

[↪ Start Here](#)[📄 Syllabus](#)

Welcome to PHIL 1320: Ethics and Society

New to the course?

- *Be sure to familiarize yourself with the [Syllabus](#) and review the information carefully.*
To succeed in this course, please fill out your [Course Pacing Guide](#) and take no more than **7 days** from when you enroll to submit it via the Modules link in the left-hand menu. Click [Start Here](#) to begin your course.



Returning to the course? Click [Modules](#) and resume where you left off.

Important reminders:

- This is a **6-month, online, correspondence self-paced course**.
- **All submissions, including exams, must be completed by the course expiration date.** When you registered for the course, you were sent an email to your Texas State account indicating registration and expiration dates.
- **You may not submit more than 2 assignments per week.**

Correspondence Course Information

As a correspondence studies student, it is your responsibility to be familiar with correspondence-related policies and services. To this end, I encourage you to review the [Correspondence Course Information page](#) as well as the [Correspondence Studies website](#).

Orientation Video

Please view [this orientation video](#) to help you get started in this correspondence course. This video addresses many topics such as Bobcat Mail, navigating this course site, test requests, and more.

Online Student Resources

[This webpage](#) contains multiple resources for online students at Texas State University. Note: Some resources are only available to students who pay a student service fee.

Technical Requirements and Support

This online course requires technical skills and access to certain technology and software that face-to-face courses may not require.

- Learn about [skills and technology](#) you need to be successful in this course.
Also review these [tips](#) and [interaction guidelines](#) to be a successful online learner.

Many users encounter fewer problems when they **use Chrome** to access **Canvas courses**.

Here's how to **get help with Canvas**:

- 24/7 [Live chat](#)
- 24/7 Phone support: 245.ITAC (4822)
- [Tool-specific help](#)
- Click Help in the left navigation of any Canvas course

Free Tutoring Resources

A variety of [free tutoring resources](#) are available for students enrolled in Texas State correspondence courses.



The Office of Distance and Extended Learning

FREE TUTORING



University Writing Center

The Texas State University Writing Center's online tutoring service allows Texas State correspondence, self-paced study students, to work with a writing tutor in real time in an online environment. During the online tutorial, both the student and the tutor are

Academic Integrity

Texas State Academic Honor Code

The [Texas State Academic Honor Code](#) applies to all Texas State students, including correspondence students. The [Honor Code](#) serves as an affirmation that the University demands the highest standard of integrity in all actions related to the academic community. As stated in the [Texas State Student Handbook](#), [Violation of the Honor Code](#) includes, but is not limited to, cheating on an examination or other academic work, plagiarism, collusion, and the abuse of resource materials.

Definitions

As stated per [Texas State Honor Code, UPPS No. 07.10.01, Issue no. 8](#).

*Please note that not all activities that constitute academic misconduct are listed in specific detail in [UPPS No. 07.10.10, Honor Code](#). It is expected that students will honor the *spirit* of academic integrity and will not place themselves in the position of being charged with academic misconduct.

Please cite all unoriginal material through the use of [standard bibliographical practice](#) explained through the [Alkek library site](#).

Incidents of [academic dishonesty as outlined by the University](#) will be reported to the administration for disciplinary action. In addition, students will receive a 0 for the assignment or assignments without the opportunity to redo the work.

Academic work signifies outcomes and products such as essays, theses, reports, exams, tests, quizzes, problems, assignments, or other projects submitted for purposes of achieving learning outcomes.

Cheating in general means, but is not limited to, engaging or attempting to engage in any of the following activities:

- Copying from another student's test paper, laboratory report, other report, computer files, data listing, programs, or from any electronic device or equipment;

- Using, during a test, materials not authorized by the person giving the test;
- Collaborating, without authorization, with another person during an examination or in preparing academic work;
- Knowingly, and without authorization, using, buying, selling, stealing, transporting, soliciting, copying, or possessing, in whole or in part, the content of an unadministered test;
- Substituting for another student—or permitting another person to substitute for oneself—in taking an exam or preparing academic work;
- Bribing another person to obtain an unadministered test or information about an unadministered test;
- Purchasing, or otherwise acquiring and submitting as one's own work, any research paper or other writing assignment prepared by an individual or firm. This section does not apply to the typing of the rough or final versions of an assignment by a professional typist;
- Submitting the same essay, thesis, report, or another project, without substantial revision or expansion of the work, in an attempt to obtain credit for work submitted in a previous course;
- Falsifying data.

