

Introduction to Ethics -- PHIL 201

Fall 2009

Instructor: Dr. Rocco J. Gennaro

Office Hours: T 1-2, W 3-4, F 1-1:50, and by appt. in LA 3064

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Required Readings/Books:

1. *A Rulebook for Arguments* (4th ed.), Anthony Weston (**RA**)
2. *A Dialogue on Ethical Issues of Life and Death*, Rocco J. Gennaro (**DIA**)
3. *Social Ethics* (7th ed.), Thomas Mappes and Jane Zembaty (eds.) (**SE**)

Course Description: This is an introduction to major ethical, social, and legal problems, e.g. euthanasia, abortion, animal experimentation, capital punishment, economic justice, war and terrorism, and world hunger. There will also be some discussion of traditional historical ethical perspectives, such as utilitarianism and Kantianism. We want to investigate what human beings ought to do in various difficult ethical situations as opposed to what we actually do or why we actually behave the way we do. We will also investigate how the law and society might reflect those conclusions while recognizing the fact that ethical considerations can sometimes be limited in determining social policy.

Course Objectives: You will become acquainted with various traditional and contemporary views on the ethical problems mentioned above. Although you may already have a strong attachment to some ethical positions, you will learn to reason more clearly and critically about them and to make more informed decisions and choices. Contrary to some popular misconceptions, good philosophy requires very clear, precise, and rigorous thinking. In order to become skillful at doing philosophy, we must follow logical principles which will become clear throughout the course. Thus, classroom discussion and debates are essential. I hope that you will enjoy the exploration of these topics which are very relevant to current societal and political issues, and that the course ultimately helps you to reason more clearly about philosophical and nonphilosophical issues alike.

Course Requirements: There will be two in-class exams (each worth 20% of your final grade), a paper of about 4 double-spaced typed pages (20%), and a take-home final exam of about 8 pages (30%). Regular class **attendance and participation** are expected and can importantly affect your final grade (10%). Excessive absences will hurt your grade. We will also have several in-class **debates** on different issues that we will cover - participation and attendance are expected!! Please come to class on time!! Any form of **plagiarism** will not be tolerated and is subject to penalty in accordance with the Student Code of Conduct and the University Handbook.

-- Please come to see me at office hours for any reason at all, especially if you would like to discuss the issues further or to discuss exam or paper questions.

-- There will be a good deal of reading in this course and some of it will be rather difficult. You are expected to keep up with it for the purpose of classroom discussion.

-- Core Curriculum: B1

Tentative Outline of Study - Day To Day Readings To Be Announced:

Topic #1: **Introduction; Logic** (approx. 1 week)

Reading: **RA** Introduction & Chs. 1-6 (especially 1, 4, 6)

What is the difference between ethics and the law? What is the difference between a normative and a descriptive claim? What is the difference between inductive and deductive reasoning? What is a valid argument? What is a sound argument?

Topic #2: **Ethical Theories: Utilitarianism, Kant, Relativism** (2 weeks)

Reading: **DIA** "Ethical Theories"

What makes an action right or wrong? Are there exceptionless ethical rules that we should follow regardless of the circumstances? In making an ethical decision, should we primarily be concerned with avoiding pain and maximizing happiness? Are all "ethical systems" equally valid, or are some ethical views superior to others?

Topic #3: **Logical Fallacies; Errors in Moral Reasoning** (less than 1 week)

Reading: **RA** Appendix I; Handout

What are logical fallacies? What is, for example, "begging the question" and an "ad hominem attack"? What are some common errors in moral reasoning? What are, for example, "stereotyping," "scapegoating," "emotionalism," and "egocentrism"?

Topic #4: **Euthanasia/Assisted Suicide** (2 weeks)

Reading: **SE** Chapter 2 (selected readings TBA); **DIA** "Euthanasia"

Under what circumstances (if any) is euthanasia morally justifiable? Should euthanasia be legalized? What is the difference between "active" and "passive" euthanasia? What is the difference between "voluntary" and "nonvoluntary" euthanasia? How could we guard against potential "slippery slope" problems and abuses if active euthanasia were legalized? What is the difference between euthanasia and assisted suicide?

Topic #5: **Abortion** (1-2 weeks)

Reading: **SE** Chapter 1 (selected essays); **DIA** "Abortion"; also read **RA** Chs. 8-9

Under what circumstances (if any) would having an abortion be morally justifiable? Is there something importantly different about cases of rape/incest and when the woman's life is at risk? Should fetuses have a right to life equal to, say, adult human beings? Is there a moral difference between a first trimester and a late term abortion? What is the difference between a "person" (in the psychological sense) and a "human being" (in the genetic sense)? Should the fact that a fetus is a potential person give it a right to life?

Topic #6: **Animal Experimentation/Vegetarianism** (1-2 weeks)

Reading: **SE** Chapter 10 (selected essays); **DIA** "Animals"

Should animals be treated as having a right to life equal to, say, an adult human being? Does our frequent negative treatment of animals stem from a prejudice analogous to the prejudices of sexism and racism? Are all animals psychologically inferior to all human beings?

Under what circumstances (if any) would performing an experiment on an animal be morally justifiable? Is eating meat ethically defensible or is vegetarianism the only ethical alternative?

Topic #7: **Capital Punishment** (1-2 weeks)

Reading: **SE** Chapter 3 (selected essays); **DIA** "Capital Punishment"

Is capital punishment ever a morally appropriate form of punishment? Is the death penalty applied in a discriminatory and arbitrary fashion? Does the death penalty really deter crime? Is capital punishment merely barbaric vengeance or is it a justified form of "payback"?

Topic #8: **Terrorism** (1 week)

Reading: **SE** Chapter 7 (selected essays)

What is terrorism? Can terrorism ever be morally justified? How can we guard against terrorist attacks without compromising civil liberties?

Topic #9: **Same-Sex Marriage** (less than 1 week)

Reading: **SE** Chapter 4 (selected essays)

Should same-sex marriage be legally permitted or should marriage be restricted to the conventional one man and one woman? What, if any, moral arguments can be offered on either side of this issue? What nonreligious arguments can be given for the conventional view?

Topic #10: **Social and Economic Justice** (1 week)

Reading: **SE** Chapter 8 (selected essays)

Should everyone in an affluent society be guaranteed a minimum income? Is it morally right to tax the income of those who work to provide incomes for those who do not? How do socialists differ from libertarians? Should there be limits or conditions placed on welfare benefits?

Topic #11: **World Hunger and Poverty** (less than 1 week)

Reading: **SE** Chapter 9 (selected essays)

What should affluent countries (or their people) do to prevent hunger and malnutrition in other countries? What is the primary cause of world hunger?