PHIL 105: Ethics
Fall 2008
Syllabus

MWF 2:40 – 3:55

Ashley McDowell

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Texts and readings:
§ Pojman, How Should We Live? (referred to here as “HSWL”)
Pojman and Vaughn, The Moral Life: An Introductory Reader in Ethics and Literature (3rd ed.) (referred to here as “TML”)
§ electronic reserves or online texts as announced

Note on Moodle: this course website will include lots of information – go to https://moodle.kzoo.edu/course/category.php?id=58 and get yourself logged on.
Note on email: I will be sending mail to the class alias, which only knows your K email address. Make sure your K email is forwarded to whatever email account you use regularly.

What this course is about
In this course, we will study the nature of ethical good and bad. 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 ethically? How do things like intentions, results, emotions, and rights fit into what is ethically good? This course is about ethical theory and "meta-theory," and thus concentrates on abstract issues about the nature of ethics and ethical 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 ethics, including its purpose, the existence of good and evil, and the question of whether ethics is in the end "all relative," or really all about what’s best for oneself, or the same as one’s religion. Afterwards, 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. We will read defenses, modifications, and criticisms of each type of theory, as well as literary passages guiding our thinking and intuitions. Finally, we will cover issues surrounding freedom, autonomy, and self-respect, including an examination of how our psychology can lead us into evil or good.

Throughout the course, you will be 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 taking your own stands on some aspects of the positions and arguments. To do all of this, you will learn about philosophical methods and concepts. Perhaps most importantly, you will learn ways to systematize and reasonably think out your ethical positions, as well as to discuss ethical issues more productively and fairly with others.
What I expect you to achieve:

I want you to learn how to “do philosophy,” and ethics in particular; to gain appreciation for ethics and its issues and arguments; and to learn the views, arguments, and message of the specific authors we’ll study. You will learn about various ethical tools, and learn how to apply all those things for yourself.

As we move into studying the general ethical theories, I will expect you not just to understand the tools, but to see how ethical thinking plays out in rigorous argumentation on particular issues of importance. I will assess your achievements in grasping the issues the philosophers are trying to resolve, and comprehending the differences between approaches and the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches. By the end of the course, I will expect you to be pulling everything together – in particular, using the tools to become enabled to participate in ethical debates and decision-making processes. You will be able to evaluate others’ positions and arguments, assess their strengths, and select a reasoned response, whether that involves formulating an original position, reaching compromise, or reaching a deeper understanding. You will be able to distinguish different legitimate stances on the topics we’ll cover, compare and contrast the arguments and principles underlying them, and be prepared to defend your choice of the most reasonable positions and views.

By the end of this course, I will expect you to locate yourself in the world of ethical concerns, becoming a participant, assessor and defender rather than a passive regurgitator. In other words, the assignments and my assessment criteria in this course will guide you to become not a student of ethics but a practitioner.

Structure of class:

Classes will consist of a mixture of lecture, discussion, and in-class work, either individual or in groups. We will go over readings and assignments due for each day. You will learn what others have said on these issues as well as developing your own views. You will also submit various work, as well as comments and discussion contributions, on the Moodle site outside of class.

Of course it’s to be expected that there will be aspects of the readings that you will need guidance with after the fact; for that reason, it’s best to read the material carefully so that you know what to ask for more explanation about. Lectures, discussion, online forums, groupwork, and in-class work will be done under the assumption that everyone has made a sincere effort to understand the reading, so doing so will make these activities much more fruitful for you and your classmates.

You must bring with you to class whatever text we are working on for that day.

Office hours:

My office hours 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.

Tentative Schedule:

This is the schedule from the last offering of the course, and will be somewhat (but not extensively) modified for Fall 2008.

Any changes in this schedule will be announced in class and on the Moodle site. The reading assignments listed for each day must be completed before that class.

WEEK ONE
Monday: Introduction
Wednesday: What Is the Purpose of Morality?
           TML Chapter 1 pgs. 7-31 and 41-52 (Golding, Hobbes)
           HSWL “A Word to the Student,” pgs. xiv-xvi, and Chapter 1
Friday:    Good and Evil
WEEK TWO
Monday:  
TML Chapter 2 pages 93 - 127 (Hallie, Benn)

Wednesday:  Why be Moral? Is the Good Good for You?
TML Chapter 8 pgs. 559-569 (Plato)
HSWL Chapter 2 pgs. 19-24

Friday:  Group exercise day

WEEK THREE
Monday:  Why be Moral? Egoism and Altruism
HSWL Chapter 2 pgs. 24-43
TML Chapter 8 pgs. 588-602 (Rachels)
(not assigned, but good if you’re interested: Nietzsche (TML 127-140), Rand (TML 569-579), Pojman (TML 580-588))

Wednesday:  Is Everything Relative?
TML Chapter 3 pages 155 – 165 (Benedict)
HSWL Chapter 3
(not assigned, but good if you’re interested: Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy or Stanford Encyclopedia entry on moral relativism)

Friday:  Is Everything Relative?
TML Chapter 3 pages 191 – 222 (Elshtain, Ibsen)

WEEK FOUR
Monday:  The Case for Ethical Objectivism
HSWL Chapter 4

Wednesday:  Religion and Ethics
HSWL Chapter 5

Friday:  EXAM 1

WEEK FIVE
Monday:  Utilitarianism: Mill

Wednesday:  Utilitarianism: Mill

Friday:  Utilitarianism
HSWL Chapter 6 pages 107-119
TML Chapter 4 pages 237-252 (Nielsen)

WEEK SIX
Monday:  Utilitarianism
TML Chapter 4 pages 252 – 271 (Williams, LeGuin)

Wednesday:  Utilitarianism
TML Chapter 4 pages 272-293 (Huxley)
HSWL Chapter 6 pages 120-134

Friday:  Deontological Ethics
HSWL Chapter 7 pages 137-142
TML Chapter 5 pages 317 – 339 (Ross, MacIver, Whateley)

WEEK SEVEN
Monday:  Deontology: Kant
HSWL Chapter 7 pages 142-149

Wednesday:  Deontology: Kant
TML Chapter 5 pages 306-313 (Kant)
HSWL Chapter 7 pages 149-153
Friday:  **Deontology: Kant**  
TML Chapter 5 pages 314-316 (Kant)  
HSWL Chapter 7 pages 154-157

**WEEK EIGHT**

Monday: **Deontological Ethics**  
TML Chapter 5 pages 340 – 370 (Bierce, Fried, Glaspell)  
HSWL Chapter 7 pages 157-159  

Wednesday:  **Virtue Theory**  
TML Chapter 6 pages 388-407 (Hugo)  
HSWL Chapter 8 pages 165-172

**WEEK NINE**

Monday: **Virtue Theory**  
TML Chapter 6 pages 407-423 (Aristotle)  

Wednesday: **Virtue Theory**  
HSWL Chapter 8 pages 172-174  
TML Chapter 6 pages 423 - 446 (Mayo, Hawthorne)  

Friday:  **Virtue Theory**  
TML Chapter 6 pages 447-457 (Frankena)  
HSWL Chapter 8 pages 174-188

**WEEK TEN**

Monday:  **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" (on electronic reserve)  

Wednesday:  **Freedom, Autonomy, and Self-Respect**  
Richard Wright, "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (online: [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/White/anthology/wright.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA01/White/anthology/wright.html))  
TML Chapter 10 pages 648-665 (King, Angelou)  
(recommended, but not assigned: TML Chapter 10 pages 691-702 and 719-725 (Hill, Vonnegut))