

**ETHICS SYLLABUS**  
**St John's College, Trinity Term 2020**  
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**I. GENERAL INFORMATION**

A. Course Content

The themes of the *Ethics* programme are threefold. The first theme focusses on the ethical agent: Do we have free will? Are we responsible for our actions? (two tutorials) The second theme focusses on the ethical action: Do only consequences matter? Is there a moral difference between foreseeing and intending or between doing and allowing? (three tutorials) The third theme focusses on the nature of morality: Is morality objective? (two tutorials) What are moral facts and can we know them? If you and your tutorial partner wish to change the balance, I am happy to spend three tutorials on a different theme (e.g. one on moral knowledge).

B. Assignments

In W1–W7, you will write an essay of approximately 1500–2000 words answering the provided questions. You must email me at [spccossette@gmail.com](mailto:spccossette@gmail.com) your essay in .doc/.rtf/.docx by **18:00 the day before** our meeting. Make sure to **include your name in the name of the file** you send me. During class, I will ask you to summarise it so that we both have a clear picture of your essay's argumentative structure. On W8, you will come back to one of your essays and improve it or write a second essay on a related topic to one of those already covered. For valuable tutorials, you must do the readings, at least the mandatory readings. You get to decide whether you want me to give you a general grade (2.2, low-high-mid 2.1, first) or not.

B. Tips for essay writing

Here are ten tips to help you writing your essays. (1) Reread your essay at least twice before sending it to me. (2) Use topic sentences, that is reread the first sentence of each of your paragraphs: ideally, this would give you a summary of your essay. (3) Upon rereading a sentence, if you do not immediately understand it, rewrite it. (4) Never write sentences that are longer than three lines. (5) Never use technical vocabulary without defining it. If you feel like there are too many definitions, try to cut down the number of technical words you are using. (6) Always illustrate abstract principles with examples, but do not spend too long describing them unless it is necessary. (7) If you present a counterexample, try not only to make it clear how it is a

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the readings of this syllabus come from the reading list provided by the Oxford Philosophy Faculty.

counterexample, but what structural reason we have for believing that the principle is false. (8) State your conclusions clearly at the beginning and end of the essay, and include plenty of ‘signposts’ throughout the essay so that the intended structure of your argument is easy to discern. (9) Spare us long and literary introductions. (10) Read the following guide and try to apply its lessons: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

#### C. Marking and late work

If you hand in your essay on time, I will read it and supply written comments, and email it to you in the tutorial or a few hours before. You get to decide whether you want me to give you a general grade (2.2, low-high-mid 2.1, first) or not. If your essay is late, I can’t make any promises. It is still important that you hand your essay in even if I do not have time to comment on it, as I am required to report to your college how many pieces of work you have completed to a satisfactory standard. Notify me by email as soon as possible, and at any rate before the start of the tutorial, if you will be late handing in your essay, and/or unable to attend one of the tutorials, giving your reasons. If you are experiencing difficulties (academic or otherwise) that are affecting your ability to work at your normal standard, or you are concerned about your level of understanding of this topic, don’t suffer in silence. Rather, let me know as soon as possible.

#### D. Study questions and finals preparation

Finals questions are quite specific. They do not simply say ‘write an essay on surrogacy’, and you cannot count on the Finals paper containing questions that happen to match your tutorial essay questions. Every single examiners’ report complains that many students simply recycle their tutorial essays in response to Finals questions that were asking something quite different. To be well prepared for Finals, you will need to know (at least) two or three topics with enough depth and breadth that you can understand and intelligently discuss almost anything the examiners choose to ask on that topic.

## II. THEMES, READINGS, AND ESSAYS

### Weeks 1–2: The Ethical Agent – Free Will, Responsibility, and Desert

We explore the free will problem and the structure of responsibility. The free will problem is that there are seemingly good arguments for the disturbing conclusion that we are never free and hence never morally responsible for our actions.

