

PHIL 0300: Introduction to Ethics

Spring 2023

Instructor: Felipe Pereira (fen2@pitt.edu)

Office Hours: Tues 2:30pm – 3:30pm (or by appointment), CL 1009-B

Class Time & Location: Thurs 6:00pm – 8:30pm, CL 221

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This course is an introduction to moral philosophy. No background in philosophy is required. We will explore three broad topics:

- The first topic is *moral obligation*. What do we owe to each other? Do we owe everyone equal and impartial treatment? Or are there people to whom we owe special treatment? Do we owe respect to the traditions of our community? Do we owe gratitude to our family? Do we owe regard to the wishes of the dead? Do we owe solidarity to people who share our race or ethnicity? Do we owe compensation to those whose ancestors have been harmed? Is there a fundamental moral rule or principle from which all moral obligations are derived?
- The second topic is *moral responsibility*. It is undeniable that a person's moral conscience is shaped by the way she was raised, her education, her genetic makeup, the environment in which she lives – all of which lie outside of her control. But if that's so, how can anyone be held responsible for doing morally wrong things? Can, for example, a person who was born and raised in a deeply racist or sexist community be held morally responsible for acting in a racist or sexist way?
- The third topic is *moral emotions*. How should we respond, emotionally, to each other's moral failures? Is it possible to keep our self-respect if we don't feel resentment towards someone who has seriously wronged us? When, if ever, is forgiveness an appropriate response to being wronged? What, if anything, makes an action unforgivable? Is love ever an appropriate response to someone's moral shortcomings? Can it be appropriate to feel contentment towards our past moral failures without feeling the same way about our future ones?

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

By the end of the semester, students will have: (1) acquired a working understanding of the methods of ethical theorizing, and the criteria by which these theories are assessed, (2) improved their writing and oral communication skills, especially their ability to express complex or abstract ideas in a clear and concise manner, (3) learned how to charitably reconstruct, and dialectically engage with, arguments from philosophical texts, (4) learned about some of the central philosophical problems related to moral obligation, moral responsibility, and moral emotions, (5) cultivated the virtues of intellectual courage, rigor, humility, kindness, and imagination, and (6) improved their ability to identify morally relevant features in complex situations.

COURSE SCHEDULE:

You may find a tentative reading schedule below. Any changes to this schedule will be publicly announced, and a new version of this syllabus, with an updated schedule, will be uploaded on Canvas.

- January 12th [-] Christine Korsgaard, pp. 92-93 from *The Sources of Normativity*
- January 19th [L] Chaim Potok, ch. 1 from *My Name Is Asher Lev*
 [A] George Pitcher, “Misfortunes of the Dead”
- January 26th [L] Chaim Potok, chs. 2-3 from *My Name Is Asher Lev*
 [A] Jane English, “What Do Grown Children Owe Their Parents?”
 [A] Henry Sidgwick, pp. 411-413 & 432-433 from *The Methods of Ethics*
- February 2nd [L] Chaim Potok, chs. 4-5 from *My Name Is Asher Lev*
 [A] Judith Jarvis Thomson, pp. 283-292 (sections I-IV) & 298-308 (sections VII-IX) from “Self-Defense”
- February 9th [L] Chaim Potok, chs. 6-7 from *My Name Is Asher Lev*
 [A] Charles Mills, pp. 131-136 (up to the end of section III.1) & 143-150 (section III.6 up to the end of the article) from “Do Black Men Have a Moral Duty to Marry Black Women?”
 [A] Immanuel Kant, 4:428-4:431 from *Groundwork of Metaphysics of Morals*
- February 16th [L] Ursula K. Le Guin, “Nine Lives”
 [A] Aristotle, bk. I.7 (§8-15), & bk. IX.8 from *Nicomachean Ethics*
- February 23rd [L] Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal”
 [A] Meghan Sullivan, “Neutrality and Meaning” from *Time Biases*
- March 2nd [L] Chaim Potok, pp. 321-325 from *My Name Is Asher Lev*
 [A] Derek Parfit, pp. 351-371 from *Reasons and Persons*
- March 16th [L] Susan Glaspell, “A Jury of Her Peers”
 [A] Thomas Nagel, “Moral Luck”
- March 23rd [L] Greg Egan, “The Hundred Light-Year Diary”
 [A] Roderick Chisholm, “Human Freedom and the Self”

