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321-20B Business Ethics

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In the context of our present economic crisis, moral questions surrounding economic issues have assumed an obvious importance. To take but a few such questions: How much information does company owe its shareholders, or for that matter, the general public? Is there such a thing as “corporate social responsibility?” Does this responsibility extend to the surrounding community? To the nation? Should we worry about the possible collusion of state and corporate actors? What are property rights, and how far do such rights extend? Is there such a thing as “fairness” in the market, and how is this determined? In such matters, must companies answer to social or governmental standards? Would it matter if they do so merely for the sake of monetary incentives?

In this course we will explore such questions in the context of a number of contemporary business ethics cases. Rather than dealing strictly with cases, however, we will start from a brief but intensive grounding in the history of Western ethical thought. The first half of the course will accordingly cover six thinkers, each exemplifying a very different standpoint: Aristotle (virtue ethics), St. Thomas Aquinas (natural law), Bernard Mandeville (self-interest and manners), David Hume (moral sentiment by way of utility), Adam Smith (moral sentiment by way of propriety), and Immanuel Kant (duty ethics or “deontology.”) We will compare these thinkers in terms of the very different answers they give us to some basic questions, namely: What is a good life? What is my responsibility to others? What is justice? What is my duty?

After laying a strong foundation with classical philosophy, we will arrive at our business case studies with some powerful tools for thinking about very pressing economic and political issues. In this respect, one of the chief operating assumptions of this course will be that the
history of philosophy is the best avenue by which to explore difficult business issues. But, it is also the case that business issues are a very productive means by which to explore the topic of ethics.

**Attendance, Participation, Assessment, and Readings**

There will be **two in-class exams** during the semester, each of which will consist of a few short answer questions and an essay. **Each exam will count for 25%** of the total grade. These exams will cover our treatment of the six philosophers mentioned above. There will be **two take-home essays; Each will be worth 20%** of your grade. These essays will concern the application of philosophical concepts to case studies. The due date for the first essay will be 5/15. The second will be due on the final day of classes. The **remaining 10%** will be determined by **class attendance and participation**. During the second half of the course especially, students will be expected to present case studies for discussion, directing class examination of a variety of issues in the case they have been assigned. Each student will be permitted a maximum of one unexcused absence without penalty. Any student missing **three** or more of the class sessions **automatically fails the course**. Exams taken late will always involve a grade penalty, barring severe circumstances (grave family or medical emergencies). **A student must take every exam and turn in every essay assignment to pass the course.**

**Plagiarism** of any kind will not be tolerated, and per Xavier’s official policy, will be met with a **FAILING GRADE** for the assignment and perhaps even the course. On this point, I highly recommend that students take the Xavier Library tutorial and accompanying quiz on plagiarism. Should any questions remain on plagiarism, either in the abstract or in the particular (that is, if one is not sure about an assignment one is about to turn in), please see the instructor. **You will not have a second warning.**

**CLASS ETIQUETTE:** There will be **NO** Computers, Cell Phones, iPods, iPads, or other electronic devices permitted in class, unless some device is required by a student to compensate for a medically documented disability.

There is **NO** “extra credit” in this course. You are in college and responsibility for achievement is yours. I will be more than happy to assist you with drafts of essays and exam answers before they are due – you may choose to avail yourself of this opportunity to produce drafts or not, but once a grade is assigned, the book is closed.

If you are a student athlete or a scholarship holder, **DO NOT** plead with your professor that you need a certain grade to remain active as a player or keep your scholarship. This is highly improper behavior and will be reported to the athletic director or scholarship authority in question.

A one-word rule of thumb for this class: **ASK.** You don’t understand a concept in the text? Ask. You want to know why you got the grade you did? Ask. You’ve missed something in class and need to hear it again? Ask. You may ask me in person about anything pertaining to the course, but I will also be distributing course materials from time to time by way of email (news
articles, other cases, small bits of reading from the philosophers relating to issues raised in the cases).

This course will involve some fairly difficult reading. Do not become discouraged if first readings of the texts yield some degree of frustration and less-than-complete comprehension. It is crucial for students to read most if not all of the assignments more than once, though first readings should precede the class in which each text is to be discussed. Success in this course depends in large part upon a willingness to come to class with questions and discuss them. If you find yourself unable to attend class for a period of time, or have any other difficulties, contact the instructor as soon as possible.

Students will be expected to follow the lectures by reading the required texts. The following portions of these texts will be required reading (in the case of Aristotle and Aquinas, you may locate a text in the library or online. I will provide links for the latter):

**Aristotle:** *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books I-II, Book V, and Book X, Chapter 9 (1179a33-end)

**Aquinas:** *Summa Theologica*, Question 94 (The Natural Law, in six articles); *Summa Contra Gentiles* Vol.3, Chapter 129 (“That some human acts are right by nature…”), Chapters 131-135.

**Mandeville:** *The Fable of the Bees*, Introduction and Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue, Remarks (36-73), 3rd Dialogue between Horatio and Cleomenes (160-82)

**Hume:** *Enquiry* sections 1-4

**Smith:** *TMS* Part I section I (9-26), Part II, Chapter 2 (78-92), Part III, Chapter 4 (156-61) and Part V Ch.2 (200-211)

**Kant:** *Grounding* section I and first part of II (7-32)

What follows below is a rough outline of topics to be covered on specific dates, and may be subject to some change depending upon our rate of progress, class discussion and other factors. Once again, be sure to check regularly with the instructor and/or classmates if you miss class.

**Course Schedule and Outline**

5/6: Introduction to Business Ethics; discussion of course structure and objectives; Begin with discussion of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* Books I-II: Happiness and the Soul, Virtue and Habituation; Book V: Justice; Book X, Chapter 9: Law and Moral Education.

5/7: **St. Thomas Aquinas**, *Summa Theologica* Question 94: The Natural Law in six articles; *Summa Contra Gentiles* Chapter 129: “That Some Human Acts are Right by Nature…”; Chapters 131-135: on the moral significance of poverty and riches


5/10: FIRST EXAM; Smith: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part I, Section 1 (9-26 on propriety), Part II, Section 2 (78-92 on justice), (156-61 on Duty), (209-211 on custom)

5/13: Kant: Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals, Section I, Section II (especially duties on pp 30-32). Begin Case Studies: Beauchamp Chapter 1, employee and labor issues

5/14: SECOND EXAM; Beauchamp Chapter 2: Case studies involving customer relations, accounting, and consulting

5/15: FIRST TAKE HOME ESSAY DUE; Beauchamp Chapter 3: Case Studies involving shareholders, government, and social responsibility

5/16: Beauchamp Chapters 4-5: Case studies involving markets, competition, and the meaning of legality; justice, fairness and exploitation

5/17: SECOND TAKE HOME ESSAY DUE; Conclude case studies from Beauchamp Chapters 4-5.