

FOUNDATIONS OF ETHICS

Responsible Faculty Instructor:
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Lecturer, JGLS

Credits: 4

Credits Type:

Cross-registration: Yes

Pre-requisites: None

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The proposed course will be designed to take students through some major propositions and critiques on ethics and morality—starting from Ancient Greek thought with Plato and Aristotle to universal morality frameworks by Hobbes and Kant as well as contemporary frameworks such as structural injustice frameworks (Iris Marion Young) and care ethics (Carol Gilligan, Joan Tronto). But instead of simply learning formal ethics, the course aims to place a material and contextual imperative on us: In times of grave international and domestic injustices, what do we owe to each other as caring, loving, social, relational and ethical beings. We start with Chapter One (the titular chapter) of Camus' excellent meditation on rebellion 'The Rebel' to place the notion of solidarity and rebellion at the centre of human existence itself. From that dictum "I rebel, therefore we exist" the rest of the course flows into studying several frameworks of ethics closely.

For the first five weeks, we study universal frameworks of Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Hobbes. Then we study some texts that trouble universal ethical frameworks: Marx's class analysis and materialism that turned Hegel on his head, Fanon's writings on racialized subjects, Simone de Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity. Then, we turn to contemporary theories of thinking about ethics: Structural Injustice framework, Care ethics frameworks, bell hooks' work on love as a political concept, Sara Ahmad's 'The Cultural Politics of Emotion' as well as Levinas' embodied understanding of responsibility as arising from "the face of the other".

Throughout the course, we question the presumptions about the nature of the human subject that different ethical theories rest on. Is the ethical subject rational, self-authoring and independent, or are they emotional, relational and interdependent? Or are they both? How do these assumptions about human nature guide actions of an ethical subject?

TEACHING METHODOLOGY:

The course will be taught through academic sources as well as some selected short stories and poems. We will take up two to three running examples to

contextualize our discussions on morality. One of the iterative examples we will use will be of Aju and Jai who are sweatshop worker and factory owner respectively. We will engage in an exercise in world-building as we imagine these two characters going through several iterative transformations and apply our ethical theories to them.

INTENDED LEARNING OUTCOMES:

1. To be able to grasp some basic texts and concepts in ethics.
2. To be equipped to apply them in their real life.
3. To build empathy and gain historical knowledge about the oppressive structures in society.
4. To be able to think critically about their ethical lives and actions (non-actions) as well as recognize and articulate the frameworks guiding their ethical lives.

READING LIST:**Academic Sources (Mandatory)**

1. Ahmed, Sara. *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge, 2013.
2. Camus, Albert. *The rebel: An essay on man in revolt*. Vintage, 1992.
3. Critchley, Simon, and Robert Bernasconi, eds. *The cambridge companion to Levinas*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.
4. Césaire, Aimé. "Discourse on Colonialism. 1955." *Trans. Joan Pinkham*. New York: *Monthly Review Press* (1972).
5. Fanon, Frantz. "Black skin, white masks, trans. CL Markmann." *New York: Grove* (1967): 109-110.
6. Gilligan, Carol. *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Harvard university press, 1993.
7. Hobbes, Thomas. "1651. Leviathan. Edited by Richard Tuck." (1996).
8. hooks, bell. *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Pluto press, 2000.
9. Jonas, Hans. *Mortality and morality: A search for good after Auschwitz*. Northwestern University Press, 1996.
10. Judith, Thomson. "A defense of abortion." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1, no. 1 (1971): 14-66.
11. Gregor, Mary J., and Allen W. Wood. "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals." *I. Kant, Practical Philosophy, cit* (1998): 73-74.
12. Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. [Marx's Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844](#)
13. Plato. *Republic*.
14. Scott, David. *Conscripts of modernity: The tragedy of colonial enlightenment*. Duke University Press, 2004.

B. Literary Texts (Mandatory)

15. Chekhov, Anton. *Uncle Vanya*.
16. Lorde, Audre. "Power."
17. Orwell, George. "Shooting an Elephant."
18. Tagore, Rabindranath. *The Post Office (Dak Ghar)*.

WEEKLY READING PLAN (WEEKLY OUTLINE):

A weekly plan is provided below:

MODULES	WEEK(S)
MODULE 1: INTRODUCTION The titular chapter one of The Rebel introducing students to the themes of rebellion and solidarity being central to the human essence.	1
MODULE 2: ANCIENT GREEKS Here, we learn about Plato, Socrates and Aristotle. The story of Gyges's ring raises the central ethical problem: would we still act justly if no one were watching? Ethics appears as a quest for truth beyond power. For Aristotle, humans thrive in community and ethics are tied to virtue or cultivating habits.	2-3
MODULE 3: MODERN FOUNDATIONS Here, we read about Hobbes' Leviathan and Kant's metaphysics. Hobbes theorizes humans as naturally fearful, competitive, and self-interested. Obligation is grounded in fear and self-preservation, giving us a political conception of morality tied to the sovereign. We briefly discuss Machiavelli and then move on to Kant. Kant bases morality in a framework of rational autonomy.	4-5
MODULE 4: ETHICS AS MATERIAL, HISTORICAL CONDITIONS Marx's intervention in ethics is showing that morality is not just about abstract universals but also about paying attention to social and material conditions of people. We read Fanon and Beauvoir for post-colonial and feminist approaches to ethics which also contextualize ethics in the real lived world. We also read David Scott's <i>Conscripts of Modernity</i> to understand the ethical stakes of historical colonial and capitalist violence (material, social and cultural).	6-8

MODULE 5: STRUCTURAL INJUSTICE We study Iris Marion Young and Catherine Lu for a contemporary theorization of global injustices and our responsibilities in the face of such structures of violence.	9
MODULE 6: CARE AND RELATIONALITY Here, we learn about care ethics which theorize that morality is not only about justice or universals but about relationships, empathy, and dependence. The moral subject is not autonomous and abstract but relational, embedded in webs of responsibility.	10-11
MODULE 7: LEVINAS AND THE FACE OF THE OTHER Here, we look at Levinas. We imagine ethics as arising from an embodied experience of the other and discuss its implications.	12
MODULE 8: ETHICS AND AFFECT Here, we entertain another proposition. That ethics is not a function of rational autonomy as human beings are not reducible to rational beings with autonomy. We look at affect and whether it can guide us through the ethical question we discuss through the course. We read Sara Ahmed and bell hooks.	13
REVISION WEEK	Week 14