Why write a thesis or pursue a minor in Ethics in Society?

Community  We’re a small community of students and faculty from all corners of campus committed to studying and talking about the important ethical issues of the day. Bring your questions, concerns and ideas, and join the conversation.

Normative Inquiry  While our students come from a variety of majors across campus, they share an interest in acquiring a deeper understanding of the ethical frameworks through which contemporary issues of moral concern can be analyzed and evaluated.

Relevance  Ethical questions are woven into every academic and community endeavor at Stanford, just as they are in real life. The complexity of today’s social problems requires students and faculty working together to come up with solutions that are just and well informed.

Advising  Writing a thesis or putting together a minor to complement your major can be daunting. In addition to working closely with distinguished faculty advisors associated with the Center, students are introduced to postdoctoral scholars who share their interests and help them sharpen their ideas and arguments.

Opportunities  Coursework and thesis research in Ethics in Society can lead to a wide array of career opportunities. Our graduates have led successful lives in public service, technology, the academy, corporations and nonprofits. A good number of them have won Rhodes, Marshall and Fulbright scholarships.

The Program in Ethics in Society offers undergraduates the opportunity to write a senior honors thesis or pursue a minor focusing on topics in applied ethics. While the program is grounded in moral and political philosophy, it extends its concerns across a broad range of disciplinary domains and welcomes students from all majors. Indeed, most students come to us seeking resources for tackling difficult ethical questions discovered in their home field of study. The program is guided by the idea that disciplined ethical thought is essential to understanding and solving current social questions and conflicts, and it seeks to encourage moral reflection and practice in areas such as business, law, medicine, politics, public service, international relations, and increasingly in STEM fields, where rapid technological change continually poses new and urgent ethical questions. Students in the program enjoy the benefits of being associated with the McCoy Family Center for Ethics through access to its faculty, postdoctoral scholars, staff and many events and guest speakers.

The Honors Program  Undergraduates who join this tight-knit interdisciplinary community are supported by core courses, a junior Honors Seminar, electives pertaining to their chosen topic, and faculty and postdoctoral fellows dedicated to mentoring them throughout the challenging process of writing a senior thesis on a topic in applied ethics. The program is structured with regular benchmarks that ensure students receive the feedback they need as their projects develop from inception in Winter Quarter of their junior year to final submission and public presentation in the spring of their senior year.
Thoughts of an Ethics in Society Undergraduate

~ An excerpt from "Why Take Ethics," by Avery Rogers, Class of 2022, Ethics in Society Minor

Regardless of your major and career aspirations, I believe it is imperative that you take an ethics class in your subject during your time at Stanford. You don't need to complete a philosophy double major or an Ethics in Society minor to understand ethical questions. Of course, the more the better, but even a single class on the ethics of computing, assistive technology, biological experimentation, journalism or political campaigning could inform the decisions you make for the rest of your life.

An ethics class will not give you all the answers to moral questions—many answers don't exist—but should give you frameworks by which to make ethical decisions on a case-by-case basis in the future. When should a company be transparent with its consumers, and when can they ethically hide internal information? How much should technology imitate human behavior? Should neuroimaging be used in courts of law? Such questions are not black and white, but determining boundaries and grey areas will help us all to address these issues consciously and systemically.

Chances are, our campus is now home to the founders of the next Facebook and Cambridge Analytica, the next head of Volkswagen, the next Stanley Milgram. We, of all people, must go into the world with ethics at the front of our minds. Most unethical behavior is not deliberate, but simply careless, and the only way to protect us from careless ignorance is ethical knowledge.

— Originally published May 2, 2018 in the Stanford Daily

The Minor

The Ethics in Society minor is open to students in any department who wish to deepen their understanding of the moral and political dimensions of personal and social issues encountered in their majors. Whether you are curious about the ethical implications of CRISPR or are concerned about the fairness of current immigration policy, coursework in the minor will teach you how to reason about human values in a thoughtful and nuanced way. The Ethics minor is the perfect complement to fields of study that naturally engage with questions of values such as Science, Technology, and Society; Human Biology; Symbolic Systems; most social sciences; and STEM fields burgeoning with technological innovation.

Application and Requirements

Interested students are invited to contact the Undergraduate Program Coordinator to discuss the application process and meet with the program's Faculty Director, Brent Sockness.

Pam Goodman, Program Coordinator: pgoodman@stanford.edu

Entry into the honors program occurs upon successful application in the fall quarter of junior year (mid-October deadline). The honors program is open to students with a cumulative GPA of 3.3 or higher, and students are expected to maintain this minimum average in courses taken to satisfy the program requirements. Courses counting toward the program may be double-counted towards the student's major requirements.

Application to the minor can occur at any point prior to the last day of Autumn Quarter senior year. There is no minimum GPA requirement to pursue a minor, but we do require that you discuss your course of study with the Faculty Director, who will assist in finding an appropriate minor advisor. Courses counting for the minor may not be double-counted toward your major.

For a full description of the requirements for the honors or minors programs, please visit ethics.stanford.edu or exploredegrees.stanford.edu.

Course Samplings

Some that have recently been offered:

ETHICSOC 103X: Contemporary Muslim Political Thought
ETHICSOC 134R: The Ethics of Elections
ETHICSOC 136R: Introduction to Global Justice
ETHICSOC 174B: Universal Basic Income: The Philosophy Behind the Proposal

Select titles of recent undergraduate theses


"Autism, Neurodiversity and Difference," by Sara Altman (Symbolic Systems). Advised by Rob Reich


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