



# A Guide to Writing in Ethical Reasoning 26 The Ethics of Atheism: Marx, Nietzsche, Freud





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## The Ethics of Atheism: Marx, Nietzsche, Freud

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# Introduction

This course explores the work of three primary figures: Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud. It is especially concerned with how these theorists articulate their critiques of religion and the implications of such arguments. What makes them atheists? Is there a purpose to their atheism? Is it associated with ethical concerns? How do ethical concerns relate to moral codes?

These fundamental questions will recur throughout the course as it pursues analysis of the texts addressed in both lecture and section discussions and asks you to do the same in writing assignments where you seek to reason ethically and to reason about ethics. Central to this is critical engagement with the text's argument—a skill valuable across disciplines. This guide outlines the course writing assignments, with an emphasis on the principles of critical argumentation students are expected to follow.

## General Guidelines

- **Read actively and critically.** Take notes, mark up pages, re-read sections. Pay careful attention to both the author's argument and the evidence it provides.
- **Avoid unreflected polemics.** You will be writing academic papers. Avoid unqualified statements of personal opinion. If, for example, you were not to appreciate Marx, it is not enough to say you do not like him; think about what aspects of the text you might be able to challenge and support your argument with textual evidence.
- **Define your terms.** We will be addressing the meaning of “atheism,” “ethics,” and “morals” throughout the semester, and it is unlikely we will always agree. Thus, it should be clear what you mean by these terms when you use them in your papers.
- **Stay close to the text.** Since you will not be writing research papers, you need not consult secondary sources. Most important is what you think about the primary texts, not what others have written. Use of secondary sources is allowed, but be sure to document any thoughts that are not your own.
- **Write clearly and directly.** Avoid overuse of the passive voice and over-generalizations. Strive for precise formulations, but do not let sophisticated wording take the place of sophisticated thinking.
- **Have a plan, but be flexible.** It is helpful to have an outline before you begin to write, although you may deviate from your initial plan as you draft the paper. If you finish your paper and realize that your real thesis statement is buried in the conclusion, you will obviously have to revise, but even if you think everything fell into place, go back and revise.
- **Support arguments with evidence.** The reading and discussion of philosophical and theoretical texts, like that of literature and art, is a discipline of interpretation. There is no entirely right or wrong answer, but the criterion of relative plausibility obtains, and you should examine your work with this criterion in mind. Textual evidence is a central component of that plausibility.

# Introduction

## Assignments

### Weekly Response Papers

*100-300 words. Posted each week, by Thursday noon, on the course website.*

The weekly response is an opportunity to think about a text on your own, in relation to or beyond what has been discussed in class. This is the place where you may wish to record a reaction, an objection, a clarification, or a question that arises from your reading of a text or from class discussion of it. In any case, your response paper should make a point by means of a brief, cogent argument. While the weekly responses are not graded unless exceptionally good or exceptionally poor, they account for 40% of the section participation grade, which in turn accounts for 25% of the course grade.

Read the responses of other students in your section before each section meeting. There will be a maximum number of threads per section, to be determined on the basis of section size, with a maximum of four responses per thread. Your TF will often begin discussion with ideas that have arisen in your responses. Thus you should be prepared to comment on someone else's response or to respond to questions about your own. Putting serious thought into writing and reading the weekly responses will contribute to a more effective and engaging section meeting.

Avoid summary, subjective impressions, and ungrounded objections. Some of the course readings are strikingly polemical. Well-argued polemic is welcome in your responses, but should be respectful and polite, even if, for example, Nietzsche's is not.

Do not be afraid to take risks in writing the responses. Think of the response paper as initially developing a line of thought which may continue to interest you and might therefore provide material for one of the longer papers.

### First Paper

*Comparative exercise: 1200-1500 words on Feuerbach and Marx.*

The first, shorter essay will involve a comparison of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* with one of the Marx texts. You might compare the purpose or examine the origin of Marx's and Feuerbach's atheism, or you might analyze any number of specific topics that occur in both (individual versus community, Christianity, Judaism, materialism, etc.). Your TF will be happy to comment on your ideas for the paper. Regardless of the topic, there are several key points to bear in mind when constructing a compare-and-contrast argument:

- Make sure your thesis is specific. If your thesis statement reads, "there are many differences between Feuerbach's and Marx's versions of atheism," you will likely wind up with a weak paper. Being specific will encourage a more thorough analysis and help limit your topic to something you can address adequately in about five pages. A better thesis statement might read: "Whereas Marx weakens his ethical argument for atheism by attaching it to a communal political goal, Feuerbach focuses on individual liberation." Thus the concepts "political," "individual," and "ethical" can define the examination and limit its scope.

- Define the terms of your comparison.
- Make sure your argument is grounded in the texts. Examples from the text are necessary to ground each stage of the argument, e.g., Marx's political atheism, Feuerbach's individual atheism, and the ethical motivation or implications of each.
- Acknowledge actual or potential counter-arguments as part of your strategy to prove your point.
- Plan your paper in advance, but be willing to make changes as your argument develops. Once you have written your outline and begun the paper, you may notice that the textual evidence suggests a different conclusion than you had originally expected or intended. Let these changes happen. It may help to begin writing with the knowledge that your introduction will be the last thing you complete.

