

# Ethical Reasoning (ETHRSON) 40: History of Human Rights



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**HARVARD**  
COLLEGE

# Ethical Reasoning (ETHRSON) 40: History of Human Rights

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# Table of Contents

## Section One:

Course Overview.....	1
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## Section Two:

General Education and Writing about Human Rights.....	2
Essay One: Evaluating a Theory or Comparing Theories.....	2
Essay Two: Applying a Theory.....	5

## Section Three:

Citations and Academic Integrity.....	6
Additional Resources.....	6
Grading Rubric.....	7
The Goals of General Education.....	7

# Course Overview



*Is morality found or made?*

Every belief comes from someplace and somewhere, but we rarely think this affects its truth. Should it? This course inquires into whether our most natural moral stance today is historically constructed, and whether that might matter, by asking how we should understand the origins and crystallization of contemporary human rights — as a package of norms, as a set of institutions and laws, and as an ethical project in the world.

Starting far back in Western history, the course begins with the basic moral building blocks of contemporary human rights culture – the idea of humanity, the concept of individual rights, the force of compassion for strangers, the intolerability of bodily pain. At least to some extent, historical research reveals these elements of human rights to be contingent and even short-lived. The world was not waiting for them until we turned into the kinds of people who believe in them.

In the second half of the course, we turn to the modern origins of the set of institutions and practices, like governmental and intergovernmental structures and non-governmental movements, that is now so closely associated with human rights promotion. Attention is also given to the rise of international law, first as a tool to regulate war and later to promote more serious limits on how governments and non-state actors behave.

Even we look at the specifics of current forms of human rights promotion, however, our abstract question is still the same. What difference does it make that our beliefs and practices have historical origins to our continuing allegiance to them?

# Section One

# General Education and Writing about Human Rights

Why is this a course in General Education? Our focus is where morality comes from, and we investigate whether and how history matters to our evaluation of the ethical commitments we hold dear. We study this broad question in the context of a specific case: the creation of human rights regimes and movements in the past few decades.

The two main writing assignments are integral in achieving these goals. The first essay is designed to help you closely examine some of the foundational works of human rights; the second is designed to help you explore the challenge of putting ideas into action, exploring what happens when historical actors attempt to mobilize in support of and even institutionalize human rights.

## Essay One: Evaluating a Theory or Comparing Theories (5 pages, due October 16)

For the first essay, your task is either to evaluate a single theory or to compare two theories. We provide you with several prompts to choose from. The goal is to write an essay with a *thesis* that makes an interpretive claim and supports that thesis with *evidence* from the texts and course lectures.

The theories come from the readings in the first half of the course. Excerpts from the works of Carlo Ginzburg, Pierre Clastres, Michel de Montaigne, Friedrich Nietzsche, and others offer an introduction to the moral building blocks of contemporary human rights culture – the idea of humanity, the concept of individual rights, the force of compassion for strangers, the intolerability of bodily pain. Your task is to evaluate the arguments that one of the authors makes regarding these topics or to compare the ways in which two authors discuss the same topic.

### *The Principle of Charity*

In order to evaluate or compare theories, you need to adopt what philosophers call the principle of charity. The principle of charity requires that even when you criticize a theory you still need to present the theory fully, fairly, and sympathetically. The most common error students make is presenting theories in a weak or partial form, all the better to dismiss them. But rather than making their own position more impressive, writers who address weak interpretations of others' arguments often appear to be hiding the deficiencies of their own position. Instead, you should work to introduce the theories of others in their strongest or most plausible form. When you evaluate a strong interpretation of someone else's ideas, you demonstrate your fairness as a writer.

## *Considering Counterarguments*

Closely related to the principle of charity is the need to address counterarguments. A counterargument is a claim that contradicts or is in tension with your thesis or with part of your argument. Counterarguments play an important role both in your writing and in your thought process. Addressing counterarguments persuasively demonstrates that you have thought through your argument with care, are aware of potential problems, and are able to address them. An essay that ignores counterarguments, shouldering its way to its conclusion indifferent to potential problems or alternative possibilities, often comes across as intellectually careless. In your thought process, counterarguments help to point out the weaknesses in your position or features that you had not considered, often helping you to see the problem you are addressing from a new perspective and to respond to it with greater intellectual creativity and insight. Whether or not they find their way into your essay, counterarguments are a constant presence in the thinking/writing process.



The most common error students make when addressing counterarguments is choosing counterarguments that are weak or insubstantial, all the better to dismiss them. But rather than making their argument more impressive, writers who only address weak counterarguments often appear to be hiding the deficiencies of their own position. Weak counterarguments are also bad for thinking—they are dismissed too easily to promote intellectual exploration. Instead, you should work to introduce counterarguments in their strongest or most plausible form. When you argue against a strong counterargument, you demonstrate your fairness as an analyst. More importantly, your thesis is strengthened in proportion to the strength of the counterarguments you are able to discount.

