UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Moral Philosophy

2526-1-E1902R009

Course title

Making Justice: Judgment, Vulnerability, Responsibility

Topics and course structure

"What elements in our experience make us evaluate a choice or situation as ethically just or unjust? "
"Can historical contexts and media influences override our ability to judge what is right? "
"Does the diversity, precariousness, and vulnerability of bodies represent an obstacle or a resource for personal freedom?"
"How far do our ethical responsibilities extend beyond the boundaries of our personal lives? "

These questions, partly ancient and partly extremely contemporary, bring into play some traditional concepts of moral philosophy: judgment, vulnerability, responsibility. At the same time, they force us to ask whether they are still relevant concepts, whether some of them should be abandoned, or whether in fact they are already being profoundly transformed in the face of the changes that have disquieted our societies in recent decades.

Moral philosophy, yesterday as today, asks these questions, stimulating us to reflect critically on our ability to "do justice" in the world through our choices in the different contexts of personal decision-making, civic engagement and professional educational activity.

The course, therefore, offers to the students a pathway divided in four sections that:
(i) introduces to the specificity and complexity of **ethical choice** by exploring the main models of ethical thought;
(ii) considers the challenges that authoritarian systems and communication technologies pose to individuals' capacity for moral **judgment**;
(iii) focuses on the growing centrality of the category of **vulnerability** within the debate on the ethics of care and social justice.

(iv) investigates the progressive broadening of the concept of **responsibility** to include natural and environmental dimensions;

EXTENDED COURSE PROGRAM

The course program is divided into sections that, in succession, make up the proposed course.

1. Ethical choice.
This introductory section identifies some philosophical issues that lie at the heart of any personal and professional choice that seeks to qualify as "right" not only because it is technically "correct" or because it is "respectful" of existing laws, but because ethically it is what it appears good to do and right to do. Starting with some cases, both theoretical and historical, some of the most influential ethical models in the history of philosophical thought will be explored: deontological ethics (I. Kant), utilitarian ethics (J. Bentham), and virtue ethics (Aristotle). Consideration will be given in particular to how these different models highlight different aspects of moral experience (principles, values, consequences, habits) and how ethically difficult choices in personal and professional settings can be read differently on that basis.

2. Judgment
This section examines a first key concept in moral reflection, that of "judgment" as the ability to discern good and evil, justice and injustice. In particular, it considers how the experience of propaganda and totalitarianism in the twentieth century prompted a critical revision of this concept, which is again in question today in the debate over the powerful influence of the Internet and social media on individuals' opinions and orientations. Discussing some examples of contemporary crises of democratic principles of freedom and equality (rise of authoritarian movements, persecution of minorities, polarization of political opinions) we will look for some possible response strategies in the texts of authors such as Hannah Arendt, Simone Weil and Byung-Chul Han.

3. Vulnerability
This section examines a second key concept in moral reflection, that of "vulnerability," which has become increasingly central to the recognition of the ethical weight of the bodily dimension of human experience, with its diversity and fragility. A number of texts by philosophers Eva Feder Kittay, Martha Nussbaum and Judith Butler will offer theoretical and practical insights to focus on the contribution of feminist reflection and discuss some ethically problematic cases drawn from the field experience of educators and social workers in light of the ambivalent relationship between ethics of care and social justice.

4. Responsibility
This section will examine a third key concept in moral reflection, that of "responsibility" as a need to "answer for" one's actions but also as a desire to "respond to" situations of suffering and injustice. In particular, it will consider how since the second half of the twentieth century the realization of the impact that technological development is having on the planet has led to a reconsideration of the very idea of responsibility, extending it from its previous boundaries. Texts by authors such as Hans Jonas and Bruno Latour will be discussed, to explore these changes and question our ability to make ethical-political choices in relation to the future.

