

PHL 154: Moral Foundations

Syllabus for Fall 2026

Dr. Róbert Mátyási

- Email: rmatyasi@sju.edu
- Office hours: lecture days (MWF), 10am to 11am in my office Barbelin 260 or by appointment.
- Email policy: Feel free to email me about practical and administrative matters related to the course. Please approach me in person during office hours or before lectures for anything else, including questions about the contents of our lectures, readings, and assignments.
- Course materials and assignments will be available through Canvas. It is your responsibility to check the Canvas page for this course on a regular basis.

About the course

Welcome to *Moral Foundations*!

In this course we will discuss philosophical questions about ethics and the good life. We will examine influential theories about morality including utilitarianism, deontology, and natural law. We will cover the basics of good reasoning and symbolic logic and put these skills to use by assessing philosophical arguments about value. We will face mind-numbing moral puzzles that inspire philosophers to this day. Lastly, we will apply logic and theoretical understanding to questions concerning global justice, social identity, and social organizations.

Most importantly, this course is about ethical reflection and its limits. It is the most natural thing to feel cheerful or upset about things people do, let them be our family members, friends, complete strangers, or even ourselves. Of course, it is equally natural to disagree with others and to have doubts about such feelings. If the stakes are high, we often can't make up our minds about what would be the right thing for us or others to do. Our aim in this class is to see how much we can rationally assess our ideas about such matters. We will learn ways to organize our thoughts in order to help us see through the messiness of social life. The more we understand about ethics and morality, including the roots of our feelings and opinions about it, the more likely that we can all live a good life together. And so, during this course, we will assess ideas about morality with the help reason and compassion. At the end, we are better equipped to live a happy and fulfilling life once we are able to take a step back from time to time to have a clearer look on our inner life and social interactions.

Learning outcomes

- Students will identify, analyze, evaluate, and formulate arguments.
- Students will understand the relevance of normative moral theory to philosophical consideration of issues pertaining to the diversity of human beliefs, abilities, experiences, identities, or cultures.
- Students will articulate moral concepts, principles, and theories from major moral traditions and employ them in constructing and critically evaluating moral arguments.

Assignments and exams

- Weekly quizzes: 10 overall, starting Week 3 (20% total)

The weekly quizzes will be available online on Canvas, and they will consist of questions about the readings.

- Two in-class midterm assignments: 9 October & 9 November (40% total, 20% each)
- Final exam: in the final exam period (30%)
- Participation (10%)

Questions or relevant comments during lectures or office hours.

Grading scale

- A: 93-100
- A-: 90-92
- B+: 87-89
- B: 83-86
- B-: 80-82
- C+: 77-79
- C: 73-76
- C-: 70-72
- D+: 67-69
- D: 60-66
- F: 0-59

Readings

Articles and course materials will be available on Canvas.

You are responsible for consulting the reading schedule on Canvas. Read the relevant texts at least one time before coming to lecture. In addition, I expect you to do the readings closely and attentively *at some time*—e.g., you may find it helpful to skim them first and read them in detail after the lectures.

As a general rule of thumb, you should aim to read everything closely and attentively at least three times before exams and assignments.

Topics and Reading Schedule

This is a tentative schedule, subject to change as we progress. I will keep you up-to-date on Canvas about the weekly topics and readings.

Week 1 Introduction

- Syllabus
- Plato, “Glaucon’s Challenge” from *The Republic*

Week 2 Reasoning and argument assessment & Consequentialism

- Logic primer
- Selections from Mill’s *Utilitarianism*

Weeks 3 and 4 (*Labor day: no class on 7 September*) Consequentialism and logic ctd.

- Selections from Mill’s *Utilitarianism*
- Smart, “Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism”

Weeks 5 and 6 Deontology

- Kant, selections from *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*

Week 7 Summaries, catch-up time & 1st midterm

Week 8 (*Fall break 12 October to 14 October*) Deontology ctd.

- O’Neill, excerpt from “The Moral Perplexities of Famine Relief”

Week 9 Moral puzzles

- Thomson, “Trolley Problem”

Week 10 Moral puzzles ctd.

- Wolf, “Moral Saints”

Week 11 Natural law

- Selections from Foot, *Natural Goodness*

Week 12 Global justice & 2nd midterm

- Singer, “Rich and Poor”

Week 13 Social identity: gender

- Saul, “Women’s Different Voice”

Week 14 (*Thanksgiving break 25 Nov to 30 Nov*) Social identity: race

- Selections from Hardimon, *Rethinking Race*

Week 15 Work and social hierarchy

- Selections from Anderson, *Private Government*

Week 16 We made it! Last day of classes on Monday: final exam preparation.

