

PHIL 165

Ethics for the 21st Century

Fall Semester 2026 · Dr. Jorge A. Muñoz · jorgem@csun.edu

WHEN

T Th · 2:30-3:45 pm

WHERE

Bookstein 1238

OFFICE

ST 533

OFFICE HOURS

T Th 11:30–2:15 & by appt.

Fifteen weeks. Five moral theories. Ten live controversies. *The goal is not simple answers — it is better ones, held for better reasons.*

THE COURSE

What This Class Is

Catalog: Introduction to the philosophical examination of contemporary ethical issues. Questions may include: When, if ever, should we boycott an institution? Is it OK to eat meat? Are fetuses or artificial intelligences persons? Is genetic enhancement a good idea? What are our responsibilities to the environment? Is there such a thing as a just war? Meets the Lifelong Learning requirement. Available for General Education, Area 3B Humanities.

This course provides an introduction to the philosophical and social concepts of justice and fairness through the study of central moral theories and their application to contemporary social issues. Because our society is shaped by human diversity, and because individuals experience the world differently on the basis of race, gender, political ideology, sexual orientation, economic class, ethnicity, age, and sex, the questions we examine will reflect the complex ways these differences give rise to urgent moral and political challenges. For the first five weeks, the course establishes a theoretical foundation by asking “What is morality?” and exploring major ethical approaches: subjectivism and relativism, consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. These frameworks will allow us to think more clearly and critically about the issues that follow.

With this grounding, we turn to some of the most pressing debates in public life today — abortion, artificial intelligence and automation, civil disobedience and unjust law, climate change and the environment, free speech versus hate speech and extremism, healthcare access and public health, immigration and refugee rights, misinformation and media integrity, systemic racism and social inequality, and wealth inequality and economic justice. We will focus on understanding the arguments that appear in the public sphere, tracing the broader conceptions of justice and fairness underneath them, and developing our own informed and reasoned views in response.

There may not be final resolutions, but there are certainly stronger and weaker positions, better and worse justifications, and more or less reasonable perspectives. Our task is to cultivate the skills to distinguish among them — and to support our own arguments with the best available evidence and reasoning, so that we can participate responsibly and thoughtfully in the conversations that shape our common life.

OUTCOMES

What You Will Learn to Do

General Education (Area 3B) outcomes — students will:

- 1 Explain and reflect critically upon the human search for meaning and values within and across the human experience, as expressed in the arts, literatures, religions, philosophies, and/or thought traditions.
- 2 Analyze, interpret and reflect critically upon creative expression, discourse, or thought traditions from diverse perspectives.
- 3 Demonstrate the ability to engage and reflect upon their intellectual and creative development within the humanities.
- 4 Describe and explain the historical and/or cultural context within which a body of work or thought tradition was created or emerged.
- 5 Critically analyze how the humanities as disciplines of memory and imagination reflect upon the current conditions of the human experience and help envision progression as a society.

Course-specific outcomes — students will:

- 1 Explain major ethical theories — relativism, consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics — as foundations for evaluating moral questions.
- 2 Analyze diverse perspectives on contested ethical debates such as abortion, artificial intelligence, civil disobedience, climate change, immigration, systemic racism, and economic justice.
- 3 Evaluate philosophical arguments by distinguishing stronger from weaker positions and identifying the reasoning that supports them.
- 4 Interpret classical and contemporary philosophical texts to connect theoretical frameworks with current social issues.
- 5 Assess the moral and political implications of systemic inequalities shaped by race, gender, class, sexuality, and other forms of human diversity.
- 6 Apply philosophical reasoning to contemporary challenges in media, misinformation, and public discourse in the 21st century.
- 7 Reflect on how philosophical inquiry into justice, fairness, and morality informs responsible civic and social participation.

ASSESSMENT

How Your Grade Is Built

Weekly Quiz	■■■ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□	15%
Class Attendance	■■ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□	20%
Discussion	■■ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□	10%
EZine	■■■ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□	10%
Short Writing Assignment	■■■■ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□	20%
Hybrid Final Project	■■■■ □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□	25%
TOTAL		100%

Policies

Missed assignments

Makeup work will be given only upon demonstrated (i.e., through proof of illness or emergency) need. Makeup work needed for any other reasons may be taken in the first week after the missed assignment with a 25% penalty, except for extenuating circumstances. Any makeup assignment must be scheduled at the mutual convenience of the student and instructor. All projects must be taken to pass the course.

Students with disabilities

Any student with a disability that prevents the fullest expression of their talents should see me as soon as possible to discuss any alterations that need to be made to the course requirements and format.

