

# Ethics and Critical Thinking

Baruch College  
PHI 1100 – CMWA  
Class Number: 40440

Instructor: Yuval Abrams  
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Meeting time: M, W 10:45-12:00  
Office hours (by appointment only): M,W 7:15-8:15 PM

Semester: SPRING 2019  
Classroom: 17 Lex 714  
Credits: 3.0  
Office: B5-287

## SYLLABUS

### INTRODUCTION

Every day, we make decisions about what to believe and how to behave. Some are fairly inconsequential: what we decide to have for lunch, for example, or what movie to watch. Others, however, are more significant: should we believe the politician on the news when he says it's in the country's interests to go to war? Perhaps the weightiest decisions of all are ethical ones. Is it right to lie to protect a friend? Should we overlook a colleague's unethical behavior to save our company's reputation?

This course is all about how to get these decisions right; and what getting it "right" even means. Here's a quick preview of some of the topics we'll be exploring:

- What are the basic structures underlying good and bad logic and reasoning? How can you tell a good argument from a bad one?
- What are reliable and unreliable sources for our beliefs? What kinds of errors pose the greatest threat to doing the right thing? What distinguishes knowledge of facts from mere opinions?
- How does the unconscious influence our decision-making? How can unconscious biases lead good people to do bad things?
- What should we rationally base our ethical decisions on? Where do ethical reasons come from? Is ethics just a matter of culture?
- What makes people happy and successful? How should we make decisions about our own well-being and that of other people?
- When (and to what extent) we should hold others responsible for their behavior? What provides us with reasons to justifiably criticize conduct?

### Textbooks

No textbooks will be required. Some readings will be distributed by email. The following books are recommended for students interested in learning more about topics covered in class, and for work on your papers. Most of them are classics of modern nonfiction, as well New York Top bestsellers. Parts of these will be made available to you on the course Blackboard site.

- Howard Kahane, *Logic and Contemporary Rhetoric*. Wadsworth, 2010.
- James Rachels & Stuart Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. McGraw-Hill, 2011.
- Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. Macmillan, 2011.
- Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*. Vintage Canada, 2009.
- Richard E. Nisbett. *Mindware: Tools for Smart Thinking*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015.
- Robert Cialdini, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*. Harper Business, 2006.

### Course Blackboard Site:

There will be a site for this course on Blackboard. The syllabus, some of the readings, and perhaps your grades, will be posted and accessible on that site.

## LEARNING GOALS

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

### Grasping Concepts

- Grasp logical concepts ('premise,' 'conclusion,' 'soundness,' 'validity,' 'truth,' etc.)
- Grasp ethical concepts ('right,' 'wrong,' 'justice,' 'relativism,' 'altruism,' etc.)

### Understanding Forms of Reasoning

- Identify and understand forms of logical reasoning (valid)
- Identify and understand forms of logical reasoning (invalid; i.e., fallacies)
- Understand what counts as a normative (and specifically an ethical) premise

### Argumentation

- Recognize well-formed ethical arguments
- Construct well-formed ethical arguments

## Course Requirements and Grading

Your grade will be a function of three things: short papers, exams, and a score for participation, which *may* include quizzes on the reading (see below!).

- **30% two short papers (15% each)** – everyone will be required to submit two short papers of about 750 words in length. **The prompts and due dates will be announced later.** Papers must be submitted in **hard copy**.
- **60% three exams (20% each)** – we will have three exams, one on March 11<sup>th</sup> one on April 15<sup>th</sup> and a Final Exam on May 20<sup>th</sup> (**dates subject to change**). There will be roughly **40 multiple choice** questions per exam. I'll confirm before each exam what material will be on there, but any material we cover in class (including Powerpoints, handouts, and assigned reading) could feature. **I will allow you to count your best exam at 30% of the grade and to discount your worst at 10% (so, e.g. if you scored 70, 80, and 90 on your three exams, your average on three exams would be 83.33, rather than 80).**
- **10% participation (including possible homework or quizzes)** – I expect all students to attend every class, arrive on time, and participate in class. A lot of the class will consist in debates and discussions. Please try to keep your contributions on topic, and try not to dominate discussion to the exclusion of other students. Personal reflections are welcome, but try to be clear and concise. Contribution to discussion is the main way to get a high participation score, but you can also boost your score by being engaged and on time.
  - **Quizzes:** If participation and preparation are weak, I may give quizzes on the reading material or on the materials on blackboard. You should expect, on any week that I might give a quiz. Quizzes, if given, will form part of your participation grade, and, in any case, no more than 10% of the final grade (the more quizzes I give, the more they count).
  - **Note:** If your individual participation is strong and constructive, the quizzes will not hurt you.