Whether we are free will sceptics or not, we have to do something with people who wrong others. The natural way to deal with them is blame and punishment. But are these legitimate if we are free will sceptics? If we are not, what justifies blame and punishment? And what are the limits that should be placed on punishment and blame?

W1: Free Will: Sourcehood vs Leeway

**Essay question:** Does free will require the ability to do otherwise?

#### Readings:

Frankfurt, Harry. 1969. 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility.' *The Journal of Philosophy* 66 (23): 829–39.

Widerker, David. 2000. 'Frankfurt's Attack on the Principle of Alternative Possibilities: A Further Look.' *Philosophical Perspectives* 14: 181–201.

Nelkin, Dana Kay. 2011. *Making Sense of Freedom and Responsibility* — ch. 1. OUP.

Wolf, Susan. 'Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility'. In Shafer-Landau, R. (Ed.). (2012). *Ethical theory: an anthology* (Vol. 13). John Wiley & Sons.

Pereboom, Derk. 2014 'Defending a Source View' in *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life*, OUP.

Alvarez, Maria. 2009. 'Actions, Thought-Experiments and the "Principle of Alternate Possibilities"'. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87 (1): 61–81.

Week 2: Responsibility: Quality of Will, Control, and Excuses

**Essay question:** 'Whether I am blameworthy for a wrong action depends entirely on the quality of my will when I act.' Comment.

#### Readings:

Strawson, P.F. 1974. 'Freedom and Resentment' in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*. Routledge.

McKenna, Michael. 2005. 'Where Frankfurt and Strawson Meet'. *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 29 (1): 163–80.

Levy, Neil. 2005. 'The Good, the Bad and the Blameworthy'. *Journal of Ethics & Social Philosophy* 1: 1–16.

Smith, Angela M. 2005. 'Responsibility for Attitudes: Activity and Passivity in Mental Life'. *Ethics* 115 (2): 236–71.

Hyman, John. 2013. 'Voluntariness and Choice'. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 63 (253): 683–708.

Hart, H.L.A. 1968. 'Postscript.' (first part) In *Punishment and Responsibility: Essays in the Philosophy of Law*. New York: OUP, 1968.

*Some of W1's readings can also be helpful here.*

## Weeks 3-5: The Ethical Conduct – Actions, Intentions, and Effects

We turn to ethical conduct. Weeks 3, 4, and 5 respectively concern the role of virtue, doing, and intention in ethics.

### Week 3: Virtue Theory

**Essay question:** What is the main objection to virtue ethics?

#### Readings:

Aristotle (trans.; ed. Irwin, Terence). *Nicomachean Ethics*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1999 (ebook) (or other editions cited in Key Historical Readings, above). Book 1, Chapter 7; 2.1-6; 6.1; 6.12-13; 10.7-8.

Annas, Julia 'Virtue Ethics', in Copp, David (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 515-536.

Foot, Philippa. 2002. *Virtues and Vices*. Oxford University Press — ch. 1, 8.

Hursthouse, Rosalind. "Virtue Theory and Abortion." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 20.3 (1991): 223-46.

McDowell, John, "Virtue and Reason." *The Monist*, vol. 62, no. 3, 1979, 331–350.

Hurka, Thomas. *Virtue, Vice, and Value*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001 (Chapter 8).

Driver, Julia. 2006. *Ethics: The Fundamentals*. Oxford, UK: John Wiley & Sons — ch. 8.

## Week 4: Doing and Allowing

**Essay question:** Assess the doctrine of doing and allowing.

**Readings:**

- Quinn, Warren S. 1989. 'Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing.' *Philosophical Review* 98: 287–312.
- Kagan, Shelly. 'Doing Harm'. In: *The Limits of Morality*. 1989. Oxford University Press.
- McGrath, Sarah. "Causation and the Making/Allowing Distinction." *Philosophical Studies* 114 (2003): 81–106.
- Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 1976. 'Killing, Letting Die and the Trolley Problem.' *The Monist* 59: 204–217.
- Woollard, Fiona. "The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing I: Analysis of the Doing/Allowing Distinction." *Philosophy Compass* 7 (2012a): 448–458.
- Woollard, Fiona. "The Doctrine of Doing and Allowing II: The Moral Relevance of the Doing/Allowing Distinction." *Philosophy Compass* 7 (2012b): 459–469.

