

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

UG Course Syllabus (tentative)

Course Code: HUMA 2921

Course Title: Ethical Theories and Contemporary Issues

Course Offered in: Fall 2026 Course (3 Credits)

Wed & Fri 13:30 - 14:50 (Rm 2464, Lift 25-26)

Instructor: Kyung-ah NAM

Email: knamab@connect.ust.hk

Office Hours: By email appointments

Course Description

This course explores ethical questions arising in everyday life and contemporary society through real-life cases and controversial issues. Through lectures, discussions, and group presentations, students will develop critical thinking skills, consider multiple perspectives, and construct reasoned judgments about moral problems.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

Upon completion of this course, students are expected to be able to do the following:

	Course ILOs	Weighting (%)
1	Acquire a broad understanding of major ethical concepts and approaches relevant to everyday life and contemporary social issues.	20%
2	Acquire the ability to critically examine moral problems and controversial issues from multiple perspectives.	20%
3	Acquire the ability to demonstrate close reading, analytical thinking, and clear writing skills through a philosophy paper or reflective essay.	10%
4	Obtain the ability to formulate and defend ethical arguments in a clear and logically coherent manner.	20%
5	Acquire the ability to evaluate ethical theories and apply them to real-life cases in order to reflect on values, decisions, and conduct.	20%
6	Acquire the ability to assess the relevance of ethical reflection to contemporary social life and to recognize the practical significance of philosophical inquiry.	10%

Weekly Topics

Week	Core Question / Topic	Focus	Assessment
1	What is ethics, and why does it matter in everyday life?	Focus: Introduction to the course, basic concepts of morality and ethics, syllabus overview	
2	How do we make moral judgments?	Focus: Moral reasoning, values, and ethical decision-making Reading: Shafer-Landau, <i>The Fundamentals of Ethics</i> , Introduction: "What Is Morality?", "Moral Reasoning," and "The Role of Moral Theory" (selected excerpt)	
3	Should we judge actions by their consequences?	Focus: Consequentialism and utilitarian reasoning Reading: <i>The Fundamentals of Ethics</i> , Chapter 9, "Consequentialism: Its Nature and Attractions" (selected excerpt)	Presentation topics announced.
4	Do we have duties that must be followed regardless of outcomes?	Focus: Deontology, rights, and moral obligation Reading: <i>The Fundamentals of Ethics</i> , Chapters 11–12, "The Kantian Perspective: Fairness and Justice" and "The Kantian Perspective: Autonomy and Respect" (selected excerpt)	Group assignments finalized.
5	What makes someone a good person?	Focus: Virtue ethics, character, and moral habits Reading: <i>The Fundamentals of Ethics</i> , Chapter 17, "Virtue Ethics" (selected excerpt, approx. 5 pages)	
6	How do ethical ideas help us understand contemporary moral problems?	Focus: Applied ethics; student presentations, Group 1 and Group 2 Reading: <i>The Fundamentals of Ethics</i> , relevant review passages from Chapters 9, 11, 12, and 17; plus student-selected materials	
7	How do ethical ideas help us understand contemporary moral problems?	Focus: Applied ethics; student presentations, Group 3 and Group 4 Reading: <i>The Fundamentals of Ethics</i> , relevant review passages from Chapters 9, 11, 12, and 17; plus student-selected materials	
8	Integration Week: How can the themes so far be connected and extended?	Focus: Review, discussion, and synthesis Reading: Review previous summaries	Midterm
9	Why do relationships and care matter morally?	Focus: Care ethics, vulnerability, and responsibility; student presentations, Group 5 and Group 6 Reading: <i>The Fundamentals of Ethics</i> , relevant review passages from Chapter 18, Feminist Ethics (especially "The Ethics of Care"); plus student case materials	
10	When is it morally acceptable to begin or end life?	Focus: Bioethics: abortion, euthanasia, medical decision-making; student presentations, Group 7 and Group 8 Reading: <i>The Fundamentals of Ethics</i> , relevant sections on moral rights, autonomy, and harm; plus short bioethics case text	
11	What moral issues arise from medicine and biotechnology?	Focus: Genetic intervention, reproduction, bodily autonomy; student presentations, Group 9 and Group 10 Reading: <i>The Fundamentals of Ethics</i> , review of autonomy, respect, and consequentialism; plus short contemporary bioethics reading	
12	What do we owe the natural world?	Focus: Environmental ethics, sustainability, climate justice; student presentations, Group 11 and Group 12 Reading: <i>The Fundamentals of Ethics</i> , moral community / impartiality passages; plus short environmental ethics text	

