

Ethics and Public Life
PHIL 133, Fall 2017
Tu/Th, 3 – 4:15 p.m., PS 101

Instructor: Nick Rimell
Office: PS 302
Email: nrimell@randolphcollege.edu
Office Hours: Tu 1:45 – 2:45 p.m. & Th 4:30 – 5:30 p.m.

Course Description

Philosophy is primarily about the give and take of reasons. Ethics, in particular, concerns reasons for or against performing certain actions, reasons for pursuing certain goals, and reasons for living a certain kind of life. We will begin this course by exploring the issue of why we should explore ethical questions in the first place and by considering a particular challenge to ethical inquiry. From here, we will consider different moral theories, evaluating arguments for and against them. Not only will this equip us to determine which theory we think is correct; it will enable us to develop the skills required for inhabiting several perspectives on an issue. We will deploy these skills further when we turn to specific ethical questions in the last two sections of our course, including: *Are we obligated to assist people suffering around the world? Is abortion morally permissible? Do we have a duty to obey the law?*

Course Goals

- Learn how to evaluate a philosophical argument.
- Learn how to compose a philosophical argument.
- Anticipate and respond to objections.
- Become familiar with major ethical theories.
- Give careful thought to real life ethical issues.
- Express ideas clearly in written and spoken discourse.

Course Requirements

I. Attendance. Attendance is mandatory. Students will be allowed two absences, after which there is a penalty of 2 points to the final grade for every additional class missed (barring a doctor's note).

II. Three Short Papers (24 % total, 8% each). You will be required to write three short papers. Each should be at least two full pages and at most three full pages in length (double spaced, 12-point font, 1" margins). Each will be a response to a particular prompt, and in each case you will be asked to provide exposition on a particular text (or particular texts) and then to end with brief critical remarks. These will be due at the beginnings of class on 9/26, 10/19, and 11/9, respectively. The prompts will be provided well in advance of the respective deadlines.

III. One Expanded Paper (18%). You will be required to take one of your three short papers and to develop the critical section considerably, in response to my comments. The resulting paper should be at least five full pages and at most seven full pages in length (double spaced, 12-point font, 1” margins) and will be due at the beginning of the last day of class (12/7).

IV. Midterm (18%). There will be an in-class midterm on Thursday, 10/12. Please bring a Blue Book.

V. Final (30%). There will be a final exam, which will be scheduled for the regular exam period. Please bring a Blue Book.

VI. Participation (10%). Philosophy is first and foremost an activity. As such, attendance and *active*, thoughtful participation are musts. Just coming to class (but not engaging) will not get you an ‘A’ for participation. You should be prepared to explain the topics we are discussing or have questions about them. You should also be prepared to engage actively in group work. (Individuals who have reasons for not wishing to speak in class should see me privately to discuss this.)

Classroom Policies and Related Notes

Screen-free classroom. Laptops, tablets, e-readers, phones, etc. are prohibited. These devices must be put away before class begins unless otherwise instructed.

Maintain a welcoming and supportive environment. Philosophy requires collegial discussion. Collegial discussion requires respect and openness. As such, abrasive attitudes, derogatory language, etc., will not be tolerated.

Accommodations. I have designed this course so that everyone can succeed. I also appreciate that there are multiple ways to learn. I would welcome students to discuss with me their learning styles and how we can make sure that they are represented in our course. Here, also, is some helpful information from Tina Barnes, Coordinator of Disability Services:

If you have a disability, an illness, or an injury that keeps you from learning to the best of your ability, there are services available that may be helpful. To learn more about these services, go to the “Just for Students” link on your Moodle Classroom Help Menu or contact Tina Barnes, Coordinator of Disability Services, in the Academic Services Center, 4th floor, Lipscomb Library, at (434) 947 – 8132, or at tbarnes@randolphcollege.edu.

(On a different note, if for any reason you feel uncomfortable discussing any of the issues in applied ethics that we’ll be covering in this class, please feel free to see me in office hours or to email me ahead of time.)

Assigned readings must be read prior to class. Active reading and engagement with the texts must be done prior to meetings. You should come to class knowing: (1) what the author is claiming, (2) how the author is supporting this claim (or these claims), and (3) whether you agree with the author (and why).

Copies of texts must be brought to class meetings. We will always want our readings on hand in case we need to refer to a particular passage. So you must bring a hard copy of the reading to class each day.

My email and meeting policy. I am happy to answer short questions over email, and I am also happy to discuss more involved questions in person (either in my office hours or, if you cannot make my office hours, at another time on Tuesday or Thursday). But please email me at least **two business days** in advance of when you would like an email response, and if you wish to meet with me in person (and cannot make my office hours) please email me at least **four business days** in advance of when, at the latest, you would like to meet. **(This includes, especially, the days leading up to exams and paper deadlines.)**

Required Texts

Plato, *Five Dialogues*. Second Edition. G.M.A. Grube (transl.) and John M. Cooper (revised). Hackett.

Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Mary Gregor (ed.). Cambridge University Press.

John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*. Second Edition. George Sher (ed.). Hackett.

Additional readings will be provided on Moodle or as handouts.

Schedule

8/29 Introduction

Unit 1: Why ask ethical questions?

8/31 Rachels, "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism"

9/5 Plato, *Apology*

Unit 2: Ethical Theories: Why be moral? What does the moral life look like? What principles should guide our actions?

2.1 Divine Command Theory

9/7 Plato, *Euthyphro*

9/12 Plato, *Euthyphro* (continued)

2.2 Virtue Ethics

9/14 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book One, chapters 1, 4, 5, & 7

9/19 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book Two, chapter 1 & chapters 4 - 9

2.3 Kantian Deontology

- 9/21 Kant, *Groundwork* I
Recommended: Rachels, “Are There Absolute Moral Rules?” (§9.2 & §9.3 only) & “Kant and Respect for Persons” (§10.1 only)
- 9/26 Kant, *Groundwork* II (through 4:430)
First short paper due.
- 9/28 Kant, *On the Supposed Right To Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*

2.4 Utilitarianism

- 10/3 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapters 1 & 2
Recommended: Rachels, “The Debate over Utilitarianism”
- 10/5 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 3
- 10/10 Catch-Up Day & Midterm Review
- 10/12 Midterm**
- 10/17 Fall Break!**
- 10/19 Selection from Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*
Le Guin, “The Ones Who Walk away from Omelas”
Second short paper due.

Unit 3: Applied Ethical Issues: Should I...? *Must* I...? *Can* I...?

3.1 World Hunger

- 10/ 24 Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”

3.2 Abortion

- 10/26 Warren, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion”
Marquis, “Why Abortion Is Immoral”
- 10/31 Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion”
- 11/2 Warren, Marquis, and Thomson, cont’d

3.3 Deception and Sexual Consent

- 11/7 Dougherty, “Sex, Lies, and Consent”
- 11/9 Dougherty, cont’d

Third short paper due.

Unit 4: Morality, Justice, and the State: What do we owe the state? What does the state owe us?

4.1 Punishment (incl. Capital Punishment)

11/14 Ellis, "Theories of Punishment"

11/16 Mill, "Speech in Favor of Capital Punishment"

11/21 Paper workshop

11/23 Thanksgiving Break!

11/28 Nathanson, "Does It Matter if the Death Penalty is Arbitrarily Administered?"

4.2 Is there a duty to obey the law?

11/30 Plato, *Crito*
King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail"

12/5 Continued discussion of Plato and King

12/7 Review & Reflections
Expanded paper due.