Be punctual — and be here

We start on time. This is a lecture/discussion section, and your participation will be important and demanded. Do not be shy: philosophy needs to be discussed. Attendance matters; your grade will suffer if you do not show up.

Academic integrity

Any subversion or compromise of academic integrity constitutes academic misconduct: falsification, unauthorized assistance, plagiarism, unauthorized aid on examinations, disruption of classes, offering gratuities or favors for grades, unauthorized use of AI like ChatGPT, etc. A grade of 0 will be given for the assignment involved. See your Student Handbook for full provisions.

Yes — a course with a unit on AI ethics restricts AI use. We will talk about exactly why in Weeks 7 and 10.

Come prepared

Part of every discussion concentrates on the readings, so keep up with the reading.

Drop deadline with instructor's signature only: September 12. After that date, withdrawals require approvals and only for "serious and compelling reasons."

My office hours are open to everyone — and if you cannot make them, talk to me after class and we will find a time.

Schedule of Topics & Readings

Schedule and procedures are subject to change at the discretion of the professor. Each week opens with the question we are trying to answer.

PART I — BUILDING THE TOOLKIT · WEEKS 1–5

WEEK 1 Course Introduction & Morality

What is morality, and why be moral at all?

8/26

Introduction to the course

- ▶ No readings

8/28

What is Morality?

- ▶ Shafer-Landau, What is Morality?
- ▶ Rachels, What is Morality?

WEEK 2 Subjectivism & Relativism

Is morality just opinion — mine, or my culture's?

9/02

Moral Skepticism

- ▶ Rachels, Egoism and Skepticism

9/04

Moral Relativism

- ▶ Rachels, Morality, Ethical Relativism, and Subjectivism

WEEK 3 Consequentialism

Is the right act whatever produces the best outcome?

9/09

Classical Utilitarianism

- ▶ Bentham, On the Principle of Utility
- ▶ Mill, Utilitarianism (Ch. 2)

9/11

Varieties & Challenges of Consequentialism

- ▶ Pettit, Consequentialism
- ▶ Nozick, The Experience Machine

WEEK 4 Deontology

Are some acts wrong no matter their consequences?

9/16

The Categorical Imperative

- ▶ Kant, The Good Will and the Categorical Imperative
- ▶ O'Neill, A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics

9/18

Beyond Kant: Duties & Contractualism

- ▶ Ross, What Makes Right Acts Right
- ▶ Scanlon, Contractualism and Utilitarianism

WEEK 5 Virtue Ethics

Is morality less about single acts and more about character?

9/23

Foundations of Virtue Ethics

- ▶ Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics
- ▶ Driver, Virtue Ethics

9/25

Contemporary Critiques and Refinements

- ▶ Shafer-Landau, Virtue Ethics

PART II — THE DEBATES · WEEKS 6–15

WEEK 6 Abortion

What makes something — or someone — matter morally?

9/30

The Case Against Abortion

- ▶ Marquis, Why Abortion Is Immoral
- ▶ Noonan, An Almost Absolute Value in History

10/02

The Case for Abortion Rights

- ▶ Thomson, A Defense of Abortion
- ▶ Warren, On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion

WEEK 7 Artificial Intelligence & Automation

Can we hand moral decisions to machines?

10/07

Ethical Boundaries of AI Decision-Making

- ▶ Fritz, Deference to Opaque Systems and Morally Exemplary Decisions
- ▶ Robbins, What Machines Shouldn't Do

10/09

Responsibility, Integrity, and AI Transparency

- ▶ Taylor, Is Explainable AI Responsible AI?
- ▶ Shaw, The Digital Erosion of Intellectual Integrity

WEEK 8 Civil Disobedience

When is breaking the law the moral thing to do?

10/14

Civil Disobedience and the Moral Duty to Resist Injustice

- ▶ King, Letter from Birmingham Jail
- ▶ Delmas, Samaritanism and Civil Disobedience

10/16

Privilege, Burden, and the Unequal Costs of Resistance

- ▶ Yankah, Whose Burden to Bear? Privilege, Lawbreaking, and Race

WEEK 9 Climate Change & the Environment

Who owes what to whom in a warming world?

10/21

Climate Change, Justice, and Collective Responsibility

- ▶ Posner & Sunstein, Climate Change Justice
- ▶ Sinnott-Armstrong, It's Not My Fault: Global Warming and Individual Moral Obligations

10/23

Virtue, Character, and Environmental Ethics

- ▶ Hill, Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving Natural Environments

WEEK 10 Free Speech vs Hate Speech

Where does my freedom to speak end — and does a machine even “speak”?

