

Philosophy 234
Ethics
Spring, 2015
Mondays and Wednesdays, 10:30 – 11:45 (Rockefeller Hall 304)

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OFFICE HOURS: Fridays, 4:30 to 6:00 p.m. I will be happy to make an appointment with you if you cannot meet during my regular office hours.

COURSE OBJECTIVES: The course provides an introduction to moral philosophy. Our central question will be: What connection (if any) is there between a good life and an ethical one? We will consider answers to these questions posed by four of the most important figures in the Western tradition in moral philosophy: Aristotle, Hume, and Kant, and J.S. Mill, as well as by some of their contemporary philosophical descendants. Although we will study these authors' works carefully, the course is not an exercise in the "History of Ideas." Our primary goal is not to know what these authors thought (although this will be a very important subsidiary goal), but rather to think our way through the questions that these authors sought to answer. Partly for this reason, we will read these authors in reverse chronological order, starting with Mill, who is closest to us not only temporally but also culturally, and ending with Aristotle, who is most distant from us in both ways.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- **Regular and faithful attendance.** I take this very seriously. Attendance will be taken, and unexcused absences *will* lower your final grade. If you need to miss class, be sure to notify me *in advance* in order to avoid penalty. I will close the door at the start of class. If you come after the door is closed, you may enter, but *you will be marked absent for that day*. If you need to miss class, be sure to notify me *in advance* in order to avoid penalty.
- **Participation in class discussions.** Philosophy can't be learned passively, by reading or listening to lectures. You learn philosophy by articulating views, probing those views, raising objections to them, refining them in the light of those objections, etc. *Talking* about philosophy with others is one of the only ways to do this. (Writing is the other.) Participation in class discussions is therefore *required*, and will contribute to your final grade. I recognize, however, that students sometimes find it very difficult to speak in the classroom. If you think this is you, please come talk to me about it outside of class. I have a host of strategies to suggest that will make speaking easier. If you find that you simply cannot bring yourself to speak, even with the help of these strategies, you can make up for this by doing more work on the Moodle discussions (see below). Class participation plus Moodle discussion will, *considered together*, contribute 30% to your final grade.
- **A note on note-taking:** Please turn off your laptops, iPads, smartphones, etc. when you enter the class. There will always be some who are tempted by the lure of Facebook, IM, e-mail, etc., and their activity distracts others... and me. For what it's worth, several recent studies have shown that students who take notes *by hand* process and recall the information at *far* higher levels than students who take the same notes on a keyboard. Apparently,

writing by hand stimulates parts of the brain tied to recall that are not similarly involved by typing.

- **Moodle discussions.** This class will have its own Moodle site. I will create a discussion thread for most (not all) assignments, usually posing one or more questions on the reading. **Before** each class, go to the relevant discussion thread and write at least one paragraph (up to a page) in answer to the question or questions posed. You will all be able to view one another's posts, and are encouraged to respond to one another, in addition to answering the questions posed yourself. Contributions must be posted by **9:00 AM** on the day of the class to which they are relevant, so that I will have time to read them before class. (You are, of course, welcome to add *more* to a thread later on, to continue a previous discussion.)

The purpose of this requirement is three-fold:

- i) It is intended to help you to think about the assignment before class, so that it will be easier for you to ask questions and contribute to discussions in class.
- ii) It is intended to help me to see, before class, what questions a reading has raised for you, how you're interpreting it, what difficulties you're having with it, etc.
- iii) **MOST IMPORTANT:** it is intended to help foster discussions among you, which you can continue off-line, out of class. There is *no better way* to learn philosophy than in discussion with your peers.

I will not grade individual discussion-threads, but at the end of the semester, I will look over all of your discussion-thread answers, and give you a grade based upon them, which will contribute to your final course grade as explained below, under "assessment." **NOTE:** Whereas the grade for your two regular *essays* will be based upon the grasp they display of the material you discuss, their philosophical acuity, precision of expression, and so on, *the grades for your discussion posts will be based entirely on effort.* I do not expect you to have a good grasp of the material before class, when you write these; nor do I expect these to be carefully written, philosophically acute masterpieces. I just want to see you doing your best to come to grips with the material. Students may skip contributing to the discussion thread on up to **three** occasions over the course of the semester without penalty to their grade.

