PH 1008: Philosophical (General) Ethics

Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology

Fall 2019
Mondays/Thursdays, 8:10—9:30 AM
DSPT 2

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Course Description and Objectives:

This course is an introduction to the philosophical study of ethics. Students will be introduced to the primary philosophical approaches to ethical questions and moral discourse, including Virtue Ethics, Deontology, Utilitarianism, and Natural Law Ethics. The focus of the course will be a close, critical study of great texts from the western philosophical tradition, including works from Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Mill, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Aquinas. Although the student will concentrate on understanding these philosophers in their historical context and on their own terms, various contemporary philosophers and scholars will also be read and discussed as a means for deepening the philosophical conversation and discerning the relevance of various philosophical approaches for contemporary ethical issues. This course partially fulfills the systematic philosophy area requirement for the Philosophy M.A. or Concurrent M.A. options. It also satisfies the philosophical ethics requirement of the Western Dominican Province’s Ratio Studiorum.

By the end of the semester, students should be able to explain the distinctive characteristics of the main philosophical approaches to ethics, and assess their relative strengths and weaknesses, particularly in their ability to provide satisfactory answers to contemporary moral debates. With a grounding in the philosophical principles of ethics, students will have the tools to enter more confidently into conversations on current ethical issues, and critically engage these issues in their future studies and leadership.
More specifically, students should be able to:

- Clearly explain Aristotle’s account of *eudaimonia* and the nature of the good, his distinction between voluntary and involuntary acts, his definition of choice, and the role of the moral and intellectual virtues in Aristotle’s ethics.
- Briefly explain the “naturalistic fallacy” and its significance for ethics.
- List the three formulations of Kant’s Categorical Imperative and explain their significance for evaluating the morality of actions.
- Explain Mill’s Principle of Utility and its significance for contemporary ethical debate.
- Summarize Nietzsche’s critique of traditional morality, and describe the role that genealogy, *resentiment*, and bad conscience play in his account.
- Identify the main features of Natural Law Ethics, and describe the structure of human acts according to Aquinas.

**Course Requirements:**

Each class session will consist of both lecture and discussion. Students will be expected to carefully prepare assigned readings in order to actively participate in the conversation and raise thoughtful questions in class. These activities will foster student capacities for reading and analyzing philosophical texts, as well as for self-direction and collaborative learning (DSPT Institutional Goals A3 and B1). To aid in this preparation, for each class meeting students will be given several questions related to the reading (posted on Moodle), and asked to write a brief response to each (no more than 100 words per question). Responses should be submitted via Moodle, and be completed before the beginning of the respective class. No credit will be given for late assignments. Students are expected to be present for class sessions, following the policies set forth in the DSPT *Student Handbook*. Absences will affect the student’s final grade. Students should plan, in particular, to be present for the **final exam on December 12**, since a make-up exam will be given only in the event of a serious illness (with a doctor’s note) or an equally grave reason. Students with disabilities or whose first language is not English are encouraged to speak with the instructor about any special needs they might have.
Students will be evaluated on the quality of their class participation and their understanding of class material as demonstrated by their bi-weekly questions, two short (6-8 page) analytic papers, and a final exam. These assignments are designed to help students develop their own critical thinking on moral issues and articulate their understanding of ethics both orally and in writing (DSPT Institutional Goals A3 and B1). Topics for the two short papers will be made available to students several weeks ahead of time. While these papers are not research papers, all sources should be cited using proper “Turabian” format (see Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. Eighth Edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013). Students are asked to consult the DSPT Student Handbook and follow the DSPT’s policies regarding academic honesty and plagiarism. The papers are due **October 31 (Paper #1) and December 9 (Paper #2)**. Late papers will be accepted, but will be penalized 1/3 of a letter grade for each day late (e.g., an “A” paper turned in one day late will receive an “A-.”)

**Grading:**

- Class Participation/Weekly Questions: 30%
  - Papers (2): 15% each
  - Final Exam: 40%

**Assigned Texts:**


Weekly reading assignments will be taken from these assigned texts and from readings posted on Moodle (http://moodle.gtu.edu). The *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas can be found online (including, for example, at http://dhspriory.org/thomas/summa/FP.html).

