2016

100-03-05 Ethics as an Introduction to Philosophy

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Recommended Citation
Wood, James, "100-03-05 Ethics as an Introduction to Philosophy" (2016). Philosophy Syllabi Fall 2016. 47.
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Overview:

In this course we will examine several different conceptions of justice, virtue, liberty, and politics with the central aim of becoming more thoughtful about what it means to live a good life both individually and collectively. We will begin our reading with the first part of Plato’s investigation of justice and virtue in both individuals and political communities in the Republic, while comparing his account to some key passages in the Hebrew Bible and Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War. Then we will study Aristotle’s account of the link between virtue and happiness in the Nicomachean Ethics. Next we will take up a competing ethical theory on the nature of happiness, utilitarianism, in the writings of 19th Century British philosopher J.S. Mill. After this we will return to Plato and the later part of the Republic to consider Plato’s proposed philosopher-ruled city as well as his criticisms of democracy and other competing forms of government. Here we will return briefly to Thucydides to read his “Funeral Oration,” one of the most famous speeches in praise of Athens, the model of ancient democracy. If we have time, we will conclude with selections from Mill’s On Liberty, one of the most eloquent and powerful modern defenses of liberty and individuality.

Course Objectives:

By the conclusion of this course you should be able to:

1) Reflect thoughtfully on the questions, arguments, and theories concerning justice, virtue, liberty, and related issues that our readings put forward.
2) Articulate your considered thoughts on these questions, arguments, and theories clearly and precisely, both in the writing assignments and in class discussion.
3) Compare the views of different writers with each other and with your own views.
4) Apply the ethical insights you have gained to your own life and to our own time and place.

1 The Philosophy Department’s official description of the purpose of PHIL 100 is as follows: “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.”

2 These objectives are specific to this course. As an E/RS course, PHIL 100 also seeks to achieve the following goal: “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. In this course, that method is philosophical.”

In addition, 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. It 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 will identify and critically assess multiple dimensions of an ethical issue in an attempt to reach a conclusion.
**Requirements:**

1. **Reading:**

   Reading is the foundation of the course. Consequently, it is extremely important that you read carefully and consistently before every class. Page assignments are usually short, but the material is often dense and difficult. Reading philosophy is not like reading a novel; slow and careful reading is essential, and re-reading is often necessary, so I recommend devoting a substantial amount of time to read, re-read, and take notes on each day’s assigned text. Reading assignments will be given by email or in class, but a rough schedule may be found at the end of the syllabus.

   **Note:** I strongly recommend using the editions and (especially) translations that I have ordered. Otherwise you will have difficulty following the class discussions and writing papers. I also recommend buying all your texts as soon as possible, since the bookstore sometimes sells out and does not hold all books until the end of the semester. You may, of course, order your texts elsewhere. I do not recommend renting or selling back your books. These options are designed to make the bookstore more money. Sure, you can save a few bucks, but these books don’t cost much and are genuinely great books, worth keeping for your entire life and reading repeatedly. Rent or sell back textbooks that will become obsolete. Do yourself a favor and keep the books from your liberal arts courses.

We will read the following philosophers and texts this semester:

- The Bible (any edition; many are available online)

2. **Writing:**

   **Essays:** There will be three formal essays, due at the conclusion of each of the three units of the course (see end of syllabus). I’ll give you due dates, topics, and guidelines at least a week in advance. You must submit your paper electronically on Canvas. I will deduct a partial letter grade for each day that an essay is late (e.g. B- becomes C after two days). You may rewrite your first two papers if you (1) discuss your paper both with me and with a tutor at the Writing Center (see www.xavier.edu/writing_center), (2) turn in the revised paper no later than two weeks after receiving the graded original, and (3) append a paragraph explaining how you sought to improve the paper in light of my feedback, oral and written, and that of the writing tutor. The grade of the rewrite will replace the grade of the original. I will never lower the grade, but I reserve the right not to raise it if your improvements are merely superficial. Each essay will be graded according to six criteria: thoughtfulness, organization, understanding of material, use of text, analysis and argumentation, and writing mechanics and style. A fuller explanation of these criteria may be found in the Canvas rubric.

   **Extra Credit:** You may receive extra writing credit for writing a research paper that relates material from our course to an E/RS event that you have attended (see http://libguides.xavier.edu/ers for additional materials and information related to the E/RS series). The paper should be at least five pages and may be turned in at any point in the semester up to the date of the final exam. You’ll need to clear the topic with me in advance. Based on the quality of your work, I will add up to 10 points to the cumulative Essay portion of your grade (55% of the total).

3. **Participation:**

   **Class Discussion:** Philosophy depends on active participation in dialogue. Consequently, class participation makes up a significant percentage of your final grade. Participation generally consists of asking and answering questions, making comments, and at the very least appearing interested and engaged in what is being said by others. On Canvas you will find a document outlining my standards for grading in-class participation.

   **Discussion Posts:** To encourage your regular participation in class discussion, I will also ask you to do the following once per week: post two questions or comments about the currently assigned reading to Canvas (to the appropriate link under “Discussions”): no later than the beginning of class. I’ll assign you a day to turn these in (MW or F) on the first day of class; if class is cancelled for a holiday or for any other reason, you may submit your entry either the class before or the class after, as you prefer. You may skip up to three of these without penalty. I will regularly ask you to share these during class discussion. The basic idea is to call the attention of the class to points that you found particularly interesting, questionable, or problematic. You can share an idea you had while reading, ask for clarification on a particularly...
tricky passage, make a comparison to something you have experienced or read, and so on. Above all, I want to see evidence of your active thinking in relation to the reading. You may also reply to a fellow student’s post in lieu of making one of your own. Any substantive reply will be graded just as a direct post would be (something like “I agree!” or “I was thinking the same thing!” does not count as a substantive reply). You may modify what you have written after class in light of class discussion, so long as any modifications are made that same day. I will grade these contributions a few times over the semester, and in total they will constitute half of your overall class participation grade. In grading them I will take into account their insight, thoughtfulness, length, clarity, and helpfulness to the class.

