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PHL 210E.01: Moral Philosophy

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Moral Philosophy (PHL 210)
Spring 2022
Monday/Wednesday 1:00p-2:20p
Location: Education (EDPJW) 312

Humans, when perfected, are the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, the worst of all.

—Aristotle, *Politics* (350 BCE), 1253a31-33

Life is given only once, and one would like to live it cheerfully, meaningfully, beautifully.

—Chekhov, “The Story of an Unknown Man” (1892)

Course Description

Moral philosophy has been a driver and mirror of Western civilization for over 2,000 years. This course will acquaint you with three of the major traditions of moral philosophy in the West and help you to write successful philosophy papers. We’ll be reading classical texts together with recent pieces by philosophers, historians, and others. You’ll be writing and re-writing highly focused papers on the material.

Our investigation of each tradition will center around three questions: how is one supposed to tell if an action (or norm or practice) is morally good?; what is supposed to make an action (or norm or practice) morally good?; what is supposed to motivate one to care about any of this? We begin, however, with some popular ways of thinking that can generate resistance to taking such questions seriously.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of the course you should be able to:

- analyze, evaluate, and accurately apply the concepts and reasoning internal to the traditions we investigate
- develop and appreciate well-reasoned philosophy papers

Course Texts

Required

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (ca. 350 BCE)
- Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785)
- Bentham and Mill, *The Classical Utilitarians* (1789-1860s)
- Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010)

Recommended

- Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751)
- Klinkenborg, *Several Short Sentences about Writing* (2013)

All of these books are available at the University Bookstore and may be available on-line for less. *Please get paper copies.* I do not allow “e-books.”

Here’s the link to the UM Bookstore:

<https://montanabookstore.bncollege.com/shop/montana-bookstore/page/find-textbooks>

Grade Breakdown

Participation: 10% (preparation, punctuality, quality of contributions in class)

Moodle Postings: 10%

Three Revised Papers: 80% (20%, 25%, and 35%, respectively)

In assigning final grades, I also consider how much your work improves over the course of the term.

Participation

This is a seminar-style course, so your regular attendance and thoughtful participation are all-important.

Read the assigned works before class and be sure to bring the readings to our meeting.

Everyone gets two absences (no excuse needed) on non-workshop days. After that your final grade goes down by one interval with each additional absence. I'll of course make allowances for Covid as appropriate.

Please note that you'll need to bring a draft of your papers to the workshops *in class* on February 23rd, March 14th, and May 9th in order to receive credit for those papers.

Contact me as soon as possible if something comes up that threatens to interfere with your work for the course.

Moodle Posts

You'll often be posting on Moodle before we meet.

Mechanics The schedule (below) indicates when a post is due. For instance, the first post is due Monday, Jan. 24. Go to our Moodle course page and click on Post #1. That will take you to a forum where you can enter and submit your responses. In some cases you won't be able to see the responses of other students until you've entered your own.

Moodle posts are due by midnight before our meeting; if we're meeting on Monday, posts are due on Sunday by midnight. I'll evaluate posts on a scale of 1-4. 4 means your response lands in the 'A' range; 3 means it lands in the 'B' range; 2 denotes the 'C' range; 1 denotes the 'D' range and 0 is equivalent to an 'F.' Posts that come in after midnight but before our meeting are docked one point. Posts that come in after our meeting do not get credit. I'll drop your two lowest post grades. Some days I won't evaluate your posts, but I'll still read them and give you credit for submitting on time.

What Makes for a Good Post

- (1) Follow the instructions and prompts provided at the forum site. Be sure to observe the word limit.
- (2) **Don't summarize.** I'm asking for responses—to texts, usually—not summaries.
- (3) *Aim for clarity and specificity in your responses.* Ground your response with page numbers.
- (4) Speak in direct sentences. *Think through each word and each punctuation mark you use.*
- (4.5) Notice what happens when you give this kind of attention to your sentences. Allow yourself to rewrite. Notice whether you're satisfied with the final product, and why.

Your style doesn't have to be formal—first person is fine and will sometimes be required—but be sure to proofread.

For information on how to access Moodle, login and then select Moodle 101 for Students (<https://moodle.umt.edu/enrol/index.php?id=13709>).

Papers

The point of the papers is to give you a chance to develop a coherent position on a highly focused topic connected to our readings. You can find the paper topics at the end of this document.

As noted above, you'll submit and workshop a draft of each paper before submitting a final version.

You must normally participate in the workshops **in class** in order to receive credit on the papers for which they are designed.

Late Work, Make-Up Work

Please note that I will not normally accept late paper drafts.

I will often give extensions on rewrites but you need to request one in advance. Rewrites that haven't received an extension will be accepted up to forty-eight hours after the deadline but they will be docked one letter grade for each day they are late.

There is no make-up work. The best way to recover from a low grade is to do better on the remaining assignments.

Email

Email is the best way to communicate in between meetings so I'll ask for your preferred email address at the start of the semester. Please be sure to check that account on a regular basis.

