



# SYLLABUS: MS&E 254 AND 254A—THE ETHICAL ANALYST

TUESDAY, 1:30-4:30 PM Pacific Time, Thornton 102  
Spring 2024

Instructor: Dr. Dale M. Nesbitt

Class Assistants: Caitlin Casey, Alexis Legrand, Rodney Guillaume

## 1. Course Description

“The Ethical Analyst” is designed to raise awareness of ethically sensitive situations and provide a set of principles and tools for forming coherent ethical judgments. This course does not promote a particular ethical point of view. Rather students use ethical principles and tools to create their own personal ethical codes and test them against established ethical theories, class discussions, homework, a wide range of situations from work and life, and a wide range of ethical principles put forth herein.

By the end of the course students will have mastered fundamental ethical distinctions necessary to think clearly about ethics, commit to a set of ethical principles (their personal ethical code), and be able to exercise disciplined decision-making skills to act ethically.

## 2. A Message from the Instructor

The title of the course “The Ethical Analyst” is significant. The course thinks about and helps students think about ethics and ethical decisions, for themselves and others, from the perspective of decisions and actions.

- Ethics is about **decisions**, about actions, not about thoughts, mindsets, abstractions, states of the world, or philosophies. Without decisions, what does ethics even mean?
- Ethics is about **people**, not about “things” (e.g., technologies, products, techniques, capabilities) because “things” do not engage in actions or behaviors. Ethics is not anthropomorphic. Ethics is about human actions and consequences.
- Ethics is about **right and wrong**, about behavior that is acceptable or not. It is not about legality, and it is not about self-interest (prudentiality), although we interrelate ethics, legality, and prudentiality during the course.
- Ethics is **ultimately personal**, related to personal decision-making or personal contribution to group decision making. Ethics needs to be driven by a well-crafted ethical code of action. In this course, everyone writes a personal ethical code of action based on solid ethical principles and theories taught. The code is a key deliverable in the course, and it has proven to be one of the most significant, penetrating, and often emotional things people do (students



have told us that after completing the course). Course alums carry and modify their ethical codes for many years into the future, long after they have left Stanford.

- Ethical codes and ethics must be **actionable**. Abstract, theoretical, hypothetical, or non-actionable concepts don't cut the mustard. Curing world hunger or not scaring the ducks is not what ethics is about (not actionable). Ethics is about decisions you make individually or as part of a group.
- Ethics is **not coercible**. Ethics relates one's own decisions and behavior "when no one is watching or overseeing." Ethics is what you do (or don't do) when no one is watching, what you do (or don't do) when no one is forcing or coercing you. The point of ethics is not to bash others on behavior or decisions but to formulate what is right and what is not.
- Ethics may be intrinsically **rational and self-interested**. We will think about the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to ethical behavior. Ethical behavior is likely not "lambs to the slaughter" but likely is rewarded by ethical behavior on the part of others. Is superhuman agency (e.g., religion) a necessary precursor for ethics?

The ethical analyst is replete with deep and insightful ethical situations. Students are challenged by the wealth of situations offered. Politics and labels are omitted from discussions; rational, logical discussions are the rule of the day. The course is not about promoting or imposing a specific set of ethics, although a broad range of historical thought is presented. It is about raising ethical sensitivities and providing tools for making ethical decisions.

### 3. Four Phases of the Course

This course develops through four phases.

1. **Learn how to use ethical logic and principles to foster clear thinking.** We put forth various ethical principles and theories that have been advanced. We learn what they are and their origin and basis. Such principles are not intended to be inserted wholesale into personal ethical codes but rather to give perspective on what ethics and ethical behavior is and how it is analyzed or judged. This phase is designed to articulate how great ethicists have thought about ethical behavior and decisions.
2. **Learn key distinctions necessary to reason ethically.** We learn the difference between prudential, legal, and ethical dimensions of an action; between positive and negative ethics; and between the action-based and consequence-based schools of thought. Our goal is to become *thoughtful* about ethical reasoning. We will also learn to identify the ethical principles we have derived, consciously or unconsciously, from religion, upbringing, work, and culture. We learn to identify the gaps where our existing principles give inadequate guidance. Our goal is to become *mindful* of ethical and unethical action.



