

# Business Ethics

Fall 2020

## Instructor

Eric Sampson  
Email: [eric.sampson@georgetown.edu](mailto:eric.sampson@georgetown.edu)  
Office: [Zoom link to virtual office on Canvas]  
Office hours: T, F (10 – 11am, or by appt.)

## Meeting Details

Days: M, W  
Time: 6:30 – 7:45pm  
Place: [Zoom link on Canvas]  
Course: Phil 170

## Course Description

Businesses make an enormous impact on the welfare of other creatures for both good and ill. They impact their workers, customers, animals (especially food companies), communities, the environment, governments, and so on. On the one hand, businesses provide many people a place to engage in meaningful work, a place to make friends, a means of providing for oneself and one's family, and a place to develop one's talents and character. In short: they help people flourish. On the other, businesses aren't charities. They don't exist *merely* to bring peace and prosperity to the world. They've got to make money because, if they don't, they go out of business. And no one can find meaningful work, ample pay, etc. at a non-existent place. So businesses have to be competitive to survive. And sometimes the best competitive move is morally suspect. Thus, businesses have commitments that pull in different directions. This leads to tough ethical questions, both about how business ought to behave and about how governments ought to regulate them. Among the questions we'll consider are: Should we even have profit-seeking businesses, or is capitalism just tool for the powerful to exploit the powerless? What should businesses aim for: Maximizing profits? Benefiting the community? Benefitting workers? Investors? Who? Is there anything wrong with businesses paying the CEO five hundred times what they pay the janitor? What's a living wage, and do businesses have any obligation to pay it to employees? Is it wrong for businesses to misrepres...errr, represent in a creative way...their products to their customers when they advertise? And what should and shouldn't be for sale in the first place?

## Texts

There's no textbook. All readings are available on the course Canvas site.

## Course Objectives

- Develop and exercise a capacity to represent and critically evaluate arguments
- Develop and exercise the ability to articulate, sympathetically and accurately, complex ideas in writing and in speech
- Understand the positions in business ethics and their philosophical motivations
- Gain awareness of the ethical dimensions of your own personal decision-making

## Course Requirements

- Participation 10%
- Reading Quizzes 15% (In-class throughout semester)
- Ethical Theory Quiz 15% Due: Fri., Sep. 4 (Canvas)
- Midterm Exam 20% Due: Fri., Oct. 16 (Canvas)
- Argument Analysis 20% Due: Fri., Nov. 13 (Canvas)
- Final Exam 20% Due: Wed., Dec. 9

## Zoom

We'll meet on Zoom synchronously—meaning we'll run it live, together, at the assigned time. The goal is to reproduce, as best we can, the environment of a normal in-person class.

*Camera policy:* The default policy is that you keep your Zoom camera on during course meetings, unless you've talked to/emailed me about needing it off. There are many reasons for needing to have your camera off. I'm not going to interrogate you under bright lights about this. If you need to have your camera off throughout the whole course, just let me know. You don't have to explain anything. But, in general, you'll be more engaged if your camera's on than if it's off. (I know from my own experience.) It's fine if you turn your camera off for a moment during class to use the restroom, take care of your dog, handle an interruption, or whatever. Just pop it back on in a reasonable amount of time. When we're in breakout rooms, it would be *really* nice if you have your camera on, unless you really can't.

*Recording class:* I'll record all of our class sessions and post them on Canvas. This is to help those who can't make it to class at the assigned time for whatever reason and to give every student a chance to review. The recordings will be stored only in Georgetown's Zoom cloud. It will be accessible only to students enrolled in the course. And links to the videos will be removed in January 2021. As I understand it, only people who are speaking will be recorded. So you won't be recorded unless sound is coming through your mic (because Zoom will think you're a speaker).

## Participation

Participation begins by reading the assigned readings carefully. If no one reads, we have nothing to talk about. Second, you'll have to contribute to class discussion by asking questions or making comments. Some people are shy. I get that. Shy people can either rack up their participation points on the back half of the semester once they become more comfortable with the class setting, or by coming to office hours, or by chatting with me about course material over email or after class. Making lots of comments in class is not the only (or even the best) way to receive a good participation grade. Quality matters too. The best thing to do is strike a nice balance between quality and quantity. Sometimes you'll say stuff that doesn't quite make sense. That's fine. Philosophy is hard, and you're allowed to struggle. So

feel free to contribute even if you're not 100% clear about what's going on. There's no penalty for making a good-faith effort but not quite getting it right. That's how you learn literally anything—trying and failing a bunch until you get it.

### **Attendance**

Attendance is expected. You can miss three (3) course meetings without any notice and without penalty. Each absence beyond those three will result in a 2-point deduction from your participation grade.

