

**Special Topics: Ethics**

Fall 2023

HONS-281-02 | MW 3:25 – 4:40 PM | Berry Dorm 103

Instructor: Nicolas Delon Office: 14 Glebe St, 302

Pronouns: He/Him Office Hours: MW 10:00-11:30 AM or by appt

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Classes are held in-person. If a session is held on Zoom, the recording will remain available for the term.

Course Description

This is not your typical introduction to ethics. This course will offer an introduction to the main ethical traditions and connect them to the psychology of well-being and issues in practical ethics. Instead of providing easy answers to the perennial questions such as: How to live? and What gives life meaning?, the course will ask what a flourishing life can look like in an age of global environmental uncertainty about whether individuals can make any difference. It offers an introduction to (a) the main ethical theories (utilitarianism, virtue ethics, deontology) and ancient eastern traditions (Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism); (b) theories of wellbeing and their relations to the psychology of happiness and the philosophy of the good life; (3) an ethical approach to real-world issues. The course draws on philosophy and psychology to make connections between timeless questions and the contemporary world: e.g., how to live a meaningful life? Will making this world better and helping others make me happy? Can I even make a difference? Together we’ll think of, and try out, ways of making our own and others’ lives better. Activities include reading, writing, discussions, journaling, exercises in and outside the classroom, and training the basic skills of a good life–nurturing social connections, rewiring one’s mind, and the cultivation of new habits.

Course Objectives

To provide students with 1) the intellectual tools to make, grasp and evaluate ethical arguments across a domains and practical contexts and to foster their critical reflection on real-world issues; 2) a solid and comprehensive theoretical and empirical background on the good life; and 3) an overview of both classical and recent readings. No background in philosophy is required, but students must be willing to confront with a variety of views, concepts, arguments, and controversies. Rigor, clarity, and critical self-reflection will be key. Class will alternate between short lectures, discussion, and group activities. It is intended to be interactive while providing comprehensive content. Active participation is required, allowing for careful analysis and respectful appreciation of others’ views.

Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs)

**At the end of this course, students will have developed introductory knowledge of moral theory and the philosophical and psychological study of wellbeing; mastered relevant conceptual distinctions. They will be able to note the similarities and differences between ethical theories; have been exposed to various western and eastern philosophical traditions; have worked on integrating course materials into their own lives. Students will accomplish those goals by performing** active and critical reading of academic texts; **annotating readings and discussing them in class; writing short reflections and two essays; peer reviewing classmates’ drafts; and completing an experiential learning group project.**

*Honors Foundations of Knowledge and Methods of Inquiry SLOs*

1. Demonstrate the ability to create and communicate analytic arguments supported by evidence [essays, group project]
2. Analyze and synthesize information within and/or across disciplines [essays]
3. Design and implement a major research project that reflects a high level of proficiency in methods of inquiry and ways of thinking [group project]

*GenEd Humanities SLOs*

1. Students analyze how ideas are represented, interpreted or valued in various expressions of human culture. [weekly assignments, group project]
2. Students examine relevant primary source materials as understood by the humanities area under study and interpret the material in writing assignments (or alternatives that require equally coherent and sustained analysis). [essays, group project]

Required Texts, Equipment, Technology

Readings will be available on OAKS. Do not hesitate to seek guidance before looking for further reading.

Course Policies

**Electronics.** Laptop use is discouraged. Cellphones must be silenced and left in your bag. Electronic devices cause serious distractions for yourself and others and are normally not needed for class meetings unless necessary for notetaking. If you can spare it, it’s much better for everyone. Handouts will be provided regularly, and slides made available after class. You will need a computer or smartphone for some class activities. I will notify you in advance in such cases.

**Lateness/Extensions**: Out of fairness to other students and out of concern for my schedule, plan ahead and advise early if you anticipate that you will be unable to complete an assignment in time. Extensions will only be granted in exceptional circumstances **and** if requested early. As a rule, do not count on extensions as they will only be granted on a case-by-case basis. “Technical issues” will not normally be accepted as excuses (again, plan ahead).