3. **Identify ethical compromise or transgression.** We examine the most common ethical transgressions—to lie, deceive, steal, harm, impose risk, or coerce. Our goal is to become *aware* of these transgressions and their intended or unintended consequences.
4. **Codify how to make ethical decisions.** We identify common ethical challenges we face, evaluate them with our ethical distinctions, and commit to ethical principles. Our goal is to become skilled and *decisive*.

#### 4. “What Will I Learn in “The Ethical Analyst?”

The course is not about lectures “right out of the book.” The course reader serves as a reference to help students write their own ethical code. You will learn theories regarding ethical action through lectures and discussions, and you will embody them in your own personal ethical code of action.

This is not a course in which you have to agree with the instructor or teaching staff. People come out of the course disagreeing totally with some of the ethical principles put forth from the past or present and just as vehemently embracing others. They may not agree with the ethical principles put forth or with the analysis by instructors or other students. The objective of this course is not to enforce conformity but rather to understand, apply, and perform deep ethical analysis and ultimately to craft your own ethical code of behavior and action.

#### 5. Course Presentation Materials (Slides)

The slides of the course will be distributed one lecture at a time on Canvas a couple of hours after each lecture. These slides are an important part of the information delivered during the course and are intended to document the lectures in part. Students are able to reference or copy these lecture slides into their own workproduct during the course. There are two types of slides in the package: (1.) normal white backgrounds, which were presented during the course and (2.) shaded gray backgrounds, which were not presented during the course but are intended to convey supporting or supplemental information or details.

#### 6. Class Size

Much of the value in the class comes from the lively discussion and high level of student interaction made possible by smaller groups. Class enrollment (non-SCPD) will be limited both for 3 credit and 1 credit students

- 3 Credit Students (254) must attend in person unless they have specific permission to participate remotely. Class size is limited.
- SCPD Students (all 3 credit students) may attend remotely (by Stanford rule) and their presentations may be submitted in recorded form.
- 1 Credit Students (254A) may attend remotely or in person at their volition.



We foster participation, discussion, and debate using tools and methods that have worked well in the past

- Class discussions (see below)
- Ed, an instructor-monitored bulletin board (see below). It is important to the participation portion of the grade to participate in Ed discussions. All postings and comments are attributed. Substantive participations are counted as part of the participation grade.
- Attendance at classes is required, recorded, and graded.
- Attendance at CA presentations is required, recorded, and graded. Extra credit is given for above-required attendance.
- Attendance at final presentations is required, recorded, and graded. Extra credit is given for above-required attendance.

## 7. Class Format/Live Attendance

Class will be fully in-person for 3 credit students (254) and may be attended remotely for 1 credit students (254A). All **non-SCPD 3 credit students** will be expected to attend in person during the regularly scheduled class time (unless specifically authorized otherwise). Attendance will be taken and repeated absences will have an impact on the course grade. Students are allowed one excused absence.

Illness, including but not limited to COVID, will be an excuse to attend remotely until the illness passes. Please do not come to class if you are ill, but advise the instructor or a CA if you will miss.

The class will be recorded for **SCPD students** and **1 credit students (254A)**, as we understand that location and work commitments may preclude live attendance. (All students will have full access to the class recordings.) However, we encourage you to attend class in-person if you can, and to participate in class discussions through Ed.

## 8. Ethics Discussion Forum: Ed

You may access our course discussion forum at Ed (address and access to be provided).

We value and will grade participation and discussion, particularly quality of discussion. The Ethical Analyst is conceived and conducted as a discussion-oriented, constructive debate and analysis course. To that end, we will use Ed as a community blackboard for discussion and debate.