10/28

The Classic Debate: Liberty vs. Harm

- ▶ Mill, From On Liberty
- ▶ Barendt, What Is the Harm of Hate Speech

10/30

Free Speech in the Age of AI: “Uncensored” Models & Whose Speech Is It?

- ▶ McGowan, The Ethics of Free Speech
- ▶ Muñoz, Speech Without a Speaker: Uncensored AI and the Future of the Free Speech Debate

WEEK 11 Healthcare Access & Public Health

Is health care a right, a commodity, or something else?

11/4

Justice, Inequality, and the Distribution of Health Resources

- King, Health Inequalities and Health Inequities
- Vaughn, Dividing Up Health Care Resources

11/6

Public Health and Moral Duty

- Giubilini et al., The Moral Obligation to Be Vaccinated

WEEK 12 Immigration & Refugee Rights

Do borders have moral weight?

11/13

Immigration, Limits, and National Responsibility

- Huemer, Is There a Right to Immigrate?
- Miller, Immigration: The Case for Limits

11/18

Scarcity, Resources, and Global Justice

- Hardin, Living on a Lifeboat

WEEK 13 Media, Truth, and Disinformation

What do we owe each other in an age of manufactured reality?

11/20

Media, Propaganda, and Public Opinion

- Emmanuel & Fasiku, The Media, Truth and the Ethics of Public Opinion in the Age of Propaganda
- Patching & Hirst, News in Crisis: The Fake News Crisis

11/25

Technology and Hyperreality

- Cover et al., The Visual in an Era of Hyperreality and Disinformation: The Deepfake Video

WEEK 14 Systemic Racism & Social Inequality

What makes racism systemic — and what follows from that?

12/02

Racism and Systemic Structures

- Appiah, Racisms
- Bonilla-Silva, What Makes Systemic Racism Systemic

12/04

Gender and Power

- Cudd & Jones, Sexism

WEEK 15 Wealth Inequality & Economic Justice

How much does morality demand of the comfortable?

12/09

Moral Duties to Aid Others

- Singer, Famine, Affluence, and Morality
- O'Neill, Kantian Approaches to Some Famine Problems (§23–§24)
- Woollard, Saving Strangers: What Does Morality Demand?

12/11

Fairness in Social Obligations

- Anderson, How Not to Complain About Taxes

SOURCES

Course Reading List

All assigned readings, in APA style. Where readings are assigned from the course reader, selection titles follow the reader; entries marked [to confirm] are pending verification against the reader edition.

- Anderson, E. (2005). How not to complain about taxes [Blog essay series]. Left2Right. [Access details to confirm]
- Appiah, K. A. (1990). Racisms. In D. T. Goldberg (Ed.), *Anatomy of racism* (pp. 3–17). University of Minnesota Press.
- Aristotle. (2019). *Nicomachean ethics* (T. Irwin, Trans.; 3rd ed.). Hackett Publishing. (Original work published ca. 350 B.C.E.)
- Barendt, E. (2019). What is the harm of hate speech? *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 22(3), 539–553.
- Bentham, J. (1996). *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation* (J. H. Burns & H. L. A. Hart, Eds.). Clarendon Press. (Original work published 1789)
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2021). What makes systemic racism systemic? *Sociological Inquiry*, 91(3), 513–533.
- Cover, R., Haw, A., & Thompson, J. D. (2022). The visual in an era of hyperreality and disinformation: The deepfake video. In *Fake news in digital cultures: Technology, populism and digital misinformation*. Emerald Publishing. [Chapter/pages to confirm]
- Cudd, A. E., & Jones, L. E. (2003). Sexism. In R. G. Frey & C. H. Wellman (Eds.), *A companion to applied ethics*. Blackwell.
- Delmas, C. (2014). Samaritanism and civil disobedience. *Res Publica*, 20(3), 295–313.
- Driver, J. (2007). Virtue ethics. In *Ethics: The fundamentals*. Blackwell. [Pages to confirm]
- Emmanuel, S., & Fasiku, G. C. (2025). The media, truth and the ethics of public opinion in the age of propaganda. *Aquino Journal of Philosophy*. [Volume/pages to confirm]
- Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. (n.d.). *Artificial intelligence, free speech, and the First Amendment*. [Specific resource to confirm]
- Fritz, J. (2025). Deference to opaque systems and morally exemplary decisions. *AI & Society*, 40, 3827–3839. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-024-02147-z>
- Giubilini, A., Douglas, T., & Savulescu, J. (2018). The moral obligation to be vaccinated: Utilitarianism, contractualism, and collective easy rescue. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy*, 21(4), 547–560.
- Hardin, G. (1974). Living on a lifeboat. *BioScience*, 24(10), 561–568.
- Hill, T. E., Jr. (1983). Ideals of human excellence and preserving natural environments. *Environmental Ethics*, 5(3), 211–224.
- Huemer, M. (2010). Is there a right to immigrate? *Social Theory and Practice*, 36(3), 429–461.
- Kant, I. (2012). *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (M. Gregor & J. Timmermann, Trans.; Rev. ed.). Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1785)
- King, M. L., Jr. (1964). Letter from Birmingham Jail. In *Why we can't wait*. Harper & Row. (Letter written 1963)
- King, [initials]. Health inequalities and health inequities. [Full source to confirm]
- Marquis, D. (1989). Why abortion is immoral. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 86(4), 183–202.
- McGowan, M. K. The ethics of free speech. [Anthology chapter; source to confirm]
- Mill, J. S. (1978). *On liberty* (E. Rapaport, Ed.). Hackett Publishing. (Original work published 1859)
- Mill, J. S. (2001). *Utilitarianism* (G. Sher, Ed.; 2nd ed.). Hackett Publishing. (Original work published 1861)
- Miller, D. (2005). Immigration: The case for limits. In A. I. Cohen & C. H. Wellman (Eds.), *Contemporary debates in applied ethics* (pp. 193–206). Blackwell.
- Muñoz, J. A. (2026). *Speech without a speaker: Uncensored AI and the future of the free speech debate* [Manuscript]. Department of Philosophy, California State University, Northridge.
- Noonan, J. T., Jr. (1970). An almost absolute value in history. In J. T. Noonan, Jr. (Ed.), *The morality of abortion: Legal and historical perspectives* (pp. 51–59). Harvard University Press.