Please refer to the course schedule for deadlines. You are expected to complete assignments unless they are marked as optional. Most of the assignments should be submitted on OAKS. Don’t wait until the last minute to submit in case you face technical issues, and always save and back up your drafts. Don’t write in OAKS first; draft, save, and back up on cloud-based storage, then copy/upload to OAKS.

**Expectations:** As a student, you are expected to read all assigned material before class, attend class, take notes, and review them in-between class meetings, participate in discussions, and complete assignments on-time. Check your email and OAKS regularly for announcements. You are responsible for knowing material covered in the assigned readings even if the material is not presented during class. Likewise, you are responsible for material covered during class (including discussions and activities) even if it is not covered in the assigned readings. Please seek help from me or your classmates and never hesitate to ask questions, consult campus resources for assistance. Needing help is expected and there are no silly questions. Silly is not asking questions when you need to.

**Time, food, and attire etiquette**. Please be in class on time. I will start class promptly and may turn away students who casually come to class significantly late without prior notice. Take bathroom/water breaks between classes if you can, otherwise be quiet and respectful. You may drink water in class, but please only consume food if you really can’t have lunch before class. If you do eat, be mindful of others. If you’re late and carrying coffee, you probably could have been on time. Don’t leave class early unless previously authorized.

Attendance Policy

No more than three classes without permission/documented excuse will be allowed. Missing classes mechanically affects your participation grade. That said, there are good reasons to miss a class, in which case your performance will not be negatively affected. I will do my best to accommodate you. If possible, bring documentation. Email me **before missing class whenever possible (if not, ASAP after class)**. You are solely responsible for catching up with missed materials and pertinent information. Ask your classmates for notes.

Course Assignments

**Evaluation criteria**: a balance of structure and coherence, understanding of references and course-related materials, critical skills and originality, and rigor and clarity. For your papers, I will use a grading shorthand available on OAKS. I will evaluate:

* Clear writing and effective and competent oral communication
* Clearly laid out arguments and evidence
* A demonstrated effort to unpack and explicate assumptions
* The consideration of objections and of multiple theories and values
* The application of such theories and their implications to the case at hand
* Contributing respectfully and constructively to discussions and group meetings
* Timely completion of assigned tasks

For reading and writing purposes, Jim Pryor (NYU) offers valuable guidance on his website:

* Philosophical terms and methods (<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/vocab/index.html>)
* Reading philosophy (<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>)
* Writing a philosophy paper (<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>)

**Assignments**

* Weekly activities, Perusall annotations, and reflections (30%)
  + Prior to class, students will answer quick questions or write discussion notes on OAKS, or annotate readings on Perusall, preferably by (i) asking questions/raising objections *and* (ii) responding to other students’ annotations.
* Group Project (25%) (proposal, progress report, presentation, reflection)
  + Groups of 4-5 students will work starting Week 8 on the concrete details of living a good life on campus, integrating psychological research, ethical theories, and local resources into a guidebook. This will involve visiting on- and off-campus resources, interviewing current and former students, and circulating the project within the CofC community. The full project comprises a proposal, a progress report, an oral presentation, and an individual reflection. Innovative, multimedia-based, field-based projects are welcome.
* Two essays, including a proposal and a draft for each (15% for each essay)
  + 1,000-word philosophical essays in response to specific prompts. A **preliminary draft** will be required and go through **peer review**. A complete paper must include a title, a question and a thesis statement, a structured argument, and at least two academic references drawn from course materials. At least two distinct ethical theories must be discussed and objections to each must be considered. I will provide detailed guidance.
* Participation (15%): I will assess your demonstrated capacity to engage with arguments, verify assertions, research facts, unpack implicit assumptions, critically examine your positions, and work with the class with mutual respect, concern and dedication. Most importantly, we’re all here to learn what can make our lives better, so be an active participant and help others achieve this goal. Missing classes mechanically affects your participation, and therefore your evaluation. That said, there may always be good reasons to miss a class, in which case your performance will not be negatively affected. It’s understandable that some of you are shyer than others, and less willing to speak their mind in class. You should not. There is no such thing as a silly question (unless it’s answered in the syllabus), a view that is not worth sharing simply because it’s not popular, or an authorized point of view that students should take. Please feel welcome to express yourself as long as you do so respectfully, in good faith, and following course policies.

