547-01 Ethics For A Planetary Crisis

Kenneth Overberg

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Every day headlines jar us with news about profound ethical issues, some of which threaten the existence of humanity. Wars, racism, hunger, stem cells, sexism, budget battles: again and again we hear of tragic situations and violent actions. Some cases may seem overwhelming yet distant; others may be very close to home. All of us face moral dilemmas. But just how do we make our moral decisions? The individualism of our culture tells us that each person must decide for himself or herself; indeed, the decision determines the morality. Some religious traditions stress following the law; obedience is the key. In our course, we will consider a third approach in the Christian tradition that attempts to combine the best of both philosophical and theological perspectives.

Scripture scholar Kathleen O’Connor has written about the wisdom tradition (especially in the Hebrew Scriptures): “According to wisdom, life is not a simple set of truths to be followed scrupulously, but a continual encounter with conflicting truths, each making competing claims upon the seeker. Wisdom views life as paradoxical, requiring discernment from situation to situation of how, when and if one should act.”

The goal of our course, then, is to search for wisdom, that is, to help all participants understand and apply basic concepts and methods of Christian ethics, to think carefully and critically about major ethical questions in the global context, and to engage in dialogue with one another with respect and willingness to learn from other perspectives. One of the major issues is violence, leading us to wrestle with this question: How can we oppose evil without creating new evils and being made evil ourselves?

Student Learning Objectives:

Students recognize and cogently discuss significant moral issues that threaten lives and all life.

Students gain knowledge, ask questions, develop skills, and form conclusions through reflective thinking.
Students discern ethical principles and personal values in light of academic experience.

Students discuss and evaluate what constitutes human wellness.

Students examine the interconnections between humans and the natural environment.

Students investigate the root causes of injustice with compassion and academic rigor.

**TEXTS:**

*The Powers That Be* by Walter Wink (PTB)


*Reason Informed by Faith* by Richard Gula, S.S. (RIF)

Recommended: *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics* by James Gustafson

**PROFESSOR:**

Kenneth R. Overberg, S.J.
Office: Hinkle 326, 745-3635, overberg@xavier.edu
Office hours: by appointment

**ASSIGNMENTS:**

1. Preparation for and participation in the class discussions are essential.
2. Presentation of a “case” and leading the discussion.
3. Two tests.
4. Your choice for the final: a) a final test **OR** b) a paper that summarizes your research, case presentation, and class discussion, and ends with your own reasoned judgment about the issue (c. 2500 words). See me if you prefer a different topic.
GRADES:

Final grade will be made up of (in equal parts):

1. participation and the case presentation
2. the paper OR the final test
3-4. each of the other two tests.

N.B. Grading scale used in the theology department is
92-100=A (“exceptional academic performance”)
84-91=B (“good academic performance”)
76-83=C (“satisfactory academic performance”)
68-75=D (“minimal academic performance”)
0-67=F (“Failure”)

+ and – also given within the stated range

See theology website for more details!

RECOMMENDED READING:

_The Making of Moral Theology_ by John Mahoney, S.J.

_Introduction to Christian Ethics: A Reader_ edited by Ronald Hamel and Kenneth Himes, OFM

_Readings in Moral Theology_ (a series) edited by Charles Curran and Richard McCormick, S.J., and others

_Time Past, Time Future: A Historical Study of Catholic Moral Theology_ by John Gallagher

_The Critical Calling: Reflections on Moral Dilemmas Since Vatican II_ by Richard McCormick, S.J.
CONCERNING THE CASE PRESENTATION

1. You will find an appropriate case (a real one--see me if that is not possible) for your topic.

2. Everyone in class is responsible for reading the assigned materials (if any) before class and incorporating them into the discussion.

3. Present your case, giving enough information for us to discuss focusing on key ethical questions and making connections with other ideas from our course. You can suggest alternative moral responses--then lead the class discussion of the case, as we search for what ought to be done.

4. **Be creative!** Time: 60 minutes.
SOME KEYS FOR THE CASE PRESENTATION

1. Does the case fit the topic?
2. Is there substantial content?
3. Ethical content and concepts, including attention to method?
4. Clarity and conciseness of the presentation?
5. Imagination and creativity?
6. Started and led the discussion with enthusiasm, insight, and fairness?

POSSIBLE TOPICS FOR CASES

Abortion Globalization
AIDS Health Care
Birth Control Homosexuality
Capitalism Immigration
Consumerism Poverty
Death Penalty Racism
End-of-Life Issues Reproductive Technology
Environment/Climate Change Violence and War
Genetic Engineering/Cloning Other
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>References</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aug 27</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sept 3</td>
<td>Morality is based on reality</td>
<td>CIC: ix-22; think about reflection questions</td>
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<td>Sept 10</td>
<td>Discerning methodology</td>
<td>CIC: 23-36; think about reflection questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sept 17</td>
<td>Conscience and authority</td>
<td>CIC: 37-57; think about reflection questions</td>
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<td>Sept 24</td>
<td>Review and test</td>
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<td>Oct 1</td>
<td>Moral theology, person, freedom</td>
<td>RIF: 1-88</td>
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<td>Oct 8</td>
<td>Sin and conscience</td>
<td>RIF: 89-162</td>
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<td>Oct 15</td>
<td>Scripture, Jesus, church</td>
<td>RIF: 165-219</td>
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<td>Sample case presentation</td>
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<td>Oct 22</td>
<td>Natural law</td>
<td>RIF: 220-264</td>
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<td>Case presentation</td>
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<td>Oct 29</td>
<td>Proportionate reason, moral decision making</td>
<td>RIF: 265-329</td>
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Nov 5  Review and test

Nov 12  Powers and the domination system
        PTB: 1-62
        Case presentation

Nov 19  Jesus’ answer
        PTB: 63-97
        Case presentation

Nov 26  HAPPY THANKSGIVING

Dec 3  Practical nonviolence
        PTB: 98-144
        Case presentation

Dec 10  The enemy and prayer
        PTB: 145-200
        Case presentation

Dec 17  Evaluations, papers due (but accepted earlier!), final test