### **Grading Scale**

A: 94 – 100    A-: 90 – 93    B+: 87 – 89    B: 84 – 86    B-: 80 – 83    C+: 77 – 79  
C: 74 – 76    C-: 70 – 73    D+: 67 – 69    D: 64 – 66    D-: 60 – 63    F: < 60

### **Office Hours & Accessibility**

I'm happy to meet with you at any time to discuss assignments or simply to talk more about the topics of the class. Come to my office hours, or if those times don't work, email me to set up an appointment.

I'm committed to making class fully accessible regardless of disabilities. If I can do anything to help make the class more accessible to you, let me know, or (if you would prefer) have the Accessibility Office contact me on your behalf.

### **Plagiarism**

You know this, but I guess I'm supposed to say it anyway: Don't plagiarize. Plagiarism is the representation of another's words, thoughts, or ideas as one's own without attribution in connection with submission of academic work, whether graded or otherwise. If you quote something, put it in quotes and cite it using whichever citation convention you like. If you use someone's ideas, cite them and put the idea in your own words. If you have questions about what constitutes plagiarism, talk to me (by email or whatever) and I'll be happy to help.

## Course Schedule

Week 1 | Aug. 26                      What Is(n't) Business Ethics? (no readings)

### Some Basic Ethical Theory

Week 2 | Aug. 31, Sep. 2            Shafer-Landau, "Consequentialism"  
Shafer-Landau, "Kantian Ethics"  
Shafer-Landau, "The Ethic of Prima Facie Duties"

### Capitalism: For and Against

Week 3 | Sep. 7, 9                      Smith, excerpts from *The Wealth of Nations*  
"It's a Wonderful Loaf" (YouTube video)  
Locke, excerpts from *Second Treatise of Government*  
[Planet Money: How Private Property Transformed China](#)

Week 4 | Sep. 14, 16                    Marx, excerpts from *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*  
Marx and Engels, excerpts from *The Communist Manifesto*  
Cohen, "[Against Capitalism](#)" (YouTube video)

### The Employer-Employee Relationship

Week 5 | Sep. 21, 23                    Anderson, Ch. 2 of *Private Government: How Employers Rule our Lives (And Why We Don't Talk about It)*  
Cowen, "Work Isn't So Bad After All"

### The Proper Aim(s) of Businesses

Week 6 | Sep. 28, 30                    Friedman, "The Social Responsibility of Business is to Increase its Profits"  
Freeman, "Stakeholder Theory and the Modern Corporation"  
Heath, "The Market Failures Approach to Business Ethics"

### What Should(n't) Be for Sale?

Week 7 | Oct. 5, 7                      Sandel, "What Money Can't Buy"  
Brennan & Jaworski, *Markets Without Limits*, Chs. 1 & 2

### Truth-Telling in Business: Advertising and Sales

Week 8 | Oct. 12, 14                    Arrington, "Advertising and Behavior Control"  
Crisp, "Persuasive Ads, Autonomy, & the Creation of Desire"  
Brennan, "Why Most Academic Advertising is Immoral Bullshit"

## **Truth-Telling in Business: Negotiation and Bluffing**

Week 9 | Oct. 19, 21      Carr, “Is Business Bluffing Ethical?”  
Gillespie, “The Business of Ethics”  
Carson, “Second Thoughts About Bluffing”

## **Descriptive Business Ethics: Why do We do Bad Stuff?**

Week 10 | Oct. 26, 28      Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, “Ethical Breakdowns”  
Milgram, “The Perils of Obedience”  
Heath, “Business Ethics and Moral Motivation”

## **Ethical Pay**

Week 11 | Nov. 2, 4      Moriarty, “Do CEOs Get Paid Too Much?”  
Brennan, “Should Employers Pay a Living Wage?”

## **Worries about Exploitation: Price Gouging, Sweatshops, Factory Farming**

Week 12 | Nov. 9, 11      Munger, “Can Price-Gouging Laws Prohibit Scarcity?”  
Snyder, “What’s the Matter with Price Gouging?”  
Zwolinski, “Price-Gouging, Non-Worseness, and Justice”

Week 13 | Nov. 16, 18      Powell and Zwolinski, “The Ethical and Economic Case  
Against Sweatshop Labor: A Critical Assessment”  
Coakley & Kates, “The Ethical & Economic Case for  
Sweatshop Regulation”

Week 14 | Nov. 30, Dec. 2      Norcross, “Puppies, Pigs, and People: Eating Meat and  
Marginal Cases”  
Hsiao, “Industrial Farming is Not Cruel to Animals”

Week 15 | Dec. 7      Course Wrap-Up and Review (no readings)