**Grading Scale**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| A | Superior | 4.00 |
| A- |  | 3.70 |
| B+ | Very Good | 3.30 |
| B | Good | 3.00 |
| B- |  | 2.70 |
| C+ | Fair | 2.30 |
| C | Acceptable | 2.00 |
| C- |  | 1.70 |
| D+ |  | 1.30 |
| D | Passing | 1.00 |
| D- |  | 0.70 |
| F | Failure | 0.00 |

Academic Integrity Policy Statement

*As members of the College of Charleston community, we affirm, embrace and hold ourselves accountable to the core values of integrity, academic excellence, liberal arts education, respect for the individual student, diversity, equity and inclusion, student centeredness, innovation and public mission. Congruent with these core values, the College of Charleston expects that every student and community member has a responsibility to uphold the standards of the honor code, as outlined in the* [*Student Handbook,*](https://deanofstudents.cofc.edu/honor-system/studenthandbook/index.php) *In pursuit of academic learning, you are expected to reference the work of other scholars, and complete your own academic work, while utilizing appropriate resources for assistance. Any acts of suspected academic dishonesty will be reported to the Office of the Dean of Students and addressed through the conduct process. Your adherence to these practices and expectations plays a vital role in fostering a campus culture that balances trust and the pursuit of knowledge while producing a strong foundation of academic excellence at the College of Charleston. Any questions regarding these expectations can be clarified by your instructor.*

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

The College of Charleston is committed to providing access and inclusion for all persons with disabilities. Students with disabilities who anticipate or experience disability-related barriers in the academic setting should notify their professor, and also initiate contact with the [Center for Disability Services (CDS)](https://disabilityservices.cofc.edu/) to move forward with the college’s established accommodation process (email: [snap@cofc.edu](mailto:snap@cofc.edu); phone: 843-953-1431; location: Lightsey Center 104). Students already connected with CDS for academic-related accommodations should share their Professor Notification Letter (PNL) with each professor as early in the semester as possible so that accommodations can be made in a timely manner. The PNL informs faculty of potential course access and accommodations that might be necessary and reasonable. It is the student’s responsibility to follow this process each semester.

OAKS

OAKS, including Gradebook, will be used for this course throughout the semester to provide the syllabus and class materials and grades for each assignment, which will be regularly posted.

Inclement Weather, Pandemic or Substantial Interruption of Instruction

If in-person classes are suspended, faculty will announce to their students a detailed plan for a change in modality to ensure the continuity of learning. All students must have access to a computer equipped with a web camera, microphone, and Internet access. Resources are available to provide students with these essential tools.

Permissible use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI)

In this class, we may use generative artificial intelligence (GAI) writing tools such as ChatGPT. I will inform you as to when, where, and how these tools will be permitted for use, along with guidance for referencing. Any use outside of this permission constitutes a violation of the CofC Honor Code.

There are a variety of GAI programs available to assist writers, yet such tools must not replace human creativity, originality, and critical thinking. However, within limited circumstances, and with proper referencing, GAI programs may be used as a tool per the guidance/instructor of your professor.

The use of generative artificial intelligence (GAI) tools is permitted as a resource and starting point in this course, and may be used for brainstorming, outlining, generating ideas, and collecting information about the basic understanding of a topic/idea. All uses of GAI must be cited and have appropriate documentation and references. Failure to do so constitutes an Honor Code violation and will be reported to the Honor Board. If you use GAI, be explicit and reflective about it in your work.