Our use of Ed may be different from the way it is used in other classes (e.g., quantitative classes.) Rather than asking questions and waiting for responses from the teaching team, Ed is intended to be used to bounce ideas off one another and engage in productive ethical debate. The



purpose of such debate is for students to challenge instructors, for students to mutually challenge other students, and occasionally for instructors to challenge students. Through such constructive debate and discussion, we learn and apply the important ethical theories from the past and examine ways to apply them in our personal ethical codes, and we introduce and discuss new ethical situations. We want to analyze not only what behaviors our codes mandate, endorse, allow unconditionally, or allow conditionally but also what they forbid.

In addition to contributions made during live classes, participation grades will be based in part on frequency and quality of engagement on Ed.

One reason we emphasize participation on Ed is that it allows more introverted as well as more extroverted personalities to participate, question, debate, and learn. Part of the participation score will be based on Ed participation, and we reemphasize that debate with other students is as almost as highly valued as debate with instructor and teaching assistants. This will not diminish in-class discussion and debate, which will be encouraged, monitored, and evaluated as well.

Our objective is to have broad, productive discussion and debate on the principles of ethics we present here and how to use them to analyze real world, practical decisions as well as to craft and challenge your own personal ethical code. MS&E 254 is a different type of course, involving maximal learning through lecture and debate during the first part and application during the second part.

Participation on Ed will not be anonymous to instructors or to other students. Your posts must include your name and Stanford email address. Private or confidential communications with instructors should occur through email or in person. Nothing will be confidential, anonymous, or unattributed within Ed.

It is perfectly acceptable for students to send private emails, but keep in mind communications via email will not contribute to participation grades. We recognize that this course can involve highly personal and sensitive conversations from students to instructors and between students, and the teaching staff is mindful to protect such discussions from general or public disclosure. Nothing by students from the course is disclosed outside the course. That is one of the reasons we have chosen Ed; they guarantee no re-distribution or exposure.

## **9. Assignment for First Class**

At some point before the first class, all 254 and 254A students please record a **90 second video** summary of an ethical dilemma you have personally confronted in your life and what you did to resolve it. It doesn't have to be a major "save the world" ethical dilemma. In fact, personal or work or education related problems are preferred. In the past, students have presented challenges ranging from cheating on a significant other to shoplifting to drunk driving to deceiving parents to questioning a job for a company whose product or service they might question. Try to make it simple, straightforward, and ethically focused. We are not looking for students to "plead guilty"



but rather to think of a problem to which they have given attention. Unresolved questions (e.g., should I complain about my manager who has been harassing someone I know) are perfectly appropriate.

Please make sure that the video does not exceed 90 seconds. We will crop the video at 90 seconds if needed.

Be sure to **include a meaningful title** (not just your name) that briefly describes the ethical dilemma that you're discussing.

We ask you to record it and submit it to the corresponding Assignment on Canvas **by the end of the day of the first class on April 2, 2024**. For your second small assignment, we will group the submitted ethical challenges into groups of ten and ask you to **write a brief response (~50 words each) to the personal ethical dilemma videos** that you watched. We will send those group postings out by Friday April 5, 2024.

The objective here is to immerse yourself quickly into the world of ethics, even before ethical codes or ethical theories in the course are presented so that you begin the process of ethical analysis from scratch. Your evaluations will not be graded, but they will be “checked” for submission and effort and included in your participation score.

## 10. Homework Submission (Please No PDFs)

The teaching staff makes comments directly into your draft ethical codes and written submissions. PDF and other formats do not easily accommodate that. Please make all submissions save for your final ethical code in an editable **Word or Google Doc format**.

## 11. Teaching Team Contact Information

- Instructor: Dale Nesbitt, [dale.nesbitt@arrowheadeconomics.com](mailto:dale.nesbitt@arrowheadeconomics.com) or [dnesbitt@stanford.edu](mailto:dnesbitt@stanford.edu),
  - Phone: (650) 218-3069, any time between 0800 and 2200 Pacific Daylight Time (Stanford time.)
  - Professional CV on course website.
  - MS&E website CV: <https://msande.stanford.edu/person/dale-nesbitt>.
- Teaching Assistant: Caitlin Casey, [cmcasey@stanford.edu](mailto:cmcasey@stanford.edu)
  - Phone: (574) 340-9940, any time between 0900 and 2300 Pacific Daylight Time (Stanford time)
- Teaching Assistant: Alexis Legrand, [legranda@stanford.edu](mailto:legranda@stanford.edu)
  - Very responsive through email
- Teaching Assistant: Rodney Guillaume, [rodneygl@stanford.edu](mailto:rodneygl@stanford.edu)



- Very responsive through email

Please email us with personal questions and reserve phone calls for important situations.