## TIPS ON DOING WELL IN CLASS

- Attend every class so you don't miss material.
- Participate in discussion, and think of something smart to say when I call on you.
- Make careful notes: some questions in the Midterm and Final won't be fully covered in the readings and Powerpoint.
- Study for exams with classmates, using readings, notes, and Powerpoints.
- Do as much as you can earlier in the semester – your life will only get more busy. Start thinking about your first paper as early as you can.
- If English isn't your first language (or if you don't have experience with formal writing), book an appointment with the Writing Center.
- **Get everything done on time.**

**Please be aware of the NY State Education Law, which provides that:**

1. Any student in an institution of higher education who is unable, because of their religious beliefs, to attend classes on a particular day or days shall, because of such absence on the particular day or days, be excused from any examination or any study or work requirements.
2. It shall be the responsibility of the faculty to make available to each student who is absent from school, because of religious beliefs, an equivalent opportunity to make up any examination, study or work requirements which they may have missed because of such absence on any particular day or days
3. Any student who is aggrieved by the alleged failure of any faculty or administrative officials to comply in good faith shall be entitled to maintain an action or proceeding in the supreme court of the county in which such institution of higher education is located for the enforcement of their rights

**CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity**

***Baruch College's Statement of Academic Integrity:***

Academic integrity in its best form involves upholding the principles and expectations of doing one's own work and giving credit to others for theirs. Academic integrity strengthens the educational environment by valuing original work and providing a fair environment for all students. (<http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/studentaffairs/AcademicIntegrity/>)

***Baruch College's Statement on Academic Dishonesty:***

Academic dishonesty is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Cheating, forgery, plagiarism and collusion in dishonest acts undermine the college's educational mission and the students' personal and intellectual growth. Baruch students are expected to bear individual responsibility for their work, to learn the rules and definitions that underlie the practice of academic integrity, and to uphold its ideals. Ignorance of the rules is not an acceptable excuse for disobeying them. Any student who attempts to compromise or devalue the academic process will be sanctioned.

For more information on the definitions of Academic Dishonesty, see here

[https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/academic/academic\\_honesty.html](https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/academic/academic_honesty.html)

**CUNY Policy on Disability Services**

Baruch College is committed to providing access to all programs and curricula to all students. Students with disabilities who may need classroom accommodations are encouraged to register with the Office of Students with Disabilities. For more information, please contact the Office of Students with Disabilities, One Bernard Baruch Way, Newman Vertical Campus, Room 2-271, New York, NY 10010, phone number, 646-312-4950 or visit <https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/studentaffairs/ossd/disabilityServices.htm> .

**Student Academic Consulting Center (SACC)**

SACC's mission is to help undergraduates of Baruch College succeed academically and in their chosen professions. This includes tutorial services. For more information, visit <https://www.baruch.cuny.edu/sacc/>

## Schedule

The primary resources for your exams will be my lectures, as well as handouts and the Powerpoints used in class. Electronic versions of these will be posted on Blackboard where appropriate. I list here readings which are tentative. Stay tuned to announcements in class and on Blackboard about which readings (if any) you are expected to do for a given class.

**Note: The dates, topics, and readings are tentative and subject to revision. It is your responsibility to stay tuned and keep up with the schedule. I will announce readings in class and on Blackboard.**

DATES	TOPIC	Readings (Tentative)
1/28-3/6	<b>Introduction to reasoning, logic, and fallacies.</b> Course overview. What is reasoning? What makes it good and bad? What are some common misconceptions? What are arguments, premises, and conclusions? What are deductive, inductive, and abductive reasoning? What are evaluative and descriptive claims? What are some common bad arguments? What is logic? What are validity and soundness? How can we tell if an argument is valid?	Kahane Ch. 1-2
3/11	<b>First Exam (20%)</b>	
3/13-3/20	<b>Internal factors in decision-making.</b> How we decide. Why good people can do bad and stupid things. Biases and heuristics. Cognitive dissonance. The role of the unconscious in decision making. (Note: We will come back to this topic after External Influences)	Kahneman Ch. 1
3/25-4/1	<b>External influences on decision-making.</b> The dangers of persuasion and authority. The Milgram Test, the Asch Conformity study, and the Stanford Prison Experiment.	Cialdini Ch. 1
4/3-4/10	<b>Rationality and Causality.</b> Economic thinking. Cost-Benefit Analysis. Sunk Costs. Causality v. Correlation.	Nisbett Ch. 4, 5, and 8
4/15	<b>Second Exam (20%)</b>	
4/17- 5/13	<b>Ethical decision-making.</b> Conflicts in ethical decision making. Theories of conduct. The double effect principle and the dirty hands problem.	Rachels Ch. 8 and 9