13	Who is responsible for the ethical use of technology?	Focus: Genetic intervention, reproduction, bodily autonomy; student presentations, Group 13 and Group 14 Reading: <i>The Fundamentals of Ethics</i> , passages on moral responsibility, harm, and moral rules; plus short technology ethics reading	
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Assessment and Grading

This course will be assessed using criterion-referencing and grades will not be assigned using a curve. Detailed rubrics for each assignment are provided below, outlining the criteria used for evaluation.

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Descriptions	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)
Group Presentation	Students will deliver a group presentation on a contemporary ethical issue. Presentations will begin from Week 6 and continue through Week 13. Each group should connect their case to the ethical ideas and concepts discussed in class. Presentation topics will be announced by Week 3, and group assignments will be finalized by Week 4. Note: To minimize free riding, each group must submit a brief outline before the presentation, identifying the responsibilities of each member. A short progress update will be required one week before the presentation. Peer evaluation may be used to assess individual contributions, and the final essay should develop the group presentation topic in a more individual and focused way.	20%
Final Essay	Students will write an individual final essay based on their group presentation topic. The essay should critically analyze the ethical issue, engage with course readings, and present a reasoned argument.	30%
Mid-term Exam	Students will take an exam that includes short-answer questions and brief essay-style questions based on the assigned readings and lecture materials covered in the first half of the course.	30%
Attendance and Course participation	Students are expected to attend class regularly, participate actively in discussions, and engage seriously with lectures and presentations.	20%

* Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be released within two weeks of the due date.

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Group Presentation	ILO 1, ILO 2, ILO 4, ILO 5, ILO 6	This assessment asks students to explain a contemporary ethical issue clearly, critically examine it from multiple perspectives, and defend a reasoned position in group discussion. It also requires students to apply ethical concepts and theories to real-life cases and to reflect on the practical significance of ethical inquiry.
Final Essay	ILO 3, ILO 4, ILO 5, ILO 6	This assessment primarily targets close reading, analytical thinking, and clear writing through an individual essay. Students must formulate and defend an ethical argument, apply course ideas to a chosen issue, and reflect on the relevance of ethical reasoning to contemporary social life.

Mid-term Exam	ILO 1, ILO 2, ILO 4	This assessment evaluates students' understanding of major ethical concepts and approaches covered in the first half of the course. It also tests their ability to critically examine moral problems and to formulate clear, logically coherent arguments in short-answer and brief essay responses.
Attendance and Course Participation	ILO 2, ILO 5, ILO 6	Regular attendance and active participation support students' ability to engage with different perspectives, discuss ethical theories in relation to real-life issues, and recognize the practical significance of philosophical inquiry in contemporary social life.

Grading Rubrics for the Essay:

