challenges of Everyday Life

Is it always good to be altruistic? What ethical challenges accompany relationships where a person has responsibility toward others? How much is ethics a matter of personal choice and to what degree are we constrained by our socio-historical situation? How do gender, race and class shape our perceptions of ethical demands?

- April 5: Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*
April 7: Peter Singer, "Famine, Afluence, and Morality," Dylan Matthews, "Join Wall Street. Save the World"
⇒ Third paper assignment available
- April 12: **Wellness Day, no reading assigned, meet at the Nasher Museum of Art**
April 14: August Wilson, *Fences*
⇒ Writing workshop
- April 19: Pauli Murray, "Dark Testament"
April 21: Last Day of Class... and Ethics Jeopardy
⇒ Response paper due for Unit IV
- April 23: Third paper due by 9:00am. Enjoy summer!!

Writing Rubric for Analytical Papers*

Major Factors

Is the writing well organized?

<p>No: Writing suffers from poor organization within and between paragraphs or sections. Little effort made to connect the parts together logically.</p>	<p>Somewhat: Structure generally works, though poor organization of some parts impede reading. Limited use of signposts to help readers navigate the structure of the paper.</p>	<p>Yes: Writing is well organized, and flow of ideas is logical. Signposts are effectively used to guide readers from one paragraph or section to the next and tie each piece in with the major ideas. The paper clearly advances a central argument.</p>
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Does the writing deal with complexity in a sophisticated manner?

<p>No: The writer tends to oversimplify, reasoning in binaries, ignoring counterarguments or counterevidence, and failing to state the limitations of their ideas or evidence.</p>	<p>Somewhat: The writer makes some attempt to address complexity, yet at other points oversimplifies important matters and/or fails to take other views or contrary evidence into account.</p>	<p>Yes: The writer deals with complexity intelligently and responsibly—breaking down binaries, responding thoughtfully to counterarguments or counterevidence and making concessions where meaningful.</p>
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Minor Factors

Is the writing reasonably concise?

<p>No: Considerable padding or irrelevant material and/or a pattern of unnecessary and excessive wording.</p>	<p>Somewhat: Most material has value, yet there is a fair amount of extraneous or irrelevant material.</p>	<p>Yes: Nearly all of the content has value. Prose is efficient yet retains detail needed for clarity.</p>
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Is the writing well proofread?

<p>No: Many problems with spelling, punctuation, word choice and/or grammar.</p>	<p>Somewhat: Enough errors or poor word choices to be distracting to readers.</p>	<p>Yes: Very few errors. Word choice is consistently good.</p>
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* Adopted from Dr. Cary Moskovitz, Duke Thompson Writing Program.

Chronology of Readings

- ~600 BCE? *Book of Job*
- ~441 BCE Sophocles, *Antigone*
- 399 BCE Trial and Death of Socrates, as takes place in Plato's *Apology*
- ~340 BCE Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
- 1532 CE Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*
- 1775 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse On The Origin of Inequality* (or, the *Second Discourse*)
- 1785 Immanuel Kant, *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*
- 1849, 1859 Henry David Thoreau, "On Civil Disobedience"
- 1859 Henry David Thoreau, "A Plea for Captain John Brown"
- 1886 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
- 1903 W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
- 1904 Ida B. Wells, "Booker T. Washington and His Critics"
- 1949 Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*
- 1949 George Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi"
- 1963 Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail"
- 1970 Pauli Murray, "Dark Testament"
- 1972 Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"
- 1973 Michael Walzer, "The Problem of Dirty Hands"
- 1973 Ursula Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas"
- 1985 August Wilson, *Fences*
- 2007 Joel Olsen, "The Freshness of Fanaticism,"
- 2007 Jonathan Haidt, "The New Synthesis in Moral Psychology"
- 2009 Jeanette Kennett and Cordelia Fine, "Will the Real Moral Judgment Please Stand Up?"
- 2010 Paul Bloom, "The Moral Life of Babies"
- 2013 Dylan Matthews, "Join Wall Street. Save the World."