“It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.” Chinese proverb

- TEXTS

Blackburn, Simon *Being Good*
Singer, Peter *One World*, 2nd ed.
Warren, Mary Anne *Moral Status*

All texts are on reserve in the library. Students wishing to do so may find it convenient to do the reading there.

- COURSE DESCRIPTION

We are a Proseminar. A proseminar is a course that is writing, speaking and reading intensive. Students are expected to come to class prepared with the reading for that day completed. Students are expected to engage in meaningful discussions about the readings. Students who are unprepared to do either may be asked to leave class or will be considered tardy. If a student is tardy twice it equals one class absence.

But more important to me, a Proseminar is the opportunity to engage in learning in the manner I would hope any entering student would desire. The class is limited to 16 students. We can meet and discuss the material. It is material, I believe, that is inherently interesting and important in the education of any citizen in a democracy. The bottom line is that you must come to class prepared and ready to discuss the material. If you are not up to any of this, please drop the course now so that another more interested student can take your place.

“Ethics” and “morality” are terms that seem quite familiar. But because they are words we use in many different ways, they are easily misunderstood when we attempt to communicate. “Philosophical ethics” is a phrase that describes the attempt to find a system of principles or a notion of character or a method that can help us decide what is morally right and wrong in most actual moral contexts. Philosophical ethics is primarily a normative inquiry rather than a descriptive one. That is, it is the attempt to discover what is right and wrong in most actual moral contexts rather than merely describe what some group or individual believes is so. The method of philosophy is the advancing and evaluating of arguments for and against various positions in the attempt to find the best reasons for our beliefs. We will study ethics by examining both historical and contemporary attempts to make sense of philosophical ethics via this method. That is, we will evaluate the arguments offered both for and against various positions in ethics from the time of the
ancient Greek philosophers to the present. Because our time is limited, our investigations will be limited to the history of ethics in the west and they will be, of necessity, brief.

But we will focus our attention on “applied ethics” rather than ethical theory. The latter will be introduced in so far as it is useful for understanding applied ethics. But what is applied ethics? It is the attempt to find the best reasons for moral judgments concerning such issues as cannibalism, slavery, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, humanitarian intervention, capital punishment, welfare, world hunger, and the host of concrete moral problems that confront us.

Students will be encouraged to examine diverse answers to the questions these issues raise. Students will, thereby, be invited to undertake different ways of seeing the world from within the moral perspective. Through our study, those who participate fully will have the opportunity to cultivate their skills of thinking, reading, writing, and speaking. To do well in the course requires at least three things. First, careful and multiple readings of the assigned material in preparation for class is needed. Second, willingness to learn what cannot be memorized for an exam is needed. Third, an open-mind that is willing to question dearly held beliefs about what is right and wrong is needed. From these three, other requirements follow. First, tolerance for the views of others even when they differ radically from your own is required. Second, willingness to debate views carefully while respecting the dignity of both others and yourself is required. Third, willingness to listen carefully to others and to exhibit care for what they believe is required. In summary, the course requires both the ability and the willingness to think and learn in new ways as well as both a healthy degree of tolerance for difference and a skepticism about what you already believe.

Broadly stated, the course explores the question: “What is right and wrong from the moral point of view?” It does so by focusing upon select moral problems philosophers pursued throughout the ages. Some of the moral problems that we will explore in this class are: homosexuality, abortion, hunger, racism, affirmative action, euthanasia, the death penalty, racism, war, and animal rights. In all cases we will use the methods of philosophical inquiry. That is, we will examine arguments in the attempt to determine those that are sound and those that are not.

Questions like, “But who is to say?” are inevitable. So let me offer a tentative answer now. We are each and all to say. That is the nature of both democracy and inquiry. Through our readings and discussions the goal is to debate the issues so that we can either reach consensus or know why we differ in our beliefs. Our means will involve the careful examination of beliefs through discussion and debate in an attempt to winnow out false beliefs and weak theories. Like any other domain of inquiry including science, ethics advances through the efforts of the community of inquirers. Paraphrasing the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars, ethics, like science, is self-correcting over time.

I assume that we will adopt no rule that blocks the route of inquiry, that everyone’s viewpoint is to be heard and tolerated yet debated, and that our aim is to find the best beliefs
possible. It is also important to remember that while the truth may make us free, it may not always make us happy. Our course asks students to risk putting their beliefs to the test of inquiry. The reward is either better beliefs or better reasons for old beliefs. The cost is the danger of change. Again, tolerance is a necessary virtue if our experiment is to be successful. Each of us and all of us are to decide, either actively or passively, either rationally or irrationally. My hope is that each of you will choose to decide both actively and rationally.

I take seriously the following about the nature of a college education.

In high school, the emphasis is on learning subjects that are fairly clear-cut and uncontroversial…. Students come to college expecting more of the same. But many college courses … have a different aim. These courses are concerned with the basis of our beliefs; they require students to question their beliefs and to work out and defend their own views. The issues discussed in college courses are often those issues that are not so clear-cut and certain. … Reasons and evidence can be given for different answers. Students in these courses are asked to learn to think for themselves, to form their own views in a responsible way. The ability to defend your views is a measure of that skill, and that is why argumentative essays are so important. (Anthony Weston, A Rulebook for Arguments, 2nd ed., p. xii)

The format of each class meeting will vary depending on class activities for the day. On most days, class will consist of an examination of the main texts and a discussion of the reading. I will ask questions in the attempt to elicit discussion. Occasionally, I will talk for 15 – 20 minutes, presenting new material, supplying background information for the reading, or evaluating arguments and theories. Obviously, such talks will be more frequent in the beginning of the semester until we gain a common background and language to communicate effectively.

Particularly during our Thursday meetings, I will ask the class to divide into groups. I will pose a question. Each group is to begin by identifying someone who will speak for them for the day. The role will rotate among the members of the group. The group will then attempt to reach consensus in answering the question. After due time, the group will report back to the class its findings. We will, then, discuss these findings in an attempt to reach consensus among those in the class. It is essential that the readings are finished and comprehended and the movie for the week seen and considered for these groups to work. You may also seek better understanding by consulting Dushkin Online (inside front page of TS) at www.dushkin.com/online/, The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy at http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/, Ethics Updates at http://ethics.acusd.edu/index.html, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at http://plato.stanford.edu/ or other sites listed on the first page of each of the three parts of TS.
**COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

*Class Participation:* All students are encouraged and expected to participate in class discussion. Failure to do so will severely affect the final grade. It will not do to complain that you are too busy listening or taking notes, that you find the discussion lame or beneath you, or that talking is not a course requirement. It is, and I consider the others mere rationalizations, lame excuses. Just as college students are to write well, so they are to speak well. Both are learned by constant and continual practice—hence the course requirements. As Aristotle argues, we acquire proper habits by doing the practice in question, frequently and with excellence. So if you want to speak well or write well, make yourself speak and write well. Soon it will become habitual, second nature.

In addition, by participating in class discussion each of us can expect to benefit. We all gain from the comments and insights of others. As Gandhi holds, each of us contains some part of the truth and only by sharing our beliefs and judgments can we hope to put those parts together. It is also unfair that some labor to contribute while others gain the advantage of the contributors’ insights but do no work to contribute in turn. It is a version of what is called the “free rider problem.”

Students will receive instructions to use an on-line discussion group for our class. The discussion group can be used to post questions to the class concerning course material, assignments, etc. I can use the listing to communicate with students in class concerning course materials, changes in the syllabus, etc. I hope that students will use the discussion groups to help one another. I, as well as each member of the class, will receive messages posted. Use of the discussion group counts towards class participation. Please feel free to comment on the weekly column by the ethicist in the New York Sunday Magazine, available in the library or online, as well as questions posed. You may also raise questions that you find relevant to the course material.

*Weekly Papers:* The papers are to be no longer than one page, single-spaced, with normal margins and font size 12. The paper should explain how the film relates to at least some of the readings for the week during which time the film is shown as well as speak to the question that I might pose for the paper. The paper is due in class the Tuesday following the film unless otherwise stated. My experience is that by requiring students to write early and often during the semester, students best acquire the habits that produce good prose.

While students are expected to attend each film viewing at least once or watch the film at the film library, only ten Weekly Papers need be written of the fifteen films. Each student is to do the first two papers but, after that, each student may decide which eight of the remaining 13 papers to do. So, after the first two, you can choose which films to write about and which not. I suggest you budget your time to avoid conflicts with other paper assignments in the course, course work in your courses, etc. Because you are given the option, please do not ask for special consideration unless you have special reasons.
The papers will receive one of four grades: plus, check, minus, unacceptable.

A late paper will result in a lowering of your grade by one notch (check plus to check) per day late. Late papers will receive a grade but no comments.

Papers are to be well written and argued. Any paper written by a first-year student that has a combination of four or more gross grammatical, gross logical, or spelling errors will receive a grade of “unacceptable” and be returned. It may be rewritten but will be considered late as discussed above. **You are strongly encouraged to work with the Writing Center on your papers.** Be sure to make appointments early as they tend to be busy.

**Films:** Several films will be shown during the term, each on two different evenings of the week, when possible. Students are required to attend the films or view them in the film library and to write a one page (maximum) single-spaced paper as discussed above. Films will be shown Tuesday and Wednesday evenings beginning at 7 PM in Couper 207.

