

Philosophy 127: Ethics

Whitman College – Fall 2008

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Course Description

The word ‘**philosophy**’ derives from Greek words meaning ‘**love of wisdom**’. So philosophy attempts to determine some of the deepest truths about our existence and the reality around us.

What distinguishes philosophy is not just the issues that it addresses, since some of these are also addressed by other fields (like science and religion). What is distinctive about philosophy is the way in which it attempts to answer those questions: through **reason**. Philosophers attempt to justify their views with arguments, laying out the strongest reasons in favor of their positions and responding to the strongest objections against them.

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that considers what is right and wrong, good and bad in human activities – in short, it tries to determine **how we ought to live**. In this course, we are going to use philosophical reasoning to examine what is a good or bad life, which actions we ought or ought not to take, and how answers to those questions affect how society ought or ought not to be structured.

Goals of the Course

The ultimate goal of the course is to help you **refine and articulate your own moral viewpoint**.

More specific goals toward achieving this include:

1. To gain an understanding of the issues and concepts of moral reasoning.
2. To explore some of the most important ethical theories in the history of Western philosophy.
3. To develop an appreciation of the relation between ethics and other theoretical and empirical inquiries.
4. To enhance the abilities to read, think, and write clearly in a philosophical way.
5. To sharpen general interpretive and analytical skills.

Class Format

Our class meetings will primarily focus on discussion of the readings and the larger issues related to them. I will sometimes also present important background or related views. As much as possible, however, you will have a chance to apply and evaluate the ideas that the texts present, and to propose and consider alternatives. In order to achieve our ultimate goal for the course, it is essential that *each* of you *actively* engage the material.

Pet Peeve

No dozing in class! It is extremely rude toward those who are speaking, and tends to dampen the energy and involvement of the group as a whole. Research shows that someone dozing off hardly retains anything anyway. So, if you find yourself that drowsy, you should simply go home and nap instead of coming to or staying in class. If I see anyone dozing off, I’ll interrupt class and ask that person to leave.

Texts to be Used

1. A good dictionary (you can't understand the readings if you don't know what the words mean!)
2. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. Irwin, 2nd edn. (Hackett)
3. Kant, Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals, trans. Ellington (Hackett)
4. Bentham and Mill, Utilitarianism and Other Essays (Penguin)
5. Noddings, Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education (U. of California Press)

(Alternate translations or editions of any of these would be fine as well.)

There are several additional readings that are on electronic reserve ("e-reserve"), available at <http://ereserves.whitman.edu>

The password for the course is: ethics.

Summary of Requirements and Grading

Participation — 20% of your total grade

Our class meetings will primarily focus on conversation about the readings and the larger issues that they address. You are expected to be an active and productive participant in our conversations. To do this, you must carefully read (and sometimes re-read) the assigned texts before class, and come to our meetings with questions and ideas to discuss. There will occasionally be more specific assignments for you to complete. You are also expected to be a productive and contributing member of your research group. More details about expectations and grading standards are provided below.

Brief Essays — 40% of your total grade

As we are examining the different views about ethics, it is important for you to reflect on the ideas presented and to develop your own thoughts. About once each week (as indicated on the schedule below), you will articulate and develop your views on the material in a brief essay. More details are provided below.

Research Project & Term Paper — 20% of your total grade

During the course of the semester, you will work with a small group of students to become the resident experts on a particular concrete ethical issue. You will research the major philosophical approaches to your topic, as well as any other relevant theoretical and factual background. Throughout the semester, we will be drawing connections between the more general theories that we'll be focusing on as a class and the particular topic that you're researching. The last two weeks of class will be devoted to discussion of your research topics, led by each group.

At the end of the semester, each student will submit a complete, free-standing essay in which you articulate and defend a thoughtful, well-grounded position on your topic.

Possible topics include: genetic engineering & eugenics, abortion, world poverty & hunger, capital punishment, euthanasia & physician-assisted suicide, nuclear deterrence, and the treatment of non-human animals. More details will be provided as the semester progresses.

Oral Examination — 20% of your total grade

During the final exam period, I will conduct a brief (30 minute) oral examination of each student. The exam will be comprehensive, and may cover any of the material that we've read or discussed this semester. The focus will be on the general ethical theories and approaches, although we may also touch on issues relating to the particular research topics. This one-on-one conversation will give you the best opportunity to demonstrate that you have understood, synthesized, and reflected on the theories and ideas that we've examined throughout the semester. More details will be provided toward the end of the semester.

** NOTE: You *cannot* pass the class if:

1. You miss more than 8 class meetings *for any reason*.
2. You miss more than 3 response papers *for any reason*.
3. You miss or fail the oral exam.

Academic Honesty

All of the work that you submit in this course must be entirely your own. Of course, you can seek help in a variety of ways as you prepare your essays and term paper. So it is **permitted** for you: to consult additional readings, to search for material on the internet, to discuss your ideas with other students, to exchange notes with other students, or to read and to discuss drafts of each other's papers. But it is **not permitted** for you to use someone else's words or ideas in your written work without giving proper acknowledgment.