## Week 5: Intending and foreseeing

**Essay question:** Is intention relevant to permissibility? What does this imply about moral deliberation?

**Readings:**

- Foot, Philippa. 1967. 'The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect.' *Oxford Review* 5: 1–7.
- Hills, Alison. 2003. 'Defending Double Effect'. *Philosophical Studies* 116 (2): 133–52.
- McIntyre, Alison. 2001. 'Doing Away with Double Effect,' *Ethics*, 111(2): 219–255.
- McMahan, Jeff. 2009. 'Intention, permissibility, terrorism, and war.' *Philosophical Perspectives*, 23(1), 345-372.
- Scanlon, Thomas M. 2008. *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame*. Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Belknap — ch. 1.
- Quinn, Warren S. 1989. "Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Double Effect", *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 18: 334-351.

## Weeks 6–8: The Ethical World

We start by assuming moral realism: roughly, there are moral facts and they do not depend on our evaluative attitudes. As such, they are objective. In weeks 6 and 7, we see whether this view can resist two kinds of challenge. The first has to do with the ‘queerness’ of moral properties. The second has to do with the idea that moral claims must be non-descriptive but expressive of attitudes. The third challenge is the possibility that our moral judgements be relative.

### Week 6: Queerness and Realism

**Essay question:** Are there objective moral facts that we can know?

**Readings:**

Hurka, Thomas. (2015) ‘Moore’s Moral Philosophy’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moore-moral/>

Mackie, John. *Ethics* — ch. 1–2.

Moore, G.E. *Principia Ethica* — ch. 1–2.

Smith, John M. ‘Moral Realism’, in H. LaFollette (ed.), *Blackwell Guide*

Harman, Gilbert and Thomson, Judith. 1995. *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*.

Thomson, Judith Jarvis. 1958. ‘In Defense of Moral Absolutes’. *Journal of Philosophy* 55 (24): 1043–1053.

### Week 7: Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism

**Essay question:** Can the non-cognitivist make sense of the following claim: ‘I don’t think that incest is morally wrong, but I find it repulsive.’?

**Readings:**

Ayer, A.J. *Language. Truth and Logic*, 2nd edition (Gollancz, 1946), Chapter 6; reprinted in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, *Essays on Moral Realism* (Cornell UP, 1988).

Hare, R.M. *The Language of Morals* (Oxford UP, 1952), Chapters 1, 5, 9.

Blackburn, Simon. *Spreading the Word* (Oxford UP, 1984), Chapter 6.

Geach, P. T. 1965. ‘Assertion’. *The Philosophical Review* 74 (4): 449–65.

Charlow, Nate. 2014. ‘The Problem with the Frege–Geach Problem’. *Philosophical Studies* 167 (3): 635–65.

### Week 8: Moral Relativism

**Essay question:** ‘Relativism is only plausible if it has some moral boundaries, but then it has the disadvantages of moral realism without its advantages.’ Comment.

**Readings:**

Driver, Julia. *Ethics: The Fundamentals*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Pub., 2006, — ch. 1.

Harman, Gilbert. “Moral Relativism Defended.” *The Philosophical Review* 84.1 (1975): 3-22.

Boghossian, Paul, “Three Kinds of Relativism” in Hales, Steven D. *A Companion to Relativism*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011, 53-69.

Williams, Bernard, “The Truth of Relativism”, in his *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers, 1973-1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 132-143.

Fricker, Miranda, “The Relativism of Blame and Williams’s Relativism of Distance.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 84 (2010): 151-77.

Harman, Gilbert, “Moral Relativism Is Moral Realism.” *Philosophical Studies* 172.4 (2015): 855-63.

**POSSIBLE WEEK: IMPROVEMENT WEEK**

Select a past paper, correct it, and extend it to 2500 words.