Plagiarism

in general means, but is not limited to, the appropriation of another's work and the inadequately or inappropriately acknowledged incorporation of that work in one's own written, oral, visual or the performance of an original act or routine that is offered for credit.

Collusion

in general means, but is not limited to, the unauthorized collaboration with another person in preparing any work offered for credit.

Abuse of resource materials

in general means, but is not limited to, the mutilation, destruction, concealment, theft or alteration of materials provided to assist students in the mastery of course content.

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Students Requiring Accommodation Through the Office of Disability Services

The Office of Distance and Extended Learning is committed to helping students with disabilities achieve their educational goals.

A disability is not a barrier to correspondence study, and we provide reasonable accommodations to individuals in coursework and test taking.

Students who require special accommodations need to provide verification of their disability to the [Office of Disability Services](#), Suite 5-5.1 LBJ Student Center, 512.245.3451 (voice/TTY).

Students should then notify the [Office of Distance and Extended Learning](#) at corrstudy@txstate.edu of any disability-related accommodation needs as soon as possible to avoid a delay in accommodations.

Course Syllabus

Instructor Information

Instructor: Dr. Bob Fischer

Email: fischer@txstate.edu([Links to an external site.](#))

Phone: 512.245.2403

Phone "Office Hours": By appointment, 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., Monday to Thursday; 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., Fridays.

Communicating With Me

For issues that don't require much discussion, I prefer email. But for anything involved, I prefer to talk on the phone. Please don't hesitate to send a message to arrange a time to talk; I'll work with your schedule.

Generally, I will respond to emails within 48 hours of receiving them. If circumstances are going to make that difficult (e.g., I'm traveling), then I'll post an announcement in Canvas.

Please include "1320-Correspondence" in the subject line of your email; that will help me make your message a priority.

Course Description

From the Catalog: "Study of ethics, its recent focus on social problems, and new fields of inquiry, including environmental ethics, ethics in business, professions, technology and sport. Also such global issues as poverty, minority rights, and stem cell research. Emphasis on development and application of principles of critical thinking and moral reasoning."

More straightforwardly: Why are some actions right and others wrong? Is there anything wrong about the way we produce our food? What's oppression? These are ethical questions and they're the subject of this course. We're going to spend the course wrestling through the philosophical issues that these sorts of questions raise. Along the way, I hope that you'll learn how to read, think, and write more carefully and critically.

Required Materials

All required materials are posted or linked in Canvas.

When you're required to watch a video, there's always a free option. However, at least one module has multiple options, some of which can only be accessed through services like Amazon Video and Netflix.

Furthermore, you'll need the hardware and software required to:

- access Canvas;
- watch videos on YouTube/ Amazon.com/ Netflix; and
- produce documents in some format other than .pages. (Acceptable formats include .odf, .doc, .docx, .rtf, .txt, .pdf, etc. Really, just about anything other than .pages.)

You're expected to be proficient with the hardware and software you use to accomplish these tasks. Should you need technical support to do so, please refer to the technical support information later in this syllabus.

Learning Outcomes

After completion of PHIL 1320, students will demonstrate (a) basic knowledge of the nature of moral inquiry and (b) their critical thinking skills.

How to be successful in this course

Completing this course successfully will require time and effort on your part. Accordingly, I've compiled the following list of study practices that I believe will help you to be successful in this course:

- **Realize that you cannot *cram* this material.** Slow and steady wins the race. Please do not try to complete this course in an unreasonably short period of time. One of your first tasks should be to prepare a schedule and stick to it. (The [Course Pacing Guide Download Course Pacing Guide Download Course Pacing Guide](#) will help you do this.) I suggest you plan to cover no more than one module per week. Also, be careful about stepping away from the course material for an extended period of time.
- **Fully utilize your online resources.** Recognize that learning is not a spectator sport. Would you expect to watch someone play a sport and then go and perform at the same level? No. It's the same with online courses. Think of your brain as a muscle; you've got to build it up and get it in shape by practicing.
- **Make a plan.** Self-motivation is necessary for successful completion of this course; no one will be pushing you but you. Use the [Course Pacing Guide Download Course Pacing Guide Download Course Pacing Guide](#) to help you identify target dates and chart a path for progressing through the course, including when you'll complete each quiz and essay. You will benefit the most by completing the assignments in the sequence shown on the pacing guide schedule. Also, as you plan your submission dates, remember that I have five business days from the date of receipt to grade your projects, midcourse exam, and final exam. Life happens; update your schedule as needed.
- **You are not alone.** Though correspondence self-paced courses offer tremendous convenience for students, they also leave some students feeling