## 12. Office Hours

Prof. Nesbitt will be having in person or Zoom office hours **on Wednesdays 1:00-3:00 Pacific Daylight Time** (Stanford Time) beginning the first week of the course (first week office hours will be held on April 3, 2024 from 1:00-3:00. All subsequent office hours will be held every subsequent Wednesday). Office hour conversations are intended to be private and separate from the Ed group discussion, where public questions will be addressed. To keep such discussions private between student and instructor, we can use office hours, and we can arrange to conduct private, two-way conversations by phone one at a time or perhaps with multiple participants at the request of the people requesting office hours. The instructor would appreciate email requests for office hour times so as to facilitate coordination.

In addition to actively monitoring Ed, CAs Caitlin, Alexis, and Rodney are available by appointment. Feel free to reach out at any point!

## 13. Required Course Text

***Ethics for the Real World: Creating a Personal Code to Guide Decisions in Work and Life***, Ronald A. Howard and Clinton D. Korver, Harvard Business Press, 2008. If the Bookstore is out, please order it from Amazon or equivalent right away.

## 14. Course Requirements

Students enrolled for 1 unit (254A): Attend all classes; be prepared; participate in class discussions; complete ethical code rough drafts; complete your personal ethical code.

Students enrolled for 3 units (254): Attend all classes; be prepared; participate in class discussions; submit essays; complete eth ethical code rough drafts; make a midterm and final presentation; complete an ethical code.

## 15. Course Conduct

The course is intended to be interactive. Discussion is intended to be intellectual, didactic, and explorational, not personal, evaluative, judgmental, political, or to advance a point of view. **Political commentary, labeling, and reproaching are discouraged.** The class has been a very safe, non-judgmental, non-penalizing environment to conduct deep, substantive, wide-ranging ethical discussions with sometimes contrary or controversial points of view or topics. The quality of substantive discussion in this course has been fantastic, and thwarting politics, labels, or reproachment has done much to ensure that. No one is “marked down” or judged in such



discussions and comments. Thinking out loud or conjecturing are encouraged. The quality of discussion in past classes has been spectacular. The above applies to both in-class and Ed discussions. In fact, the instructor has constantly been amazed at the amount of instruction and learning that occurs through debate and discussion.

## 16. Grading

### 16.1. Three Credit MS&E 254 and SCPD Students

Three credit 254 students will be graded on the following, all of which will contribute to the final grade as follows:

Class Participation, including attendance	20%
Two Essays on Ethical Principles	10%
Midterm Presentation	10%
Ethical Code Rough Drafts (x2)	5%
Final Presentation	20%
Final Ethical Code	30%

- **Class participation (20%):** Much of the value in this course comes from class discussion and substantive participation. Attendance in live classes is required (except for SCPD students, by Stanford rule). We benefit in this class from various points of view. Reading the assignments carefully and participating in discussion are vital to creating a rich and rewarding class experience. Quality counts more than quantity; we seek frequent and thoughtful debate, discussion, and analysis. Comments of high quality move the conversation forward, highlight new or interesting thoughts, and show evidence of listening to those who have spoken before. You also have the opportunity to participate on the Ed discussion forum with high-quality posts and/or responses. Class participation will account for both of these avenues.
  - **CA Presentations.** Each CA will devise, schedule, and make a presentation, a lecture, on an ethical topic of his or her choice of up to an hour in length. These CA presentations will allow personal attendance and participation (at a Stanford location and time announced by each CA) and will be on Zoom. We encourage in-person attendance for students at Stanford. It is required that students attend 75 percent of the CA presentations as part of their attendance grade. CAs have much to contribute, and they gain teaching and lecture experience in a class setting. 1/4 of the participation grade will be determined by attendance at CA presentations.



