

Engineering Ethics

Last Updated: Mon, 01/05/2026

Course prefix: PHIL

Course number: 3109

Section: RK

CRN (you may add up to five):
33619 33620

Instructor First Name: Robert

Instructor Last Name: Kirkman

Semester: Spring

Academic year: 2026

Course description:

Engineering is a profession, but what exactly does that mean? What is it that engineers are supposed to profess?

On one account, to be a professional is to have an exclusive claim on authoritative judgment in some domain, which brings with it a certain social standing and a higher degree of autonomy than is generally possible for those who merely have jobs. That acknowledgment of authority is conditional, however: for the public to accept and to trust such an exclusive claim of expertise, professionals must strive to be *worthy* of trust.

In short, to become a professional is to make a commitment to practice well and responsibly; it is to be accountable to the public.

In this course, we will examine the ethical commitments at the heart of engineering through attentive reading, lecture, active discussion and writing.

Course learning outcomes:

The overall goal of any ethics course worth its salt is to foster the development of mature and adept moral practice, the ability to respond well to complex problem situations as they arise.

The more modest goal for this course is to make a few changes in how you perceive and think about the work of an engineer and about the responsibilities you take on when you become a professional.

For our purposes, these goals should be enough for us to go on. For administrative purposes, though, the syllabus must include some more determinate “outcomes” which align with our aims.

Required course materials:

There is one required text for the course, available through the Georgia Tech Bookstore: Harris, et al., *Engineering Ethics: Concepts and Cases*, Sixth Edition (paperback: ISBN 978-1-337-55450-3). There are also electronic versions of the book available but, whatever you do, be sure you get the Sixth Edition!

Grading policy:

With the exception of the Engagement assignments, all grading for the course will be done by the Teaching Assistants, with the guidance and supervision of the Instructor.

Also with the exception of the Engagement assignments, written assignments will be assessed on a 3-point scale, built around the *expectations* of each assignment as specified above: 3 = exceeds expectations; 2 = meets expectations; 1 = does not meet expectations; 0 = not submitted.

To meet expectations, accomplish the basic work of the assignment or exam prompt, demonstrating a solid understanding of the matter at hand, making the necessary distinctions and/or connections, and no more.

To exceed expectations, do more than just put in effort: take a risk; reach for some new connection among ideas; try an unusual angle, a shift in perspective; or, really, just do anything that demonstrates full engagement with the process of inquiry aimed at understanding.

The final grade will be determined by an accumulation of points, up to a maximum of 74:

- 12 Engagement Assignments, dropping the lowest two for a total of 10 points;
- 9 Exercises, dropping the lowest one for a total of 24 points;
- 2 Exams, up to a total of 50 points.

Final grades will then be determined by the following scale:

A = 66-74

B = 57-65

C = 48-56

D = 40-47

Please note that the gradebook on Canvas will be of limited use to us: while it may provide a record of how many points you have earned on each assignment, it will attempt to

calculate your final grade as a weighted average. Ignore that.

Attendance policy:

N/A

Academic honesty/integrity statement:

Georgia Tech aims to cultivate a community based on trust, academic integrity, and honor. Students are expected to act according to the highest ethical standards. For information on Georgia Tech's Academic Honor Code, please visit <http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/policies/honor-code/> or <http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/rules/18/>.

Any student suspected of cheating or plagiarizing on a quiz, exam, or assignment will be reported to the Office of Student Integrity, which will investigate the incident and identify the appropriate penalty for violations of the Honor Code.

Take this seriously. All suspected instances of academic dishonesty will be dealt with immediately, according to Institute procedures.

Core IMPACTS statement(s) (if applicable):

Core IMPACTS: Humanities

This course should direct students toward a broad *Orienting Question*:

- How do I interpret the human experience through creative, linguistic, and philosophical works?

Completion of this course should enable students to meet the following *Learning Outcome*:

- Students will effectively analyze and interpret the meaning, cultural significance, and ethical implications of literary/philosophical texts or of works in the visual/performing arts.

Course content, activities and exercises in this course should help student develop the following *Career-Ready Competencies*:

- Ethical Reasoning
- Informational Literacy
- Intercultural Competence

Ethics Requirement

Many of you are taking this course to fulfill the Ethics Requirement of your degree program. You may get more out of your experience with the course if you know the background of that requirement.

Degree programs in engineering are evaluated and accredited by a non-profit organization known as ABET, the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology. In the current version of the criteria for accreditation, Criterion 3.3 specifies that students should come away from a degree program in engineering with “an ability to recognize ethical and professional responsibilities in engineering situations and make informed judgments, which must consider the impact of engineering solutions in global, economic, environmental, and societal contexts.”

In April 2023, The Academic Faculty of the Institute specified outcomes for courses that fulfill the Ethics Requirement. Students should come away with:

- An ability to recognize ethical and professional responsibilities in real-world contexts.
- An ability to assess actions or decisions based on established ethical principles and theories, or through deliberative processes.
- An ability to consider the implications of actions, both broadly (e.g., global, economic, environmental, or societal) and for individuals.

This course is designed to foster the kind of moral imagination that is a prerequisite for these three “outcomes.”