Plagiarism will *not* be tolerated in any form. You have signed a statement indicating that you understand and will abide by the College policy on plagiarism. **Any student caught plagiarizing will automatically fail the course, and may be expelled from the College.** For more details, see the Student Handbook.

High-Tech

- I will often distribute important announcements, reminders, and clarifications through e-mail. It is your responsibility to *check your account every day*.
- There is also an e-mail list-server set up for the class, which you should feel free to use. Messages sent to phil127b_08fa@lists.whitman.edu will be forwarded to everyone in the class.
- This syllabus and a variety of other useful and/or entertaining stuff can be found through the class website: <http://people.whitman.edu/~clearfms/ethics.htm>

Tentative Schedule of Topics and Assignments

Wed.	Sep. 3	course introduction	
Fri.	Sep. 5	what is ethics? how is ethics done? Kagan, <u>Normative Ethics</u> , ch. 1, on e-reserve Williams, <u>Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy</u> , ch. 1, on e-reserve [instructions for accessing e-reserves are included above with the list of course texts]	
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Mon.	Sep. 8	basic ideas of virtue ethics Aristotle, <u>Ethics</u> I.1-5 and I.7-12	<i>syllabus quiz</i>
Wed.	Sep. 10	virtues of character Aristotle, <u>Ethics</u> I.13, II.1-9, and III.6-12	
Fri.	Sep. 12	virtues of character, cont.	
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Mon.	Sep. 15	weakness of the will Aristotle, <u>Ethics</u> VII.1-10	<i>brief essay #1 due</i>
Wed.	Sep. 17	virtue and friendship Aristotle, <u>Ethics</u> VIII-IX	
Fri.	Sep. 19	virtue, friendship, and society	research topic preferences
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Mon.	Sep. 22	pleasure and the good life Aristotle, <u>Ethics</u> X	<i>brief essay #2 due</i>

Wed. Sep. 24	virtue-based approaches to your research topics <i>readings TBA</i>	
Fri. Sep. 26	introduction to Kant and deontology	
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Mon. Sep. 29	good will and duty Kant, <u>Grounding</u> 387-401 [Preface & sec. 1 through "...from the effect"]	<i>brief essay #3 due</i>
Wed. Oct. 1	the Categorical Imperative – universal law formula Kant, <u>Grounding</u> 402-28 [from "But what sort..." through "...for hypothetical imperatives."]	
Fri. Oct. 3	the Categorical Imperative – ends-in-themselves formula Kant, <u>Grounding</u> 428-445 [from "But let us..." through end of sec. 2]	
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Mon. Oct. 6	the Categorical Imperative – ends-in-themselves formula, cont.	<i>brief essay #4 due</i>
Wed. Oct. 8	deontology and society Rawls, <u>A Theory of Justice</u> , excerpts on e-reserve	
Fri. Oct. 10	deontology and society, cont.	proposal due
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Mon. Oct. 13	NO CLASS – FALL BREAK	
Wed. Oct. 15	deontology and society, cont. Nozick, <u>Anarchy, State, and Utopia</u> , excerpts on e-reserve	
Fri. Oct. 17	Kantian approaches to your research topics <i>reading TBA</i>	
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Mon. Oct. 20	introduction to consequentialism; Bentham's utilitarianism Bentham, <u>Principles</u> , ch. 1 and <i>skim</i> chs. 4, 13, and 14	<i>brief essay #5 due</i>
Wed. Oct. 22	Mill's utilitarianism Mill, <u>Utilitarianism</u> , chs. 1-2	
Fri. Oct. 24	Mill's utilitarianism, cont.	
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Mon. Oct. 27	the case for utilitarianism Mill, <u>Utilitarianism</u> , ch. 4	<i>brief essay #6 due</i>
Wed. Oct. 29	the case for utilitarianism, cont. Shaw, "Arguing for Utilitarianism," excerpts on e-reserve	
Fri. Oct. 31	utilitarian approaches to your research topics <i>reading TBA</i>	progress report due
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Mon. Nov. 3 utilitarianism and rights

Wed. Nov. 5 utilitarianism and rights, cont.
Mill, Utilitarianism, ch. 5

Fri. Nov. 7 background and introduction to ethics of care
Gilligan, In a Different Voice, excerpts on e-reserve ***brief essay #7 due***

Mon. Nov. 10 analysis of caring
Noddings, Caring, chs. 1-3

Wed. Nov. 12 caring as a basis for ethics
Noddings, Caring, ch. 4

Fri. Nov. 14 the ethical ideal
Noddings, Caring, ch. 5

Mon. Nov. 17 care and education
Noddings, Caring, ch. 8 ***brief essay #8 due***

Wed. Nov. 19 care and society
Held, "Noncontractual Society," on e-reserve

Fri. Nov. 21 care-based approaches to your research topics
reading TBA **detailed outline due**

