

Philosophy 210E: Introductory Ethics
Fall 2018
Professor Deborah Slicer
L.A. 155/243-2527/ deborah.slicer@umontana.edu
O.H.: tba

Course Description:

This is an introductory course in ethics for philosophy majors and minors. There are no prerequisites. We want to get at the bottom of the judgments we make about what is morally right and wrong. Specifically, what kinds of reasons can we give for those judgments and prescriptions? We will study in depth three secular, western moral theories that we frequently appeal to in order to justify the moral claims we make: theories about virtuous character, Kantian and rights theories, and utilitarianism. We'll also look at critiques of these three theories. Iris Murdoch's essay, "On 'God' and Good" is one sort of criticism. In order to understand if and how these theories are practical we will test their application to some contemporary moral issues: capital punishment, civil disobedience, environmental ethics, and morality in the initiation and conduct of war. In addition to our reading, we'll watch three films that also explore the application of these principles. By the end of the semester, if nothing else, you should be more conscious and articulate about the moral judgments and prescriptions that you, family, friends, politicians, and religious authorities make. And since this is a university "W" course, we'll hone basic writing skills as you write several 2-3 page papers that emphasize organization and prose that's direct, clear, crisp, and foregrounds your unique voice.

Schedule

8/28 Hello and Business
8/30 "The Value of Philosophy," Bertrand Russell (x—find this on-line) & excerpt from "Philosophy and Literature," Iris Murdoch (x)
9/4-6 "Crimes and Misdemeanors," film. Please watch on your own time.
9/11 "The Principle of Utility," Jeremy Bentham (x); "The Experience Machine," Robert Nozick (x)
9/13-25 *Utilitarianism*, J.S. Mill
9/27-10/11 Kant, *The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*
10/9 NO CLASS
10/16 "In Defense of the Death Penalty," van den Haag (x); "The Case Against the Death Penalty," Bedau (x);
10/18-23 Dead Man Walking, film. Please view on your own time.
10/25 "Just War," William V. O'Brien (x)
10/30-11/13 *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle
11/6 ELECTIONS, NO CLASS, PLEASE VOTE
11/15 "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving the Natural Environment," Thomas Hill (x)
11/20 "On 'God' and 'Good'," Iris Murdoch (x)

11/27-12/9 “Weapons of the Spirit” film. We’ll watch together.
12/4-6 “Letter from the Birmingham Jail,” M.L. King (x—find this on-line) & “The Abstract Wild,” Jack Turner (x)

Texts:

Utilitarianism, J.S. Mill

The Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant

The Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle

(x)= handout or find this on-line

Requirements

- 1.) 4 2-3 page papers on assigned topics. I’ll actually give you 5 assignments. So that means you can drop your lowest score if you write all 5. NO make-up assignments. These are due at the beginning of class. I will NOT accept a paper once class has started. 60 points total
- 2.) 1 paper rewrite. I’ll let you know individually which paper you should revise/expand. 5 points
- 3.) Comprehensive final exam= 35 pts.

Law and Order

- 1.) Attendance and participation—I will take attendance sporadically. If attendance is good and you’ve participated in discussions, and if you have a borderline grade at the end of semester, I’ll boost your final grade. If your attendance has been poor, I won’t boost the grade. Be forewarned: Readings for this class are very difficult. If you don’t come to class and take good notes, chances are good you’ll fail it. So read diligently and have a conversation with what you’re reading, come to class regularly, take very good notes, find a study partner or two, and see me whenever you’re confused.
- 2.) I consider the following rude and unacceptable: ringing cell phones, open lap tops, reading the newspaper or working on something other than class materials in class, whispering to your neighbor, texting, coming into class late or leaving early (unless you’ve okayed this with me), in other words anything that keeps you or other students from giving me your full attention. I’ll call you out for these things just once. After that, I simply drop you from the class. Please just be considerate, responsible adults, and we’ll get on fine.
- 3.) See the University of Montana [Student Conduct Code](http://www.umt.edu.SA) re. cheating, etc. (<http://www.umt.edu.SA>) .

3rd Paper/Phil 210E

3-4 pages. Due 11/ 7 Late papers recycled unread.

This paper is a bit more challenging than the others, but I think you can handle it.

The film is loosely framed by 2 similar images. (1) In one of the first shots a poetry student of Helen's reads a poem that features a woman waiting at the end of a road with her arms open to someone. (2) Helen's mother wakes her from a bad dream the night before Matt's execution. Her mother reminds Helen that as a child she would sleepwalk and how once she walked into the street when she was sleeping. Her mother ran out to get her and Helen struck out, giving her a black eye. Her mother concludes the story by saying "But I held you tight. A mother's arms are strong when her child is in danger."

First, relate these images to Kant's notion of duty, dignity, respect, unconditional worth, and the Kingdom of Ends (approx. 1 ½ pages). Then relate them to the situation with Connor McBride (approx. 1 ½ pages). See "Forgiven," class handout. I realize Kant, who is a proponent of capital punish on retributivist grounds, may not be comfortable with reconciliatory justice. But let's assume he'll consider reconciliatory justice and use his concepts to discuss the McBride/Grosmarie situation. Don't try to be literal, to relate the woman in the poem or Helen's mother to any particular person in "Forgiven." Just discuss how those ideas are relevant to the McBride situation.

Guidelines

1. Once again, get right to work. No long introductions or background summaries. Make an outline of the 4-5 points you want to make and hang with those.
2. Write in your natural speaking voice. Read the paper out loud and edit.
3. Use the grammar guide. I'm now deducting points for repeat offenders.

PLEASE:

**Don't summarize the essay. I've read it. Get right to point after a 1 or 2 sentence introduction.

**You don't need to work with all of Bentham. Work with specifics that are relevant to the topic.

**Make an outline before you write and stick with the 5-6 points in your outline.

**Read your drafts out loud and edit as you go. This will vastly improve your writing.

Write in your natural speaking voice! Don't try to sound smart! You are smart. Let your own voice lead.

**You will lose points for 5th-grade grammatical errors! For example edit for comma splices, sentence fragments, possessives, use semi-colons properly (it's easy—they separate complete sentences or items in a list). Use the grammar guide that you've already printed from our web site.

**Minimal quotes in a paper this short. I'd prefer you not quote from Bentham at all. I need to see that you can put these ideas into your own words.