Philosophy 105: Ethics (Fall 2017)

Professor: Max Cherem
Schedule: M/W/F, 9:40-10:55am, UL306
Office hours: T/TH, 9-11am (last appointment 10.45), HH202

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Course Description:
Ethics is a sub-field of philosophy with rather lofty goals. It claims to be the study of what is valuable, what people have practical reason to do, and what is right and wrong. This course is only an introduction to part of this rich subfield: normative ethics. At the end we may have time for a small taste of applied ethics.¹ We start by engaging with standard attempts to question ethics (amoral-ism, relativism, egoism, etc). We then survey the main ethical frameworks: virtue ethics, utilitarianism and deontology. We will read a variety of classical texts in these traditions as well as some more contemporary authors. The course is designed to demonstrate why ethics matters, to expose students to a variety of ethical frameworks and to equip them with the conceptual resources to think critically about each framework.

General learning objectives:
By the end of Phil 105, all students are expected to be able to:

- Identify and articulate the standard problems encountered by approaches that attempt to deny or deflate the need for a moral system or framework of evaluation (subjectivism, relativism, amoral-ism, etc).
- Identify and articulate the fundamental elements of and differences between the main schools within moral philosophy (virtue ethics, utilitarianism, deontology).
- Understand the arguments of each author in detail as well as the assumptions that they rely upon.
- Identify and articulate the weak points in each way of viewing morality and the weak points in each particular author’s writing.
- Make a considered judgment backed up by reasoned argumentation (so, not a mere preference or opinion) as to the moral system that the student finds most convincing. The student should be able to construct a successful persuasive argument explaining why they believe their chosen system is superior to other systems.

We will meet these learning objectives through a combination of readings, pre-class questions that accompany readings, lectures, in-class discussion, and individual assignments (see below).

Expectations: This syllabus will let you know my expectations. I am also interested in knowing about you and what your expectations for class are. Please take a moment to fill out the note card on your desk with the following:

(1.) Name, year, major (if known) and relevant interests—academic or otherwise.
(2.) Prior experience in philosophy, political science, logic, mock trial, pre-law or debate (if any).
(3.) (Most important) Your expectations for this class!

Participation and Attendance: jointly make up 10% of your grade. Attendance is a necessary yet not sufficient condition for participation (you can’t participate unless you attend, but simply attending does not mean you are participating). You can take one unexcused absence without consequence. Each subsequent absence will lower your participation grade by 1/3⁴ of a letter grade (B→B-). Missing eight classes or more is grounds for failing the course. Coming to class more than 5 minutes late constitutes ¼ of an absence. If you miss more than 3 days without extenuating, documented reasons you will automatically loose this entire 10%. Think about it: we have 10 weeks and each week we meet 3 times. Missing 3 days is already missing a week—10% of the entire class! Please e-mail me if you miss class. Whether you are late or absent you are responsible for being aware of everything that goes on in class (check with me or classmates for notes or handouts). As for participation: you need to consistently be an active participant to earn full participation (contribute to in-class discussion, answer questions, respectfully critique / respond to / build upon a point made by an author or a fellow classmate, etc). This means that you should always come to class having carefully and thoroughly read the assigned readings. We will primarily use structured questions and class discussion to analyze the readings; both methods require familiarity with the text and active questioning based on that familiarity.

Paper writing standards: Writing a philosophy paper is different from the paper writing you might do for other classes. Although many of the questions we will discuss have no single “correct” answer there are nevertheless better and worse ways to construct an argument. You will be graded on how well you defend your views (whatever they may be) not what position you take (though, of course, some ‘positions’ are themselves indefensible due to internal contradictions,

¹ Ethics is usually split into 3 parts: meta-ethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. In a ten-week course at the undergraduate level there is no way to give a good introduction to all 3 areas.
unsound inferences, etc…). For guidance please read Jim Pryor’s essay “How to Write a Philosophy Paper” (required). Even though his style can be snarky, it helps: http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html. You should strive to clearly and succinctly express your arguments. This may involve an accurate, short summary of another’s arguments. You need to express yourself very clearly in your writing. I can only grade what you write on the page. Even if you know a theory or argument well in your head, I can only grade what you write (there is no fair way evaluate what someone intends to write but does not clearly express). I write fairly detailed comments on each student’s paper in order to explain why you have earned a certain grade. Comments are meant to help you identify your strengths and weaknesses and to do better on the next paper. If you ever feel that my comments show that I have misunderstood what you wrote then please meet with me and we will go over the paper. One way to check your writing is to let a friend read you’re paper and see if they understand it. You can also set up an appointment at the writing center. But, keep in mind that it is not a “one-stop shop” that will simply “fix” all the mistakes in an assignment for you so that you get a better grade. The center’s purpose is to help develop your writing skill by giving sustained feedback over 4 years.