isolated. Remember that I'm here to help. If you have questions about the course content or structure, please contact me. You can also visit the links to reference materials, interactive activities, and videos provided in Modules. If you're on campus, you can utilize [SLAC Links to an external site.](#) for free tutoring. Those of you distant from campus have access to free online tutoring via [SmarthinkingLinks to an external site.](#). See more in Modules regarding free tutoring resources.

Course Procedure

The course is organized into modules of instruction as outlined in the Course Schedule below. Each module is listed by its main topic and contains required readings, videos, quizzes, and writing assignments.

Unless indicated otherwise, you'll submit your written assignments via Modules. Detailed submission instructions are provided for each assignment.

How To Demonstrate That You've Achieved Course Aims: Assignments & Quizzes

Your grade for this class will be based on ten quizzes and ten short writing assignments.

- Each quiz is worth 10 points for a total of 100 points.
- Each assignment is worth 30 points for a total of 300 points.
- Total possible points: 400.

To get your course grade, take your total number of points and divide by 400. (Where, as is customary, A: 90-100; B: 80-89; C: 70-79; D: 60-69; F: below 60.)

- *You must wait to receive feedback and a grade on submitted assignments before you can submit subsequent assignments.*
- *You may not submit more than two lessons per week.*
- *You may not resubmit an assignment after it has been graded.*

Per the Office of Distance and Extended Learning, I have five business days to return an assignment to you, but I usually turn things around within three days.

- I encourage you to use the [Course Pacing Guide](#) [Download Course Pacing Guide](#) to plan your assignment submissions and ensure that you finish the course on time.

When you submit a writing assignment, name your file according to this format:

LastnameFirstname-ModuleNumber

So, for example, if I were to submit the writing assignment for Module #3, I would name my file

FischerBob-3

You are responsible for keeping copies of whatever work you submit.

Various Important Tips and Policies

Reading and Rereading. In the grand scheme of things, you don't have to read that much for this course; however, the word count is deceptive: you won't be able to get through these texts quickly and you might not understand much after a single reading. Don't be discouraged by this; it's the nature of the discipline. I have three master's degrees and a Ph.D. and *still* don't understand what I read the first time through. (I'm often reminded of the wise words of Gene Stelzig, a professor of mine, who said that **the only good reading is rereading.**) So be prepared to go through the material slowly and repeatedly. I promise that I do my best to choose texts that are worth the investment.

Scheduling Your Time. To some extent, you can set your own pace in a correspondence course, but it is important to schedule your time effectively. You should be able to complete each module, along with the quiz and assignment therein, within two weeks. So completing the course in five months is possible if you budget your time. Online courses are just as time intensive as traditional courses. In fact, many students claim that online courses require more time and commitment. As you begin this course, you would be wise to schedule eight or more hours per week for studying materials and completing assignments. Remember, you have a maximum of six months to complete this course. Use the [Course Pacing Guide Download Course Pacing Guide Pacing Guide](#) to proceed through the course effectively.

Canvas Technical Support

The [Technical Requirements \(Links to an external site.\)](#) page identifies the browsers, operating systems, and plugins that work best with Canvas. If you are new to Canvas check out the [Texas State ITAC Canvas SupportLinks to an external site.](#) page.

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Counseling Center

Philosophers like to talk about topics that many people find awkward, upsetting, or just plain painful. If I say something that reopens an old wound—or creates a new one—please know that that was not my intention. Moreover, **please remember that the folks at the [Counseling CenterLinks to an external site.](#) are always available.**

The Counseling Center is in LBJ 5-4.1; you can reach them at 512.245.2208.



Module 1

Objectives and Assignments

Objectives

Upon completion of this lesson, students will be able to:

- define and identify the components of ethical arguments;
- describe how progress is made in ethics.

