Philosophy 445: Contemporary Ethical Issues

Course Description
The “standard” view of philosophical ethics sees its task as setting purely rational and impartial standards for judging which actions are the morally right ones, and it sees its primary purpose as solving conflicts of interest. Both of the main “standard” theories, utilitarianism and Kantianism, are products of the European Enlightenment, which adopted a rational, secular approach to human values. This course will focus on some challenges to that standard view, challenges which are in some ways challenges to Enlightenment thinking in general. We will read and discuss works that raise questions such as the following:

- Might there be more room in ethics for a consideration of feelings and emotions than the standard view generally suggests? Might particular moral emotions such as compassion, empathy, forgiveness, remorse, friendship, and loyalty merit the attention and study of moral philosophers? On the other hand, we might want to consider a very different challenge from Nietzsche who suggests that character traits such as compassion and forgiveness may be vices rather than virtues.

- Does the “standard view” give inadequate attention to the ethics of personal relationships? Should more attention be given to friendship, for example?

- Might there be more room in ethics for partiality toward “one's own” than standard ethics generally allows? If so, what kinds of partiality are morally appropriate and how much partiality? We will ask whether partiality toward one's family, toward one's ethnic group, or toward one's country might be morally acceptable or even praiseworthy, and we will explore whether patriotism and nationalism are virtues.

- Should ethics concern itself not only with determining criteria for right actions but also (and perhaps primarily) with the characteristics of a good person? Contemporary “virtue ethics” takes this to be central to ethics. This course will introduce “virtue ethics” and explore the extent to which it deserves to supplement or even replace “standard” ethical theories of obligation. A central concern of virtue ethics is a well-lived life conceived not just in terms of fulfilling obligations but in developing the character traits conducive to living well, which are the virtues.

- For many, living well is connected to a life which has meaning and even purpose. Has the “standard” approach to ethics given inadequate attention to this question? What connection is there, if any, between a well-lived life and a life thought of as fulfilling a purpose? For a life to be purposeful, must the purpose be given or can it be created by each person for himself or herself? Can a life be meaningful even if it does not have a purpose? Can it be worth living even if it is ultimately meaningless? We will explore the existential challenge to standard ethics.

- (Time permitting or as an undercurrent to reflect on occasionally) What is the underlying ethical conflict involved in what some call the contemporary “clash of civilizations”? The clash is sometimes characterized as the West versus the Islamic world, but clearly there are strains and conflicts within the West and within the Islamic world that may be the more significant “clash of civilizations.” Is the clash one of traditional cultures versus
“modernity”? Is it between the secular-rational thinking of the Enlightenment versus a concern for the sacred and transcendent?

Within the broad topic of “contemporary ethical theory” and consistent with an emphasis on the topics indicated above, we will remain open to exploring related articles and themes that evoke strong interest among members of the seminar; for example, a religious approach to ethics and feminist ethics. These could be in the form of student presentations and/or student-initiated reading assignments.

The course will function as a seminar with an emphasis on class discussion and active student participation. Discussion will take place both during class time and on the seminar web page, and each form of discussion should complement and enrich the other.

**Course web page.**

Bookmark this page: [https://ctools.umich.edu/portal/site/1105044007636-5687113](https://ctools.umich.edu/portal/site/1105044007636-5687113).

You need your uniqname and Kerberos password to enter this site. If you are having trouble, ask me to add you as a guest until you get things straightened out.

**How to Reach Me**

Office: CB 3088. Email: elias@umich.edu (This is the best way to reach me, especially on non-class days). Office phone: (313) 593-5179.

Usual office hours: Monday 1-2:30 and Wednesday, 2:30-4. Often available Friday after 12:30. Please feel free to discuss any matters where I might be of help. Come individually or in a group. Office hours are for you, not just to discuss papers and tests but to engage in informal discussions about ideas that interest you.

**Course Requirements**

1. Active and regular participation in discussion both in class and on the web. (40% of grade)
   a) Regular attendance and active participation in class are required and expected. Please notify me if you are unable to attend class. Your course grade will be affected if you miss more than two class sessions (except for emergencies). Since we are not locked into a specific schedule of readings in advance, assignments will often be announced and distributed in class and on the course web page, so the assumption is that everyone will be present.
   
   b) You are expected to contribute regularly to the web-based discussion. You should offer some thoughtful comment on each assignment. These may be formulations of your own (challenges or criticisms), responses to comments of others, questions puzzling about the meaning of a reading assignment, or reflections on ideas brought up in the previous class session. Ideally this will be natural and fun rather than forced and burdensome. I hope this will be an outgrowth of your wrestling with the ideas in the course, that you will want to express your own views and seek help, feedback, and clarification from others. I will be involved in the discussions as well.
   
   c) Class presentations. You will coordinate the class discussion on several topics of special interest to you. Typically this will be based on a short statement that you prepared and
that we will all have read on the web page before class. I will probably ask to review your statement with you before you post it to the web.

*I will inform you occasionally of your performance in this area of the course: your strengths, areas in need of improvement, and overall evaluation. Feel free to ask anytime.*

2. Several short writing assignments and one major argumentative essay. Some of these may be outgrowths of a class presentation (e.g., you present a provocative thesis to the class, we discuss it, and then you develop an essay paper from it). This will be 60% of your course grade, probably 30% for the major paper and 30% for all the shorter essays.

I will suggest some topics but feel free to suggest some of your own. Please be sure, though, to clear any topic with me in advance. This is for your own protection. I will also distribute instructions on writing papers.

3. *Possibly* a midterm test and a final test. There will *not* be tests if the seminar is proceeding as I hope it will with a full commitment of all seminar participants to class and web-based discussion. We will assess this in class every few weeks so you will know well in advance if there might be tests.

*Warning!* It’s hard to imagine anyone cheating in an ethics seminar like this, but I need to include this information “for the record.” My policy is to give a failing grade in the *course* to anyone who cheats in any way or to anyone who helps anyone else cheat. The reason for the failing grade will be explained in a note to the Dean of your School or College. This policy is a protection to *you*, the honest student, because it is you who are cheated when other students are dishonest.