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**Course Schedule:**

9/5: Course Introduction

    Cicero, selections from *De Officiis*, Book III (Class Handout)

9/9: Aristotle on Happiness

    Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1
    Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, Chapter 8

9/12: Aristotle on Virtue and Vice

    Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue*, Chapters 2-3

9/16: Aristotle: on the Moral Virtues

    Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books 3.6–4
    Alasdair MacIntyre, selections from *After Virtue*

9/19: Aristotle on Justice and the Intellectual Virtues

    Optional: Ronald Polansky, selections from “Giving Justice Its Due”

9/23: Aristotle on Pleasure and Contemplation

    Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books 7 & 10
    Optional: Verity Harte, “The *Nicomachean Ethics* on Pleasure”
9/26: No Class

9/30: Social Contract Theory
   Hobbes, Selections from De Cive
   Rousseau, Selections from Discourse on Inequality

10/3: Hume’s Moral Psychology
   David Hume, Treatise on Human Nature Book III, Section 1

10/7: Hume and the Naturalistic Fallacy
   Alastair MacIntyre, “Hume on ‘Is’ and ‘Ought’”
   Searle: “How to Derive ‘Ought’ from ‘Is’”
   Optional: MacBeth, "'Is' and 'Ought' in Context: MacIntyre's Mistakes"

10/10: Kant and the Ethics of Duty
   Immanuel Kant, Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals I
   Optional: Christine Korsgaard, “Kant’s Analysis of Obligation: The Argument of Groundwork I”

10/14: The Categorical Imperative I
   Immanuel Kant, Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals II

10/17: The Categorical Imperative II
   Immanuel Kant, Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals III
   Optional: Thomas W. Pogge, “The Categorical Imperative”

10/21 & 10/24: No Class (Reading Week)

10/28: Utilitarianism I
   John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism Chapters I-III
   Optional: West, “Mill and Utilitarianism in the Mid-Nineteenth Century”
10/31: Utilitarianism II
  John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism* Chapters IV-V
  *First Paper Due*

11/4: Contemporary Consequentialism
  Peter Singer, “The Singer Solution to World Poverty”
  and “What’s Wrong with Killing?”
  Robert Spaemann, selections from *Benevolence and Happiness*

11/7: Nietzsche’s Subversion of Morality I
  Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, First Essay
  Philippa Foot, “Nietzsche’s Immoralism”

11/11: Nietzsche’s Subversion of Morality II
  Maudemarie Clark, “Nietzsche’s Immoralism and the Concept of Morality”

11/14: Emotivism and Non-Cognitivist Approaches to Ethics
  Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”
  MacIntyre, selections from *After Virtue*

11/18: Existentialist Ethics
  Sartre, “Existentialism as a Humanism”

11/21: Aquinas: Natural Law I
  Flannery O’Connor, “The Enduring Chill”
  Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”
  Jean Porter, selections from *The Recovery of Virtue*

11/25: Aquinas: Natural Law II
  St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, qq. 90-97
  Sokolowski, “What is Natural Law?”
11/28: Thanksgiving (No Class)

12/2: Aquinas on the Structure of the Human Act
   St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, qq. 6-9, 18
   Ralph McInerny, *Ethica Thomistica*, Chapter 4

12/5: No Class

12/9: Aquinas on the Virtues
   St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, qq. 55-56, 59, 61, 63-64
   Josef Pieper, selections from *The Cardinal Virtues*
   *Second Paper Due*

12/12: Final Exam

N.B.: The instructor reserves the right to revise the course syllabus as the need arises.

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**General Criteria for Grading of Papers**

**A:** The student’s essay not only reflects a correct understanding of the subject matter, but also a depth of comprehension which sees the wider implications of ethical principles and theories. The writing is fluent, well-organized, without grammatical or syntactical errors, following the standards articulated in Kate Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations* (Eighth Edition).

**A-:** For work which, although still excellent, falls short of the above.
B+: The student has produced a paper demonstrating a correct grasp of the subject matter, and has expressed this articulately. The paper itself is free of grammatical and syntactical errors.

B: The student has correctly grasped the essence of the subject matter, although with a few errors, and has presented his or her understanding in an organized, articulate way.

B-: Although the work shows a fair understanding of the subject matter, there are multiple errors in content, or the student’s understanding has not been well expressed.

C+: Although the student’s work shows evidence of effort and some genuine understanding of the topic, there are more significant errors or omissions, or the expression results in difficulty determining the extent of the student’s understanding.

C: Serious errors or omissions show that the student has failed to grasp important aspects of the subject matter or make a fully coherent argument, or has expressed their argument in such a way as to leave serious difficulties in determining the paper’s position and the student’s understanding.

C-: The student’s paper exhibits very little understanding of the topic and is poorly expressed.

D: The work exhibits a lack of understanding of the topic and is poorly expressed.

F: The work fails to meet even the minimum standards of understanding and expression, or has not been turned in.
Additional Resources

The following is list of supplemental and suggested readings. They are by no means required reading for the course, but may be of some interest to students wishing to do additional research in the area of philosophical ethics.


——. The Disputed Questions on the Virtues (Quaestio Disputata de Virtutibus In Communi and Quaestio Disputata de Virtutibus Cardinalibus). Translated by Ralph McInerny. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 1999.


Cicero, Marcus Tullius. On Duties (De Officiis). Translated by Walter Miller. Volume 30 of


MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Ethics in the Conflict of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning,*