Assignments

To complete this lesson, a student must:

- read the primary Module 2: Arguments text;
- read (secondary text);
- watch (supplementary media);
- complete Quiz 2;
- complete Writing Assignment 2.



Module 1


Primary Reading

INTRODUCTION

This course is called “Ethics and Society.” It has three key parts. First, you’re in for a quick introduction to *critical thinking*. Critical thinking is really a skill, one that takes a lot of practice to develop; however, you can also think of it as the study of arguments: how to identify them, how they work, how to evaluate them, and so on.

Second, we’re going to have a look at *moral theory*. Here are some things I believe: (a) you shouldn’t steal things from the grocery store just because it would be nice not to pay for them; (b) you shouldn’t pressure someone into having sex with you; (c) if you borrow money from a friend, you should pay her back. My guess is that you believe these things too. A moral theory would explain *why* these things are true in something like the way that chemistry explains why water boils at 212°F. In other words, a moral theory tries to identify what makes it the case that we should do certain things and shouldn’t do others. As you’ll see, these theories disagree deeply. So, in addition to making you aware of the options, I’ll try to help you think about how to approach these disagreements.

Third, we’re going to think about a few topics in *applied ethics*. Some people think that you should always be honest with your friends, even if it hurts them. Others think you usually shouldn’t rock the boat if you can help it. Some people think that scrolling through Facebook during work isn’t a big deal. Others think that it amounts to stealing from the company. Some people think that the death penalty is a good thing, people getting exactly what they deserve. Others think that it’s a cruel, barbaric practice. In each case, who’s right? Answering these questions—or, at the very least, trying to—is the business of applied ethics. Surprise, surprise—this is pretty difficult. However, since the answers matter, we’ll have a look at a few topics, and learn what we can about thoughtful ways to proceed.

This first module is designed to help you get oriented. First, you’re going to read a bit more from me about what we’re doing here. Second, you’re going to read Kwame Appiah’s excellent essay, [“What Will Future Generations Condemn Us For.” \(Links to an external site.\)](#) 

Then, you’re going to watch at least one documentary. After that, you’ll take a quiz, and you’ll close things out by writing a reflective essay.

Welcome to the course! I hope you find it engaging.

WHAT ARE WE DOING HERE?

People disagree. Sometimes, those disagreements are empirical—that is, they're the kind of disagreements that scientists can help us settle. Uncle Joe thinks that when the minimum wage goes up, there are fewer jobs since employers can't pay as many people to work. Aunt Hilda thinks that when the minimum wage goes up, there are *more* jobs since there are more people with more money to spend. Who's right? To find out, we should talk to economists.

However, lots of disagreements aren't—or aren't only—empirical. They're about *ethical* or *moral* issues. (I'll use those words interchangeably.) Someone might think, for instance, that it's *unfair* for employers not to pay higher wages, given the extent of their profits. Someone else might think that employers *deserve* the profits they earn, and while it might be kind of them to share more, it's fine (morally) if they don't.

We can't settle this disagreement by getting clear on the issue we raised earlier: namely, the impact of a higher minimum wage on jobs. We can't settle it by answering any other economic question either. Maybe it's true that employers *could* afford to pay higher wages without certain negative consequences (like there being fewer jobs overall). Even if so, it doesn't follow that they *should* pay higher wages. There are lots of things people *could* do that they don't *have* to do, morally speaking. The economists can't figure this out for us: the disagreement is about what people *ought* to do, not about how things are or would be if there were certain policy changes.

In fact, we can't turn to *anyone* to settle the debate. Of course, many people are confident about what others should and shouldn't do. Presidents, imams and pastors, your great-aunt Sally, professors, Hollywood celebrities, the Twitterati, and TikTok stars—they all seem to think they know what's right and wrong. But do you really believe that presidents never make mistakes? That pastors always get it right? That having a million followers means you know everything? Unlikely.

This is a course on how to think about moral questions. It's a course about different ways of understanding what's good and bad, right and wrong. It is *not* a course that tries to tell you what's right and wrong, since I know that I make mistakes too. I certainly don't have all the answers! Instead, the goal is to help you get better at reasoning about moral problems in a transparent way. That is, by the end of this course, you should be a lot better at dissecting moral issues, assessing arguments for particular conclusions, and explaining why you believe—or don't believe!—one conclusion or another.

“ETHICS,” YOU SAY?

