

## **Psychology and Ethical Behavior: Doing the Right Thing**

### **Course Description**

Throughout recorded history, behaving ethically has been a central human concern. From Aristotle's philosophical treatise *Ethics* to Spike Lee's film *Do the Right Thing* humans have struggled with the why and how of moral living. From a social construction perspective the right thing also changes over time and in different cultures. Today we rightly condemn slavery, eugenics, and cruelty to animals, but in other eras such practices were not only tolerated but rationalized and even intellectually justified. Similarly, commonly-accepted practices in one culture, may be abhorrent in another. For example, in some regions of the United States plural marriage is still practiced despite legal prohibitions. Cultures also vary widely in what constitutes appropriate child discipline versus child abuse or endangerment. While prohibited in most developed countries, capital punishment is favored by a majority of Americans.

This course will offer foundational knowledge about the history of ethical decision making and the psychological underpinnings of ethical behavior. A secondary objective will be to understand how ethical and unethical behavior can be enshrined in both societal norms and enacted into legislation.

For example, the first legal drug prohibitions in the United States (1860s in San Francisco, California) were enacted not because of the dangers of smoking opium, but in response to fears among the dominant culture of the large numbers of Chinese construction workers imported to work on railroads and levees. Current legislative changes in how societies view suicide and assisted suicide are other examples.

The course will challenge students to critically reflect on their own ethical behavior and to develop personal ethical decision-making tools. Just as a compass can assist geographical navigation, understanding models of ethical decision-making and appreciating professional codes of conduct can help us create a personal ethical compass to utilize when faced with moral quandaries.

### **Learning Objectives**

At the conclusion of the course, students will:

1. Possess a basic understanding of ethical frameworks, contemporary as well as historical, that guide human behavior.
2. Understand how psychological processes affect ethical decision-making.
3. Have developed a personal code of conduct/ethical behavior intended to provide a foundation for students to "do the right thing".

### **Required Readings**

Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Ernest Hemingway, *Hills Like White Elephants*

*A Framework for Thinking Ethically*

Alan Gratz, *Code of Honor*

### **Required Viewing**

*Lost in Woonsocket: A Miraculous Journey of Hope*, A team of documentary film makers attempt to assist two homeless, chronic alcoholics.

Selected TED Talks, to be determined.

### **Requirements and Grades**

Attendance	5%
Active class participation	25%
Five Two-page reading responses	25%
Group presentation	10%
Field work	15%
Personal code of conduct	20%

### **Group Presentation**

Small self-selected groups will develop and deliver 15-minute presentations on the one of the following ethical frameworks

- Utilitarian
- Rights
- Relativism
- Justice
- Common Good
- Moral/virtue

### **Field Work**

Each student will be required to recruit and interview another person (friend or family member) using a series of guided questions about that person's current or past ethical challenges. A two

page summary of the interview will include the student's observations and impressions based on the interview material.

### **Personal Code of Conduct**

Each student will develop a 3 page essay using the following format:

1. Description of a personal ethical dilemma that they are currently facing or have faced.
2. An analysis of the dilemma from at least three of the frameworks presented in class.
3. A recommendation or series of recommendations to respond or resolve the dilemma
4. Based on this exercise, 3-5 elements in their personal code of conduct

### **Unit One: Introduction to Psychological Research and Practice**

Presentation: Socially Constructed Categories of Shame and Guilt

Readings: *Principles of Psychology*, William James

### **Unit Two: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly**

Exercises: The Ethical Barometer; Take a Stand

Readings: *To Kill a Mockingbird*

### **Unit Three: Case Studies, Field Work and Vignette Challenges**

Exercises: What would you do?

Readings: *Code of Honor*, Alan Gratz

### **Unit Four: Legal implications of psychology, behavior and ethical decision making.**

Presentation: Is there a "just" war; capital punishment; assisted suicide.

Readings and Viewings: To be determined