Fall 2004: MWF 2:40 - 3:55, Humphrey House lounge

Instructor: Dr. Ashley McDowell

Office: 202 Humphrey House
Office phone: 337-7077

Website: www.kzoo.edu/phil/McDowell/Ethics.htm

Weekly ethics lunch: Mondays, 1:15 - 2:00, in the Marriott cafeteria

Coffee hour discussions or movies: Tuesday nights, odd weeks, except week 5. Time and place TBA.

Note: I will be sending announcements, handouts, assignments, and so forth to the class listserv. This listserv includes only your K email address, so make sure email sent there is forwarded to whatever email address you're likely to check frequently.

Texts:
- Weston, A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox
- Pojman, The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature (2nd ed.)
- Packet (article by Cummins)

Course Description

In this course, we will study the nature of morality and immorality. What makes an act, or a person, morally good? What reasons do we have for our answers to such questions? What do we mean by the terms "right" and "good"? Do we have good reasons to act morally? How do things like intentions, results, emotions, and rights fit into what is morally good? This course is about moral theory and "meta-theory," and thus concentrates on abstract issues about the nature of morality and moral concepts. To help us really see and feel the motivations and implications of all of these ideas, the main textbook we're using includes many passages from literature. Powerful literature and non-academic writing, such as in Golding's Lord of the Flies, Hugo's Les Miserables, or King's I Have a Dream, have the power to bring out our moral intuitions and test our moral ideas in ways that academic writing rarely can.

In the first section of the class, we will study the nature of morality, including its purpose, the existence of good and evil, and the question of whether morality is in the end "all relative". In Weeks 3 - 6, we'll be studying three prevalent types of ethical theories: attempts to provide comprehensive moral standards for what makes actions right and wrong, or persons good and bad. The theories focus, roughly, on well-being, duties, and virtues, respectively. We will read defenses, modifications, and criticisms of each type of theory, as well as literary passages guiding our thinking and intuitions.

Next, we will cover some specific moral issues that are particularly pressing. Why should we be moral - or do we only have reason to do what's best for ourselves? How important are freedom, autonomy, and self-respect, and how should those things fit into a moral theory?

The emphasis in the course thus far is on moral theory in the abstract. In Weeks 8 and 9, we will study ways to use philosophical theory in our lives. How can we integrate different values and theories? What do we do when values clash? How can we engage in ethical discussion and decision-making? Our textbook on ethical "tools" will supplement theory with application.

We will close with two subjects that are intended to make this topic feel more "real" and personal to you. We will read one philosopher's survey of modern ethical theory and where it stands, to give you a feel for the vibrant contemporary research that is ongoing in ethics. And finally, we will study ethics and the meaning of life. We all should think about whether and how our lives have meaning - how can ethics help with that quest?

Throughout the course, you will be both learning about what others have said on these issues and developing your own views. We will be approaching other views - and our own - with respect and with a critical eye. The focus will be on providing and assessing arguments for positions, to try to come to the most thoughtful position possible on these questions. You will be tested on how well you have learned what these philosophers have thought, and their reasons and arguments. I will also be assessing how well you have integrated and gained mastery over the various source materials and their contributions to the overall issues. In addition, you will be writing essays in which you take and defend a stand on some aspect of the positions and arguments. To do so, you will learn about philosophical methods and concepts. Perhaps most importantly, you will learn ways to systematize and reasonably think out your moral positions, as well as to discuss moral issues more productively and fairly with others.

Class Format

This class will consist of a combination of lecture and discussion. Since philosophical learning is best done in an environment of discussion, attendance and participation are expected.

You will be responsible for completing the readings before each class, and being prepared to discuss those readings. You should be aware that some of the readings in this course will most likely be quite challenging for you. Give yourself plenty of time to do these readings carefully. Those who want to truly excel...
in this class will most likely want to read each assignment at least twice, and take notes on the readings. In this class, we will be discussing issues that most people find important, and on which many people have strong opinions. We will not be merely exchanging opinions, but will be seeking the truth. In that spirit, everyone’s contributions will be both respected and open to thoughtful criticism.

Course Requirements and Grading Scheme

Response papers: 5%
Every Monday (excluding First Week), you will write a response paper on an assigned topic related to the material currently being covered. This will be a typed, double-spaced short essay, and it should be about a page in length (a little over or under is okay). Response papers will generally involve you thinking about the material we’ve been discussing or reading in a personal way, either grappling with your own view on a topic or applying ethical ideas to things in your own life.

These response papers may be shared with the class, unless you ask me (on the paper) not to do so - you may also ask me to only share your paper with the class anonymously, if you like.