Let’s step back for a minute. We’ve been throwing around words like “ethics” and “morality.” What are we talking about?

Ethics is about what’s right and wrong, good and bad, worthwhile and worthless. It’s about how we should live our lives, about who we ought to become. It’s about whether there are lines that we should never cross. It’s about what we should hope to achieve in our daily lives, on our campuses, in our country, and in the world.

That all sounds nice. However, those statements don’t constitute a definition. I wish that I had one of those to offer you, but I don’t. (Coming up with one is harder than you’d think. Try it!) What I can do, however, is supplement the above with some ideas about what ethics *isn’t*. After we see how far that gets us, I’ll talk a little about how to do ethics, which will take us a bit further.

Ethics and the Law

First, it’s a mistake to think of ethics as just another way of talking about the law. In this sort of view, what’s legal is what’s moral, what’s illegal is what isn’t.

Not so. First, there are plenty of things that are legal and immoral. The law, for example, allows you to be a pretty terrible person. For instance, it’s perfectly legal to say lots of cruel and hurtful things about your ex on social media just to get a lot of likes. Not because they hurt you, not because they deserve it: solely for the internet love. That seems wrong, but the law won’t stop you.

Second, there are plenty of things that are illegal and perfectly moral. Consider, for instance, Division 6, Part 1, Chapter 7, Article 2 of the California Fish and Game Code:

Any person may possess any number of live frogs to use in frog-jumping contests, but if such a frog dies or is killed, it must be destroyed as soon as possible, and may not be eaten or otherwise used for any purpose.

Now suppose that you own a live frog that you intend to use in a frog-jumping contest, and—quite tragically—it dies. Do you really think that it’s *immoral* not to destroy its body as soon as possible? Still, it’s illegal.

Moreover, there are cases in which it might not just be *permissible*—morally OK—to break the law. Instead, something stronger might be true: Perhaps the law *ought* to be broken. For example: some cities, like San Antonio, Texas, have banned feeding the homeless. But many people think that they’ve got a moral obligation to feed the hungry. If they’re right, then perhaps

they ought to do exactly what the law prohibits. (*Perhaps*. After all, if everyone stopped following the laws that they believe to be unjust, there would be chaos. There has to be some strong presumption in favor of following laws that got on the books through the democratic process. Still, if civil disobedience is ever justified, then there will be some cases where that presumption can be overridden.)

Ethics and Your Behavior

Second, ethics isn't just about *the choices you would make* in various situations. It's important to remember that while your choices might be *relevant* to what's right—in the sense of being evidence for it, at least insofar as you're a decent person—your choices might be wrong. It's easy to have overly rosy views of ourselves; we tend to think we're good people, whether or not we are. So, we're strongly inclined to think that what we'd do is what we ought to do, or at least what it's OK to do. But if we're honest with ourselves, we'll admit that we often fail *by our own standards*. We don't always do what we think is right, and worse still, sometimes the gap between our ideals and our behavior is *huge*. So, before jumping from "I'd do that" to "That's OK," we need to be very careful to consider whether we're simply trying to protect our respective self-images.

Moreover, even if I'm acting in line with my best judgment, it's still an open question whether my best judgment is correct. For what it's worth, I'll just report that it would be really surprising if I were morally infallible — if I had all the right moral answers. First, there's just so much I don't know about the way the world works, which means that I probably have lots of false beliefs about how my actions affect others. Since what's right often depends on how our actions affect others, there are probably many cases in which I'm mistaken about what's right and wrong. Second, you can just look at my track record. I've changed my mind about all sorts of things over the years. So, either I was mistaken before or I'm mistaken now; I can't have been right at both times. At least in my own case, then, before I move from "I'd do that" to "That's OK," I should at least consider whether "I'd do that" because I'm confused about what's OK.

Ethics and What You've Got Good Reason to Do

Third, ethics isn't just what it makes sense for you to do or what you've got good reason to do. After all, you've got reasons to do all sorts of things: have lunch, get a college education, watch reruns of *Law & Order*, and so on. Sometimes, it makes sense to do these things. But there are plenty of cases in which the sensible choice is just plain wrong.

It's 11 p.m. on a Sunday. You've got a paper due at midnight. However, you still haven't started it, as you recently met someone new and you've been spending all your spare time with them. You could just turn the paper in late, but you've got two big exams this week, so you can't afford

to be distracted by the paper after tonight; it's got to be done so that you can study for bio-chem, which is going to be a beast. What should you do?

