100-19 Ethics as an Introduction to Philosophy

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Xavier University
PH 100 – 19: ETHICS AS AN INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY
Fall Semester, 2016

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Office Hours: TR 11:30-12:45, W 9-12

Class room: ALT 001
Time: TR 2:30 – 3:45 p.m.

Required Texts

Hume, An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals (Oxford edition)
Smith, The Theory Of Moral Sentiments (Liberty Fund edition)
Kant, Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals (Ellington, trans. Hackett edition)

Course Description

As long as there have been human beings, justice has been a question—its nature, its forms, and its very possibility. By studying classic works of philosophy, especially Plato’s Republic, you will examine different views on justice and human goodness, tracing them back to the principles on which they depend, and reflect critically on these principles. You will also develop your ability to identify, understand and critique a variety of ethical issues. Finally, you will be introduced to other basic human questions and philosophical ways of thinking about them.

This course will provide an introduction to the Western tradition of philosophical ethics through a study of four great moral thinkers. We will begin with some of the basic questions raised in Plato’s Republic, and which motivate the study of ethics to the present day: What is justice and how can it be achieved? What kind of life should I lead? What are my obligations to others? Can these obligations be justified through religion or reason, custom or feeling? Can there be uniform standards for ethical behavior, or do cultural differences render such standards nonsensical? Is there such a thing as “duty”, and if so, does it constitute the main purpose of my existence? What is the meaning of honor? How important is a good reputation? Are good intentions more important than results? Will doing the right thing make me happy?

These questions have been answered in very different ways by different philosophers. Since ethics as a philosophical enterprise has inherently to do with questioning the nature of right and wrong, we will not try to vindicate any one particular thinker’s view. Instead, we will attempt to understand each philosopher on his own terms. In doing this, each student should strive to rethink his own ethical positions and the reasons he might offer in support of them.

The course is part of the Ethics/Religion and Society sequence. Consistent with the mission of Xavier University as a Jesuit, Catholic university rooted in the liberal arts tradition, the Ethics/Religion and Society (E/RS) sequence of courses provides a basis for you to become
intellectually, morally and spiritually educated individuals capable of critical reflection on ethical and religious questions of social significance from the perspective of multiple disciplines with unique methods. Through the E/RS elective, you will develop a more proficient and durable ability to reflect critically on ethical and/or religious questions of social significance.

This course is part of the Xavier Core Curriculum, which aims to develop people of learning and reflection, integrity and achievement, in solidarity for and with others. The course addresses the following core learning objectives at the introductory level:

1a: Students recognize and cogently discuss significant questions in the humanities, arts, and the natural and social sciences.

3a: Students identify and critically assess multiple dimensions of an ethical issue in an attempt to reach a conclusion.

2a: Students find, evaluate, and logically convey information and ideas in written and oral presentations.

4a: Students describe and examine the multifaceted character of society and how the inclusion of different perspectives can influence one’s worldview.

4b: Students discuss and evaluate what constitutes human wellness.

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

There will be two exams during the session, each of which will consist of a few short essay questions. Each exam will count for 25% of the total grade. There will be two take-home essays. Each will be worth 20%. The remaining 10% will be determined by class attendance and participation. Each student will be permitted a maximum of two unexcused absences without penalty. Any student missing one third 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 both exams and turn in both essay assignments 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.

The following standards have been adopted for grading in the department of philosophy:

A= work that not merely fully and accurately reproduces class discussion, the main thread in an argument or the main philosophical significance of a text under discussion, but which goes beyond these and indicates a contribution of the student, giving evidence of a deeper understanding of the material in question.
B=work that shows a more or less complete and exact understanding of the issues, texts, and/or arguments as explained in class, clearly and logically formulated without going beyond such explanations.

C=work that shows basic understanding of the material but with errors, omissions and confusions of either a formal or material nature.

D=work that shows a minimal acquaintance with the material or serious logical and conceptual flaws in formulating responses to the question raised, the argument at issue, or to the philosophical text under discussion.

F=work that shows inadequate acquaintance with texts, issues, or ideas with little or no valid logical argumentation; or, the work is a plagiarism. In cases of plagiarism, which involve the use of published or other’s written work without giving credit, an F will be awarded for the semester and the student’s name reported to the Dean of the College.

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.

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 posting course materials to the class website. It may be helpful to check the website from time to time just to make sure you are caught up with course activities.

This course will involve some fairly (and particularly in the case of Kant, very) 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:

**Plato:** Republic Books I-V, Book VII to 521c, Book X 614b to the end

**Hume:** Enquiry sections 1-9, A Dialogue

**Smith:** TMS Part I sections I and II (9-43), 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**

8/23-25: Introduction to **Plato**: some remarks on the dialogue form and the “Socratic method”; Introduction to Plato’s *Republic*, a “book about everything”; *Republic* Book I: some basic questions about justice, and some possible answers

8/30-9/1: Continue *Republic* I: Socrates investigates justice with Polemarchus; Socrates’ confrontation with Thrasymanachus. Begin *Republic* II: The human soul as a “city in speech”

9/6-8: Continue *Republic* II: the “city in speech” as the just state; *Republic* III: education and the arts: medicine, virtue, and law

9/13-20: Begin *Republic* IV: The city as a model of the virtues, and the three parts of the soul; *Republic* Book V: Political virtue and the problem of the family; gender, sexuality, marriage, and the public sphere; the rule of “philosopher kings.”


9/29-10/4: Introduction to **Hume**: *Enquiry* sections 1-2. The reality of moral distinctions and their source in sentiment; the close relationship between beauty and morality; benevolence.

10/6: **FALL HOLIDAY: No Class Meeting**

10/11: Begin *Enquiry* sections 3 and 4: the “artificial” social virtues (justice, fidelity, allegiance, chastity)

10/13: **MID TERM EXAM**

10/18-25: *Enquiry* sections 5-8: Utility, the central concept of Hume’s moral thought; qualities useful to self, “agreeable” qualities.

10/27-11-1: *Enquiry* section 9 and “A Dialogue”: against moral “systems”; against the “monkish virtues”; the rejection of ethical pessimism; the problem of cross-cultural and cross-historical judgments; are there universal standards

11/3-15: **Adam Smith**: moral commerce, sympathy, and spectatorship; propriety, custom, and cross-cultural judgment.

11/17-22: **Kant**: *Grounding* section 1: the foundation of ethics in reason; ethical “formalism”; the concept of duty in ordinary moral experience

11/24: **THANKSGIVING DAY: No Class Meeting**

11/29-12/6: *Grounding* section 2: toward a “metaphysics of morals”; freedom, autonomy, and the categorical imperative.

12/8: Review for Final Exam