March 30 th	[L] Philip K. Dick, “Adjustment Team” [A] Susan Wolf, “Asymmetrical Freedom”
April 6 th	[L] Octavia Butler, “Amnesty” [A] Bernard Boxill, “Self-Respect and Protest”
April 13 th	[L] Clarice Lispector, “Love” [A] Vida Yao, “Grace and Alienation”
April 20 th	[L] <i>TBD</i> [A] Camil Golub, “Making Peace with Moral Imperfection”

ASSESSMENT:

- **Guided Reading Questions (30%)** – There will be a set of “guided reading questions” due at the beginning of each class. Your answers must be typed, not handwritten. You may, but are not required to, submit answers to more than 10 sets of guided reading questions. (There will be 13 sets in total.) Only the 10 sets with the highest scores will contribute to your final grade. Each set will be graded out of 3 points:

- 0 to 2 correct answers = 0/3 points
- 3 to 4 correct answers = 1/3 points
- 5 to 6 correct answers = 2/3 points
- 7 or more correct answers = 3/3 points

Students with an unexcused absence receive a score of 0/3 for the reading questions that were due on the day they were absent. Students with an excused absence may, on the first day they return to class, submit answers to the reading questions that were due on the day they were absent, for full credit.

- **Papers (60%)** – You are required to write three short papers, between 800 and 1,500 words, each worth 20% of your final grade.
 - **Paper #1:** Your first paper is an argument analysis. It will be **due on February 13th**. In this paper, you are expected to critically assess one of the argumentative prose texts we have discussed in class. These texts are indicated by an “[A]” in the reading schedule.

A successful argument analysis paper should answer the following questions:

- (1) What is the author’s main thesis?
- (2) What is the author’s argument in support of that thesis?
- (3) Briefly, what reasons can be given in support of each premise in the author’s argument?
- (4) Do you think there is at least one false premise in the author’s argument? If you do, which premise is it, and why do you think it is false? If you don’t, what is the best objection you can come up with against the author’s argument, and why doesn’t *that* objection succeed?

- **Paper #2:** Your second paper is a literary reflection. It will be **due on March 13th**. In this paper, you are expected to discuss the ethical significance of one of the “literary” texts we have discussed in class. These texts are indicated by an “[L]” in the reading schedule.

A successful literary reflection paper should answer the following questions:

- (1) Briefly, what is this story about?
- (2) Does the story depict a character in an ethically interesting position? For example, is there a character in the story who is struggling with a moral conundrum? Making a sacrifice? Feeling hopeful? Feeling hopeless? Feeling guilty? Feeling tempted? Feeling pity? Feeling resentment? Showing mercy? Being loyal? Being disloyal? Being kind? Being cruel? Being negligent? Being manipulative? Being courageous? Being selfish? Being too deferential? Not being deferential enough? Seeking compensation? Seeking forgiveness? Seeking revenge? Having some kind of epiphany about what “really matters” in life?
- (3) Do you think the character had good reasons to act/feel as they did? Why, or why not?

- **Paper #3:** Prompts for the third paper will be made available a month prior to the due date. The paper will be **due on April 18th**.

In order to submit a paper, you must **not only** upload an electronic copy of your paper on Canvas, **but also** place a physical copy of your paper in my mailbox, located in room 1009, at the Cathedral of Learning. Unless you have been granted an extension, submitting a paper past its due date will result in a 1/3 letter-grade penalty for every day that has passed since the due date.