Conclusions: ethics education and ethics of education
In this last, short section of the course, we ask about the ancient but ever-present relationship between ethics and education. In light of the course taken, it will be highlighted how the development of ethical reflection in contemporary times goes hand in hand with the responsibility to introduce each person to the exercise of judgment, the extension of responsibility and the recognition of vulnerability. In this sense, an ethical component is inscribed in the task of the educator, not simply as a set of norms or principles that are added from the outside to educational practice, but as an impulse that informs educational practices by directing them to the liberation of people.

Objectives

The course aims to provide basic philosophical tools to **analyze difficulties and dilemmas in personal and professional ethical choice, exploring how some contemporary issues have led to a reconsideration of some key concepts** from the great traditions of moral philosophy.

In general, starting with the **analysis of ethical cases** and **public controversies**, we aim to develop, individually and in groups, the capacity for **ethical reflection and deliberation** in these different areas, with a particular focus on the **relationship between ethical reflection and contexts and practices of education**.

EXPECTED LEARNING OUTCOMES

Knowledge and understanding
By the end of the course, the student will know the concepts underlying the main philosophical models of evaluating and justifying ethical choices, with reference to their origin in the work of classical and modern authors such as Aristotle, Kant and Bentham. Will be able to distinguish between principles and consequences, epistemic virtues and moral virtues. Will be able to appreciate the ethico-political relevance of the philosophical concepts of social justice and the common good, care and judgment, responsibility and vulnerability.

Applied knowledge and understanding
By the end of the course, students will be able to analyze the critical issues that characterize our capacity for moral judgment, starting from an awareness of the concrete historical and media conditions in which such a capacity is exercised. They will be able to articulate emerging ethical problems in educational contexts and civic participation in relation to human technological development and the issue of climate justice. They will identify the most relevant ethical questions arising in educational practices and public controversies, drawing also on contemporary feminist reflections on the ethics of care, empowerment processes, and bodily vulnerability. Students will be able to deliberate—both individually and in groups—on the appropriate course of action when faced with ethically problematic or dilemmatic situations.

Autonomy of Judgment
By the end of the course, the student will be able to philosophically articulate some basic ethical justifications for his or her own conduct and to reflexively evaluate his or her own role as a professional in education in light of a plurality of ethical-political ideals and values.

Communication skills
By the end of the course, students will be able to illustrate an ethical problem and discuss the justifications for their own and others' moral choices using precise language, philosophical terminology, and a clear argumentative structure.

Learning skills
By the end of the course, students will have acquired the basic knowledge and skills needed to stay informed and up-to-date on emerging ethical issues in educational and professional contexts, as well as to pursue further study of contemporary debates in moral philosophy at more advanced levels of education.

Methodologies

The course uses a combination of different teaching methods. **All lectures consist of a part in which ideas, authors and texts are presented** (delivery mode for about **60%** of the lecture) and **a part devoted to critical discussion of lecture topics and group deliberation on ethical cases** (interactive mode for about **40%** of the lecture).

Overall therefore, the teaching consists of **28 lectures of 2 hours for a total of 56 hours divided into approximately 33 hours of didactic delivery and 23 hours of interactive teaching**.

All activities are usually conducted in presence but at the same time a curated selection of the teaching conducted in class is regularly video-recorded and made available to non-attending students to support their study activities.

Teaching is **delivered in Italian**, but the professor is available to support students speaking in **English and French** outside of class.
The entire course bibliography is also available in English.
The **final exam** can be taken by international students **also in English and French**.

Online and offline teaching materials

The materials used during the course will be made available to students in parallel with the lessons.

Open discussion, the answer to shared questions and the discussion of ethical cases drawn from the field experience of professionals and educators constitute a central element of the course. In this sense, **the presence and interactive participation of the greatest number substantially enriches everyone's learning experience**.

At the same time, for **working and non-attending students**, audio-video recordings will be made available to support personal study: these will be videos dedicated to the presentation and discussion of the texts included in the bibliography. The **purpose of this approach is to ensure to all those who cannot attend the course that they can still access a selected collection of video-lessons** which facilitate them in the choice of texts to present for the exam and support them in their reading.