## COURSE POLICIES

### (i) Late paper policy

All papers are due in class on the due date given. You must submit a hard copy either in class or in my mailbox at VC 5-295. Extensions will be granted only for compelling academic reasons (e.g., conflicts with other due dates) and only with advance notice of at least 24 hours, or for personal reasons to be assessed on a case-by-case basis. Late papers will be marked down by 2% of the total grade per day. No late paper will be accepted more than a week after it was originally due.

### (ii) Attendance

I will be taking attendance every class

### (iii) Cheating and Plagiarism:

Cheating and plagiarism are extremely serious offenses in all academic areas. The following definitions are based on the College's Academic Honesty website:

*Cheating is the attempted or unauthorized use of materials, information, notes, study aids, devices or communication during an academic exercise. Examples include but are not limited to: (a) copying from another student during an examination or allowing another to copy your work; (b) unauthorized collaborating on a take home assignment or examination; (c) using unauthorized notes during a closed book examination; (d) using unauthorized electronic devices during an examination; (e) taking an examination for another student; (f) asking or allowing another student to take an examination for you; (g) changing a corrected exam and returning it for more credit; (h) submitting substantial portions of the same paper to two classes without consulting the second instructor; (i) preparing answers or writing notes in a blue book (exam booklet) before an examination; (j) allowing others to research and write assigned papers including the use of commercial term paper services.*

*Plagiarism is the act of presenting another person's ideas, research or writing as your own. Examples*

*include, but are not limited to (a) copying another person's actual words without the use of quotation marks and footnotes (a functional limit is four or more words taken from the work of another); (b) presenting another person's ideas or theories in your own words without acknowledging them; (c) using information that cannot reasonably be considered common knowledge without acknowledging the source thereof; and (d) failure to acknowledge collaborators on homework and other assignments.*

For more, see [http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/academic/academic\\_honesty.html](http://www.baruch.cuny.edu/academic/academic_honesty.html). A tutorial on plagiarism may be found at <http://newman.baruch.cuny.edu/plagiarism/index.htm>.

My policy for this course is to give a failing grade to any assignment that has been plagiarized or an exam in which you have cheated. If you commit a second offense, you will receive an F (a failing grade) in the whole course. In addition, I am required by College policy to submit a report of suspected academic dishonesty to the Office of the Dean of Students. This report becomes part of your permanent file. I might add that you must not think you will be able to get away with cheating or plagiarism – in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, you will be found out. It would be foolishly optimistic of you to try to buck those odds.

#### **(iv) Electronic devices**

All instruments, including but not limited to mobile phones, that beep, chirp, tinkle, chime, ring, or make other annoying electronic noises must be turned off *before* you enter the classroom. This is a non-negotiable rule, and it will be enforced. Any student who uses an electronic device during class will first be asked to turn it off, and then asked to leave the room. Repeated offenders will face severe penalties to their participation score.

#### **(v) Other policies**

- Show up on time. I notice students who are late, and their participation grade will take a hit.
- If you arrive late (or need to leave early) please do so as quietly and as discretely as possible.
- At the end of the class, please don't begin packing up until I announce that class is over.
- In discussion, be respectful to me and to your fellow students. Especially to your fellow students.
- Please treat your email correspondences with me as professionally as possible. Please include your full name and your course section number in the email and avoid using cheesy slang or netspeak. If you're asking me to do you a favor – like giving you extra assistance writing a paper – then ask me nicely. More advice on how to email professors can be found here: <http://goo.gl/5FNnBl>
- Before you email me to ask a question, check whether it's covered in this syllabus or in my emails.

#### **IMPORTANT DATES**

February 18<sup>th</sup> (Monday): No class (President's Day)

March 11<sup>th</sup> (Monday): First Exam (20%)

April 15<sup>th</sup> (Monday): Second Exam (20%)

April 22<sup>nd</sup> (Monday): No Class (Spring Break)

April 24<sup>th</sup> (Wednesday): No Class (Spring Break)

May 20<sup>th</sup> (Monday): **Final Exam (10:30-12:30 pm) (Tentative) (20%)**