Philosophical Ethics

Course packet

Instructor: John Davenport
Spring 2006

Phlu 1100 - 004
M-Th 2:30 -12:45
Contents of Course Packet

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Handouts on Philosophy, Ethical Theory, and our Reading Topics
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3. Philosophical Ethics: Introduction
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12. Summary of Kant's Ethics
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Supplemental Readings (outside of the textbooks)
1. Renford Bambrough, “A Proof of the Objectivity of Morals”
4. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, selection from the Second Discourse on Inequality
5. Rousseau, selection on slavery from The Social Contract.
6. Abraham Lincoln, selection from the *Fifth Debate with Douglas*.
Office Hours: Thursdays 4 - 6 PM, or by appointment. I'm in Room 923E. Many Wednesday afternoons I will be at Rose Hill for department meetings, or attending other events at LC.

The idea of Ethics: Ethics concerns problems and questions we inevitably encounter in trying to live worthwhile and decent lives. We make decisions about our actions, our attitudes towards others, our long-term commitments, our jobs, our families, our political values. Whether we realize it or not, we all make moral judgments and operate with an implicit set of values, along with some notion of what ought and ought not to be done, and a sense (however inarticulate) of what matters.

Philosophical ethics is the systematic attempt to articulate these views and make sense of the principles underlying them. Many of the most famous writers in the history of human culture have sought to explain the moral perspective, to uncover objective bases or foundations for the values we use in deciding how to live, what actions to praise and blame, and which institutions to foster. In the process, they have raised questions that are fundamental to human life:

— is there an objective difference between right and wrong, good and evil?
— what is worth living for? what is worth caring about?
— what is true human happiness? why not simply do whatever I enjoy most?
— do the interests of others limit what I may legitimately do in pursuing my chosen goals?
— are human beings egoists, inherently self-interested, or can we select and alter our goals in light of criteria that concern other interests than our own well-being?
— what arrangements are just and unjust in social life?
— does religion provide the basis for ethics, or is morality independent of faith?

Many people assume that the answers to these questions must be mere matters of opinion, or sheer personal preference, like preferring blue to red, but none of the most famous writers on ethics in history have agreed with this kind of dismissive subjectivism. Instead, virtually all have held that ethical questions are amenable to serious logical analysis and argument. We cannot just uncritically assume our position; it must be defended. When we try to defend our moral opinions, we are forced to address deeper underlying questions such as:

—what distinguishes moral norms and ethical ideals from other sorts of principles?
—what kind of grounds could there be for moral claims?
—are duties and ideals of virtue based on reason or sentiment, thinking or passion?
—is egoism or selfishness compatible with political justice or not?
—are motives such as pure love and pure hatred possible for us?
Course Goals: Ethics can thus be approached from several different angles. This course will introduce the philosophical study of ethics by focusing on the problem of egoism or a life aimed only at securing one's own interests (conceived in different ways). Each philosopher we read this semester gives us reasons to reject egoism, or to limit or reconceive the pursuit of our own advantage to conform to moral values. In the process, students will be introduced to different theoretical accounts of the basis of morality, such as classical eudaimonism, deontological or rights-based approaches, utilitarianism, and social contract theory.

Through reading, written analysis, and class debate, students will learn how these different ethical theories apply to serious practical questions and problems in private and public life. A key goal of the course is to learn how to interpret philosophical texts and become familiar with the critical evaluation of value-concepts. Thus all readings must be completed before class on the assigned date, so that we can practice such close reading and analysis in class.

Texts: These books should be in our bookstore; it is vital to use these editions.
6. Course packet required for all the other course readings. You must buy the packet through me: a money order for $20 made out to Fordham reimburses the department duplicating account. This procedure is to save you money by avoiding the high cost of going through an outside vendor like Campus Coursepaks packets.

Why you must buy the five books for this course, along with the course packet:
I have a strict policy that students must purchase all books for the class. There is no point in spending $12,000 to go to college and then trying to save $100 by not buying books for your courses, which makes it almost impossible to do the work. That is like buying a new car and then refusing to fill it with the grade of gas it requires. I do order the cheapest copies I can to make the costs easier, but my view is that students have to expect and plan on spending a few hundred dollars for course materials each semester as part of the normal cost of college.

-- I will check on Wednesday during the second week of the semester to see that you have all the books for the semester on your desk.

-- Buy all the books at the start of the semester. The bookstore starts returning unpurchased books as early as mid-February to make room in its limited space for inventory.

-- Keep your books! You should have a small library by the time you finish college, including books you can look back on for the rest of your life. You may not want to keep everything, but don't sell yourself out of this long-term asset by returning all your books for the sake of making a few measly bucks (usually less than 30% of your purchase price) in the short-term!
**Grading System**

Class participation: 15%
Class exercises: 20%  
This breakdown of course components is a basic guide
Essay: 25%  
for you, but there is also be a certain amount of leeway
Midterm test: 20%  
and credit for improvement in assigning the final grade.
Final exam: 20%

**Requirements:** All work must be typed on a standard word-processing program (Word or Wordperfect). I cannot accept any assignments by email; printouts are essential.

**Class Exercises:** Includes the following:
- One in-class pop quiz on reading (no warning!),
- One summary of an argument, including a paraphrase, regular quotation, and block quote. This is effectively a 2-page paper, which will be due in early February.
- One question (at least one paragraph of reflection/inquiry) due on the day assigned in class. Each student will be responsible for writing a question on one of the readings during the semester.