Turning in writing and extensions: Assignments will be counted down 1/3 of a grade (e.g. A to A-, or B- to C+) for each day (or part of a day) they are late. Thus, it is important to turn things in on time. Please plan ahead so that you are not working on something right up until the deadline. While extensions will not normally be granted, please let me know if you feel there are extenuating circumstances that merit an extension.

Laptops and cell phones: This class involves engaged discussion. A distraction-free environment where people can focus on the material is always best for discussion. Silence your phones at the start of class. Do not text during class. Because laptops typically produce a variety of distractions (email, Facebook, etc) they are not allowed.

Discussion questions: I distribute questions via email 1-3 times each week to help you focus on the most salient issues in the readings. Although we will discuss some of these questions in class we will not always get to every question. I encourage you to think about the questions we do not get to after class and re-read the material with them in mind. Doing so will help you on assignments and papers. You are also encouraged to come to office hours to discuss any questions that we don’t get to in class or other aspects of the material as well.

Readings: Please read the readings before class on the day for which they are listed below (except the 1st day). You will need to thoroughly read (not skim) all assigned readings. You will probably need to read some assignments two or three times. This course has difficult reading and philosophy texts take time to read. I don’t want anyone to fall behind, so make sure you set aside enough time in your fall schedule to do the readings. You are encouraged to come to office hours to talk further about the readings.

Plagiarism and academic integrity: I do not tolerate plagiarism or other violations of academic integrity. Any instance of plagiarism (no matter how small or unintentional) will automatically result in at least a failure of the assignment and will be reported to dean of student affairs. It is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with the college’s policies. For plagiarism see: https://reason.kzoo.edu/studev/stuconduct/. In particular: art.1, sect.17 & 18 and art.3, B1. For academic integrity see: https://reason.kzoo.edu/studev/policies/dishonest/. If, after reading the college policies, you have questions about what constitutes either plagiarism or academic integrity then please ask.

Accommodations: If you need accommodations (due to learning, physical, emotional or other disabilities) please let me know in the first week so we can start certifying the accommodation: http://reason.kzoo.edu/studev/disabilities/

Short summary assignments: For each of the 3 main moral positions we cover I will assign a prompt asking you to summarize an author’s views or a particular issue. Because the prompts will be fairly straightforward your response should be short: 550 words maximum! You only need to do 2 of the prompts and you may choose which 2 to write. The prompts are assigned as we go along. This means that if you choose to skip one prompt you must do the remaining ones. You may also choose to do all 3 prompts and take the highest 2 grades. Short summary assignments are assigned as we go along. They will typically be emailed to you after we finish a unit and you’ll have about 1 week to do them.

Grading breakdown:
- Attendance and participation: 10%
- 2 short summaries (maximum 550 words each) throughout the term: 30% (each worth 15%)
- Midterm paper: 30%
- Final paper: 30%
**Required Texts:**
- J. J. C. Smart & Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against*.
- Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Mary Gregor (trans./ed.)
- James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (6th ed.) [7th ed. just released, but we will use the 6th ed.]
- Coursepack (available at the Kalamazoo College bookstore as of 09/10)

