Should states ever do anything that is not in their immediate interests? Can a foreign policy that is devoid of ethics be legitimate? What are our responsibilities to others? What is the best way to measure development? Why should we care about global inequality? Is there any reason why we should care about the impact of global warming on future generations? Is terrorism justified? Is torturing suspected terrorists justified? What is wrong with shooting captured prisoners-of-war rather than keeping them alive to be returned after the cessation of hostilities? What are human rights? Are they universal? Does a world based on tolerance mean that I have to accept anything someone does on the grounds of cultural autonomy? Is global justice or global order more important? When, if ever, should states intervene militarily in the affairs of others?

These and other questions underlie several observations that are the foundation for this course. One, states are guided not only by the pursuit of power but also by a sense of what is right and wrong. In other words, the realist-inspired caricature of a world comprised by self-interested states pursuing power at all costs is just that – a caricature that has little basis in reality. This course begins with the assumption that states are constantly attempting to marry power and values in their foreign policies and are doing so both principled and pragmatic reasons. Second, there are a range of different ethical metrics that we can use to judge whether an act or outcome is legitimate. Some acts we might justify on the grounds that the means justify the ends, but other acts we might condemn as just wrong regardless of the situation. Is it possible to act morally in an immoral world? Should we? Third, international ethics do not simply exist but are actively debated, negotiated, and created by states and nonstate actors. Is it the case that those with the most power determine the content of international ethics? In other words, do the biggest and most powerful states get to decide what is right and what is wrong? Does might make right? Fourth, some treat the extension and expansion of international ethics as a sign of a growing and deepening sense of international community. On what grounds? Do we, as members of the international community, have obligations to distant strangers? What can and should we do? In short, this course: presumes that international actors are guided by more than simply power; explores how they are constantly involved in trying to sort out what sort of ethics should guide their foreign policies and international actions; are constrained, in some measure, by their prior agreements; and are constantly judging their actions against not only what is possible but also what might exist.

These four guiding themes are woven throughout the three sections of the course. We begin by reviewing: the conventional wisdom regarding the presence of ethics in a world of sovereign states; the different kinds of ethical metrics used to judge acts, events, and outcomes; whether international ethics can ever be singular and with a consensus or must it always be plural and relative? After having examined these foundational issues in a somewhat abstract way, Section II and III explore the cases of global security and global development. Although the standard line is that all is fair in (love and) war, beginning in the 19th century states began placing limits on when they could go to war, how they could wage war, the weapons they could use, the conditions under which they could kill civilians, and how they could treat their captured enemies. In short, they tried to humanize war, and while we will not judge whether or not they have been successful, we will examine why and how they have tried to do so. Why do we worry
about global inequality and what, if anything can be done about it? The world has always been divided between the haves and have-nots, the divisions between the two have grown over the decades, but why should we care? And how should we care? What is the best way to try and improve the material lives of others? Since World War Two international economic assistance has been a growth industry, but it is unclear whether all this effort has had much impact. Is there a better way? And, if not, does that mean we should give up?

Requirements. All students must come to class prepared to contribute through discussion - which requires you to have read and reflected on the materials assigned for that class session. You will be graded according to the following assignments: a take-home midterm (25%); a final exam (35%); and two short papers (20% each). With respect to the short papers, you will find throughout the semester opportunities to write on a particular question. You can choose any you want, but you must do two and these papers must be turned at the beginning of class on the day of the relevant readings. In other words, you cannot do a paper if we have passed the date in which we have discussed the material. No exceptions to this rule. I do not give a grade for discussion, but I have a soft heart for those who do.

Readings. There is a fair bit of reading in this course, including books, articles, essays, and reports. You must do the reading for each week before coming to seminar.

Peter Singer. The Life You Can Save. NY: Random House

Office Hours. My office is at 501J the Institute for Global and International Studies, ESIA, and my office hours are Tuesdays 10:00-12:00 and by appointment. The best way to reach me is either after class or by email: barnett@gwu.edu. David Banks is the teaching assistant for this class and his email is debanks@gwmail.gwu.edu. His office hours are Wednesdays from 1-3 at David Hodgkins House (609 21st Street) and by appointment. He can be contacted at debanks@gwmail.gwu.edu

Section I:
A World of Ethics

January 11 Ethics in a World of States

The dominant view of international relations, namely realism, makes two important empirical and normative claims about ethics in world affairs: states pursue the national interest to the exclusion of values, ideals, and principles; and states should pursue the national interest to the exclusion of values, ideals, and principles. Where does this view come from? What is the empirical evidence to support this claim? Should we advise state leaders to avoid anything that it not in the national interest defined in terms of material power? If so, isn’t this an ethical stance? Should we think of the world as divided between sovereignty and ethics, or can we imagine ways in which the two are interrelated?
We want states and other international actors to do the right thing. But what should be our ethical metric for making such judgments? How would we know the “right” policy, action, or outcome if we saw one? Does this mean that it has its heart in the right place? Or can we only know good policy after the fact, when we see the results? When is it safe to look? Is a good foreign policy one that selects the proper path, or can the ends justify the means? Do we care about the process? Do we want an inclusive, deliberative process? What if a more democratically based foreign policy leads to “worse” outcomes? How important is democracy to the conduct of foreign policy? How inclusive and how deliberative? Does everyone have to be able to represent their interests in the process? Or is it enough that their views are taken into account? In this respect, what is the relationship between ethics and legitimacy?

Singer: The Life You Save, chaps. 1-5.