Policies

Late work

Late assignments will lose a full letter grade for each calendar day they are late. For example, an A-quiz turned in 3 days late will receive a B-.

If you need an extension due to an emergency or illness, please email me at least 48 hours ahead of the deadline. If that's not possible, contact me asap.

Attendance

You are expected to attend lectures on a regular basis. Naturally, you may have unforeseen obligations, therefore you are permitted to miss 4 lectures without penalty. Remember, it is your responsibility to get up-to-date on the contents of a missed lecture.

If you turn sick, please stay home and write me ahead of class so you can be excused from attending for the day. Note that if you are sick for a significant portion of the time, I may require you to provide me a doctor's note.

During lectures, cell-phone, tablet, and laptop use will not be allowed, unless it is necessary for accessibility reasons (if so, please contact me ahead of time).

Take notes with pen and paper, if necessary, but I encourage you to prioritize paying attention and engaging with the lecture instead of trying to write down every detail.

Please note that this is a fully in-person course. SJU may declare a virtual learning day in which case I will inform the class through Canvas about the way in which we will adapt the lectures to the circumstances.

Participation

Participation amounts to 10% of your final grade, and it will likely be a deciding factor if you are between grades at the end of the course. Keep in mind that the grade will not be determined solely on the amount of comments you make during lectures. Be relevant and concise. If you have trouble speaking in front of the rest of the class, please be aware that discussions during my office hours also count towards participation.

Respect

I expect you all to be respectful of one another. This means that, at the minimum, you must not interrupt, speak over, or shout down other people in the class. Chosen names and gender pronouns should also be respected in all circumstances. However, it is our shared duty together in this class to give space to opinions, beliefs, and theories, even if we strongly disagree. And so, please remember to be courteous, humble, and open-minded. Respectful critical evaluation of ideas, arguments, and theories is essential to our subject matter and will be encouraged in this class. Insulting or condescending behavior will not be tolerated.

Academic honesty

SJU's academic honesty policy will be strictly enforced. The policy is published in the student handbook and on SJU's academic integrity page. It is your responsibility to understand this policy. If you are not familiar with it already, consult one of these sources:

<https://www.sju.edu/academic-integrity/academic-honesty-policy>

<https://academiccatalog.sju.edu/programs/>

For example, academic honesty violations include, but are not limited to, the following:

- On papers and assignments:
 - Using someone else's ideas or words without appropriate acknowledgment.
 - Submitting your own work in more than one course.
 - Making up sources or facts.
 - Obtaining or providing unauthorized assistance on any assignment. This includes working in groups on assignments that are supposed to be individual work, or turning in assignments fully or partially written by generative AI.
- On tests and exams:
 - Using or possessing any unauthorized aid, including a cell phone.
 - Looking at someone else's answers.
 - Letting someone else look at your answers.
 - Submitting an altered test for re-grading.

(Adapted from SJU's academic honesty policy.)

A violation will result in a grade of F for the entire course, not just for the assignment in question.

If you have any questions about what is or is not permitted in this course, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Generative artificial intelligence

The use of generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Claude, etc.) is permitted in this course only for the following activities:

- Finding information on your topic. However, only with extra caution due to potential errors and never as a substitute to class readings and learning materials.

- Checking grammar and style.

The use of generative AI tools is NOT permitted in this course for the following activities, since it would violate the academic honesty policy from above:

- Using the tool to compose assignments.
- Writing drafts.
- Writing entire sentences and/or paragraphs to complete class assignments.

Recording

In accord with SJU's community standards, audio or video recording of any aspect of this class without both my express consent in writing and the consent of any individuals who are recorded is absolutely forbidden. Please be aware that if you violate this policy, you may be expelled from the university and face other legal consequences.

Accessibility

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. My number one goal is for you to learn, so please let me know as soon as possible if there's anything that needs my attention to achieve this goal.

If you need assistance with accommodations, you are encouraged to contact the Office of Student Disability Services (SDS) at sds@sju.edu or by phone at 610.660.1774. More information can be found at: www.sju.edu/sds

Land acknowledgement

Saint Joseph's University courses are taught in buildings that reside in the present and ancestral homeland of the Lenape (len-AH-peh) people, Lenapehoking (len-AH-peh-HO-king), which they inhabited for over 10,000 years prior to European imperial colonization. The Lenape people embrace the values of collaborative use of land, peaceful resolution of conflict, respect for people of diverse backgrounds, and, as the continuing stewards of Turtle Island, a deep reverence for the natural world.