- **Essays:** There will be two essays due. The mid-term Essay is due Friday, Feb 27th at 10:00AM (in the Philosophy Dept. office, RH209), and should be approx. 7-9 pages. Essay questions will be distributed early in the semester. The Final Essay is due **IN CLASS** on Monday, May 11th, and should be approx. 10-12 pages. Page-lengths for the essays are *only approximate* (based roughly on double spacing, 12-pt. font and 1" margins). Please conserve paper by printing on both sides of the page!

Please see the following, excellent guide (by professor James Pryor) to writing a philosophical essay:

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

It's worth reading right away, even before you think about writing essays, as it can help you to figure out how to engage with the texts we'll be reading.

I *strongly* suggest that you avail yourself of one or both of the following resources when writing your papers:

- 1) *The Writing Center*, located in the Library's *Learning and Teaching Center*, has writing tutors (students) and a writing specialist (faculty) who will meet with you and help you with your essay at any stage of the writing process – from drawing up the outline to editing the final draft. They have walk-in hours, but get busy at crunch

times during the term, so it may be best to make an appointment. More info on them is available here: <http://ltc.vassar.edu/writingCenter.html>

2) *Philosophy Department Interns* are senior philosophy majors, chosen by the department because they are (a) exceptionally good students of philosophy and (b) nice, easy people to talk to. Like the writing center tutors, they will help you think about and write your philosophy papers. The philosophy interns this semester are: Tom Wolfe (thwolfe@vassar.edu) and Michael Sandberg (misandberg@vassar.edu). They will hold regular office hours, which are posted on the door of their office, RH401A.

Your papers will be much better if you get help from these sources, and I'll be able to give you more philosophical comments and fewer comments about how to write.

IMPORTANT: I take essay deadlines very seriously. Unless you have specific permission from me, *in advance*, to hand in an essay late, late essays will be subject to a penalty of one grade increment per day late. I.e., one day late takes you from an A to an A-, two days to a B+, three days to a B, four days to a B-... On the other hand, if asked sufficiently in advance, I will grant reasonable requests for extensions.

I do not accept essays by e-mail, except in special circumstances.

ASSESSMENT

There will be no final exam. Your final grade will be calculated as follows:

Class participation + Moodle Posts:	30%
First essay:	30%
Second essay:	40%

Poor attendance may lower the grade calculated on this basis.

TEXTS

Please do not use other editions for this course (except, of course, as supplements). I have picked these editions both because of their scholarly accuracy and because they are inexpensive. All are available from the campus bookstore.

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- Hume, *Moral Philosophy*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2006)
- Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H.J. Paton. (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1956.)
- John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2001)

Other readings will be available for download on Moodle.

SCHEDULE

The following schedule is *tentative* and *subject to change*. Note that the readings are distributed so that there is a reasonable amount of reading *each week*. However, the distribution of the topics makes it unavoidable that there will often be a relatively long reading assignment for the *Wednesday* class. It will be prudent, therefore, to do at least part of the reading for the Wednesday class during the preceding weekend, in addition to the reading for the Monday class.

1. W., Jan 28th

Introductory remarks

2. M., Feb. 2nd

An example of a moral argument

- Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”
- Look around the web-site www.GivingWhatWeCan.org. In particular, look at “How We Assess Charities,” and look at the descriptions of their four “top charities” (under “Find out more”).
- Optional (short) further readings: Toby Ord, “The Moral Imperative toward Cost Effectiveness” and Andreas Mogensen, “Giving Without Sacrifice?,” both available at: <https://www.givingwhatwecan.org/research/theory-behind-effective-giving>

3. W., Feb. 4th

What is a good life? Mill’s hedonism

- J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, pp. 1-11, stopping with the paragraph that ends “...subject to the same regard.”
- Robert Nozick, “The Experience Machine” (from his *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*).
- Richard Kraut, Desire and the Human Good, §§I-IV
- Interview with Mr. Money Mustache, *Washington Post*

4. M., Feb 9th

Utilitarianism

- The Queen v. Dudley and Stephens (1884)
- J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chaps I-IV

5. W., Feb 11th

Utilitarianism and Justice

- J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chap. V.
- J.J.C. Smart, “An Outline of a System of Utilitarian Ethics,” §10, “Utilitarianism and Justice” (You need only read §10.)
- John Harris, “The Survival Lottery”

6. M. Feb 16th

Sophisticated Consequentialism

- Peter Railton, “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality”

7. W., Feb 18th

Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Preface and Chapter I: ‘ordinary rational knowledge of morality’

- Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Preface and Section I, *stopping* at the end of p. 401 of the Akademie edition pagination (in the margins of your edition), which is on p. 69 in the H.J. Paton translation. Stop just before the paragraph that begins: “But what kind of law can this be the thought of which...?”
- Christine Korsgaard, “An introduction to the ethical, political, and religious thought of Kant,” pp. 1-13

