

Philosophy 105 Section 002C: Introductory Ethics
Fall 2008 - Syllabus

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Location: MWF 11:30-12:30, N. Halsey 268

Office hours: MW 4:30-5:30pm, F 1:00-2:00pm, Polk 69 (in north basement area)

Text: Moral Philosophy: A Reader (3rd edition), by Louis P. Pojman

About the class- We all make moral judgments, usually without much thought. We judge at least some actions to be *right* and others to be *wrong*, certain people to be *good* and others *evil*, and events to be *good* or *bad*. Even people who say that morality is nonsense seem to think that at least some actions are wrong, even if the only ones they consider are those that affect *them*.

In this class we are going to study how such judgments fall into patterns called “moral theories”. In a moral theory, principles of right and wrong are not simply asserted as commands, as they might be in a religion or a legal system. Rather, they are *argued* for. All of the philosophers that we will be studying – Hobbes, Bentham, Mill, Kant, and others – have tried to find a *rational* or a *natural* (as opposed to supernatural) basis for morality, arguing that at least some of morality’s principles are as objective and reasonable as those of science or mathematics. In so doing, they have done us the service of mapping out the main ways in which proposed moral principles can be justified and criticized.

In this class, no moral theory will be set forth as the correct one. Strengths and weaknesses of each theory will be discussed, and you will make up your own mind in regard to which (if any) theory comes closest to being correct. More importantly, you will learn a variety of concepts that should enable you to think more clearly about *your own* moral theory, whatever it may be. And in the process, you will be learning some of the main methods of philosophy.

Ethics and a liberal arts education- A liberal arts education such as the one you are pursuing at UWO exposes you to many of the historical ideas and events that have shaped our modern lives. It increases your awareness of the world’s complexity and of thought’s diversity – quite literally, such an education expands your mind. While it may not teach you how to do any particular job, it develops skills that are increasingly necessary in *any* job, including the ability to understand complicated readings on unfamiliar subjects, to express your thoughts clearly and persuasively, and to reason critically, creatively, and independently. In addition to introducing you to certain methods of philosophy and the contents of some moral theories, this course is designed to help you develop all of these skills.

Quizzes- There will be five or six quizzes, worth a total of 20% of your grade for the course. These will be **taken online** (on our D2L website), and subsequently discussed in class. The lowest quiz score will be discarded before a letter grade for all quizzes is assigned at the end of the semester. ***There will be no opportunity to make-up a quiz after it has been discussed in class.*** If you miss a quiz, discuss the problem with me *immediately* (via email if necessary).

Writing assignment- 20% of your grade will be based on a short, two-part writing assignment. The first part, to be completed at the start of the course, requires you to make some moral judgments about situations we will discuss in class, and to explain your reasons for making those judgments. The second, done at the end of the semester, requires you to analyze those initial judgments and explanations in terms of the moral theories we have studied. ***The first part of the writing assignment will not be graded; both parts must be completed for you to earn any credit for it.*** The grade will be based on three criteria: (1) the extent to which your writing shows an understanding of the material covered in class, (2) the clarity and completeness of your reasoning, and finally (3) the overall quality of your writing (spelling and grammar).

Exams- There will be three in-class exams, each worth 20% of your final grade. They will be given throughout the semester at approximately 5-week intervals. Letter grades will be assigned after each exam on a curve that will never be tougher than the standard scale: A \geq 94%, AB \geq 88%, B \geq 82%, BC \geq 76%, C \geq 70%, CD \geq 64%, D \geq 58%. The effect of any curving of grades will always be to lower these percentages (in order to compensate for the difficulty of a given test). ***To make up a missed exam, you must have written documentation of a good excuse from a medical professional or school official.*** If you know that you must miss an exam, be sure to talk to me about it as soon as possible, so we can make alternate arrangements.

Challenging an answer choice- The correct answers to all of the questions asked in quizzes or exams will be discussed in class. At that time, you will have an opportunity to challenge the correctness or incorrectness of an answer choice. If you chose *for a good reason* an answer that I considered to be wrong, I will usually give you credit for that answer. “Good reasons” include ambiguity or vagueness in the question, or in some point I explicitly made in lecture. However, simply *not understanding* a question (if it is reasonably understandable) is not a good reason for getting it wrong. Also, that a question might be a little “tricky” (that is, require some reasoning to get right) does not constitute a good reason for your having selected a wrong answer.

Lecture outlines and handouts- Outlines of upcoming lectures (as well as other handouts) are on our Desire2Learn website. These outlines are not complete lecture notes, but rather helpful organizers. They include much of the material that you would otherwise have to copy off of the board or PowerPoint presentations (and probably not have time to do so accurately). PowerPoint slides are *not* available for download, for two reasons: first, they can be misleading without the lecture to provide context, and second, you will better understand the lectures if you *actively listen* by taking notes.

Text- The text for this course is Louis Pojman's *Moral Philosophy: A Reader* (3rd edition). This book is not a textbook in the sense of constituting a complete, self-contained course. Rather, it is a collection of readings that we will be discussing in class. I will assign chapters from the text before we discuss them, but do not be concerned if you find them hard to understand the first time you read them. The lectures should make the main points of the readings much clearer.

Asking questions- While this is primarily a class in which I will be lecturing and (hopefully) you will be taking notes, you are *strongly encouraged* to ask questions during and after class. You may even receive **extra credit** for asking good questions or making thoughtful comments.