The University of Michigan: A Moral Institution?
PHIL 196, Sec 003 Fall 2008
MW 2:30 – 4:00 pm
3451 Mason Hall
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"Religion, morality, and knowledge, being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."

These words of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787[1], carved above the pillars of Angell Hall, postulate links between morality, religion, knowledge and education. But what is the role of morality at the University of Michigan and in your student life and academic career here? Is your college education also a *moral* education? Will it make you a better citizen? A better human being? Do you have particular moral responsibilities as a student? Do I as an instructor and University administrator? What are they and why? Are we living up to them? Do we — students, faculty and staff of the University — collectively form a distinct moral community, with mutual obligations amongst ourselves? In what ways is the University a moral institution — i.e., when is it legitimate to apply moral judgments to the University as an institution, and in those situations, how do we decide whether the University has acted morally?

This course is a philosophy course, and I therefore take it to be a course in *examined life.* We will examine moral dimensions of the University and its faculty, students, and staff in their roles as citizens of an academic community, drawing on concepts and theories of moral philosophers. Our goal is to help you as students think about how to approach participation in this community and develop your deliberative competencies by questioning academic life and the University from moral and social standpoints. I also hope that you will help me understand our collective moral lives from your perspective, to better inform my own thinking and acting as scholar and administrator.

Our inquiries will fall into three distinct but related domains:

Individual morality and academic integrity at the University
What moral responsibilities do you as students have, and what is the basis of those responsibilities? What about faculty? Will your University education help you develop, as the Northwest Ordinance clearly hoped, as a moral individual and good citizen — and if so, how? How can morality be taught — if it can ever be taught — in an institution that is dedicated to free and open inquiry and tolerance toward wide-ranging and disparate viewpoints? Can it be taught without indoctrination? What are key concepts

[1] The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 created the Northwest Territories, of which Michigan was a part. If you look at the inscription on Angell Hall, you will see that it is flanked by two seals — one of the State of Michigan and one of the University of Michigan. Note the date on U-M seal; it does not match the date that is currently on the seal. Why not?

and principles that we might employ in deliberating about our moral responsibilities as learners and teachers?

The University of Michigan as an academic community

According to one ideal, the issues of academic integrity play out in the context of an academic community of faculty and students — a community dedicated to the free pursuit of knowledge and truth. This is a vision of the University that contrasts with another common view — namely, that the University provides a service, education, which you have purchased. What is your vision? Are these views incompatible? Does membership in an academic community entail responsibilities over and above basic social mores? Does the University of Michigan really constitute an academic community, or is it too diverse, disparate and extended an entity to be one? How might your beliefs and behavior toward your fellow students and faculty differ if we are or are not a community? What are the bases for such a community? What are the recognitions and social contracts from which it depends? You are a member of the community, but who gets to be a member of the community, and on what grounds? What should happen when individuals violate the standards of the community?

These are large and complex issues, worth a whole course in their own right. In order to bring some focus, we will frame our inquiries around the relationship of academic freedom to academic community. What, in brief, is the relationship of the free, responsible, individual scholar — whether student or faculty member — to the academic community? From there we will explore values such as the pursuit of truth, rational open inquiry, access, and diversity in its various forms. We will look at relevant examples from the University and its history, such as the academic freedom case of U-M professors Chandler Davis, Clement Markert and Mark Nickerson during the McCarthy era and, more recently, the Student Code of Conduct.

The University's moral obligations as an institution

If you are a free, responsible scholar, and we are an academic community, what is our relationship to this institution called "The University of Michigan"? Does the University of Michigan as an institution have moral responsibilities over and above basic social mores and laws — and if so, to whom and on what basis? To the citizens of the state and nation? To humankind? Is the University obligated to pursue certain forms of education or research for the good of society? Are there dangers inherent in becoming too much entangled in issues extraneous to the University's primary missions — or too little engaged with and attentive to the larger world? Should the University forego certain actions? For instance, should the University engage in classified research? Should it apply ethical tests to its investments? Should it impose codes of conduct on its members? Conversely, what are our responsibilities with respect to the University? Finally, in a pluralistic order, at what point does the pursuit of particular morality interfere with the basic functions of open discourse and free expression that we may believe are essential to academic life and the fundamental missions of the University?

We will examine specific examples, such as the University's divestment of stock holdings, from South Africa in 1987 and tobacco companies in 2000 (and other calls for divestment), its decisions in the 1960s, 1970s and later to place various restrictions on classified or other forms of research, or its recent defense of affirmative action in admissions.

Readings

Readings will likely include the work of moral and political philosophers such as Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Aristotle, Plato, and John Rawls; readings on particular moral topics in higher education such as plagiarism, academic freedom, freedom of speech, university autonomy, and so forth; and case studies, news articles, and short stories that we will use to examine a variety of issues.

Class Requirements

Primary requirements will likely include three short papers, several required but ungraded 1-2-page writing exercises. There might be a semester project, which would substitute for one of the papers and some of the writing exercises -- I am still thinking about that. This is a discussion-based class, and class participation will count for a significant portion of the grade (probably 30% to 40%). Class participation will include required engagement in some out-of-class events or activities.

What I hope you and I will get out of the course

As I said above, this is a philosophy course, which I take to mean it is a course in examined life. This course is more about questions than answers, but it is about particular sorts of questions, questions that engage in the age old philosophical pursuit of wisdom. We are going to search for the good, the right and the true in the context of University life, and I want us to do this together. If we engage responsibly and responsively in this endeavor, I believe we will take several things away from this class. So here are my hopes and the opportunities that I will try to provide, first for you as students:

To develop your abilities and skills in questioning your education and your academic environment — abilities presumably applicable well beyond the University. Are they right and true? Will they bring you the good life? Will they bring good to others?

To begin — because it is a lifelong process — to understand and appreciate the moral complexity of human persons and human societies. How are they organic? How are they constructed? What are their dialectical relationships? What are their power structures? What are their truths?

To learn more about the University of Michigan, your home — physically, socially, and intellectually — for the next several years. What is your relationship to it? What are the sorts of issues it confronts? Is it the kind of institution you want it to be? How might you and we make it better?

To understand the value of committing yourself to full participation in the academic community you have joined, while also understanding how to think about the limitations of the "community" in both idea and practice, and how to assess them.

To become acquainted with some of the key ideas of Western moral philosophy: consequentialism, deontology, and virtue. To confront great thinkers and join them in wrestling with issues of integrity, freedom, autonomy, justice, happiness, virtue, responsibility, the right, and the good.

To understand issues of plagiarism, academic dishonesty, and academic integrity in a thoughtful and sophisticated way, rising above rules and regulations to the ideas that inform them. To understand academic freedom, its moral and social justifications, and the responsibilities it entails.

To come to grips with the "examined life," both personal and collective, and to see it as an orienting idea for intellectual and moral growth. I want you to confront your beliefs, develop your moral voice, and, as Friedrich Nietzsche would say, to become "human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves."[2]

To share freely of your opinions, as I will, and strive with all of us to rise from mere opinion to true ideas and articulate understanding. To develop your abilities to express — verbally and in writing — your views and arguments, and to engage in deliberation and discourse.

And for myself, in addition to the above, I hope:

To learn more of what the world looks like from a position a quarter-century younger than my own, and thereby better to understand you as participants in our shared institution.

To have your views, your understanding, and your aspirations inform my own thinking about the nature of the University and the academic community, as well as the issues of policy and administration that I confront in thought and practice.

To come out of this course having advanced, with your help, my own work in philosophy of higher education, academic freedom, and personal and social morality.

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[2] *The Gay Science*, Section 335.