8. M., Feb 23rd

More on the argument of *Groundwork I*

- Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Section I (*re-read* the part you’ve already read)
- Barbara Herman, “On the Value of Acting from the Motive of Duty”

9. W., Feb 25th

Groundwork II: The Formula of Universal Law

- Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Chapter II
- Kant, “On a Supposed Right to Lie because of Philanthropic Concerns”
- Korsgaard, “An introduction to the ethical, political, and religious thought of Kant,” pp. 13-22

**** First Essay Due 10:00 AM Friday, Feb. 27th, in Philosophy Dept. Office, RH209 ****

10. M. March 2nd

The Formula of Humanity and the Kingdom of Ends

- Korsgaard, “An introduction to the ethical, political, and religious thought of Kant,” pp. 22-35

11 W. March 4th

Neo-Kantian Contractualism

- T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*,
 - pp. 148-58
 - pp. 191-206
 - pp. 213-19
 - pp. 229-240

12. M. March 9th

Hume on reason and passion

- David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book II, Part III, section III (pp. 60-64); and Book III, Part I, sections I-II (pp. 64-82).

13. W., March 11th

Hume's theory of the natural virtues: what we approve of

- Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Sections I, II, V (Part I of V *only*), VI (paragraphs 1-7, up to discussion of 'discretion'), and Appendix II ("Of Self-Love")
- You may *skim*: sections VII & VIII.
- Paul Bloom, *Just Babies*, pp. 13-39

[Spring Break]

14. M., March 30th

Hume's genealogy of the natural virtues: How we came to approve of them, and how we got them

- Hume, *Enquiry*, Section V, part II and Section IX, part I
- Paul Bloom, *Just Babies*, pp. 214-216

15. W., April 1st

Hume's genealogy of the artificial virtues

- Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part II, section II: *read only pp. 95 – 99.*
- Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, section III: *read only pp. 207-21 and Appendix III (pp. 281-87).*

Further Reading:

- David Wiggins "Natural and Artificial Virtues: A Vindication of Hume's Scheme"

16. M., April 6th

Why be moral?

- Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, part II of section IX;
- Bernard Williams, *Morality: an Introduction to Ethics*, chapter 1, "The Ammoralist."
- T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 158-168

17. W., April 8th

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I: The relationship between happiness and moral character

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I

Unless you have read Plato's *Republic*, you can skip chap. 6 of Bk. I. If you've read the *Republic*, you'll want to read Aristotle's critique, in chap. 6, of Plato's notion that there is an "idea of the Good."

18. M., April 13th	What ethical virtue is and how it is acquired. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>NE</i> II.1-4 • Myles Burnyeat, “Aristotle on Learning to Be Good”
19. W., April 15th	The “Doctrine of the Mean” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>NE</i> II.5-9, <i>NE</i> III.1, III.4-12 • J.O. Urmson, “Aristotle’s Doctrine of the Mean,” <i>up to</i> the paragraph on p. 166 that begins “We may now pass to another difficulty.”
20. M., April 20th	Moral motivation and the virtues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>NE</i> IV • Rosalind Hursthouse, “The Virtuous Agent’s Reasons: A Reply to Bernard Williams” **Note on the Hursthouse reading: she uses without translating the Greek phrase <i>di’ auta</i>. This is, literally, “because of themselves,” and is rendered by Crisp in our translation “for their own sake.”
21. W., April 22nd	More on particular virtues <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No new assignment, but read <i>NE</i> III and IV again.
22. M., April 27th	Weakness of will and pleasure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>NE</i> VII • Amélie Rorty, “<i>Akrasia</i> and Pleasure: <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> Book VII”
23. W., April 29th	Pleasure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>NE</i> VII, 11-14 (again) • <i>NE</i> X, 1-5 • Julia Annas, “Aristotle on Pleasure and Goodness”
24. M. May 4th	Contemporary Aristotelian naturalism? Philippa Foot, “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”
25. W. May 6th	Reconsidering moral demandingness Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints”
26. M. May 11th	Taking Stock No new assignment ***FINAL ESSAY DUE IN CLASS***

For students with disabilities: Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities who are registered with the Office for Accessibility and Educational Opportunity.

Students in need of disability accommodations should schedule an appointment with me early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course that have been approved by the Office for Accessibility and Educational Opportunity, as indicated in your AEO accommodation letter.