Disability

Let me know if you have a disability so we can make arrangements.

Plagiarism/Academic Dishonesty

Plagiarism amounts to taking someone else's *thoughts* or *words* and presenting them as your own. The term traces back to the Greek word for kidnapping (*plagion*). Examples of plagiarism range from the blatant, e.g., handing in work that you did not do (perhaps you bought a paper from the internet or simply borrowed a paper from another student) to using material from an outside source—such as a book, a website, a published or unpublished paper—without documenting that source. The University of Montana Student Conduct Code proscribes all forms of plagiarism (Article IV). It's also a violation of the Student Conduct Code to hand in work that you already submitted for a previous course. You will at a minimum receive an "F" on any work that plagiarizes or was previously submitted. Here's a link to the Student Code: <http://umt.edu/student-affairs/community-standards/default.php>

Schedule of Readings and Assignments

This is a provisional schedule. You're expected to keep track of any changes we make to it. (M)=Moodle.

Jan

W 19 Welcome! Here's what you need to know.

History, Psychology, and Meta-Ethics

M 24 *Moral Frailty*. Asch and Milgram. No Reading. Writing: Post #1

W 26 *Divine Command Theory*. Reading: Driver, "God and Human Nature" excerpt (M); Wilkerson, 1-46. Writing: Post #2

M 31 Reading: Connell, "Birth Control: The Case for the Catholic" (M). Writing: Post #3

Feb

W 2 *Cultural Relativism*. Reading: Driver, "The Challenge to Moral Universalism" (M); Wilkerson, 47-94. (Optional reading: Midgley, "Trying Out One's New Sword" (M).) Writing: Post #4

M 7 Short Film: "Facing History." Reading: "Introduction to the Holocaust": <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/introduction-to-the-holocaust>;

Zuzana Justman, "My Terezín Diary":

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/09/16/my-terezin-diary>

Writing: Post #5

W 9 *Egoism* Reading: Feinberg, "Psychological Egoism," §§1-13 (M)

- M 14 Feinberg continued. Reading: Wilkerson, 95-122. Writing: Post #6
 W 16 Paper prep. (Optional reading: Klinkenborg, *Several Short Sentences About Writing*, 1-36.)
- M 21 No meeting. Presidents' Day.
 W 23 **Workshop paper #1 in class. Paper #1 draft due. Rewrite package due Friday, Feb. 25 by 5p in LA 101 or LA 148**

Three Classic Moral Theories

- M 28 *Utilitarianism* (sympathy). Reading: Wilkerson, 123-164; (optional reading: Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* §§V-VIII, focusing on §V). Writing: Post #7
- March**
 W 2 *Utilitarianism*. Reading: Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, chaps. I and IV (pp. 8-12; 19-22) and "Push-Pin versus Poetry" (94) in *The Classical Utilitarians*; Nozick, "The Experience Machine" (M). (Optional reading: Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ch. 2 in *The Classical Utilitarians*.)
- M 7 *Utilitarianism* Reading: Rawls, "Classical Utilitarianism" (M); Wilkerson, 165-204. Writing: Post #8
 W 9 *Utilitarianism* Reading: Hare, "What is Wrong with Slavery" (M); Wilkerson, 205-221
- M 14 **Workshop paper #2 in class. Paper #2 draft due.**
 W 16 No meeting. Rewrite package due by 5p today in LA 101 or LA 148

March 21-25 Happy Spring Break!

- M 26 *Kant's Ethics* Reading: Kant, *Groundwork* (G.), Preface and Section I; Wilkerson, 222-259. Writing: Post #9
 W 30 *Kant's Ethics* Reading: G., Section II (406-427)

April

- M 4 *Kant's Ethics* Reading: G., Section II (428-end); Wilkerson, 260-301. Writing: Post #10
 W 6 *Kant's Ethics* Reading: Langton, "Duty and Desolation," Part I (M)
- M 11 *Kant's Ethics* Reading: Langton, "Duty and Desolation," Part II (M); Wilkerson, 302-331
 W 13 Interlude: Liberal Democracy and Abortion. Reading: TBA. Writing: Post #11
- M 18 *Aristotle's Ethics* Reading: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* [NE], 1.1-1.9, skipping 1.6; Wilkerson, 332-363. Writing: Post #12
 W 20 *Aristotle's Ethics* Reading: NE, 1.13-all of NE 2 (virtue of character); Comte-Sponville, "Politeness" (M)
- M 25 *Aristotle's Ethics* Reading: NE, 3.6-4.9 (some particular virtues of character); Didion, "On Self-Respect" (M). Writing: Post #13
 W 27 *Aristotle's Ethics* Reading: NE, 7.1-7.4 (*akrasia*); Bennett, "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn" (M)

May

- M 2 TBA. Reading: Wilkerson, 363-412. Writing: Post #14
 W 4 **Workshop paper #3 in class. Paper #3 draft due**

Paper #3 rewrite due Monday May 9 by 5p in LA 101 or LA 148

Paper Instructions, Topics, and Criteria of Evaluation

Instructions

- Address the exact question or issue and strive to keep your focus on that.
- Draw on the readings and provide citations to ground your discussion; quote sparingly.
- Use paragraphs to organize your discussion; be able to identify the purpose of each paragraph.
- Write in short-ish sentences and make them as direct as possible. Be *deliberate* in what you say.
- Refrain from grand introductions. Get straight to the matter at hand.