We live in a world of diversity, where different values drive different ideologies and different standards of what is right and what is wrong. Does cultural diversity, by definition, mean that we live not just in a pluralistic world but also a world of moral relativism? Can we find an overlapping consensus on basic fundamental rights, and, if so, how should we go about doing so?

Clifford Geertz. 1984. “Anti anti-Relativism.” American Anthropologist 86, 2,
February 1  International Humanitarian Law

It was not until the mid-19th century that states got serious about identifying rules and principles to guide their conduct during war. Why then? In which areas? Why would war-waging states choose to “civilize” organized killing? Does the emergence of international humanitarian law represent the first sighting of a more humane international order?

Byers: chaps. 10 & 11.
Gross: chap 1.
Graham: chap. 3.

February 8  Can I Wage War, Now?

A critical distinction in international humanitarian law is between jus en bello (waging a just war) and jus en nillo (waging war through just means). What makes for a just war? How has this changed over the decades? Can states wage war only in self-defense, or are there other times when they are justified using force? Specifically, in an age of terrorism and nontraditional threats, to states have to wait until they are attacked before they can strike? What is the difference between prevention and pre-emption?

Byers: Part Three.
Read the following in Henry Shue and David Rodin, eds., Preemption: Military Action and Moral Justification: Shue and Rodin, "Introduction"; Hew Strachan, "Preemption and Prevention in Historical Perspective"; and Marc Trachtenberg, "Preventive War and U.S. Foreign Policy."
Walzer: chap. 5.

February 15  Humanitarian Intervention?

After decades of derision, humanitarian intervention, the use of military means to protect civilians against mass violations of human rights, is undergoing a renaissance, most
spectacularly in the form of a “responsibility to protect”? When, if ever, should states be authorized to use force to protect distant populations?

Graham: chap. 5.
Walzer: chap. 6.

February 22 Who Can I Kill?

It is possible to fight an unjust war with just means and just war through unjust means? What makes the conduct of war just or unjust? A raff of issues emerge, including: are some weapons uncivilized and inhumane? how far states must go to prevent the killing of civilians? and what constitutes proportionality during war?

Walzer: chaps. 8-13.
Walzer: chap. 8.
Gross: chap. 11.
Graham: chap. 4.

Paper Choice: In the debate between Walzer/Margalit and Kasher and Yadlin, whose views make most sense? What are the central points of divide?

March 1 Accountability and War Crimes

Global accountability has becoming something of a buzzword over the last several decades, and the drive to make accountability global makes sense given a globalizing world. Although these developments can be seen in various areas, perhaps the most interesting development is to make public officials accountable for violations of international law, most clearly exemplified by the creation of the International Criminal Court. Is this justice? Or is this justice run amok?

Walzer: chap. 18.
Dirty Hands

The problem of dirty hands confronts how public officials act in a world that is messy, provides plenty of opportunities for opportunistic behavior, allows for considerable expediency and selecting the path of least moral resistance, fulfilling one moral duty might mean violating another, and requires the justification for what might be viewed as unsavory behavior under ideal circumstances.


Torture

The problem of dirty hands runs up and down the foreign policy bureaucracy. Over the last decade torture has been the signature issue regarding dirty hands. Is torture wrong under all circumstances? What is the bureaucratic setting that makes torture permissible, thinkable, and defensible?


March 29  

Accountability and National Security

This week we return to the question of accountability, but take a more in-depth look at the possibility of war crimes committed by American officials. Although Americans typically associate the question of prosecuting former officials for wrong-doing as the kind of thing that others have to worry about, that is, those states making the transition from authoritarianism to democracy, in fact this country has had to confront the same issues. I want to be clear: we do not know if American officials committed war crimes, but the issue is whether they should be investigated for doing so and, if there is sufficient evidence, should they be held to account and in what way?

Walzer: chap. 19.

Paper Choice: Write a memo to the Attorney General recommending a course of action regarding an inquiry into and prosecution of those accused of war crimes during the Bush administration.

Section III:  

What, if anything, Can and Should Be Done to Reduce Global Poverty?

April 6 What Do the Rich Owe to the Poor?

Do the rich owe anything to the poor? What would that be? Are there limits? And, who exactly owes what to whom? If we decide that the rich do owe something to the poor, are there better and worse ways of fulfilling those obligations? Does thinking about a world divided
between the haves and have-nots contribute to a greater sense of global solidarity, or does it sustain demeaning and patronizing visions of the poor?

L. Wenar. 2005. “Should We Stop Thinking about Poverty in Terms of Helping the Poor?” Ethics and International Affairs, 19, 1, 19-27.
Graham: Chap. 7

Paper Choice: You are asked to participate in a debate at GWU on the following question: The United States' primary obligations are to its citizens, and only once its citizens are taken care of can it begin to address the needs of foreigners. Take a position.

April 13 Foreign Aid

Frequently the debate on foreign aid turns on whether it works, or not. What is the nature of the debate? What is the evidence to conclude one way or another? What are the unintended consequences of aid, and can these unintended consequences be minimized?

Singer: chapters 6-7.

April 20 Capabilities

Traditionally, well-being and development were operationalized in terms of per capita income on the grounds that this indicator did a reasonably good job of capturing much of what we wanted to know about the level of affluence and opportunity in a society. These indicators not only became measures of outcomes, they also became policy goals, i.e. public policy should be trying to improve per capita income. A growing number of critics, though, argued that such elegance hijacked a more robust, inclusive, and meaningful notion of development. What do these more fine-grained measures reveal that are obscured by more parsimonious indicators? What are the implications for policy?

Kristof and Wu: Entire Book.
Singer: chaps. 8-10.

Paper Choice: Select a chapter from Half the Sky and show how it is or is not consistent with a capabilities approach.