Criteria	Excellent (A)	Good (B)	Satisfactory (C)	Needs Improvement (D)	Unsatisfactory (F)
Understanding of Ethical Concepts (20%)	Demonstrates a deep and accurate understanding of key ethical concepts and theories, and integrates them effectively into the discussion.	Shows a good understanding of key ethical concepts and theories with clear relevance to the discussion.	Displays a basic understanding of ethical concepts, but the treatment is limited or uneven.	Shows limited understanding of ethical concepts and makes weak or unclear use of them.	Demonstrates little or no understanding of key ethical concepts; work is off-topic or inaccurate.
Application to Real-Life Cases (30%)	Applies ethical concepts and theories to the chosen case with exceptional clarity, depth, and insight.	Applies ethical concepts and theories to the case clearly and appropriately, with some depth.	Applies ethical concepts in a basic way, but the connection to the case is only partially developed.	Makes weak or inconsistent connections between ethical concepts and the case.	Fails to apply ethical concepts to the case in any meaningful way.
Argumentation and Critical Analysis (30%)	Develops a well-organized, persuasive, and intellectually strong argument with excellent critical analysis.	Presents a clear argument with solid reasoning and good critical analysis.	Offers an argument, but it is uneven in clarity, depth, or development.	Argument is weak, poorly structured, or insufficiently supported.	No clear argument or analysis is present.
Reflection and Judgment (10%)	Shows thoughtful ethical reflection and a well-reasoned personal judgment on the issue.	Shows some ethical reflection and a reasoned judgment.	Includes limited reflection, but the judgment is underdeveloped.	Reflection is minimal and judgment is weak or unclear.	No meaningful reflection or judgment is provided.
Reflection and Judgment (10%)	Writing is clear, well-organized, concise, and free of major errors.	Writing is generally clear and well organized, with few errors.	Writing is understandable, but contains noticeable errors or organizational problems.	Writing is often unclear and contains frequent errors that distract from meaning.	Writing is incoherent or extremely difficult to follow.

Final Grade Descriptors:

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Demonstrates a comprehensive grasp of subject matter, expertise in problem-solving, and significant creativity in thinking. Exhibits a high capacity for scholarship and collaboration, going beyond core requirements to achieve learning goals.
B	Good Performance	Shows good knowledge and understanding of the main subject matter, competence in problem-solving, and the ability to analyze and evaluate issues. Displays high motivation to learn and the ability to work effectively with others.
C	Satisfactory Performance	Possesses adequate knowledge of core subject matter, competence in dealing with familiar problems, and some capacity for analysis and critical thinking. Shows persistence and effort to achieve broadly defined learning goals.
D	Marginal Pass	Has threshold knowledge of core subject matter, potential to achieve key professional skills, and the ability to make basic judgments. Benefits from the course and has the potential to develop in the discipline.
F	Fail	Demonstrates insufficient understanding of the subject matter and lacks the necessary problem-solving skills. Shows limited ability to think critically or analytically and exhibits minimal effort towards achieving learning goals. Does not meet the threshold requirements for professional practice or development in the discipline.

Course AI Policy

In this course, generative AI tools (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini) may be used for preliminary research, brainstorming ideas, or grammar checking. However, all submitted work must represent the student's original thinking and analysis. Direct submission of AI-generated text as your own work is prohibited and constitutes academic dishonesty.

Students must:

- Cite AI usage (e.g., "I used ChatGPT for initial outline generation").
- Critically evaluate and revise AI outputs.
- Avoid AI for core analytical arguments, especially in essays on metaphysical concepts.

Violations will be handled per HKUST Academic Integrity Policy.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission. Feedback on assignments will include [specific details, e.g., strengths, areas for improvement]. Students who have further questions about the feedback including marks should consult the instructor within five working days after the feedback is received.

Resubmission Policy

One resubmission total is permitted **before the assignment deadline** via Canvas.

Post-deadline submissions (prior to grade release only):

- Allowed within 3 calendar days after deadline
- 15% deduction per day late penalty
- **No submissions accepted after grade release or 3-day window**

Required Texts and Materials

Shafer-Landau, Russ. *The Fundamentals of Ethics*. 5th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

Wolff, Jonathan. *An Introduction to Moral Philosophy*. 1st ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017.

♦ All required readings for this course will be made available through Canvas.

Academic Integrity

Students are expected to adhere to the university's academic integrity policy. Students are expected to uphold HKUST's Academic Honor Code and to maintain the highest standards of academic integrity. The University has zero tolerance of academic misconduct. Please refer to [Academic Integrity | HKUST – Academic Registry](#) for the University's definition of plagiarism and ways to avoid cheating and plagiarism.