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PHIL 422E.01: Contemporary Ethics and the Pursuit of Excellence

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Contemporary Ethics and the Pursuit of Excellence

I. Goals

The first goal of the course is to sketch the standard positions of contemporary ethics and their arguments for neutrality as regards the pursuit of excellence and the good life. Next we need to understand Bernard Williams's diagnosis of the narrow scope of modern ethics. We will then consider John Dewey's proposal that anticipates and meets many of Williams's criticisms and yet concludes that articulate standards of moral excellence are inappropriate and even detrimental. Finally we will evaluate George Sher's critique of neutrality and his version of moral excellence.

As companion readings we will use Nelson Aldrich's account of a traditional American model of excellence and David Brooks's description of a contemporary American version of excellence.

II. Readings

Aldrich, Old Money.
Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy
Dewey, Human Nature and Conduct
Sher, Beyond Neutrality
Brooks, Bobos in Paradise

III. Requirements

(A) Classroom Participation (30% of course grade)

It will be your obligation to show through participation in the classroom discussions and, if called upon, through a ten-minute summary of the preceding class meeting that you are keeping up with the readings and are in command of the material presented in class. It will be my obligation to make everyone feel welcome and encouraged to participate.

(B) Three In-Class Examinations (each accounting for 10% of the course grade)

- (1) September 27,
- (2) November 8,
- (3) December 19, 10:10 a.m. (Final Week)

(C) Term Paper (40% of course grade)

1. Intent

The major tasks are three. (1) You have to take on a limited but significant issue of contemporary moral life. The issue may pertain to social justice, the environment, art, religion, science, technology, or the like. (2) You have to bring some of the important points and perspectives developed in class to bear on the issue. (3) You have to forge (1) and (2) into an argument that bears the imprint of your convictions.

Beyond these three requirements you are free to draw on any material whatever. But be careful not to do so to the detriment of the basic threefold intent.

2. Technical Details

(a) General: The paper must be typewritten and paper-clipped. Follow some standard format. The deadline is December 4. You are required to submit an outline before you begin detailed work on the paper. The outline is due November 6 at the LATEST.

(b) Undergraduates: 2500 words (10 pages). Use of scholarly material beyond that discussed in class is not required or encouraged since it usually dilutes the crucial ingredient--original reflection.

(c) Graduates: 4000 words (16 pages). Here too the emphasis is on independent thought. At the same time you should acknowledge and incorporate a piece of significant scholarship, a book a part or chapter of a book, or a substantial essay or article. An oral report on that piece should be given in class. The report should be about 20 minutes in length, giving an exposition and critique of the author's thesis.

NOTE:

September 24 is the last day to add and drop classes by Dial Bear.
October 15 is the last day to drop classes or change the grading option.

Office Hours: MWF 8:10-9:00 and by appointment in LA 149.
Phone and messages: 243-2792

If you have a disability, please let me know so that we can provide accommodation.