- **Final Presentations.** Each student presentation team will devise, schedule, and make a presentation, a lecture, on an ethical topic of their choice (with approval of the teaching staff). These final presentations will be done in the final 2-3 weeks of the course. It is required that students attend 75 percent of the final student presentations as part of their attendance grade. Student presentations have much to contribute to the teaching in the class. 1/4 of the participation grade will be determined by attendance at final student presentations. Attendance will be taken by the teaching staff.
- **Ed Participation.** Ed participation, which will comprise ½ of the attendance grade, will be evaluated by the teaching staff once every two weeks. They will assess number of submissions, whether posing or responding to a particular ethical issue (posing an issue is generally more difficult and substantive, quality of submission, relevance to ethics, avoidance of politics, labels, and record for every student their number of quality submissions and interactions.
- **Attendance Multiplier.** Attendance in this course is mandatory. Absences must be communicated to the teaching team in advance, or as soon as possible after missing class. You are allowed one unexcused absence during the course. Each additional unexcused absence will reduce your overall participation grade by 1/9. For example, a final raw participation score of 100 with 2 unexcused absences will be calculated as:  $100 * 8/9 = 89\%$  Overall Participation Score.
- **Two Essays on Ethical Principles (10%).** There are two homework essays in the early part of the course. They address contemporary ethical problems based on consequentialism, utilitarianism, action-based ethics, and other methods from the course. The teaching staff will pose an ethical topic, and we will want a brief ~500-word essay on the topic. The objective is to apply ethical reasoning and theories to a topic of current interest and thereby sharpen ethical analysis skills.
- **Midterm Presentation (10%):** Toward the middle of the quarter, we will set aside time to have short presentations on a topic of your choice. The goal of this presentation will be to introduce a topic to the class that you believe has significant ethical implications. (Individual or very small group actions have proven much better than large group or government actions.) Please ensure it is an ethical (not political or legal) topic. We ask that you let the teaching staff know of your topic a week in advance to ensure the topics are ethically centered and to be sure every student is part of a team. These presentations will be recorded on your own time and made available to the class but not presented live in class.
- **Ethical Code Rough Drafts (5% each):** At two points we will ask for rough drafts of your ethical code. They are required for credit, but more importantly it gives the teaching team a chance to provide feedback to improve the quality and relevance of your final Ethical Code. Your draft and final ethical codes are held in strict confidence, and you will understand why. The lying/deception portion of your ethical code has proven to be the toughest, so you should begin thinking and drafting as early as possible in the course.



- **Final Presentation (20%):** Presentations are your opportunity to lead the class in a discussion or debate. Presentations will be reviewed by the instructors based on how well they help students understand an ethically sensitive issue and how well they help students refine their ethical codes. The teaching team will score the presentations. Presentations are typically 15 minutes in length and are done in small groups. Again, please submit your topic about one week before final presentations to ensure that you are on the right track. These final presentations will be held in class, and there will be one or two extra class sessions to accommodate that.
- **Ethical Code (30%):** The most important assignment in this class is the creation of your Personal Ethical Code. As we will spend most of the class developing and refining your code, our expectations regarding the clarity of the thinking and the overall quality of this assignment are high. The criteria by which your code will be judged can be found in chapter four of the course text. Your grade will not be based on your particular ethical point of view. Your grade will be based on how clearly and thoughtfully you have expressed your ethical point of view and how tied it is to strong, fundamental ethical principles.

### 16.2. One Credit MS&E 254A Students

One credit 254A students will be graded on the following deliverables, all of which will contribute to the final grade.

Class Participation, including initial ethical scenario and Ed discussions	20%
Ethical Code Rough Drafts (15% each)	30%
Final Ethical Code	50%

### 16.3. Engagement and Timeliness

We encourage students to engage deeply with course material. We also insist on timely turn-in of all assignments; failure to be timely without prior excuse results in significant decrement in score.