Comparing two texts may seem like a simpler task than a more open-ended essay topic, but the clear framework can lead to oversimplified arguments. Good papers not only identify similarities and differences, but also make something of them: use comparison as the basis for your own argument. In other words, what does the comparison reveal about the texts that we might otherwise overlook? Feel free to contact your TF with further questions.

## Final Paper

*Exercise in ethical reasoning: 2700-3300 words on Nietzsche or Freud.*

The final paper requires that you engage in ethical reasoning with regard to specific aspects of Nietzsche's or Freud's theoretical projects. You may address both Nietzsche and Freud, but you must first discuss the comparison with your TF and receive permission to pursue it.

Almost all of the works addressed in this course have provocative elements. The final paper asks you to engage with the ethical dimension of a text or texts of your choice by first imagining how some readers might hold one of these thinkers' works to be immoral and by then producing a counter-argument demonstrating the ethical dimension of his work. The final stage will be to explore to what degree the two positions are reconcilable, irreconcilable, or inapplicable or irrelevant to one another.

Papers should thus (1) explore a real or hypothetical moral objection, demonstrating how the text or texts could be considered objectionable, and then (2) refute it by marshalling evidence from Nietzsche's or Freud's texts. Then you should (3) draw and justify your own conclusion on the relation between these competing positions. Possible topics might include:

- Nietzsche and antisemitism.
- Freud's or Nietzsche's misogyny.
- Nietzsche's or Freud's critique of morality.
- Freud's association of civilization with neurosis and his portrayal of the normal as the unhealthy.
- Freud's theories concerning infant and early childhood sexuality.
- Nietzsche's or Freud's atheism and critique of religion.

The point is not to “apply” Freud or Nietzsche to contemporary morality, but rather to isolate and explore the motivations and implications of their seminal contributions to the way we think about the purpose and nature of our life and our relation to ourselves and others.

In addition to the general guidelines and suggestions for the first paper, the following will help you construct an effective argument:

- **Be sure your thesis is original and interesting.** Provocative theses make for more insightful papers, but must be grounded in understanding of the texts and critical engagement with them.
- **Focus on interpretation.** The goal is less to advocate an ethical position than it is to explore the reasoning behind this position. Good argumentation is more important than “correctness” or alignment with personal belief, the perspective of the professor, or the opinion of your TF.
- **Be thorough, but avoid asides.** Make certain that all parts of your argument are fully developed and that one thought flows logically into the next. Reconsider each example given and each paragraph to make sure they serve your general argument, moving cogently and coherently from thesis statement to conclusion.
- **Use texts effectively.** Summarize and paraphrase only for the purpose of advancing your argument. Adequate citation of primary texts is essential. Every quotation from the primary text should be explicated for its contribution to your argument, either as positive evidence or as a critical foil.
- **Acknowledge counter-arguments, but make a point.** It is important to provide a rounded view of the issue at hand, but be careful not to fluctuate between competing perspectives to the extent that your own argument is lost. To test whether you have done this, look back at your conclusions and the structure of your argument as a whole; both should clearly support a thesis on the relation between Freud’s or Nietzsche’s ethics and the possible objection you will have explored.
- **Titles are important.** Dull titles turn readers off, while overly elaborate, paronomastic, or precious titles annoy them. Wit, of course, is welcome. Present participles have now suffered overuse in titles and should generally be avoided. Give serious thought to your title. Your goal should be an engaging, perhaps even intriguing title that both captures the essence of your paper and makes the reader eager to read it.

Your TF can help you develop an interesting and manageable paper topic. This final writing exercise is an opportunity to utilize the analytic tools acquired over the course of the semester in order to reason ethically and to reason about ethics.



# Other Resources

- **Teaching Staff.** Your TF will hold office hours to discuss the papers. You should also feel free to discuss your paper with Professor Burgard.
- **The Writing Center.** The Writing Center offers individual assistance to students who would like to work closely with trained undergraduate tutors on the structure, focus, and clarity of essays, research papers, and senior theses. Students should access the Writing Center website to make an appointment or call for more information.

<http://fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr>

Barker Center 019

617 495 1655

- **Harvard Guide to Using Sources.** This publication introduces the fundamentals of using sources in academic papers.

<http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu>

- **House Writing Tutors.** Several Harvard houses have resident or non-resident writing tutors who hold regular office hours to help students with their writing. Contact your resident dean to find out if your house has a writing tutor.

- **Bureau of Study Council.** The Bureau of Study Council is a resource center for academic issues and personal concerns. The Bureau offers counseling, consulting, group workshops, peer tutoring, and the Harvard Course in Reading and Study Strategies.

<http://bsc.harvard.edu>

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RESOURCES

# Notes



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