The point of the essays is to integrate your academic learning of the material into your personal life and thinking, and to have the experience of constructing statements of your own reactions to the topics studied. They are meant to help you see the material as relevant to your life, and to see yourself as able to take a place in the ongoing debate about philosophical issues. I will grade these on the basis of how well I see you trying to do those things, not on the basis of your ability to regurgitate facts from the readings, or parrot back to me thoughts I or the philosophers studied have expressed.

Random assignments: 5%
I may occasionally ask you to do an in-class or homework assignment, designed to help facilitate learning and/or discussion. I will let you know details of such assignments as they come up.

Short papers: 15% each
You will write two short (4 - 5 page) papers in the first half of the quarter. These will be on the material covered (roughly) in weeks 1-2 and 3-4, and I’ll give you topics to work with. These will mostly involve your showing that you have grasped the material adequately.

Term paper: 25%
You will be writing one relatively long (about 8-page) paper for this course. The paper will be focused on material covered in Weeks 5 - 7, and will be due before Thanksgiving. Ideally, you will design your own thesis and argument for this paper, taking a stand on something you have found engaging. Those who prefer to be given a paper topic by me will have that option.

The point of this paper is to construct and present a philosophical argument for an ethical thesis. One goal is to apply for yourself the principles of reasoning, insight, philosophical writing, and argumentation modeled and taught in this class. The other goal is to craft a carefully considered position on an issue, grappling with fundamental problems in your own way.

Assignment responsibilities:
For either the short or long papers, I may require you to turn in an outline or draft, or have you exchange outlines or drafts with other students in the class. I will be able to look at rough drafts, either turned in or during office hours; I will let you know details as the time gets nearer. I also encourage you to run rough drafts by each other or your peers at the Writing Center, even if I do not require you to do so. Whether I look at them or not, rough drafts and outlines of each of your papers will be due along with the final drafts.

All assignments must be turned in as hard (paper) copies - no emailed assignments will be accepted except by special permission. It is your responsibility to retain copies of all assignments you turn in, in a reliable format. An assignment that is between one hour and 24 hours late will receive a 1/5 grade reduction. An assignment that is between one day and two weeks late will receive a full grade reduction. Assignments will not be accepted more than two weeks late. You will be permitted one “freebie”: an assignment turned in as much as two days late, no questions asked, as long as you let me know you’re taking your freebie. Be mindful not to use it lightly. The formal requirements for all assignments will be announced in detail well ahead of time, both in class and on the website, and most likely through the email listserv.

A note on changing grades: if you feel you have been assigned a grade unfairly or inaccurately, you should by all means talk to me about it. My only requirement is that you prepare an argument (a set of reasons and facts) before you do so.

A note on reading: don’t succumb to the misconception that in order to read something you only have to move your eyes over the lines, or “read it out loud in your head,” so to speak. What I expect is that you will read the material in a more sophisticated way, thinking as you go. You should be asking yourself the main points, making sure you understand the structure of the reading, thinking about how this reading relates to others you’ve done, and otherwise working to comprehend the material, not just to complete a technical “reading” of it. You might try highlighting, underlining, making marginal notes, or outlines - whatever helps you focus and understand. By the way, don’t forget to read the footnotes or endnotes as well as the main text in your readings.

Final exam: 30%
The final exam for this class will be held Monday Dec. 6, from 8-11 a.m. It will be a cumulative exam, covering your depth of understanding of everything studied in the course.

Participation, attendance, and class conduct: 5%
Attendance is expected: three or more unexcused absences will result in a full grade reduction for the course. Absences will only be excused for required sports activities or practices or for a dire personal circumstance.

Participation is also expected. In a philosophy class of this kind, discussion is absolutely essential, and may be the way you learn most about the material. I know that participation is difficult for some people, but you can consider this a safe place to practice contributing to a group discussion, which you will surely need to do throughout your life. I will require and ensure that conversation in class, although probably critical of ideas, will not be critical of people.

I will keep general track of your contributions in class. Keep in mind that contributions can take various forms, including asking for clarification, participation in group work, and giving helpful examples. Keep in mind also that more does not necessarily mean better; those who excessively dominate discussions, speak disrespectfully, or otherwise use their voices in a negative way may be penalized for doing so. If you are in doubt, ask me.

Your conduct in this class includes improvement and effort. It also includes issues of respectful behavior, such as tardiness, distracting behavior, or disrespectful behavior towards members of the class. We will go over this in class.

Grading scheme:
5% Response papers
5% Random assignments
30% Short papers - two at 15% each
25% Long paper
30% Cumulative final exam
5% Participation, attendance and class conduct

**Academic integrity and the Honor System**

"It is always important to think of the intellectual world as a community of mutual dependence, mutual helpfulness, mutual protectiveness, and common delight. We take ideas from others and we give them to others. We are indebted to others, and others are indebted to us. In sharing and acknowledging the community, we define ourselves more certainly as individuals. The ability to describe our sources is also an ability to define our own originality and our own selves. All communities depend on generosity, trust, definition, and the proper use of sources is part of the mortar that holds the community of the mind together."