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<th>Week 1</th>
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<td><strong>Mon, 09/11:</strong> Course basics. Syllabus review, introduction to the course.</td>
<td>Reading: Jim Pryor’s online essay “How to Write a Philosophy Paper” (see above for web address)</td>
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<td><strong>Wed, 09/13:</strong> What is Morality / Ethics? Some skepticism about morality.</td>
<td>Reading: Rachels, James. Chapter 1 (pgs. 1-13) AND Singer, Peter “About Ethics” (coursepack) AND Plato excerpt (part of “Book II”) from <em>The Republic</em> (coursepack).</td>
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<td><strong>Mon, 09/18:</strong> Relativism and subjectivism continued.</td>
<td>Reading: Rachels, James. Chapters 2 &amp; 3 (pgs. 14-47).</td>
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<td><strong>Wed, 09/20:</strong> Contemporary challenges to morality: relativism and subjectivism continued.</td>
<td>Reading: Williams, Bernard. “The Amoralist”. (coursepack)</td>
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<td><strong>Fri, 09/22:</strong> A short session Egoism and Contractualism. What would a sophisticated contractual-ist morality really be?</td>
<td>Reading: Rachels, James. Chapters 5 &amp; 6 (pgs. 62-96).</td>
<td>Writing: It is possible that a summary prompt (related to skepticism about morality) will be assigned via email</td>
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<td><strong>Wed, 09/27:</strong> Virtue Ethics: some charges and responses.</td>
<td>Reading: Annas, Julia. “Being Virtuous and Doing the Right Thing” (coursepack)</td>
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<td><strong>Fri, 09/29:</strong> Virtue Ethics in Aristotle: “Eudaimonia”, the highest achievable human good.</td>
<td>Reading: Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics Book I, Chapters 1-6.</td>
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<th>Week 4</th>
<th>NOTE: Midterm paper will be assigned via email on 10/03 or 10/05; likely due in a week—see email.</th>
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<td><strong>Mon, 10/02:</strong> Virtue Ethics: Aristotle’s function argument.</td>
<td>Reading: Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics Book I, Chapters 7-13 &amp; all of Book II.</td>
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<td>Writing: Virtue Ethics related summary prompt assigned via email.</td>
<td><strong>Fri, 10/06:</strong> Utilitarianism—Benthamite’s simplistic account and an introduction to Millian utilitarianism.</td>
<td>Reading: Bentham, Jeremy. Chapters 1 &amp; 4 (coursepack) AND Part of Crisp’s intro. to Utilitarianism (pgs. 5-26 only)</td>
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<th>Week 5</th>
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<td><strong>Mon, 10/09:</strong> Mill’s more sophisticated utilitarianism</td>
<td>Reading: Rachels, James. Chapter 7 (pgs. 97-109), Mill’s Utilitarianism chapters 1 &amp; 2 (pgs. 49-72),</td>
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Wed, 10/11: Mill’s more sophisticated utilitarianism
Reading: Mill’s Utilitarianism Chapter 5.

Week 6:
Mon, 10/16: A more contemporary critique of utilitarianism (NOTE: we are ONLY reading the part by WILLIAMS)
Reading: Williams, Bernard. “A Critique of Utilitarianism” chapters 1-4 (2nd part of “Utilitarianism for and Against”)

Wed, 10/18: A more contemporary critique of utilitarianism continued.
Reading: Williams, Bernard. “A Critique of Utilitarianism” chapters 5-7 (2nd part of “Utilitarianism for and Against”)

Fri, 10/20: Finishing up with utilitarianism.
Reading: Rachels, James. Chapter 8 (pgs. 109-123) AND rest of intro. in Utilitarianism (pgs. 26-32)
Writing: Utilitarianism related summary prompt assigned via email.

Week 7:
Mon, 10/23: Beginning deontological ethics.
Reading: Rachels, Chapters 9 & 10 (pgs. 124-145) & Kant’s Groundwork, Preface and section 1

Wed, 10/25: Deontological ethics in Kant.
Reading: Groundwork, section II (pages 19-31)

Fri, 10/27: Review of Kant.
Reading: To be announced (check your email for reading; I am building in a day of potential review here for Kant).

Week 8:
Mon, 10/30: Deontological ethics in Kant continued.
Reading: Groundwork, section II (pages 31-36)

Wed, 11/01: Deontological ethics in Kant continued
Reading: Groundwork, section II (pages 36-51)
Writing: Deontology related summary prompt assigned via email.

Fri, 11/03: Finishing up deontological ethics.
Reading: Langton, Rae. “Maria von Herbert’s Challenge to Kant” (Coursepack).

Week 9:
Mon, 11/06: Further issues with utilitarianism: harming and wronging.
Reading: blog post from the “What’s Wrong” blog (assigned via email).

Wed, 11/08: A Taste of applied ethics part 1a: global allocation of resources.
Reading: Singer, Peter. “Famine, Affluence and Morality” (coursepack).

Fri, 11/10: A Taste of applied ethics part 2a: global allocation of resources and “effective (?) altruism”
Reading: Short “popular audience” pieces by Lisa Herzog and Amina Srinivasan (handouts)
Writing: final paper topics assigned by this time.

Week 10:
Mon, 11/13: “effective (?) altruism” continued
Reading: Boston Review panel on effective altruism.

Fri, 11/17: A taste of applied ethics part 2b: Euthanasia.
Reading: Callahan, Daniel. “A Case Against Euthanasia” (coursepack)

Monday, 11/20: Final paper due by 9am turned in to HH #202. If you want comments, write your mailbox # on pg. 1!