The Center for Student Learning

The [CSL](https://csl.cofc.edu/) offers academic support services for most College classes in a centralized location in the Addlestone Library. Services include drop-in and by appointment tutoring, SI (Supplemental Instruction), and academic coaching, offered at no additional charge for CofC students. Peer educators—recommended by faculty and trained by CSL staff—comprise the bulk of the staff, and as one of the largest student employers on campus, the CSL can offer on-campus employment to 130+ qualified students each year. All students are encouraged to visit, call, or email the CSL at the start of each semester to discuss which academic support services align with their current course schedule; they can also request a Personalized Resource Plan.

Attendance Verification

Only students officially registered (graded or auditing) for this course may attend class. During the week following the drop/add deadline, the professor will verify student enrollments in this course. Any student appearing on the class roll but determined not to have attended the class even once will be removed, except for when a student is absent because of quarantine or isolation due to COVID-19.

Mental & Physical Wellbeing

The College takes each student’s mental and physical wellbeing seriously. If you find yourself experiencing physical illnesses, please reach out to student health services (843.953.5520). And if you find yourself experiencing any mental health challenges (for example, anxiety, depression, stressful life events, sleep deprivation, and/or loneliness/homesickness) please consider contacting either the Counseling Center (professional counselors at CofC Counseling Center or 843.953.5640 3rd Floor of Robert Scott Small Building) or the Students 4 Support (certified volunteers through texting "4support" to 839863, or meet with them in person 411 (4th Floor) Stern Center). Learn more about Students 4 Support on CofC’s Hub. These services are there for you to help you cope with difficulties you may be experiencing and to maintain optimal physical and mental health.

Food & Housing Resources

Many CofC students report experiencing food and housing insecurity. If you are facing challenges in securing food (such as not being able to afford groceries or get sufficient food to eat every day) and housing (such as lacking a safe and stable place to live), please contact the Dean of Students for support (SALT - Student Affairs Leadership Team). Also, you can go to Student Food and Housing Insecurity to learn about food and housing assistance that is available to you. In addition, there are several resources on and off campus to help. You can visit the Cougar Pantry in the Stern Center (2nd floor), a student-run food pantry that provides dry-goods and hygiene products at no charge to any student in need. Please also consider reaching out to Professor ABC if you are comfortable in doing so.

Safe Environment

CofC is committed to providing an environment free of all forms of prohibited discrimination, including sexual harassment and violence (i.e. sexual assault, domestic and dating violence, and gender or sex-based bullying and stalking). If you have experienced discrimination or harassment, help and support are available. CofC employees, other than designated confidential resources, must report information they receive about prohibited discrimination, including sexual harassment and sexual violence. This means that if you tell me about a situation involving sexual harassment, sexual violence, discrimination, or harassment, I must share the information with the Title IX Coordinator. You may speak to someone confidentially by contacting the Office of Victim Services at 843-953-2273, Counseling Center at 843-953-5640, or Student Health Services at 843-953-5520. You can also report any sexual misconduct or discrimination, or learn more about your options and resources, by contacting the Office of Equal Opportunity Programs at 843-953-5754.

Religious Accommodation for Students .

The College acknowledges that religious practices differ from tradition to tradition and that the demands of religious observances in some traditions may cause conflicts with student schedules. In affirming this diversity, like many other colleges and universities, the College supports the concept of “reasonable accommodation for religious observance” in regard to class attendance, and the scheduling of examinations and other academic work requirements, unless the accommodation would create an undue hardship on the College. Faculty are required, as part of their responsibility to students and the College, to ascribe to this policy and to ensure its fair and full implementation.

