

Syllabus Template
Philosophical Ethics or Moral Philosophy

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Preliminary Reflections on Developing a Syllabus for Philosophical Ethics

The syllabus provided here is a template for guiding thought about how to structure an introductory level undergraduate course on philosophical ethics or moral philosophy. The role of such a course varies significantly from institution to institution and in the business curriculum of institutions. In many universities, the course serves multiple audiences and meets a general requirement. Sometimes that general requirement also includes a diversity component. In some institutions, the course may function as the first philosophy course and is taken by all students. In other institutions, the course may be a second or third level course. In business schools, the course may be a pre-requisite for a business ethics course, but this is not usually the case. Because of all of these contingencies, faculty members need to give consideration to the structure of the curriculum at their own institutions in deciding what to include in the course.

As noted in our paper, we believe that one of the central purposes for the study of moral philosophy at Catholic universities is to cultivate in students a deepened understanding of and appreciation for the Western philosophical tradition and Catholic heritage, especially to nurture in each student a philosophical habit of mind, a spirit of intellectual inquiry, and a lifelong desire for wisdom. In addition, we maintain that a general ethics course at a Catholic university should include consideration of the distinctive contributions of Catholic intellectual thought, specifically consideration of virtue ethics, the natural law tradition, practical reasoning, and the dignity of the person. In order to accomplish these goals, it is important that students become careful readers, being patient with their own processes of understanding and trying to develop accurate interpretations and thoughtful questions. The elements that we have included on the template and the teaching notes provided are intended to aid others in developing courses that meet the needs of their institutions while maintaining a focus on the contributions of Catholic intellectual thought.

In sharing a draft of this syllabus template with others, we encountered two objections. Below, we describe and reply to each.

On the one hand, this proposal might seem too ambitious. Isn't this too much material to cover in a one-semester course on ethics? Wouldn't it be better to focus on the Catholic moral

tradition and to leave the other material for a different course? This raises the old problem of balancing breadth and depth. We acknowledge that, in covering the range of philosophical approaches that we mention, it will be necessary to strike a balance that may sacrifice depth. At the same time, our experience shows that it is possible to cover a range of competing moral philosophies, and that it is helpful for students to gain familiarity with both the Catholic moral tradition (including virtue ethics, the natural law tradition, practical reasoning, and the dignity of the person) while also studying other moral traditions. Certainly, we recognize that a survey of many moral philosophies may result in superficiality and a sense of moral relativism. But we think it is possible to guard against those tendencies. Further, we think that it is important for our students to recognize other moral traditions, both to learn from them and to raise critical questions about them. In particular, versions of utilitarianism and deontology are frequently found in businesses and other large organizations. Further, with an increasing sense of globalization, it seems likely that our students will encounter a range of traditions and moral concerns. It is helpful for students to gain experience in recognizing a variety of moral philosophies, to see how these are connected to various decision-making models and policies, and to develop an ability to critically evaluate such philosophies.

On the other hand, this proposal might seem to impose theological concerns onto a philosophy faculty that have no interest in or expertise at teaching the Catholic intellectual and moral tradition. Isn't much of the material that we propose better handled in a theology class rather than in a course on philosophical ethics? Isn't it inappropriate to require students of philosophy to study the writings of saints and popes? In response, we want to make it clear that we are proposing, not imposing. Faculty members and academic departments are the ones charged with determining the curriculum, so we certainly do not pretend that we can impose what should be taught in philosophical ethics classes at Catholic colleges and universities. Further, it is worth emphasizing again (as we do in the background note) that the Catholic tradition prizes the practice of philosophy as a discipline with its own tradition and standards. With that said, it is also worth noting that the distinctive contributions from the Catholic tradition in the field of ethics that we mentioned in the background note are properly philosophical in character. So, while the objection seems to be framed as our effort to impose theological concerns onto a secular faculty, the objection also might be re-described as the objector's defense against having to stretch into areas of philosophy beyond one's specialized expertise. In that case, what is needed is support and encouragement for philosophers (especially young faculty, whose education and research program understandably has focused on narrow areas of specialization) to broaden their concerns and to deepen their knowledge of other philosophical approaches. With regard to including readings from saints or popes (such as Thomas Aquinas or John Paul II), several things might be said. Just because one is a saint or a pope, it doesn't follow that one cannot write works that merit philosophical attention. Indeed, both Thomas Aquinas and John Paul II wrote in a wide range of genres including poetry, songs, sermons, theological treatises, and philosophical writing – and with both authors, their philosophical writing has generated vibrant philosophical reflection. Implicit within the objection, there seems to be a false presupposition that philosophers should only study works written by professional philosophers. It should be obvious that excellent teachers of philosophy frequently encourage philosophical reflection on literature, movies, and even television programs because it is pedagogically valuable to see the way that a philosophy can be embodied in various works. In a similar way, it seems appropriate at a Catholic university or college for philosophers to engage works that are

theological in character to examine the concepts and arguments within such texts. For these reasons, we think it is fitting to invite and support professors of moral philosophy to form a curriculum that includes the philosophical study of virtue ethics, the natural law tradition, practical reasoning, and the dignity of the person – along with a study of utilitarianism, deontology, and other moral traditions.