### 17. Confidentiality

Ethical codes in the past have been extremely personal and disclose sensitive, personal, confidential information. Your ethical code will not be disclosed in draft or final form to other students or anyone else. Only the instructor and CAs will read and comment on your ethical codes. We view your ethical code as a confidential communication between you and the teaching staff, not to be disclosed to third parties in any form. Students will see as their ethical codes are built why we hold them so strictly confidential. They are sensitive and personal. (The instructor



has held his personal ethical code confidential since its inception and discusses pieces of it at his discretion. The instructor recommends that you hold your ethical code personal and confidential for the rest of your life so that you can do all the thinking and modification without oversight, criticism, argument, questioning, mocking, or other forces that tend to interfere with it.)

### 18. Late Assignments

Writing assignments, term papers, and ethical codes are due at the exact time listed in the schedule. Late assignments will not be accepted except in extenuating circumstances with prior approval. Anticipating that there may be glitches in the electronic infrastructure that accompanies this class, we will not penalize students who are precluded by electronic malfunctions or difficulties, more so than under normal circumstances (live classes).

### 19. Final Exam

There is no final exam in the course. We will use the total time in all ten weekly lecture slots for the course. We will use the final exam period to complete any necessary final presentations and for an ethical case study by the Instructor that affected him deeply.

### 20. Class Schedule

Following is the schedule of assignments and due dates, topics, and readings for the 3-credit students. (Note that lectures from April 4, 2024 through May 9, 2024 may slip into May 16, 2024.)

DATE	TOPICS	Readings and Assignments Due Dates
April 2, 2024	Course introduction	<b>Video: Personal Ethical Dilemma Due</b>
	Ethical distinctions	Hand out Exceptions Survey
	Ethical situations	
	Ethics in the news	
April 9, 2024	Personal Ethical Dilemma Review	Reading: Introduction, Chapters 1 and 2
	Ethical Nihilism	<b>Turn in Exceptions Survey</b>
		<b>Review of videos due</b>
	Ethical Egoism/Markets	First ethical essay topic assigned
	Desperation and Ethics	



<b>April 16, 2024</b>	Ethical Relativism	
	Consequentialism	Reading: Chapter 3
	Coercion	<b>Writing: First ethical essay due</b>
	Action Based Ethics	Second ethical essay topic assigned
		<b>Proposed Midterm Presentation Topic Submitted</b>
<b>April 23, 2024</b>	Virtue Ethics	<b>Writing: Second ethical essay due</b>
	Special Topics	Begin your Ethical Code draft on truth telling
	Begin Deception, Stealing, Harming	
<b>April 30, 2024</b>	Finish Deception, Stealing, Harming	Reading: Chapter 4, Appendix B
		<b>Video: Midterm Presentations Due</b>
<b>May 7, 2024</b>	Touchstones (Religion, Business, Secular)	<b>Writing: Ethical Code draft of truth telling due</b>
		<b>Proposed Final Presentation Topic Submitted</b>
<b>May 14, 2024</b>	Business and Professional Ethics	<b>Writing: Ethical Code draft of stealing and harming due</b>
	Analysis of Contemporary Ethical Issues	Reading: Chapters 5,6,7, Epilogue
<b>May 21, 2024</b>	Final Presentations	Final Presentations
<b>May 28, 2024</b>	Final Presentations	Final Presentations
		<b>Writing: Final Ethical Code Due</b>
		Hand out Final Exceptions Survey
<b>June 4, 2024</b>	Final Presentations	Final Presentations
		<b>Final Exceptions Survey Due</b>



<b>C o u r s e</b> <b>Finals Period</b>	Nesbitt Ethical Dilemma Presentation	Final Exceptions Survey Discussion
	Course wrap-up	

## 21. Goal

We want this class to be a fun and interesting respite from the difficulties facing the world these days, as well as teaching and applying ethical theories to construct an ethical code that you can use and adapt the rest of your life to live and act ethically.