Well, your professor has a lot of students and doesn't have a teaching assistant, so there's a chance that she'll only skim the papers to see whether people have made a good-faith attempt. If she's moving quickly, she might not detect a little copying and pasting, especially if you switch a few words around. Everyone borrows some language from the Internet every once in a while, right? So should you cheat?

Of course, it's *wrong* to steal someone else's work and then lie about it being yours—which is what plagiarism involves. But there are plenty of times when it makes a lot of sense—maybe even *most* sense—to do what's wrong. I can certainly imagine someone thinking that it makes the most sense given all these details. So whatever ethics is, it isn't about making an “understandable” choice, at least if we cash out that idea in terms of what would be sensible (or even best) for *you*. Ethics is about other people's interests too. (In this case, for example, it requires thinking about your professor's interest in getting what she asked for—namely, your work—and other students' interest in competing on a level playing field.)

Ethics and What's Realistic

Finally, ethics isn't always about what's realistic or achievable. For example, it seems plain that slavery has always been wrong, even when it was legal. However, when it *was* legal, I'm sure there were people who said things like this:

We're never going to be rid of slavery. The economic argument for slavery is just too strong: we just couldn't run our plantations without them. Of course, we should try to make the lives of slaves better. For example, people shouldn't be allowed to whip their slaves for trivial offenses. But there's no point criticizing owning humans in and of itself.

The claim here is that *it doesn't make sense to criticize the institution of slavery*; there's no way to change such a deeply entrenched aspect of the culture. And at the time, it may not have been unreasonable to say this. Surely there were periods in American history when slavery seemed like it would be with us forever. Moreover, it would have been good for someone to be opposed to whipping slaves for trivial offenses. However, even if there was a time when it would have been useless to advocate publicly for the end of slavery—even if criticizing people for owning slaves wouldn't have made any difference at all—it doesn't follow that there was no point in criticizing the idea that it's OK to own humans. Maybe people will never change (thankfully, of course, they have!), but it's still worth asking what people ought to do and how things ought to be, even if it seems impossible to get there. In part, this is because we can be completely wrong (as our imaginary speaker was) about what sorts of changes are possible. But it's also because it's worth knowing what we should strive for, even if those goals are

unattainable. Knowing what we should hope to achieve helps us think more clearly about what is, and isn't true progress.

So ethics is. . .?

I've now said a bit about what ethics isn't. We can identify a few takeaways so far. First, the law matters, but it answers to ethics—not the other way around. Second, you might be someone who makes good choices and has the right moral beliefs, but you might not be. So, what you'd do isn't always the best guide to what should be done. (Sorry!) Third, don't confuse what's *reasonable* for you to do with what you *ought* to do. Lots of reasonable things are wrong; some unreasonable things may be morally mandatory. Fourth, don't confuse what's realistic with what's right. Sometimes, a country, culture, or era gets things entirely wrong. When that happens, even *hoping* to make progress can seem crazy. That doesn't mean, however, that it wouldn't be progress—that change wouldn't be for the better.

And while we're still a long way from a *definition* of ethics, we've made progress in another way: we've learned something about how we *study* ethics. Think about how we worked through what ethics isn't: in brief, I gave you arguments—that is, reasons that supported particular conclusions. For instance, I didn't simply tell you that morality is distinct from the law. Instead, I gave you some examples of actions that seem to be immoral but legal (social media cruelty) and illegal but moral (not destroying the frog's body). If you agree those examples should be described as I described them, then you don't have to trust my say-so about the relationship between morality and the law. You can reach that conclusion yourself! And if you don't agree, then you can explain exactly *why* you don't agree. I'm not hiding my reasons.

As I think of it, then, studying ethics involves trying to be transparent about our reasons for accepting or rejecting conclusions about what's good and bad, right and wrong. We do that making arguments, by laying out our reasons as explicitly and as clearly as we can. This process keeps us intellectually honest; it ensures that we're accountable both to our conversation partners and to our own consciences. When we do ethics, we shouldn't be confused about why *you* believe or disbelieve a given moral claim; likewise, there shouldn't be any confusion about why someone else thinks that you should agree with them. And once we have those reasons on the table, we can start to evaluate them. Being explicit and open about our reasons makes us vulnerable to criticism—including our own. And that's a good thing! Ethics isn't about self-justification; the goal isn't to protect your beliefs at all costs. Instead, the goal is *to figure out what to think*. And to do that, we need to make it easier to change our minds. Being transparent about our reasons is a step in that direction.