In developing a specific syllabus, we encourage faculty to reflect on all of the following:

- Who is the audience? Are all of the students business majors or does the course serve many majors, including philosophy majors?
- What should be included in the course description? Does the description make clear to students that the Catholic intellectual tradition is fundamental to the course? If this is a theory course, does it also explain that a range of ethical theories will be examined?
- What goals are appropriate for the course? Is there a way of setting goals that shows students that there are academic and life goals for the course, and that these are not separate?
- What is the best way to structure the course to enable students to think about deep questions for their own lives within the context of Catholic intellectual inquiry? Can something be included that sets the course within the religious tradition of the specific institution? How should the contributions of Catholic thought, especially about virtue, human dignity, the natural law, and practical reasoning be included? What will help students understand the need for, and develop skills in, engaging in dialogue across differences?

Course Description:

An exploration and analysis of moral practices, decision-making, and theories. We will begin by raising questions that motivate ethical reflection: What does it mean to be human? What makes for a good life? How shall we live? We will look at ethics as embodied in specific communities, disciplines, and practices. We will focus particular attention on Catholic intellectual tradition and its emphasis on practical reasoning and the dignity of the person as well as virtue and the natural law. This focus will provide a basis for analysis that will explore a wide range of Western and world theories and practices.

COURSE GOALS: There are seven main **academic goals** in this course: 1) to examine the role of reason in guiding human life and conduct; 2) to read, think and write about what it means to live well; 3) to read, think and write about the question "How do we tell if an action is right or wrong?"; 4) to introduce several of the main moral theories in the history of philosophy, including virtue ethics, natural law, practical reasoning, human dignity, utilitarianism, duty ethics, and care ethics; 5) to study various views on the meaning of justice along with ways to evaluate these, 6) to study the relationship between ethics and religion; and 7) to gain some practice in applying moral theory to concrete life situations. In addition, there are several **long-term non-academic goals** for your life: 1) that you might make progress in the moral life; 2) that you might find intellectual reasons to strengthen your commitment to leading a moral life; 3) that in your life (in the personal, professional and civic spheres) you might apply the intellectual and ethical heritage of our study for the good of society as a whole.

Sample Course Outline:

- I. Setting a Context for Ethical Reflection (3 weeks)
 - A. [Exploring Some Questions to Guide Our Analysis](#)
 1. What does it mean to be human? How do we conceptualize this meaning?
 2. What makes for a good life?
 3. How do we (individually and in communities) live good lives?
 - B. [Thinking About Moral Philosophy as Practical Reasoning](#)
 - C. [\(Marianist/Jesuit/Augustinian/etc Education\) and Moral Philosophy](#)
 - D. Identifying Issues that Inform the Context of Contemporary Moral Action (possible examples)
 1. Issues of justice and rights
 2. Issues of environmental degradation and sustainability
 3. [Economic issues including poverty and meaningful labor\(JPII\)](#)
 4. Issues of violence (including family violence, social violence, and war)
 5. Issues of health (throughout the world)
 6. Issues of education
- II. Exploring and Assessing Western Moral Philosophy
 - A. Virtue Ethics (3 weeks)
 1. [Plato and Aristotle](#)
 2. Augustine

3. Aquinas
4. The Natural Law and Virtue Ethics
 - a. Cicero
 - b. Aquinas
5. [Contemporary Virtue Theory \(MacIntyre, Nussbaum, etc.\)](#)
6. Reflection on Selected Issues (group presentations)
- B. Deontology (2 weeks)
 1. Kant
 2. Contemporary
 3. Reflection on Selected Issues (group presentations)
- C. Utilitarianism (2 weeks)
 1. Betham and Mill
 2. Contemporary
 3. Reflection on Selected Issues (group presentations)
- D. Care Ethics (1 week)
 1. Gilligan, Tronto, Noddings
 2. Reflection on Selected Issues (group presentations)
- III. Expanding the Dialogue on Moral Philosophy (some examples)(3 weeks)
 - A. Confucianism and virtue
 - B. Islam and the natural law
 - C. Hinduism and duty within the community
- IV. How Then Shall We Live? (1 week)

[Possible Course Materials and Assignments](#)