Philosophy 17A: Introduction to Ethics

Philosophy 17A is designed to introduce students to some of the most interesting arguments now being made in both moral philosophy and practical ethics. The first part of the course explores the theories of value put forward by utilitarians, deontologists, proponents of virtue ethics, intuitionists, and moral relativists. The second part of the course uses these theories to explore a host of more practical normative controversies that arise in private and public life, including controversies about the value of human life, animal rights, euthanasia, free choice and state paternalism, hate speech and its regulation, punishment, world hunger, and environmental justice.

Learning Goals: The course has three general learning goals. The first is to introduce students to the field of ethics as understood above, i.e., as a field that encompasses both ethical theories and practical moral arguments. The second is to enable students to develop those skills associated with the discipline of philosophy in general – including the ability to uncover those assumptions on which particular arguments are based and to assess the arguments themselves in a rigorous fashion. The third is to provide students with the basis for making clear, logically sound, arguments of their own about fundamental questions of value in the world.

Course Requirements: two 7-8 page papers and a final exam. Class attendance is mandatory. Participation in class discussion is greatly encouraged.

Work Load: Success in this four-credit course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for class readings, papers, and the final exam.

Grading: Equal weight will be given to the two papers and the final exam.

Course Materials: The following three books will be used extensively. They can be purchased at the Brandeis University Bookstore:

J. S. Mill, Utilitarianism.
J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, Utilitarianism: For and Against
Hugh LaFollette, ed., Ethics in Practice.

Coursepack: The readings that are not included in the above volumes can be found in a coursepack (CP) that you can purchase from me at cost in class.
Academic Integrity: Students are expected to be honest in all of their academic work. Plagiarism is a punishable offense and will not be tolerated. Please consult Brandeis University’s Rights and Responsibility document for policies and procedures related to academic integrity. Sanctions for academic dishonesty can include a failing grade for the course and/or suspension from the university.

Students with a Documented Disability: If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately after class or during my office hours.

READINGS

NOTE: Class discussions will be focused on assigned readings as scheduled below. Hence, it is important that you read the following selections by the date cited.

Aug. 29: Introduction to Course.

Sept. 5: Jeremy Bentham, selections from Principles of Morals and Legislation (CP).

Sept. 6: J. S. Mill, Chapters 2 and 4 of Utilitarianism.

Sept. 12: J. S. Mill, Ch. 5 of Utilitarianism.

J. J. C. Smart, Utilitarianism: For and Against, pp. 9-12; 42-53; 67-73.

Sept. 17 Bernard Williams, “Critique of Utilitarianism”, in Utilitarianism: For and Against, pp. 82-100; last paragraph of p.115-117.


Oct. 3: Kant, “Free Will” (CP).
   Thomas Hill, “Kantianism” (CP).

Oct. 8: W.D. Ross, “Criticism of Kant” (CP).

Oct. 10: Marcus Singer, “Generalization in Ethics” (CP).


   Rosalind Hursthouse, “Applying Virtue Ethics” (CP).

Oct. 22: First Papers Due (no class/extra office hours). Note: If you are doing a paper on virtue ethics, then you have until the 24th.

   William Shaw, “Relativism in Ethics” (CP).
   Richard Brandt, “Disagreement and Relativism in Ethics” (CP).

   David Vellman, “Against the Right to Die”, Ethics in Practice.


Nov. 7: Carl Cohen, “The Case for the Use of Animals in Biomedical Research”, Ethics in Practice.
Hugh LaFollette, “Why Cohen is Mistaken”, Ethics in Practice.

Robert Goodin, “Saving Smokers From Themselves” (CP).

Nov. 14: James Q. Wilson, “Against the Legalization of Drugs”, Ethics in Practice.

Susan Brison, “The Price We Pay; Pornography and Harm”, Ethics in Practice.

Nov. 26: James Rachels, “Punishment and Desert”, Ethics in Practice.

Jeffrey Reiman, “Against the Death Penalty”, Ethics in Practice.


Dec. 7: Second papers due in Philosophy Department Office

Dec. 10: Conclusions

Final Exam: TBA