Programme and references

The bibliography of the course includes **a reading of your choice for each of the sections of the course**. The study of these texts is accompanied by **the study of the materials used in class and always available online**. The texts will all be presented during the course, thus facilitating the choice according to the interests of each. No preliminary reading is required for the course itself.

1. For the section "Ethical choice"

Michael Sandel, *Justice. What's the Right Thing to Do?*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York 2010, ch. 1, 2, 5, 8.

2. For the section "Judgment"

Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, Schocken Books, New York 2003, Part I ch. 1, 3, 4 and Part II ch. 3.

OR

Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, Stanford University Press, Redwood 2015.

3. For the section “Vulnerability”

Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor. Essays on Women, Equality and Dependency*, Routledge, London and New York 2020, Introduction and ch I, II, VI.

OR

Martha C. Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development. The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, Introduction and ch. II, IV.

OR

Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2015, ch. 1, 4, 6.

4. For the section "Responsibility"

Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1984, ch. 1, 5.

OR

Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth. Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2018.

Programme and course bibliography are the same for attending and non-attending students. Audiovisual materials will be available to support the non-attending students in choosing and approaching the books in bibliography.

For those who seek further support to their understanding of the course framework, it is possible to read:

5. Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory. An Introduction*, Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham and New York 2013.

Assessment methods

METHOD OF EVALUTION

The assessment is through **a final oral-only test**. There are no midterm exams.

The final oral test is structured in **four questions**, each of which tests a specific area of learning, as follows:
i. one question on the introductory course section on Ethical Choice;
ii. one question on the section on Judgment;
iii. one question on the section on Vulnerability;
iv one question on the section on Responsibility.

The final exam can also be taken by **international students** in **English** and **French**.

EVALUATION CRITERIA

The final grade is expressed in thirtieths and is based on a weighted average of the different learning objectives:

a) Knowledge and understanding of the theoretical elements covered in the lecture materials and in the bibliography selected by the student (40% of the grade);

b) Applied knowledge and understanding + Autonomy of judgment in illustrating references and connections between the course themes and analyzing the ethical cases considered (35% of the grade);

c) Communication skills demonstrated during the oral exam by using precise language, philosophical terminology, and a clear argumentative structure (25% of the grade).

In assessing the oral exam in these areas, the following reference criteria are applied, which students can use as a guide in preparing for the exam:

- A **fail (0–17)** corresponds to a lack of or highly deficient knowledge of the content of the texts in the bibliography selected by the student (which usually serve as the starting point for exam questions), and an inability to reference the main themes of the course as presented in the materials uploaded to the e-learning platform.

- A **sufficient to more than sufficient (18–23)** evaluation corresponds to a basic knowledge of the content of the texts in the bibliography selected by the student, a modest ability to reference the main course themes covered in the e-learning materials, an imprecise and not well ordered oral presentation.

- A **good (24–27)** evaluation corresponds to a broader knowledge of the content of the texts in the bibliography selected by the student, a good ability to reference the course themes and cases presented in the e-learning materials, a fair ability to connect different topics covered in the course and to clearly and coherently present philosophical arguments based on texts and cases, a good use of language and terminology.

- A **very good to excellent (28–30 cum laude)** evaluation corresponds to a thorough knowledge of the content of the texts in the bibliography selected by the student, a wide-ranging ability to reference the themes, texts, and cases presented in the e-learning materials, and a strong capacity to connect different topics and clearly and precisely articulate philosophical arguments based on texts and cases, demonstrating independent judgment grounded in autonomous elaboration of the contents and critical reflection on the issues.

Office hours

The teacher is gladly available to students to arrange a meeting by appointment, in person or remotely.

Programme validity

The programs are valid for two academic years.

Course tutors and assistants

Sustainable Development Goals

NO POVERTY | QUALITY EDUCATION | GENDER EQUALITY | DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH | REDUCED INEQUALITIES | SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES | PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS