

USEM 5b
Spring 2008

Prof. Gila Hayim X62639
Office: Pearlman 107
Office Hrs. Tuesday 3-4
Wednesday 5-6:00
And by appointment

CONCEPTIONS OF THE "GOOD LIFE"

Course Description and Requirements

The course explores competing conceptions of the *good life*, of *moral right*, and of *self-fulfillment* and *well-being*, and how these conceptions vary across different cultural periods in history. We explore standards for what is "good" and how we can justify that one lifestyle is better than another. We may find that these conceptions still compete for our souls today. We will explore different modalities of life and of commitments, such as "pleasure," "virtuous activity," "public service," "power," "self-assertion," "faith," "love," "art," and so on, and situate these modalities in their respective times and cultures.

We will want to read some of the works in the original, examine their claims and methods of argumentation, and be able to establish connections between theory and daily practice.

Throughout the course we also read short position-papers on practical and controversial issues as examples of Ethics in Action. The material serves as basis for debates on a variety of clashing views on contemporary moral dilemmas, ranging from environmentalism to assisted suicide, egoism and altruism, cloning, Is torture ever justified? Etc. A debate forum consists of two students at a time, to be followed by class participation.

Requirements

- I. There is a great deal of joy and satisfaction involved in comprehending a piece of reading, commanding it, and submitting it to critical analysis, in a disciplined group discussion. So for any learning to succeed it needs generous commitment and presence. This means class attendance, home preparations, full completion of the reading assignments, input to the class when needed, and so on. All of these components cannot be quantified, but they are essential to the success of the course and *your share* of it. A well-prepared participant is an asset to the class experience; you contribute to analysis, discussion, interpretations, and so on. It is only fair, therefore, that these aspects of the course be counted in the constitution of the final grade. If you are apprehensive about speaking in class, I'll help you deal with the problem as best I can- in individualized sessions. We will want to formalize some aspects of the class, but we also count on the emergent experience of learning and of mind-sharing in the classroom setting, by way of engaging in

in-class text reading, exchanging interpretations, identifying strengths, weaknesses, interdisciplinary commonalities, variations, and so on.

- II. Two thematic papers (each 3-4 pages long), and one final paper (8-10 pages long) will be required. From time to time I also ask for one page commentary – response, exposition, etc. related to specific readings. Time context appears in the syllabus. More information will be available as we proceed.
- III. Short class presentations pertaining to the readings and debates on *Ethics in Action* will be *encouraged*.
How we externalize what we know is very important. Writing and assigned oral presentations will therefore be most *emphasized*. *Every effort will be made to make you want to work hard in this respect; to provide you with the resources, skills and individual attention required, and to see results.*

If you are a student with a documented disability on record at Brandeis University, and wish to have a reasonable accommodation made for you in this class, please see me immediately.

Required books:

Abelson Raziel: **Ethics for Modern Life** Bedford/St.Martin's Press
2003 (sixth edition) ISBN 0-312-15761-4

Satris Steven: **Taking Sides- Clashing Views on Moral Issues**,
Dushkin/McGraw-Hill 2008 (Eleventh Edition) ISBN 0-07-339715-6

J W Goethe: **The Sufferings of Young Werther**
Translated by Harry Steinhauser. W.W Norton. New York

SYLLABUS

COURSE OUTLINE: THEMES AND READING ASSIGNMENTS

Introduction: conceptual format of the seminar, goals and requirements, reading and writing assignments and other thematic and technical matters.

Good Life as Pleasure

January Wed.16, Wed. 23, Mon.28

Reading Assignments:

Epicurus: Letters to Menoeceus. From The Extant Remains, trans. C. Bailey, Oxford: Clarendon Press (Reprint).

Sahakian: Epicurus: Hedonism. (Handout)

Note: The Selections for the debate forum appear in **Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Moral Issues**. By Stephen Satris 11th Edition, 2008.
(A debate forum by two students to be followed by class participation)

Debate Forum: Issue #3 in Satris
Is Ayn Rand's Ethical Egoism Correct?
Yes: Ayn Rand.. pp. 49-56
No: Louis Pojman pp. 57-62

(FIRST PAPER DUE ON MON. FEBRUARY 4)
(I will help you with theme construction and documentation)

Good Life as Pleasure, Goodness, Utility

Jan. Wed. 30,
Feb. Mon.04, Wed.06
Reading Assignments:

John Stuart Mill, "Social Benefit": In Abelson (2003) Ethics for Modern Life (6th edition) pp. 42-52.
John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism (Handout)

Debate forum(Ethics in Action)

John Stewart Mill: The Private Domain (Abelson, pp.373-384)
David Richards: Sex, Drugs and Privacy (Abelson pp.401-406)

Debate Forum

In Satris, Issue# 5

Must Sex Involve Commitment?

Yes: V. Punzo Morality and Human Sexuality. Pp.88-93
No: Alan Goldman: Plain Sex. Pp.94-100

Good Life as Virtuous Activity and as Self-realization

Feb, Mon.11, Wed. 13 (Mon.Feb 18 to Friday 22nd: Recess)

Feb. Mon. 25, Wed. 27

Reading Assignments:

Aristotle: Virtuous Activity, paths to happiness, friendship, character and virtue
Sahakian : Aristotle: on Self-realization (Handout)

Issue #6 Should Same Sex Marriage Be Allowed? (in Satris)

Yes: Jonathan Rauch pp. 104-111
No: Jeff Jordan pp.112-123

Debate Forum: Issue #9 in Satris
Should Congress Allow the Buying and Selling of Human Organs?
Yes: Robert Cihak pp.166-169
No: James Childress pp 170-173

(Thoughts on second paper, due date to be announced)

Good Life as Reason

March, Mon.03, Wed. 05, Mon. 10, Wed. 12

Reading Assignments

Immanuel Kant: "Rationality" from Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals pp. 29-41(in Abelson)

Kant: Intuitionism (Handout)

When Are We Responsible?