— THANKSGIVING —

Mon. Dec. 1 student-led discussion
topic & reading TBA

Wed. Dec. 3 student-led discussion
topic & reading TBA

Fri. Dec. 5 student-led discussion
topic & reading TBA

Tue. Dec. 8 student-led discussion
topic & reading TBA

Thu. Dec. 10 student-led discussion
topic & reading TBA

Fri. Dec. 12 semester wrap-up
Kagan, Normative Ethics, ch. 1
Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, ch. 1 **term paper due**

Brief Essays

The purpose of the brief essays is to give you a forum throughout the semester to develop and express your own ideas in relation to the course material. The only content requirements are:

1. **Your essay must make significant and direct contact with at least one specific idea or passage from one of the readings since the last response paper was due.**
2. **Your essay must make a single main point: explain and support a particular claim.**

Some of the possibilities include:

- Explore an assumption behind an author's view.
- Present an objection to one of an author's claims.
- Provide further or different support for one of an author's claims.
- Explore the connection between two different aspects of an author's view.
- Relate one author's ideas to another author, either that we read or that you've read in another context.
- Expand on or respond to a point made in class about an author's view.
- Apply one of the author's views to your research topic.
- Apply one of the author's views to some other concrete ethical issue.

These are only suggestions; any other topic is fine, as long as it satisfies the two requirements listed above.

Length: There is an **absolute maximum** length of **650 words**.

** Longer papers will not be accepted for credit!*

Due: You can hand in your response paper *anytime* up to the beginning of class on the due date.

If you hand in a paper outside of our class meetings, you should leave it in my mailbox in the main Maxey office. Do not leave your paper outside of my office or under my office door.

** Late papers will not be accepted* unless the Powers That Be verify that you've been unable to work for *several days*. Procrastinate at your own risk!

Format:

- Your essay should be typed, using 12-point Times New Roman or a similar font.
- In the upper left-hand corner, single-spaced, you should list your name, the course number, and the date.
- The body of your paper should be double-spaced.
- At the end of your essay, you should include a word-count.
- If possible, please print on both sides of the paper.
- Multiple pages must be stapled together.

Citation (very important!): If you use someone else's exact words, you must put them in quotation marks, and you must give proper acknowledgment. You must also acknowledge any specific passages or ideas that you paraphrase. For this assignment, informal citation is fine. After the end of the quote or paraphrase, include a brief parenthetical citation in the text. For outside sources, just include enough information for your reader to find the original source.

Grading: Individual response papers will be graded as follows:

- A** Your paper expresses sophisticated insight into the text or issues, or draws unusual and profound connections between texts or ideas.
- B** Your paper gives an adequate presentation of ideas that go beyond the text and our class discussion.
- C** Your paper indicates some reflection on the material, but does not go far enough beyond a recap of the text itself or our class discussion, does not make adequate contact with the text, or is based on a serious misunderstanding of the text or issues.
- F** Your paper does not constitute a serious attempt to fulfill the assignment: the substance and/or the mechanics of your paper fall far short of normal college-level work.

In calculating your overall grade, your lowest response paper grade will be dropped. You may skip one if you wish, but I recommend that you plan to complete them all: it is a good idea to have a cushion in case you don't do as well as you'd like on one or need to miss one unexpectedly.

Class Participation

Most of our time together will be spent in a group conversation about the readings and the issues and questions that they suggest. You will learn not only from the authors and from me, but also from each other.

Like any conversation, you can't usefully participate if you don't know what you're talking about. So it is essential that you come to our meetings prepared:

- Read (and perhaps re-read) the assigned text carefully before class.
- Reflect on the reading, and identify some questions, themes, and ideas that you'd like to discuss.
- There will occasionally be other assignments, which you should complete with thoughtfulness and attention.

Everyone in the class should be a part of our conversation. With so many of us, no one person needs to talk all of the time. The *quality* of your contribution is much more important than the *quantity* of time that you're speaking. I also understand that everyone has good days and not-so-good days; some of the readings and conversation topics will engage you more than others. Your participation grade will depend on your *overall* involvement throughout the semester.

These are the grading criteria that will be used:

An **OUTSTANDING** (A-level) participant typically:

- Displays great enthusiasm and personal engagement with the readings.
- Advances the conversation to new levels.
- Contributes complex insights into the texts and issues.
- Draws insightful connections among different texts and issues.
- Enhances the participation of others by questioning, actively listening, and sharing time.
- Takes a leadership role in the research group.

A **GOOD** (B-level) participant typically:

- Shows genuine effort.
- Actively listens and volunteers.
- Stays on-topic and furthers the conversation.
- Raises substantial, text-based questions and ideas.
- Contributes an equal share of work to the research group

A **FAIR** (C-level) participant typically:

- Listens but does not volunteer.
- Shows acquaintance with the text and signs of preparation if called on.
- Offers opinions on the text, but without specific textual reference or other support.
- Takes more than gives to the research group.

UNACCEPTABLE (failing) behavior includes:

- Frequent absence.
- Repeated dozing in class.
- No evidence of preparation.
- Other signs of total disengagement: doodling, working for another class, etc.
- "Toxic" or hostile behavior that works against our intellectual community.
- Complete withdrawal from or undermining of the research group.