**Class Participation:** This grade depends on two factors:
- The quality of your questions and contributions in class, including being prepared and able to answer assigned study questions for the day. Be an active contributor, not just a passive listener, and you'll get more out of this material! Philosophy should be fun.
- Your attendance. If you are absent more than twice, you will lose points. Five absences is likely to lower you a whole grade. See attendance policy below.

**Midterm test:** Your knowledge of the readings will be evaluated in a midterm exam in March. The test will consist of multiple choice questions along with some short-answer questions and a short essay. It will be an open-book test, but remember you have only a limited time, so know everything well in advance. Attending to class discussion will help a lot here, since test questions will emphasize the material we focus on during class.

**Paper:** There will be a 7-8 page paper due in early April, in which you compare and contrast the ideas of two thinkers and argue for your own position on a question they address. You will have some choice among assigned questions here. I deduct 1% for every grammar error beyond the first five!

**Final exam:** the final exam in May will have a similar format to the midterm.

**Other Policies**

**Attendance and typical excuses** (sorry but I've had to get tough):
--No absence is excused for medical reasons without a real doctor's note.
--No absence is excused for work reasons (tell your employers when you have classes)
--Absence is excused for weddings and funerals only with some kind of proof after the fact.
--No absence is excused because of family vacations or airline tickets booked at bad times.
The February family vacation in Woods Hole or Maui is not an excused absence!

**Honesty and Citation:** I take this very seriously; cheating is the one unforgivable sin. All your work for this class must be original, must be your own, and you must cite your sources, both when you quote text, and when you paraphrase. Examples of cheating:

1. Handing in work you did for another class without clearing it with me.
2. Copying another student's work on a test or paper.
3. Handing in an essay downloaded from the internet, copied from an uncited website, or copied from an encyclopedia, book, or article without citation is plagiarism. This holds true even if the wording has been significantly changed.

*If I judge that a student has cheated in any of these ways, or in any comparably serious fashion, that student will fail the entire course and it will go on his/her permanent record here. If there are any prior offenses on record, suspension is possible.* A very minor infraction results in an F for the entire assignment, usually dropping your final grade by a whole letter.

You are welcome to bring in ideas and quotes from secondary sources, but you must cite them either by footnotes or parenthetical references referring to a bibliography at the end of the paper. Even if you acknowledge an internet site, for example, you can't just lift large sections of its text wholesale: only take short quotations, clearly indicated as such in your paper.

—This includes paraphrases: even if you reword what the author said, cite the page number.
—It also includes websites: give the full URL of the page you cite. Note that webpages should never be the only source you cite in college essays.

**Computer Disks:** Finally, you should never plead that the computer ate your disk. Always save any paper, at every stage of drafting, *on more than one disk!!* They are only $1 for Pete's sake. Backup is the most basic principle in using computers for college work.

**Tentative Schedule**

**1/21:** Introduction
(1) Theories and problems in ethics (see handout in course packet)
(2) Discussion of moral relativism (see handout in course packet).

**1/26-1/28:** The Problem of Moral Relativism
(1) Renford Bambrough, “A Proof of the Objectivity of Morals” (course packet)
(2) James Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism” (course packet)
(3) Tolerance principles (see handout in course packet)

**2/2-2/4:** A Paradigm Case of Moral Argument: Enlightenment arguments against slavery
(1) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, selection from the *Second Discourse on Inequality* (course packet).
(2) Rousseau, selection on slavery from *The Social Contract* (course packet)
(2) Abraham Lincoln, selection from the *Fifth Debate with Douglas* (course packet).
(3) Immanuel Kant, “Universal Practical Philosophy,” from the Lectures on Ethics (course packet).
(4) A new version of the argument from autonomy (presented in class).

(1) Begin John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism (Ch.1-2)
(2) A simple utilitarian argument for redistribution of wealth (see handout in course packet)
(2) First class exercise due: 2-page argument analysis.

2/16: President’s Day: Monday classes meet on Tuesday instead, at the normal time.

2/17-2/18: Mill on Altruism and Justice
(1) Mill, Utilitarianism (Chs 3 & 5).

2/20: Monday classes meet following President's Day. Our class does not meet.

2/23-2/25: Kant’s Solution: Rights before Utility
(1) Objections to utilitarianism and discussion of problem cases (see handouts in course packet).
(2) Begin Immanuel Kant, Groundwork Part I.

3/1-3/3: Kant on Duties to Aid, the Kingdom of Ends, and Autonomy
(1) Kant, Groundwork Part II
(2) Onora O’Neill on the Kantian duty to aid people in dire circumstances (course packet)

3/8-3/10: Kant and midterm
(1) Kant continued
(2) Midterm Test on March 10.


(1) Thomas Hobbes, Man and Citizen (pp.37-70; 109-133; 165-172)

(1) Hobbes continued.
(2) Peter Singer, "Morality, Egoism, and the Prisoner's Dilemma" (course packet).
(3) The Paradox of Collective Egoism.

4/5-4/7: Aristotle’s Eudaimonistic Alternative to Egoism
(1) Begin Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, Book I.
(2) See handout on Aristotle’s function argument (course packet).
(3) Essay due April 7.

4/12: Easter Recess: no class.

4/14: Aristotle on Moral Virtue
(1) Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, Book II.

4/19-4/21: Courage, Temperance, Generosity, Magnanimity, and Friendship
(1) Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bks. III-IV selections (pp.40-64)
(2) Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bks. VIII-IX selections (pp.119-128; 141-153).

4/26-4/28: John Kekes on Pluralism
(1) Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, chs 1-4 (pp. 3-75).

5/3-5/5: Kekes on the good life
(1) Kekes, *The Morality of Pluralism*, chs 5-6 (pp. 76-117).