Syllabus: Fall 2014

Course Number/Section: PHIL 2306/01
Course Title: Ethics
Professor: Dr. Michael J. Matthies
Office: Macs-14
Office Hours: MW 2:30-3:30; TR 11:00-12:00
Telephone: 409-880-8524

Course Description:

The purpose of this course will be to help students gain an understanding of ethics as a human reality, to perceive that there might be universal standards of conduct that enable the human to integrate reason with action. We will examine the principal theories in ethics that have come to us through the history of human thought, theories that attempt to defend the view that there is an activity called moral decision-making. With this background the student should have some appreciation for the claim that there are human rights, that humans are not living in a moral vacuum, and that contemporary moral issues require the same sense of thoughtful deliberation, argumentation, and critical assessment as any issue or problem of human importance. In this sense, students should come away with the sense that the process of argumentation is as important as the conclusions that they might try to defend. It is this process of argumentation, with an underlying sense that one’s own position requires being defended with evidence, that one’s own views could be wrong, that helps us to understand ethical reasoning as a learning-process. In this regard, ethics is analogous to any other process of learning, including those of the sciences, mathematics, and the arts.

Prerequisite: None

Required Text: Contemporary Moral Arguments: Readings in Ethical Issues, Lewis Vaughn, Oxford University Press

Learning Outcomes:

1. Students will become familiar with the major theories in ethics in the history of philosophy.

2. Students will learn to think critically by understanding that there are a number of competing positions and justifications for any ethical decision, and that this competition, as in any rational activity, does not mean an absence of objectivity in, or significance to, the decision-making process.

3. Students will learn to communicate their questions, observations, and points of view orally to the class at large and in smaller discussion groups.

4. Students will learn to compose clear, coherent, logically precise arguments in written form concerning their own ideas on ethical issues, and in criticism of those of others.
Core Curriculum Objectives:

Critical Thinking:

Critical Thinking: Through short writing assignments, students will demonstrate competency in critically analyzing arguments, pinpointing the author’s goal (conclusion), and examining the premises that the author uses in support of the goal of his or her argument. Beyond this, students will demonstrate an ability to question an author’s premises, examining any assumptions that the premises entail, highlight the historical, political, cultural or circumstantial conditions upon which the premises rest. In addition the student will be expected to arrive at a position of his or her own in relation to the argument under consideration, while taking into account other positions against which the student’s own is developed.

Communication:

Communication will consist of two parts:
(a) Writing: Using their reading assignments, students will compose clear critical/analytical essays with a clear thesis and introduction, along with clear and organized supporting paragraphs. Students will also use the standard conventions of English grammar and punctuation, and will write clear and efficient sentences.
(b) Speaking: Through the use of discussion groups, students will address the group, presenting their own essays to the group, responding to questions from their fellow students, and raising questions of the their own concerning the essays of others in the group. Students will be assessed on posture, gesture, eye-contact, and clear use of their voice, and the quality and nature of interaction with their group members.

Social Responsibility:

In essays students will demonstrate a commitment to understanding basic ethical theories as a form of social responsibility. As such students will demonstrate an understanding of the meaning of civility and civilization, showing how respect for ideas, laws, and principles lies at the basis of each. In relation to this, students will recognize the concept of justice as it develops in the natural law tradition, and understand competing theories that arise out of the modern period.

Personal Responsibility:

In essays and tests, students will demonstrate an understanding of the idea of self, as it develops in various ethical systems, along with the importance of the idea of self-development as it pertains to the ethical ideal in traditional natural law theory. Students will also demonstrate personal responsibility by helping organize the topics for discussion in their discussion groups, as well as demonstrating leadership in presenting their ideas for a group discussion and responding to questions from fellow students in ways that show sensitivity to and respect for the viewpoint of others.
Disability Accommodation:

It is the policy of Lamar University to accommodate students with disabilities, pursuant to federal and state law, and the University’s commitment to equal educational opportunities. It is the student’s responsibility to register with Lamar’s Disability Support Services (880-8347) as quickly as possible. Any student who feels s/he may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact the professor directly during the first week of the course.