- Richard Marius, Expository Writing Program, Harvard University

In this class, as in all classes at Kalamazoo College, we will be operating under the Honor System. It is important that you familiarize yourself with that system, and so I am attaching a copy of the College’s statement of it. You should also familiarize yourself with proper procedures for collaborating, doing research, and citing sources. I expect each of you to visit my webpage and read the essay there called “Plagiarism and How to Avoid It” (http://kzoo.edu/~mcdowell/Academic_integrity_and_plagiarism.htm). Should you have any questions about citations, plagiarism, or honor system issues, please visit or contact me.

Any assignment you turn in that I find to violate academic integrity, either through dishonesty, plagiarism, lack of appropriate citations, or unauthorized collaboration, will receive a grade of 0. Any further instance of a violation of academic integrity will be punished by a failing grade in the class as a minimum sanction.

**Special needs**

If you have any special needs that I can accommodate, please let me know as soon as possible.

**Office hours**

My office hours are posted above. They will be conducted on a first-come, first-served basis, and by appointment, with appointments taking precedence. You should feel absolutely free to come to them and discuss the course, the material, the assignments, or philosophy.

I request that each of you take a few minutes to visit me during my office hours sometime in the first week or two of classes. It will be an opportunity for us to chat one-on-one for the first time, and to get to know each other a bit more.

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**Schedule of Readings**

This schedule is tentative. Any changes will be announced in class and on the website. The reading assignments listed for each day must be completed before that class.

**WEEK ONE**

M 9/27 Introduction

W 9/29 What Is the Purpose of Morality?
TML, Chapter 1

F 10/1 Good and Evil
TML, Chapter 2 pages 54 - 107

**WEEK TWO**

M 10/4 Good and Evil
TML, Chapter 2 pages 108 - 153

W 10/6 Is Everything Relative?
TML, Chapter 3 pages 155 - 191

F 10/8 Is Everything Relative?
TML, Chapter 3 pages 191 - 222

**WEEK THREE**

M 10/11 Utilitarianism: Bentham and Nielsen
TML, Chapter 4 pages 227 - 252

W 10/13 Utilitarianism: Mill
Mill, Utilitarianism Chapters I and II

F 10/15 Utilitarianism: Mill
Mill, Utilitarianism Chapters III and IV

**WEEK FOUR**

M 10/18 Utilitarianism: Williams, LeQuin, Huxley
TML, Chapter 4 pages 252 - 293

W 10/20 Deontology: Kant
TML, Chapter 5 pages 295 - 316

F 10/22 Deontology: duties
WEEK FIVE
M 10/25 Deontology
TML, Chapter 5 pages 337 - 370
W 10/27 Religion and Ethics
TML, Chapter 5 pages 370 - 373 (Plato)
Weston Ch. 2
F 10/29 Virtue Theory
TML, Chapter 6 pages 388 - 423 (Hugo and Aristotle)

WEEK SIX
M 11/1 Virtue Theory
TML, Chapter 6 pages 423 - 457 (Mayo, Hawthorne, Frankena)
W 11/3 Ethics and Egoism: Glauccon's Challenge
TML, Chapter 8 pages 559 - 569
F 11/5 Ethics and Egoism: Rand
TML, Chapter 8 pages 569 - 579

WEEK SEVEN
M 11/8 Ethics and Egoism: criticisms
TML, Chapter 8 pages 580 - 602 (Pojman and Rachels)
W 11/10 Freedom, Autonomy, and Self-Respect
TML, Chapter 10 pages 648 - 665 (King and Angelou)
Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (online: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/White/anthology/wright.html)
F 11/12 Freedom, Autonomy, and Self-Respect: psychology and autonomy
TML, Chapter 10 pages 666 - 680 (Milgram)
Denise Cummins, "Minds in Groups: How Others Influence Our Behavior" (packet)

WEEK EIGHT
M 11/15 Mapping Moral Debates
Weston Ch. 4
W 11/17 When Values Clash: Theoretical Approaches
Weston Ch. 6
F 11/19 When Values Clash: Integrative Approaches
Weston Ch. 7

WEEK NINE
M 11/22 Dialogue: Learning by Talking
Weston Ch. 14
W 11/24 Class cancelled

WEEK TEN
M 11/29 Contemporary Ethics
Rachels, "Modern Ethical Theory" (on reserve)
W 12/1 Ethics and the Meaning of Life
TML Ch. 9, pages 604 - 623
F 12/3 Ethics and the Meaning of Life
TML Ch.9, pages 623 - 647

Monday, 12/6: Final exam, 8-10 a.m., Dewing 103