- **“Disagreements Apart” Letter (10%)** – You are required to write a short letter, between 400 and 800 words, to one of the authors we read during the semester, the author with whom you *most disagreed*. In this letter, you are expected to answer the following questions:

- (1) Briefly, what is the source of your disagreement with the author?
- (2) In spite of your disagreements, what have you learned from the author?
- (3) What do you find admirable in the author’s work?

Your letter will be **due on April 25th**. In order to submit it, **you only need to upload an electronic copy of your letter on Canvas**. No need to place a physical copy of your letter in my mailbox. Unless you have been granted an extension, submitting your assignment past the due date will result in a 1/3 letter-grade penalty for every day that has passed since the due date.

REQUIRED MATERIAL:

You are required to acquire a copy of Chaim Potok’s (1972) novel, *My Name Is Asher Lev*. If money is a problem and you are not able to loan a copy of the novel from any local library, reach out to me – I can try to arrange a copy for you, though I can’t guarantee it. All other assigned readings will be available for free on Canvas.

CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION:

In class, you are always encouraged to ask clarificatory questions, raise objections, reply to objections or questions raised by your colleagues, expand on comments made by your colleagues, and suggest alternative ways of interpreting the text under discussion. You are expected to voice your opinions respectfully and to listen attentively when other students have the floor. You will receive one warning for disrespectful behavior of any sort. Subsequent incidents of disrespect may negatively impact your overall course grade.

ELECTRONICS POLICY:

You may not use electronic devices (including, but not limited to: laptops, tablets, cellphones, smart-watches) in class without my express permission. If you need to call someone or respond to a text message, you are welcome to leave the classroom to do so.

There are two possible ways of receiving permission to use an electronic device in class:

- **Option #1:** We can talk about it! I understand that there are many, legitimate reasons to request to use an electronic device in class. I will consider requests on a case-by-case basis. If you can't make it to my office hours to talk about it, we can set up an appointment to meet at a different time that works for both of us. To set up an appointment with me, just send me an e-mail telling me the times at which you are available.
- **Option #2:** If you need to use an electronic device in class because of a disability, you can reach out to [Disability Resources and Services](#) (DRS) and request for an accommodation. If DRS has determined that you need to use an electronic device in class, I will automatically give you permission to do so.

To minimize the need for notetaking, I will distribute typed handouts every class meeting, containing all the important information I plan to cover during that meeting.

E-MAIL POLICY:

If you would like to set up an appointment with me, or have any logistical questions about the course, do not hesitate to e-mail me. My e-mail address is: fen2@pitt.edu. I try to answer e-mails within 48 hours. If you have questions about the course material, I encourage you to bring them up during lectures, office hours, or scheduled appointments, instead of e-mailing me.

DISABILITY SERVICES:

If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact [Disability Resources and Services](#) (DRS), 140 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890, drsrecep@pitt.edu, (412) 228-5347 for P3 ASL users, as early as possible in the term. DRS will determine reasonable accommodations for this course and communicate them to me.

COUNSELING SERVICES:

If you or anyone you know experiences overwhelming academic stress, persistent difficult feelings and/or challenging life events, you are strongly encouraged to seek support. The [University Counseling Center](#) is a resource available to you. You can call 412-648-7930 at any time to connect with a clinician. If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal, please call the University Counseling Center at any time at 412-648-7930. You can also contact Resolve Crisis Network at 888-796-8226. If the situation is life threatening, call Pitt Police at 412-624-2121 or dial 911.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

Students in this course will be expected to comply with the [University of Pittsburgh's Policy on Academic Integrity](#). Any student suspected of violating this obligation for any reason during the semester will be required to participate in the procedural process, initiated at the instructor level, as outlined in the University Guidelines on Academic Integrity. This may include, but is not limited to, the confiscation of the examination of any individual suspected of violating University Policy. To learn more about Academic Integrity, visit the [Academic Integrity Guide](#).