Let's be honest: this isn't what some people want from the study of ethics. Lots of people would prefer to get some talking points: they want a list of things to say in response to people with whom they disagree. You won't get that here. Instead, I'm going to introduce you to a way of

studying ethics that reveals how hard it is to offer a solid argument for basically any interesting moral claim. It's work—and it's sometimes frustrating. But if things are complicated, it's good to know that they're complicated. Maybe we should all be a little less confident in our moral views.

Before going any further, let me give you a preview of coming attractions. In the next module, I'm going to try to say a bit more about what it means to think critically. After that, I'll say a lot more about the idea of making and evaluating arguments. By that point, you'll have a decent scaffolding built up, and we can turn our attention to moral theory—that is, major systematic accounts of what matters and what we ought to do. We'll close by thinking through some of the barriers to having good conversations about ethics—including the worry that it's all relative. Along the way, we'll think a bit about how all these ideas can be applied to real debates about how to act. Welcome to ethics!

Start Assignment

- Due No Due Date
- Points 30
- Submitting a file upload



Module 1

Writing Assignment

There are two things I'd like you to consider in this writing assignment.

- **First, what's shaped *your* morality?**
- **Second, having read Appiah and watched the documentaries, are there any places where *your* morality might be wrong?**

I'll say a bit more about both questions.

On the first one, there are many biographical factors that can affect how you think about ethics: age, gender, sexual orientation, geography, ethnicity, nationality, religious background, military experience (or lack thereof), socioeconomic status, education, etc. For example: you might be a straight, twenty-something Latina (as opposed to a gay, forty-something white male), a U.S. citizen (as opposed to a Chinese citizen), a left-leaning Christian (as opposed to a conservative Muslim), a product of a middle-class Houston suburb (as opposed to rural Montana), and a psychology major (as opposed to a business major). Those facts shape your identity, and you'd need to cite them—and many other biographical details—in any decent explanation of why you're attracted to certain moral positions. So, what's your story?

The second question is much harder. What I'm asking you to consider is whether there are any issues where you're inclined to say, "Yeah, I know we all do this—and we all seem to think it's OK—but maybe it *isn't* OK."

There are many possibilities. Many people seem to think it's OK not to vote in local or even national elections. Many people seem to think that it's OK not to give money to homeless people. Many people seem to think that it's OK to eat meat that comes from factory farms, cool their homes down to 68°F, and use the word "gay" to describe something other than a gay person, and to laugh at jokes that play on racial stereotypes. Many people seem to think that it's OK to spend money on luxury items when that money could fund cancer research, provide clean water to those who don't have it, or relieve famine in places where people are starving.

Maybe lots of people are *correct* that these things are OK. I'm not saying they aren't. What I *am* saying is that these are things where *our* morality *might* be wrong. I'm just asking you to think about whether it's possible that there are cases where *your* morality might be wrong. And if so, which ones?

Your task isn't to write a formal essay; these are reflections on your own experience. Moreover, if it makes you uncomfortable to talk about a specific aspect of your background, you certainly don't need to share it. But for whatever you do decide to share, please resist the temptation to speak in generalities about its impact on you. Use this assignment as an opportunity to think about specific connections between aspects of your background and particular moral views or assumptions that you hold. (Note that this may involve talking about particular moral views or assumptions that you've abandoned, and why.) Similarly, try to think about specific moral views about which you might ultimately be mistaken and why.

Your reflections should be between 1250 and 1500 words.

If you want to get an 'A' on this writing assignment, you need to:

1. address both questions
2. reflect carefully on the issues at hand, articulating your own nuanced view (rather than parroting someone else's ideas or speaking in generalities), and
3. submit a well-organized document that's free of spelling and grammatical errors.

When you're ready to submit your completed writing assignment, click Submit Assignment, then attach your document and submit it. Any document file type (.doc, .pdf, .txt, .docx, etc.) is acceptable *except for* .pages files.

After I have graded your assignment, you will be notified through Canvas. I will include feedback on each assignment submission that you can review by viewing the assignment in Grades.