

Ethics Bowl Class

Course Syllabus

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This customizable syllabus is based on two books – one open source and free to use; the other not free, but including free professionally-produced video lectures featuring the author (Harvard professor, Michael Sandel) discussing the book’s core ideas with a live audience. It is broken down into four sections which mirror the suggested sequence for teaching the course:

- I. Discuss 3-5 cases from the National High School Ethics Bowl (NHSEB) case pool
- II. Read and discuss *Ethics in a Nutshell: An Intro for Ethics Bowlers*
- III. Cover *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?* using the online video lectures as guides and supplements
- IV. Conduct an intra-school (or intra-class) Ethics Bowl

Discussing cases from the NHSEB case pool first will a) pique the students’ interest in doing ethics, b) show them that it can be challenging, and c) help them recognize and articulate their pre-course views on moral reasoning. Then covering *Ethics in a Nutshell* will equip the students with powerful tools for deeper and more meaningful ethical analysis, and *Justice* and the accompanying videos will take their understanding to an entirely new level. Finally, returning to the cases to prepare for and execute an intra-school ethics bowl will allow the students to apply all they have learned, and knowing the course will end with a competition will give them an additional incentive to master the material.

This format is only a suggestion and should be adjusted based on class length, size, student interest and ease in grasping and applying the concepts. For example, to the right of each reading you will find a suggested number of days to devote to the topic. If you find that the students quickly understand the criticisms of moral subjectivism found in *Ethics in a Nutshell* Chapter Three: “Why Ethics Isn’t Ice Cream,” that chapter may only warrant 1 day of coverage rather than 4-5. On the other hand, if the class struggles to distinguish between Utilitarianism and egoism after a week discussing *Justice* Chapter Two: “The Greatest Happiness Principle,” it may warrant 2 weeks rather than 1.

Core Curriculum

- ✓ *Ethics in a Nutshell: An Introduction for Ethics Bowlers* by Matt Deaton available for free download [here](#)
- ✓ *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* by Michael Sandel available [here](#) for purchase

Essential Resources

- ✓ *National High School Ethics Bowl Regional Bowl Case Pool, updated annually, and available [here](#)*
- ✓ *National High School Ethics Bowl Rules and Procedures, Judges Score Sheets, etc. available [here](#)*

Helpful Resources

- ✓ *Video example of an intra-school ethics bowl (featuring Rick Terry's jr. high ethics class students) [here](#)*

Course Schedule

I. Read and Discuss 3-5 Cases from the National High School Ethics Bowl (NHSEB) Case Pool (2-3 days)

Visit nhseb.unc.edu, and click "Regional Cases" to download the most recent case pool.

Suggested approach: Read each case aloud to the class, ask the students to spend the first 3-5 minutes silently reflecting and recording their thoughts before discussing, then use the study questions in the case pool to guide thoughtful, respectful discussion. Remember that this isn't a "debate," and that the class should work together in a cooperative effort to figure out which view makes the most sense, rather than each student independently attempting to prove that their view is superior.

II. Read and Discuss Deaton's *Ethics in a Nutshell: An Intro for Ethics Bowlers*

Ethics in a Nutshell Chapter 1: Introduction & Chapter 2: What's Ethics? (1-2 days)

Philosophical ethics is the reason-based attempt to decide what we morally ought to do. These first two chapters distinguish the discipline, preview the rest of the book, and explain why the philosopher's approach to moral decision-making can be complementary to a religious approach, as well as facilitate productive deliberation amongst persons from a variety of backgrounds and committed to a variety of doctrines.

Ethics in a Nutshell Chapter 3: Why Ethics Isn't Ice Cream (2-3 days)

Contrary to popular belief, we have good reason to think ethics is an objective subject, and not a mere matter of personal opinion. This chapter lays out simple but powerful arguments that attempt to dispel the allure of subjectivism.

Ethics in a Nutshell Chapter 4: Three Key Distinctions (1-2 days)

As the title implies, this chapter makes three key distinctions. 1. When doing ethics “ought” and “should” are usually used in a prescriptive, rather than a predictive, sense. 2. Ethics concerns what people should do, apart from what they’re psychologically likely to do. 3. Morality and legality are related but distinct concepts that aren’t always linked. (Good law tracks morality, but not all things that are legal are moral, and not all things that are illegal are immoral.)

Ethics in a Nutshell Chapter 5: The Four Dominant Ethical Theories (4-5 days)

This chapter provides an overview of the content of and arguments for the four dominant ethical theories: Kantianism, Consequentialism/Utilitarianism, Feminist Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics. Kantianism entails two main rules: always treat persons with respect (and never as mere tools), and only do things you could rationally “universalize.” Consequentialism/Utilitarianism mandates that we maximize net pleasure. Feminist Care Ethics emphasizes obligations that arise from our relationships with loved ones. Virtue Ethics recommends that we follow the established virtues, and avoid the established vices – or simply behave as a moral exemplar would behave.