### *Option A: Evaluating a Single Theory or Text*

Some of the prompts ask you to evaluate a single text or theory. In general, evaluating a theory means providing a critical analysis of the theory's claims. A critical analysis does not necessarily imply that you will ultimately disagree or find fault with the theory you are considering. Rather, it suggests a certain questioning or probing stance toward the theory in which you test it by introducing various kinds of doubts about it. In other words, your job is to place the theory in dialogue with a skeptic or naysayer and then see how the theory holds up in the light of different kinds of skepticism or doubt. You may find that the theory holds up quite well, or you may find that it does not hold up, or you may find something in between. This sort of critical stance is one of the main way scholars arrive at truths; scholars probe or test ideas to see if they are in fact good ideas.

You might reasonably wonder: how can I draw on a source to evaluate itself? You can approach this kind of task by offering what is often called an immanent critique. ("Immanent" means "existing or operating within; inherent.") An immanent critique explores internal inconsistencies, tensions, or slippages within a text as a basis for evaluating the text's argument.

Forms of immanent critique:

- Look for internal inconsistencies: You might find what appears to be an inconsistency in an author's argument — that, for instance, the author claims  $p$  but that she also claims  $q$ , and  $p$  implies not- $q$ . You can then ask yourself: what consequences does this inconsistency have for the validity of the author's overall position?
- Look for gaps in reasoning: Sometimes a writer makes an unwarranted inference. A writer might reason that if  $p$  is true,  $q$  also has to be true. But it may be that you need  $p$  and  $r$  in order to show  $q$ , in which case the truth of  $p$  does not yield the truth of  $q$ .
- Look for unfulfilled promises: Writers often make certain promises, usually early on in their texts, about what their arguments will show or accomplish. Such promises may sometimes not be fulfilled by the argument itself, in which case you are presented with an opportunity for critique.
- Question assumptions: All arguments involve assumptions — claims that are assumed to be true but are not explicitly argued for. You may find that an author embraces assumptions that are dubious, and that his argument fails because it rests on a shaky ground.
- Look for alternative interpretations of the evidence: Evidence always admits of more than one interpretation. Perhaps there is a better interpretation of the evidence introduced by a writer than the interpretation suggested by that writer.
- Question implications of the theory: Sometimes a theory can be questioned because it logically implies something that is implausible. If a theory implies something that is absurd or implausible, perhaps it is not a very good theory.
- Introduce doubts about the problem or question the argument addresses: Perhaps the argument purports to address a problem or question that, in your view, is not a real or interesting problem or question.
- Perhaps the argument is not clear: Sometimes closer examination reveals that an argument is not persuasive because it is subject to too much ambiguity — it is difficult to see what the author is really claiming.

A note on appealing to your own intuitions: It's worth considering a caveat about evaluating *ethical* arguments. Whenever you consider an ethical argument, you are likely to have your own intuitions about the moral issue at stake. It might be your intuition, for instance, that it is never morally acceptable to take the life of another human being. Although your intuitions may guide your approach to evaluating a writer's moral argument, it is crucial that you do not assume that simply because you have a particular moral intuition that intuition must therefore be rational and defensible. The adequacy of your moral intuitions must be demonstrated with reason and evidence, not simply assumed.

### *Option B: Comparative Analysis*

Other prompts ask you to compare the theories of two authors, specifying a particular basis of comparison. If you select one of these prompts, you will want to begin by thinking about the similarities and differences in the two texts. Yet simply detailing the similarities and differences is not sufficient. You need to come up with an interpretive argument that tells your reader why these similarities and differences matter, why they are significant.

The *thesis* of a comparative essay, then, is a claim about what the comparison illuminates or demonstrates in relation to the central questions posed in the prompt. As it responds to these questions, it should address a key relationship between the two texts. It should do more than simply argue that the texts are both similar and different.



The *evidence* for your comparison should derive primarily from the two main texts, but you may also draw on other course readings and lectures. As you search for evidence, consider the advice above under “immanent critique.” Many of these tips can help you compare texts as well as analyze a single text in isolation.

Comparative essays pose many *structural* challenges: how will you weave the two texts together clearly and convincingly? For advice on how to meet these challenges, please see “How to Write a Comparative Analysis” on the Harvard Writing Center’s website: [writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/how-write-comparative-analysis](http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/how-write-comparative-analysis).