**Service Learning Journal and The Theory/Practice Paper:** One of the topics for our course is the relationship between theory and practice. For instance, to know solely in theory how to swim or bike is useless: suppose you don’t know how to swim or bike, even if you’ve mastered the appropriate theories of physics and physiology you still can do the practice. Is the relationship between philosophy (theory) and the good life (practice) the same? Is the relationship between moral theory and applied ethics the same? These distinctions parallel the one Aristotle draws between knowledge (*episteme*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*). It also parallels the use of *praxis* by Marx and of *pragmatism* by Dewey. Marx argues that theory is part of the epiphenomenal ideological superstructure: a mere reflection of the economic base of society. So he writes, “Philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point, however is to change the world.” Dewey argues that the primacy of theory over practice has its origins in the ancient Greek distinction between citizen and slave: it was the slave who knew how to do the work that made society possible, skills the privileged citizen lacked. In fact, Dewey argues, and so does Heidegger, practice is primary to theory. Theory is what we concoct after we already know how to do, and those who do not do usually concoct it. What, then, is the status of a liberal arts education that ignores practice for the sake of theory? What purpose does it serve? For whom?

My concern is that you begin to think intelligently about the relationship between theory and practice. Especially, I would like you to consider what this means in terms of your own education at a liberal arts college.

Each student is to perform twenty hours of a socially useful activity during the semester, an average of less than 1.5 hours a week, and to write a short paper, no more than 1,000 words, commenting on your socially useful activity and the relationship between theory and practice in ethics and the liberal arts. Each student is also to keep a journal that relates experiences related to service learning to topics of the course like egoism, relativism, poverty, racism, etc. There should be an entry for each time socially useful work is performed. You may define “socially useful activity” by your own lights. It may be...
work that you would perform anyway or not, e.g., SHINE or The Spectator or HAVOC or WHCL. I am particularly interested in your insights concerning the relationship between theory and practice as discussed above.

A draft of a paper on theory and practice is due November 16. It should incorporate your experiences in service learning and respond to some of the questions listed above. The draft is to be submitted with your student number as identification and not your name. The final version of your paper and the peer review sheet are to have your name on them.

The drafts will be distributed among students in class so that no student has her paper. Each student will, then, review the paper in her possession and complete the peer review sheet (found online for our course). The peer review sheet is due November 18th, the class immediately following the due date of the draft. The authors’ paper and the peer review will be distributed November 18th in class. They will rewrite their paper in light of the peer review. The Theory/Practice Paper along with the journal is due the last day of class.

A late paper or omission of any one of the three parts will each result in a lowering of your grade by one notch (B to B-) per day late. Someone who fails to exchange or who fails to comment on a classmate’s paper will receive a grade of “F” for the assignment unless other arrangements are made with me in a timely manner.

Papers are to be well written and argued, including the draft for exchange. The number of words in the essay are to be stated on the title-page of the paper. The same rules that apply to Weekly Papers apply to Theory and Practice Papers. You are strongly encouraged to work with the Writing Center on your papers. Be sure to make an appointment early.

The draft is due in class on Tuesday, November 16th. The peer review is due in class on Thursday November 18th. The final version of your paper is due in class on the last day of class.

It is the student’s responsibility to find an appropriate socially useful activity although ample opportunities will be made available through class.

Honor Code: It is the student’s responsibility to know the Hamilton College Honor Code. I will trust each of you in accord with the Code. But should I have reason to believe that you have violated the Code, I will report you for an Honor Code Violation. It is your responsibility to report students in the class that you have good reason to believe are in violation of the Code. The Honor Code will only work if free riders are reported.

Safe Space: I consider our classroom to be a safe place. By that I mean that whatever is said in class will not become a source of rumor or ridicule outside of class. By signing the class contract below, each of you agree to treat our classroom as a safe place. By so doing we can improve the likelihood of free speech in the classroom. I also encourage
you to discuss the topics discussed in class, outside of class. I strongly encourage you to do so. But you can do so without mentioning names or ridiculing or stigmatizing others.

**Attendance**: Students are expected to attend all classes as well as all films assigned. Most films but probably not all films are available in the film library. If you cannot attend a showing you may make arrangements to view it there or elsewhere. Knowledge of availability and private viewing of the films is the student’s responsibility. Remember, the Weekly Paper is due the Tuesday following the showing of the film and late paper status applies. Since the schedule for films is available, if you know that you will miss a film, view it early.

Attendance will be taken in class. Your final unmodified grade may be subject to an adjustment based on your attendance record. Your final unmodified grade (FUG) may be raised or lowered according to the following table of adjustments for unexcused absences:

- 0 excused or unexcused absences = raises FUG 2 points (76 to 78)
- 1-2 unexcused absences = no adjustment to FUG
- 3 unexcused absences = lowers FUG 1 notch (B to B-)
- 4 unexcused absences = lowers FUG full letter grade
- 5 unexcused absences = lowers FUG 1 1/3 letter grade
- 6 unexcused absences = lowers FUG 2 1/3 letter grade
- 7 unexcused absences = AUTOMATIC FAILURE OF THE COURSE WITH A GRADE OF “FF.”