- Nozick, R. (1974). The experience machine. In *Anarchy, state, and utopia* (pp. 42–45). Basic Books.
- O'Neill, O. (1993). The moral perplexities of famine and world hunger. In T. Regan (Ed.), *Matters of life and death: New introductory essays in moral philosophy* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill. [Edition/pages to confirm; assigned as “A Simplified Account of Kant's Ethics” (Week 4) and §23–§24 (Week 15)]
- Patching, R., & Hirst, M. *Journalism ethics: Arguments and cases for the twenty-first century*. Routledge. [Assigned chapter and edition to confirm]
- Pettit, P. (1991). Consequentialism. In P. Singer (Ed.), *A companion to ethics* (pp. 230–240). Blackwell.
- Posner, E. A., & Sunstein, C. R. (2008). Climate change justice. *Georgetown Law Journal*, 96(5), 1565–1612.
- Rachels, J., & Rachels, S. *The elements of moral philosophy*. McGraw-Hill Education. [Edition to confirm; assigned selections follow course-reader titles]
- Robbins, S. (2025). What machines shouldn't do. *AI & Society*, 40(5), 4093–4104. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-024-02169-7>
- Ross, W. D. (2002). What makes right acts right? In *The right and the good* (P. Stratton-Lake, Ed.). Clarendon Press. (Original work published 1930)
- Scanlon, T. M. (1982). Contractualism and utilitarianism. In A. Sen & B. Williams (Eds.), *Utilitarianism and beyond* (pp. 103–128). Cambridge University Press.
- Shafer-Landau, R. *The fundamentals of ethics*. Oxford University Press. [Edition to confirm; assigned selections: “What Is Morality?”, “Virtue Ethics”]
- Shaw, D. (2025). The digital erosion of intellectual integrity: Why misuse of generative AI is worse than plagiarism. *AI & Society*, 40(8), 5819–5821. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-025-02362-2>
- Singer, P. (1972). Famine, affluence, and morality. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1(3), 229–243.
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2005). It's not my fault: Global warming and individual moral obligations. In W. Sinnott-Armstrong & R. B. Howarth (Eds.), *Perspectives on climate change: Science, economics, politics, ethics* (pp. 285–307). Elsevier.
- Taylor, I. (2025). Is explainable AI responsible AI? *AI & Society*, 40, 1695–1704. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-024-01939-7>
- Thomson, J. J. (1971). A defense of abortion. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1(1), 47–66.
- Vaughn, L. *Bioethics: Principles, issues, and cases*. Oxford University Press. [Edition to confirm; assigned chapter: “Dividing Up Health Care Resources”]
- Warren, M. A. (1973). On the moral and legal status of abortion. *The Monist*, 57(1), 43–61.
- Woollard, F. (2012). Saving strangers: What does morality demand? *Dialogue*, 38, 41–46.
- Yankah, E. N. (2022). Whose burden to bear? Privilege, lawbreaking and race. *Criminal Law and Philosophy*, 16(1), 13–28. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11572-019-09503-x>