

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

UG Course Syllabus

Introduction to Moral Philosophy

HUMA1920

3 Credits

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Office Hours: To be announced

Course Description

How do we know right from wrong? What does it mean to be a morally good person? Are there moral facts, or is morality relative in some way? This introductory course examines these and other fundamental questions about the nature of morality and various traditional attempts to answer them. We will be reading and critically thinking about the views and arguments of influential philosophers such as Hume, Kant, Aristotle, Bentham, Singer, Ross, and others. By the end of this course, students will have the skills to formulate and rationally justify moral views and critically evaluate moral arguments.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

By the end of this course, students should be able to:

1. Recall and paraphrase various moral theories such as Utilitarianism (rightness of action based on consequences), Kantianism (rightness of action based on duty), Virtue Ethics (rightness of action based on virtue and character) and their relative merits in helping to resolve moral issues.
2. Articulate common moral ideas and issues such as the relation between morality and religion, relativism, egoism, euthanasia, etc.
3. Formulate their assumptions and assess the logical cogency of arguments pertaining to these ideas and issues.
4. Critically interpret the significance of the values that are espoused.

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:

- 1) Short Paper

In this short paper (ca. 1000 words), students must criticize or defend one of the positions or arguments discussed in this course, and they must do so in a novel way. To do this, students have to first summarize the

position or argument that they are arguing for or against and then they must offer their novel critique or defense of it. Students are advised to use the methodological and argumentative tools introduced during the course.

2) Quizzes

There will be two multiple choice quizzes that will test the students' ability to understand and apply the concepts discussed in the course.

3) Final Examination

This is an open book examination that primarily involves identifying and evaluating moral arguments. In preparation for the final exam, the students will be given example questions that will be discussed in this course.

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due Date
Quiz I	20%	
Quiz II	20%	
Short Paper	25%	17/05/2026
Final Exam	35%	

Mapping of Course ILOs to Assessment Tasks

Assessed Task	Mapped ILOs	Explanation
Quiz I & II	ILO1, ILO2	This is a multiple-choice quiz that requires students to explain and apply core moral concepts to common moral issues.
Short Paper	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3, ILO4	In this short paper (ca. 1000 words), students have to criticize or defend one of the positions or arguments discussed in this course, and they must do so in a novel way. To do this, students have to first summarize the position or argument that they are arguing for or against and then they must offer their novel critique or defense of it.
Final Exam	ILO1, ILO2, ILO3, ILO4	This task assesses students' ability to explain and apply core concepts in moral philosophy (ILO 1) and to use its methodological tools to critically evaluate moral positions. Moreover, students have to write their analysis in a cohesive essay.

		identify, analyse, and critically evaluate moral arguments and rationally justify their own position on moral issues.
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Grading Rubrics

	Bad (0)	Insufficient (1)	Good (2)	Very Good (3)	Excellent (4)
Explanation of the position / argument	There is no position / argument discussed.	The original position / argument is mis-represented.	The original position is only partially represented.	The original position is fully represented with minor mistakes.	The original position is fully represented in a correct way.
Critique of the position / argument	There is no critique or defense in the paper.	The critique or defense is poorly developed and is not directed at the original position / argument.	The critique or defense is directed at the position / argument but only partly addresses the issues at stake or it is not novel.	The critique or defense is both novel and directed at the position / argument. However, some parts of the paper fail to address the issues with the position / argument fully.	The critique or defense is novel and adequately directed at the position / argument.
Philosophical cogency	The novel argument is illegitimate or wrong.	The novel argument is incomplete and/or partly wrong.	The novel argument is incomplete, but the argument is strong and valid.	The novel argument is valid and complete, but it is not strong enough to be convincing.	The novel argument is valid, complete, and strong.

Final Grade Descriptors:

Grades	Short Description	Elaboration on subject grading description
A	Excellent Performance	Demonstrates a comprehensive grasp of the fundamentals of moral philosophy, 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 moral philosophy, 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 moral philosophy, 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 moral philosophy, 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 moral philosophy 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

Students are **not** allowed to use generative AI to complete any of the tasks for this course. The application of generative AI in the process of mastering the course material is at the student's own risk. Generative AI does not possess the capacity for philosophical interpretation or analysis. The student is required to train such skills independently of the assistance of AI.

Communication and Feedback

Assessment marks for individual assessed tasks will be communicated via Canvas within two weeks of submission. Students will have the opportunity to get feedback on drafts of their short paper. This feedback will include an assessment of the structure of the paper and a cogency of the developed argument. Students who have further questions about the feedback including marks should consult the instructor within five working days after the feedback is received.

Required Texts and Materials

The required readings will be uploaded to Canvas.

Class	Date	Readings	
Wk1	Feb 2	Introduction; What is Moral Philosophy?	
What is the morally right thing to do?			
	Feb 4	Utilitarianism #1	Bentham, Ch.1
Wk2	Feb 9	Utilitarianism #2: Hedonism	Nozick
	Feb 11		
Wk3	Feb 16	Utilitarianism #3: Demandingness	Singer

	Feb 18	No Class – Lunar New Year	
Wk4	Feb 23	Kantian Deontology	Kant
	Feb 25		
Wk5	Mar 2	Kantian Deontology #2	W.D. Ross
	Mar 4		
Wk6	Mar 9	Virtue Ethics #1	Hursthouse, Ch.1
	Mar 11		
Wk7	Mar 16	Quiz I	Hursthouse, Ch.2
	Mar 18	Virtue Ethics #2	
Wk8	Mar 23	Virtue Ethics #3	Van Zyl, Ch.9
	Mar 25		

What is moral reality and how do we know it?

Wk9	Mar 30	Moral Realism: Are there moral facts?	Hume, Treatise 2.3
	Apr 1		
Wk10	Apr 6	No Class – Mid-Term Break	
	Apr 8		
Wk11	Apr 13	Moral Skepticism	Shafer-Landau #1
	Apr 15		
Wk12	Apr 20	Moral Relativism	Kagan, Ch.6
	Apr 22	Quiz II	
Wk13	Apr 27	Moral Knowledge	Shafer-Landau #2

	Apr 29		
Wk14	May 4	Moral Knowledge #2	Shafer-Landau #3
	May 6	Final Exam	

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.