**Extra Credit:** You may receive extra participation credit for every acceptable report you submit from attending a pre-approved “philosophy event” (mainly E/RS events and Philosophy in Film screenings). I will add one or two points to your class participation grade (or reverse an absence if you’re over the limit), up to a maximum of eight points. An acceptable report is 1-2 pages summarizing the main points (including any discussion or Q & A) and providing your own commentary on the event, turned in by the following class. In addition, I will give you extra participation credit if you come talk with me during office hours (for at least 15 minutes) about issues currently being discussed in class—not about assignments or papers, and not to make up an absence (see below). I won’t assign a point value to such visits, but they will be factored into your overall participation grade.

**4. Group Project:**

On a few occasions over the course of the semester we will participate in a group project called “Building Kallipolis.” “Kallipolis” is the name that Socrates gives to the city he constructs in Plato’s *Republic*, and it means “Beautiful City” or “Noble City” in Greek. Our project will mirror that of Socrates and his companions in the *Republic*, as we will be making fundamental decisions about what constitutes the best kind of community, taking into account issues like basic human needs, forms of government, the structure of social and economic classes, the role of the military, the place and value of money and commerce, education, culture, liberty, equality, and, of course, justice (and other virtues). It will be up to us how far we wish to follow the lead of Socrates or other thinkers—though we will take their theories and ideals very seriously in the course of our deliberations. More information will be provided in a separate document (“Building Kallipolis” under “Pages” in Canvas).

**5. Quizzes**

Occasionally I will administer a pop quiz to determine whether you have done the reading. Quizzes will be graded pass/fail, with failure being treated as an absence from class. These “absences” may be made up in the same way as literal absences (see below).

**6. Exam:**

There will be a final exam on the assigned date for your section (Sect. 03: Wed., Dec. 14th, 8:00-9:50; Sect. 05: Mon., Dec. 12th, 10:00-11:50). It will be composed of long and short essay questions. I will give you more information close to the end of the semester.

**Grading:**

First Essay: 15%
Second Essay: 20%
Third Essay: 20%
Participation: 15%
Group Project: 15%
Final Exam: 15%

*Note:* Assignments will be given letter grades, but I will record your grades in Canvas on the 100 point grading scale (100-96=A; 91-95=A-, 90=A-/B+; 87-89=B+; 84-86=B; 81-83=B-/C+; 80=B-/C; and so on). I will not round up or down until I calculate your final grades. In borderline cases I will take into account your overall effort and commitment, as well as your improvement over the course of the semester.

**Attendance:**

Failure to attend class will result in penalties applied to the class participation portion of your final grade. If you miss more
than 3 classes, I will begin deducting a partial letter grade for each additional absence from that portion of your grade. So if you miss 4 classes, a B will be reduced to a B-, at 4 it becomes a C+, and so on. I will not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences, but I will give you the opportunity to make up an absence. If you want to make up an absence, you will need to talk to me about the class material AND write a one-page paper about the material for that class, no later than one week after your absence. However, any student who misses 12 or more classes (i.e., 4 weeks and more than ¼ of the total) for any reason will automatically fail the course (or be asked to withdraw). I reserve the right to start counting lateness to class as absence if it becomes chronic. If you arrive after I check attendance, it is your responsibility to make sure I don’t count you as absent.

Class Policies:

1) Always have your text and a notebook with you. I will regularly conduct a spot check, and if you do not have these materials, I will count you absent.
2) No computers or other electronic devices. Keep notes the old-fashioned way, with pen and paper. Please remember to turn off your cell phones. And if I catch you using your phones in class (texting or whatever), I'll count you absent.
3) No food. Drinks are acceptable.
4) No irrelevant conversation. If your talking is not related to the class material (for example, some people are tempted just to chat in small group discussion), you'll be wasting your time and that of others, and we'll all get irritated at you.

Academic Conduct:

Academic dishonesty of any sort will not be tolerated. Most serious is plagiarism. If you turn in work that is not your own in any way—for example, copied in whole or part from another student, from secondary texts, from the Internet (this includes SparkNotes), etc.—it will receive no credit, and will be reported to the Dean’s Office. A second offense will result in expulsion from the course. Note that I will be checking papers for plagiarism. To make sure we’re all on the same page about plagiarism, please complete the online library tutorial and quiz on the subject. You can find this quiz in our Canvas course and also at http://www.xavier.edu/library/xu-tutor/xu-tutor-Use.cfm (if you go straight to this link, you will need to email the results to me). If necessary, take the quiz several times until you have scored 100%. This will need to be completed by the due date of the first essay in order for you to receive credit for your essay. Plagiarism aside, in both your written work and class discussion, it is very important that you be honest: about what you don’t understand, about what you like or don’t like, about questions or problems you may have, and about your ideas and opinions.

Reading Schedule:

Unit One (Weeks 1-7): Justice and Injustice
Texts: Plato’s Republic, the Bible, and Thucydides’ History

Unit Two (Weeks 8-12): Virtue, Pleasure, and Happiness
Texts: Aristotle’s Ethics, Mill’s Utilitarianism, and the documentary Happy

Unit Three (Weeks 13-16): Philosophy, Politics, and Liberty
Texts: Plato’s Republic and Mill’s On Liberty

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3 This is a rough guideline. Specific reading assignments will be given by e-mail or in class.