The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology

Course Title: Ethical Theories and Contemporary Theories

Course Code: HUMA2921

Name: Plato Tse

Email: hmplatotse@ust.hk

Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

This course introduces the major traditions of ethical theory through the living questions that have shaped them. We begin with Divine Command Theory and the perennial challenge of whether moral obligation depends on God's will or on reasons that even God must recognize. We then consider Moral Relativism and ask whether right and wrong can vary between cultures or whether some acts are wrong for all human beings. Natural Law Theory invites us to reflect on whether morality is rooted in human nature and in the purposes characteristic of human life. The middle part of the course examines the great modern systematic theories. Consequentialism proposes that the morality of an action depends on its outcomes; we will ask whether this view can respect individual rights and personal integrity. Ethical Egoism challenges common morality by claiming that each person ought to pursue only their own good. Kant's moral philosophy offers a powerful alternative, arguing that morality is grounded in rational autonomy and in the demand treat persons always as ends in themselves. Contractualist theories explore the idea that moral principles are those that free and equal persons could reasonably agree to. The final weeks turn to character and moral judgment. Virtue Ethics and Care Ethics emphasize the cultivation of good character, practical wisdom, and attentive relationships rather than rules alone. Moral Particularism questions whether there are any exceptionless moral principles at all. Throughout the course students will engage with classical texts and contemporary debates, developing the ability to analyze arguments and to reflect critically on their own moral convictions.

Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs)

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

1. Explain the central doctrines of major ethical theories.

2. Analyze philosophical arguments concerning obligation, value, and virtue.

3. Compare consequentialist, deontological, and virtue-based approaches.

4. Construct clear written arguments using ethical concepts.

5. Critically engage with primary texts and contemporary interpretations.

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.

Weekly Schedule:

No. of Week	Date	Topic

1	Feb 3	Introduction	
2	Feb 10	Divine Command Theory	
3	Feb 17	Lunar New Year's Day	
4	Feb 24	Moral Relativism	
5	Mar 3	Natural Law Theory	
6	Mar 10	Take-Home Assignment	
7	Mar 17	Consequentialism 1	
8	Mar 24	Consequentialism 2	
9a	Mar 31	Ethical Egoism	
9b	Apr 7	Mid-Term Break	
10	Apr 14	Kant's Moral Theory	
11	Apr 21	Moral Contractualism	
12	Apr 28	Virtue Ethics and Care Ethics	
13	May 5	Moral Particularism	

Assessments:

Assessment Task	Contribution to Overall Course grade (%)	Due date
Take-Home Assignment	25%	10/03/2026
Reflective Participation	25%	Weekly
Final examination	50%	19/05/2026

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

Generative AI tools may be used to support comprehension, brainstorming, and language improvement, but students must not submit AI-generated text as their own original work. Any use of AI must be declared in a short statement attached to the assignment, explaining how the tool was employed. The intellectual responsibility for all submitted work remains with the student.

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

Attendance is mandatory and may be recorded at the beginning of class. Missing classes makes it progressively more difficult to follow the arguments and historical context on which later topics depend. Late submission of assignment will be penalized. No make-up examinations or quizzes will be provided. In exceptional and justified circumstances (such as serious illness or family emergency), the instructor may approve a make-up assessment, which will be of comparable or greater difficulty to the original task and may take a different format. Requests must be supported by appropriate documentation and submitted as soon as practicable.

Required Texts and Materials

Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory: An Introduction*

Divine Command Theory – Plato, *Euthyphro*

Moral Relativism – Herodotus, *Histories* (Book III selections on customs)

Natural Law Theory – Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I–II, q.94

Consequentialism – John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*

Ethical Egoism – Plato, *Republic* Book II (Glaucon's challenge)

Kant's Moral Theory – Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

Moral Contractualism – Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* ch. 14–15.

Virtue Ethics and Care Ethics – Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book II; Nel Noddings, *Caring* (selections).

Moral Particularism – Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VI (phronesis)

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.