Ethics in a Nutshell Chapter 6: All-Things-Considered (2-3 days)

While the four dominant ethical theories sometimes recommend competing courses of action, we can apply them simultaneously and arrive at an “All-Things-Considered” view by reflecting on how powerfully each theory mandates certain actions, and choosing the option that enjoys the greatest net support.

Ethics in a Nutshell Chapter 7: Argument by Analogy (1-2 days)

We can decide moral questions in an unfamiliar area by reflecting on relevantly similar cases in familiar areas and applying similar reasoning to the former. This chapter explains that process.

Ethics in a Nutshell Chapter 8: Moral Intuitions and Coherence (1-2 days)

This chapter notes how our fundamental moral intuitions are necessary input into the ethical theorizing process, and explains that arriving at a coherent set of ethical beliefs is one goal of philosophical ethics.

Ethics in a Nutshell Chapter 9: Conclusion (1 day)

This final chapter recaps the book, drawing the reader’s attention to its central elements.

III. Read and Discuss Sandel's *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*

Justice Chapter 1: Doing the Right Thing (3-5 days)

Accompanying Episode: <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/03/episode-01/#watch>

Justice Chapter 2: The Greatest Happiness Principle – Utilitarianism (3-5 days)

Accompanying Episode: <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-two/#watch>

Justice Chapter 3: Do We Own Ourselves? – Libertarianism (3-5 days)

Accompanying Episode: <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-three/#watch>

Justice Chapter 4: Hired Help – Markets and Morals (3-5 days)

Accompanying Episodes: <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-04/#watch> and <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-05/#watch>

Justice Chapter 5: What Matters is the Motive – Immanuel Kant (3-5 days)

Accompanying Episode: <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-06/#watch> (also part 1 of episode #7 – see below)

Justice Chapter 6: The Case for Equality – John Rawls (3-5 days)

Accompanying Episode: <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-07/#watch> (part 1 of this episode concerns Kant) and <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-08/#watch> (the 2nd half of this episode fits with chapter 8, on Aristotle)

Justice Chapter 7: Arguing Affirmative Action (3-5 days)

Accompanying Episode: <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-09/#watch>

Justice Chapter 8: Who Deserves What? – Aristotle (3-5 days)

Accompanying Episode: <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-08/#watch> (part 2 of this episode) and <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-10/#watch>

Justice Chapter 9: What Do We Owe One Another? – Dilemmas of Loyalty (3-5 days)

Accompanying Episode: <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-11/#watch>

Justice Chapter 10: Justice and the Common Good (3-5 days)

Accompanying Episode: <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-11/#watch> and <http://www.justiceharvard.org/2011/02/episode-12/#watch>

IV. Prepare for and Execute an Intra-school Ethics Bowl (5-10 days)

After a semester of preparation, now the students can finally form teams, hone their positions, and showcase all they've learned. Be sure to remind them that even though a winner will be declared, ethics bowls are intended and designed to be more cooperative than competitive (the organizer of a bowl in Michigan recently called ethics bowl "anti-debate"). Teams are expected to model the behavior of wise and humble citizens – persons who do their research, rigorously apply logic and reasoning, listen carefully to all points of view, and are always willing to change their view if given good reason to do so.

To hold an intra-school (or intra-class) ethics bowl you will need:

- a. At least two teams (preferably comprised of 3-5 students each)
- b. Judges (preferably 3)
- c. At least one moderator (to oversee the event, read the cases and questions, announce the winner, etc.)

The rules and procedures for the National High School Ethics Bowl can be found at nhseb.unc.edu. Depending on your class size, time constraints and other factors, you may choose to modify the process such that, for example, teams speak for shorter or longer periods of time, the students have access to the questions (in addition to the cases) before the competition, more than two teams simultaneously compete in the same room, etc.

For a good example of what a well-run intra-class ethics bowl can look like, click here to watch Mr. Rick Terry's junior high bowl in action.

Postscript

If you need further assistance running an intra-school ethics bowl, if you would like to explore launching an *inter*-school ethics bowl, if you have questions about *Ethics in a Nutshell*, *Justice*, the NHSEB case pool or anything else, you are free and encouraged to contact the author, Dr. Matt Deaton, at your convenience at matt@mattdeaton.com. Dr. Deaton has taught philosophy and ethics on the collegiate level for almost a decade, has organized, moderated, judged or assist coached ethics bowls in three different states, and offers free consultation to the pre-college philosophy community thanks to support and encouragement from the Squire Family Foundation. Thanks for your interest in promoting pre-college philosophy and ethics, and the best of luck to you and your students!