Susan Wolf: Hard and Soft Determinism. (Abelson pp154-156)

Issue 7 Should Human Clonning Be Banned?

Yes. George Annas. Pp.130-135

No. John Robertson Pp.137-141

Good Life as Self-Assertion

March. Mon. 17, Wed 19. Mon. 24, We 26, Mon. 31st

Reading Assignments:

F. Nietzsche: Selections from Geneology of Morals (Abelson pp. 89-94)

Beyond Good and Evil (Hand out)

Sahakian: The Will to Power(Handout)

Debate Forum : Issue 11(Eleven)

In Satris: Is Gambling Immoral?

Yes: Lisa Newton. pp. 191-206

No : Peter Collins pp. 208-219

The Morality and Immorality of Assisted Suicide

For: Dan Brock Moral Justifiability.....(Abelson pp. 191-200)

Against: Daniel Callahan: The Immorality of Assisted Suicide (Abelson pp. 201-215)

Issue # 15 Is Torture Ever Justified?

Yes. Mirko Bagaric and Julie Clarke Pp307-315

No. Desmond Manderson Pp 316-324

Love and the Aesthetic Experience

Wed. April 2nd, Mon. 07, Wed. 09, Mon. 14, Wed 16

Reading Assignments:

Goethe: The Sufferings of Young Werther (entire book)
Thomas Mann (Intro. Handout)

The Ultimate Debate of the Day

Debate Issue (In Abelson) War and Terrorism

B.T Wilkins : Can Terrorism Be Justified? Abelson :Pp.534-540

Alfred Louch: Terrorism is Immoral. Pp.541-547

NOTE: (April-Mon.21st- Fri. 25th Spring Recess)

Catch up time, Concluding reviews, handing out and preparing for finals

Mon. April 28

Wed. April 30

Final Papers are due on Friday May 9.

(all of the above items will be fully discussed in class in time)

Conceptual Format

We start with the moral theory of hedonism, which states that pleasure is one thing that is desirable for all persons, and therefore it is good. Epicurus is closest to this thesis. Epicurus, however, made it clear that he is not merely talking of the pleasures of profligates – “continuous drinking and reveling and satisfactions of the senses,” but of the freedom from pain in the body and from the mind.

John Stuart Mill, centuries after Epicurus (1806-1873), from another period in time, another culture in history, also identifies pleasure with the good. Mill qualifies, however, both the concepts of “pleasure” and “good” by adding principles of dignity and of social benefit as the standards and criteria for our judgment. For Mill, “it is better to be a human being dissatisfied than an animal satisfied.” Does that mean there are values higher than pleasure?

In the third unit of our analysis we move on to the Aristotelean conception of the good as essentially an activity (384-322 B.C.). But this activity, according to Aristotle, cannot be fragmented, but should aim at promoting and enhancing the totality of one’s physical and intellectual well-being. The good coincides with total growth and *happiness*, according to him. But what is happiness? Wealth, pleasure, glory, art, contemplation, love?

Kant fifteen centuries after Aristotle, tried to answer this question. Not only that, but he would think that *both Aristotle and Mill have failed to establish that what makes us happy and benefits us is necessarily moral*. We may be moral but unhappy and at a disadvantage. Right conduct does not vary by self interest or calculation, according to Kant, but is universal. Power, glory, riches, even health, can be used in harm if not moderated by imperative principles of conduct *applicable to all*.

Just as we were impressed by Kant and thought that we had settled a major ethical concern, here comes Nietzsche and tells us that conceptions of the good, the moral, the beneficial, and so on, are not universal, but have the bias of historical times and socio-political interests. Moral conceptions, in Nietzsche's view, differ according to whether they are conceived by a person in power, or one who is powerless. We may obey a custom not because it is useful to us (Mill) or because it is universally moral (Kant), but because it *commands* us and exercises power over us. Reason, in fact, may promote self-denial and obedience to conventional morality. Nietzsche wants, instead, the exuberance of passions. Against a "good" derived from the moderation of reason, we have a "good" derived from the force of passion.

Naturally, other people in other cultures also inquired into the meaning of the "good life" and of "happiness." For Buddha, the oriental philosopher, the writings and goals of Epicurus, Aristotle, Mill, and Nietzsche, are founded on illusions because all of them presuppose a "self." The good life for Buddha lies in the extinction of self and desire and what we call "individual goals." Only when we deny the existence of self and of all its pursuits: pleasure, power, wealth, and fame, do we gain perfect happiness. Pleasure is fleeting and contingent. We suffer when we don't have it and we suffer when we have it – through fear of losing it. But Buddha does not leave us stranded. He offers us the state of Satori, or enlightenment, which is so different from the western conception of enlightenment, but what is it?

At this stage, I thought it would be proper to move into other angles from which to view the concept of the "good life." Sensuous gratification, friendship, love and so on, are some of the angles considered.

We tackle the notion of "love" and "aesthetics" as an idea and as an experience, through reading Goethe's The Sufferings of Young Werther. We may find, at the very end, that our inquiries and judgments, no matter how rational they aspire to be, remain always vulnerable to the biases of Eros and the aesthetics of self-deception.

Practical Format

As stated earlier, we read briefs on practical and controversial issues as examples of Ethics in Action, and debate these issues in reference to the concepts we cover in class, or in general. This part is meant to sharpen your oral skills and contribute to your communicative and writing expression.

Let's all make every effort to enjoy the experience.