**READING ASSIGNMENTS**

Strings of capital letters are acronyms for the title of books listed above. ER refers to electronic reserve. Readings due on Tuesday are before the “;” while those due Thursday are after the “;” Descriptions of films and how long they run can be found on many websites including Rotten Tomatoes and the *New York Times* Movie Reviews.

Week 1, 8/31, Introduction to Ethics
*BG* Part One, *TS:MI* 2
*The Decalogue: Decalogue I*

Week 2, 9/7, Introduction to Ethics
*BG* Parts Two & Three; *TS:MI* 1
*Night and Fog & Hiroshima and Nagasaki, August 1945 & The Children of Chabonnes*

Week 3, 9/14, Moral Status and Utilitarianism
*MS* Chapters 1&2; 3
*Lone Star*
Week 4, 9/21, Rights and Relationships
*MS 4; 5, TS:MI 3*

*The Hours*

Week 5, 9/28, Multi-Criterial Analysis of Moral Status and Euthanasia
*MS 6; 7, TS:MI 19*

*Choosing Death*

**FALL BREAK**

Week 6, 10/7, Abortion
*MS 9; TS:MI 5*

*Cider House Rules*

Week 7, 10/12, Contextualism and Animal Rights

[www.gsu.edu/~wwwphl/Reconceiving_the_Abortion_Argument.pdf](http://www.gsu.edu/~wwwphl/Reconceiving_the_Abortion_Argument.pdf); *MS 10&11, TS:MI 12*

*Gorillas in the Mist*

Week 8, 10/19, Global Warming
*OW Preface&1&2; TS:WP 19*

*What’s Up With the Weather?*

Week 9, 10/26, Globalization
*OW 3, TS:WP 1; TS:WP 9, 17*

*Life and Debt*

Week 10, 11/2, Humanitarian Intervention and International Criminal Court
*OW 4, TS:WP 7, 13; TS:WP 18, 16*

*The Fog of War*

Week 11, 11/9, World Poverty and One World
*OW 5&6; “Do Rich Nations Have an Obligation to Help Poor Nations?” In Satris, ed, TS:MI, 7th (ER), TS:WP 10, 11*

*Central Station*

Week 12, 11/16, The Harm Principle: Drugs and Homosexuality

*The Life and Times of Harvey Milk*

Week 13, 11/23, Civil Disobedience
Plato *Crito*, Thoreau “Civil Disobedience,” Martin Luther King Jr. “Letter From Birmingham Jail” (ER)
A Force More Powerful: MLK and Denmark
Shown in class.

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Week 14, 11/30, Affirmative Action and Capital Punishment
TS 18; TS 13
The Widow of St. Pierre

Week 15, 12/7, Racial Preferences and Reparations for Slavery
TS 14; TS 15
Fresh

• Grades

It is necessary to complete all written assignments in order to receive credit for the course.

Notice that most of the assignments are devised so that you do not need to reveal your own opinions. I do that on purpose. My belief, based on years of teaching experience, is that those who complain that the professor in a course is grading their beliefs rather than their work are usually those students who are doing poorly because they are not diligent with their studies and who are looking for a means of denying responsibility. Notice that effort and performance are two very different things. There is no guarantee that because student A puts in more hours than student B that A will earn a better grade. Some people are simply more skilled than others. Consequently, there is no guarantee that one’s grade will be proportionate to one’s effort. I do my best to see that one’s grade is proportionate to one’s performance. In other words, merit is rewarded while effort may or may not be depending on how much merit it reveals.

CLASS PARTICIPATION 40%
WEEKLY PAPERS 40%
SERVICE LEARNING JOURNAL
And
THEORY/PRACTICE PAPER 20%
CLASS CONTRACT

(Sign and return, if you intend to be a member of the class.)

I read carefully the course syllabus for Philosophy 111 and understand the requirements of the course. Specifically, I understand the reading, writing, and film watching expected, the service learning requirement, the attendance and class participation requirement, the safe space requirement, and the grading policies generally. I agree to fulfill my responsibilities as a member of the course, including my responsibility to treat all members of the course, including myself, with the respect due to all persons.

By my signature below, I reaffirm on my honor that I shall abstain from dishonesty in all academic work. I have read and understood the regulations governing academic conduct and the Constitution of the Honor Court, and I shall abide by their provisions. It is my obligation to take action and to report violations of the Honor Code to the proper authorities.¹

Print Name ___________________________________

Signed ___________________________________

Date ___________________________________

¹ Paragraph taken from “The Honor Code, 2003-04,” Hamilton College