## Essay Two: Applying a Theory (7 pages, due November 23)

In the second half of the course, we turn to the modern origins of the set of institutions and practices that are now so closely associated with human rights promotion. The second essay asks you to consider attempts to form movements and often to create institutions that embody some of the theories we encountered in the first half of the course. As with the first essay, you will have several prompts to choose from.

For this essay, your *thesis* should offer an interpretive claim regarding efforts to form movements and create institutions that promote specific understandings of human rights. To accomplish this goal, you will closely analyze one or more primary sources, using the theories from the first half of the course as a lens to help us better understand them. Your *evidence* should come from the theories and the primary source(s). For historians, primary sources are original materials produced during a time period under study. They include pamphlets, letters, diaries, photographs, and much more. For our second essay, the primary sources are political statements produced during the twentieth century such as the Atlantic Charter, the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Amnesty International’s Founding Article.

Your task is to use the foundational theories from the first half of the course to analyze the understanding of human rights embedded in your primary source. The theories provide the lens to help your reader understand your primary source on a deeper level. Your argument should explain how the theory illuminates, supports, challenges etc. the understanding of human rights put forth in your primary source.

# Citations and Academic Integrity

Please follow the guidelines for citing sources in the Chicago Manual of Style. This means that you need to include footnotes and a bibliography in your essays. The full manual is available through Hollis, and a “quick guide” is available on-line at: [chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide.html](http://chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html).

You are welcome to discuss with others throughout the course, but your papers and exam have to be your own work exclusively. Members of the Harvard College community commit themselves to producing academic work of integrity – that is, work that adheres to the scholarly and intellectual standards of accurate attribution of sources, appropriate collection and use of data, and transparent acknowledgement of the contribution of others to their ideas, discoveries, interpretations, and conclusions. Cheating on exams or problem sets, plagiarizing or misrepresenting the ideas or language of someone else as one’s own, falsifying data, or any other instance of academic dishonesty violates the standards of our community, as well as the standards of the wider world of learning and affairs. In other words: don’t cheat.

Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present a letter from the Accessible Education Office (AEO) and speak with the instructor by the end of the second week of the term.

## Additional Resources

### *Teaching Fellows*

Your TF has office hours where you can discuss the papers. Your TF will look at your introductory paragraph or a one page outline but not a rough draft of the paper.

### *Bureau of Study Council*

[fas.harvard.edu/~bsc](http://fas.harvard.edu/~bsc)

5 Linden Street  
617-495-2581

The Bureau of Study Council offers students academic and psychological support through counseling, consulting, and other services. The Bureau offers group workshops, peer tutoring, and the Harvard Course in Reading Strategies.

### *Harvard Guide to Using Sources*

[usingsources.fas.harvard.edu](http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu)

The Harvard Guide to Using Sources, an online publication of the Harvard College Writing Program, provides information on evaluating sources and avoiding plagiarism, tips on integrating sources, and guidelines on different citation styles.

*Harvard Writing Center*  
[fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/](https://fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/)  
Barker Center 019  
617-495-1655

At the Harvard Writing Center, writing tutors are available for individual conferences about essays in all disciplines and at all stages of the writing process. Trained undergraduate tutors can meet with you to brainstorm topics or to discuss an essay's argument, use of evidence, structure, or other elements of academic essays. To schedule an appointment, visit the Writing Center's website.

#### *House Writing Tutors*

Several undergraduate houses have resident and non-resident writing tutors available for consultation. Contact your House Tutor for further information.

## Grading Rubric

*We are looking for:*

- Clear thesis and argument
- Direct supporting evidence from the texts
- Cogent analysis of that evidence
- Careful consideration of counterarguments
- Correct citations
- Stylistic fluency and even elegance

## The Goals of General Education

Harvard has long required that students take a set of courses outside of their concentration in order to ensure that their undergraduate education encompasses a broad range of topics and approaches. The Program in General Education seeks to connect in an explicit way what students learn in Harvard classrooms to life outside the ivied walls and beyond the college years. The material taught in general education courses is continuous with the material taught in the rest of the curriculum, but the approach is different. These courses aim not to draw students into a discipline, but to bring the disciplines into students' lives. The Program in General Education introduces students to subject matter and skills from across the University, and does so in ways that link the arts and sciences with the 21st century world that students will face and the lives they will lead after college.

Complementing the rest of the curriculum, this program aims to achieve four goals that link the undergraduate experience to the lives students will lead after Harvard:

- to prepare students for civic engagement;
- to teach students to understand themselves as products of, and participants in, traditions of art, ideas, and values;
- to enable students to respond critically and constructively to change;
- and to develop students' understanding of the ethical dimensions of what they say and do.

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