First Paper Topic

Many people are influenced by the theories of cultural relativism, divine command theory, and psychological egoism. Select two of these theories and explain, in your own words, what it maintains and at least one serious problem with it. In conclusion, explain which of the two theories you selected holds, or once held, the greater attraction for you and why.

Mechanics: Your **final** paper must be at least 1000 words and *no more than* 1200 words. Your **draft** must be at least 1000 words but *may* exceed 1200 words. Single-space to save paper. Please indicate the word count at the top of both your draft and final paper. For the **final** version, do *not* put your name on the first page. Instead, simply sign at the bottom of the back page. This will allow me to read the paper without knowing whose paper it is.

Draft due in class Wednesday February 23.

Rewrite package due Friday Feb. 25 by 5p in LA 101 or LA 148.

Your rewrite package consists of 3 things: (1) your rewrite; (2) your draft; (3) the workshop sheet your partner filled out for you. Please staple these together with your rewrite on the top.

Second Paper Topic

Critically explain and evaluate the charge that utilitarianism is too permissive. Make use of the assigned readings in your discussion and be sure to provide page numbers.

Mechanics: Same as above.

Draft due in class Monday March 14.

Rewrite package due Wednesday March 16 by 5p in LA 101 or LA 148.

As before, your rewrite package consists of 3 things: (1) your rewrite; (2) your draft; (3) the workshop sheet your partner filled out for you. Please staple these together with your rewrite on the top.

Third Paper Topic

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, two men hunting for runaway slaves ask Huck about Jim's status. Huck says 'He's white'; in so doing, Huck deliberately helps Jim to escape to freedom.

- (a) In so helping Jim does Huck exemplify virtue, as Aristotle conceives it? If you answer 'yes,' identify a particular virtue that Huck exemplifies and explain how exactly Huck's efforts on Jim's behalf fit Aristotle's conception of virtue. If you answer 'no,' explain how Huck's efforts fail to fit Aristotle's conception of virtue.
- (b) Consider whether Huck's action is consistent with Kant's categorical imperative. Explain why or why not. (Here I recommend focusing on *one* formulation of the imperative though you will need to bear the other formulations in mind to give a fair representation of Kant's thought.)
- (c) Briefly discuss which of these ideals—Aristotle's conception of virtue or Kant's conception of moral goodness—you find more compelling, and why.

Answer (a)-(c) as clearly, directly, and precisely as you can. Be sure to use specifics from each text in developing your answers. Huck's deliberations are recounted in Bennett, pp. 124-127.

Mechanics: Your final paper must be at least 1350 words and may not exceed 1450 words. You need not submit a draft or workshop sheet this time. Please continue to refrain from putting your name on the first page and instead sign the last page.

Draft due in class Wednesday May 4. Rewrite due Monday May 9 by 5p in LA 101 or LA 148.

Criteria of Evaluation

Focus: Does the paper address the *specific* items or questions posed and *only* those?

Reading: How closely and faithfully does the paper engage the text(s)? This is a matter of accuracy as well the level of detail.

Organization: How well-organized is the discussion *paragraph-by-paragraph*? Is there a coherent progression from one paragraph to the next?

Sentence: How well-written is the paper *sentence-by-sentence*? Is every sentence grammatical? Is the language clear, direct and well-chosen? Are there misspellings? Typos? Unnecessary words?

Cogency*: How cogent is the argument or discussion? Does the author supply evidence for her claims, and is it good evidence? Does she make objectionable assumptions? Does she beg important questions? Does she consider intelligent objections to her position? Does she make needed distinctions?

Imagination: Is the discussion thoughtful? Is the author making interesting, possibly surprising, connections? Do they offer fresh examples or observations?

**Cogent: "Having power to compel assent or belief; argumentatively forcible, convincing." From Latin 'co'- together+ 'agere'- drive. -Oxford English Dictionary*

University Writing Assessment

Because this is an intermediate writing course, you'll be asked by the University to submit one of your papers (via Submittable) to a University writing committee for the purpose of improving writing instruction. This request will occur at the end of the semester. Your paper will be stripped of individual identifiers and entered into a database from which it may be randomly selected for assessment. None of this has any bearing on your grade in the course. I am not a member of this committee and any assessment it might make would be both unknown to me and entirely irrelevant to your course grade. (Moreover, committee members themselves won't know whose papers they're reading.) Let me know if you have any questions.