**Course Schedule**

| **DATE** | **Activities** | **Topics** | **Readings / Media** | **Assignments** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Week 1**  8/23 - 25 | Introductions, Survey, OAKS for this class | **What is this class about?** |  |  |
| **Week 2**  8/28 - 30 |  | **The examined life, *eudaimonia*, and justice** | Plato, *Apology*; *Crito*  Martin Luther King Jr., excerpts, *Letter from Birmingham City Jail* | Discussion |
| **Week 3**  9/4 - 6 |  | **Ancient Eastern traditions** | Introduction and chapters on Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism from *How to Live a Good Life*  \*Bryan Van Norden, “[The second sage](https://aeon.co/essays/the-influential-confucian-philosopher-you-ve-never-heard-of)” | Annotations |
| **Week 4**  9/11 - 13 |  | **Ancient Western traditions** | Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book I  Stoics: Selections from Epictetus, Cicero, and Seneca  Epicureans: Selections from Epicurus and Lucretius | Reading Qs  **Essay 1 topic** |
| **Week 5**  9/18 - 20 |  | **Utilitarianism** | Mill, *Utilitarianism* (I-III)  Watch Todd May on *The Good Place* and utilitarianism | Annotations |
| **Week 6**  9/25 - 27 |  |  | Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (“Against ordinary morality”)  Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism” | **Essay 1 draft**  Reading Qs |
| **Week 7**  10/2 - 4 | **Group projects primer** | **Deontology** | Watch May on *The Good Place* and deontology  Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (“Ethics”)  Kant, *Groundwork* | Annotations |
| **Week 8**  10/9 - 11 |  |  | Kant, *Groundwork*, cont’d  \*Hay, “A feminist Kant”  \*Stohr, *Choosing Freedom*: this [excerpt](https://medium.com/humanities-unveiled/a-kantian-way-of-living-b1bb14285ccb) and “A Kantian love life” | **Essay 1 due** |
| **Week 9**  10/18  **Week 10**  10/23 - 25 | **Fall break – No class on Monday 10/16**  **Group projects check-in** | **Practical Ethics: Effective altruism** | Tiberius on values and helping  Singer, “Famine, affluence, and morality”  Piper, Effective altruism  \*Larissa MacFarquhar, *Strangers Drowning* ([excerpt](https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/bookworm/larissa-macfarquhar-strangers-drowning/excerpt-from-strangers-drowning))  \*Amia Srinivasan, “Stop the robot apocalypse”  Watch *The Good Place* (s3e8): Don’t let the good life pass you by | Discussion  **Essay 2 topic** |
| **Week 11**  10/30 – 11/1 |  | **Practical ethics: Partiality, empathy, pregnancy** | Susan Wolf, “Moral saints”  Gruen, Entangled empathy  Plumwood, Being prey  Maggie Little, “Abortion, intimacy, and the duty to gestate” |  |
| **Week 12**  11/6 - 8 | **Differences breakout activity**: List most important values, pleasures, and pains | **Theories of wellbeing** | Nozick, Experience machine excerpt  Bishop, Can you be happy in the matrix?  Parfit, “What makes a life go best” (and watch Roger Crisp)  Haybron, *The Pursuit of Unhappiness*, chapter 2  Browse Our World in Data, 80000 Hours, Happiness and Wellbeing Project | **Essay 2 draft**  Discussion |
| **Week 13**  11/13 - 15 |  | **The psychology of happiness** | Haybron’s SOARS model  Tiberius, “Well-being: Psychological research for philosophers”  Listen *Happiness Lab*, Season 1  Watch Daniel Gilbert  Sean Illing and Paul Bloom on “The good life is painful” at *Vox* | Reading Qs |
| **Week 14**  11/20 | **Thanksgiving**  **No classes on Wednesday** | **Anthropocene** | Jamieson, “Life in the Anthropocene”  Jamieson and Nadzam, excerpts  Scranton, “Learning how to die in the Anthropocene” | **Essay 2 due** |
| **Week 15**  11/27 - 29 |  | **Death and meaning** | Nagel, “The absurd”  Rini, “The last mortals”  Wolf, “The meanings of life” |  |
| **Week 16**  12/4 | **Last class Monday** | **THE END** |  | **Group presentations** |