Academic Honesty:

Lamar University students will not cheat, lie, plagiarize, or tolerate those who do. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated on any course assignments. Should you be found responsible for a dishonest incident, the course instructor will assign a reasonable penalty, which may include failure of the course. If you do not consent to the findings and/or penalty, you must file an appeal with the department chairperson within five days, as specified in the student handbook (available at www.my.lamar.edu).

Drop:

It is your responsibility to make sure that you are officially enrolled in this course. If, at any point, you decide not to participate in this course, it is your responsibility officially to drop or withdraw from enrollment. Failure to do so may result in a failing grade. Drops after the course begins may carry financial penalty in that full reimbursement may not be possible.

Attendance:

Attendance will be taken daily. No points will be deducted from your final grade due to absence, but no extra credit or extra participation points will be given to any student who has over three unexcused absences. Participation points for group discussions will be given a zero for any absence without a satisfactory excuse.

Grading and Evaluation:

There will be four examinations, including the final examination; each examination will cover material beginning from the preceding examination. Examinations will be both written (short essay, definitions) and multiple choice in character. Please bring a scantron #882-E and a soft-leaded pencil for each examination. Examinations will come from lectures and assigned reading material. Absences from any examination must be made up by appointment in my office prior to the exam’s being handed back. Failure to do so will result in a grade of zero for the exam.

Should the student miss an examination because of illness or some other unavoidable reason, documentation for the excuse must be provided, and a comprehensive make-up exam will be given to the student at the end of the semester, the grade for which will substitute for the missing exam.
Homework questions on various readings will be assigned on a regular basis. These questions will be graded in class. Failure to do the assignment will result in a grade of zero for that assignment. If the student missed the class, and turns in the assignment prior to the assignment’s being handed back, the homework will be accepted as late, with a small penalty. Any homework that was not handed in, or that was given a penalty, can be made up by the student’s doing extra credit work, provided that the student does not have excessive absences.

Extra credit papers will be accepted during the semester. The nature of these papers and other requirements, such as attendance, will be described in a separate handout.

The final examination must be taken on the scheduled date, unless excused. Travel plans and travel problems will not be accepted as excuses, nor will work-related problems. Please plan your work schedule around this and all other examinations.

The student’s points on all examinations, homework, and papers will be added together and divided by all possible points that a student could make on all these areas. The decimal will then be moved two places to the right, giving the student an average for the semester. In general grade totals will be assigned based on a weighting that should be roughly as follows:

Examinations and homework: 70% of grade.
Papers: 25% of grade.
Group discussion: 5% of grade.

Grading Scale:

A final average of 90 to 100 will earn an A, 80 to 89.99 a B, 70 to 79.99 a C, 60 to 69.99 a D, and 0 to 59.99 an F. Students whose average ends in something like 70.6 will ordinarily have their grade bumped up, assuming that there are no circumstances relating to matters such as absences that will deny the student this advantage.

Course Outline:

Week 1: Lecture: What is ethics? How does ethics differ from religion and law? What is a moral argument? How evaluate moral premises?
Paper Topic: What is Plato’s point in “The Ring of Gyges”? 18-34.

Week 2: Lecture: Are ethical values relative?
Discussion: Presentation and discussion of papers and group evaluation of homework.
Lecture: What is utilitarianism.

Week 3: Lecture: Steps in utilitarian decision-making. Examples of this.
Discussion: Evaluation of Homework. How would a utilitarian evaluate Robert F. Scott’s decision in his crisis in the Antarctic?
Lecture: What is the Kantian ethical theory? What are the three categorical imperatives? How would Kant evaluate the act of lying? How would the utilitarian? How would each evaluate murder?

Week 4: Discussion: Go over homework.
Lecture: What is natural law theory? What is Aristotle’s idea of the morally good person? What would Aristotle say about lying? How would his response differ from Kant’s and Mill’s?

Week 5 Test 1: Multiple choice, written essay, definitions.
Go over test.
Discussion group: Evaluation of homework and discussion of Warren.
Paper topic: Read Michael Tooley, “In Defense of Abortion and Infanticide,” 158-174, and John Noonan, “An Almost Absolute Value in History.” Which paper has the stronger argument? Why is the other one weaker? What moral theory enters into the viewpoint of each author?

Week 6: Discussion groups: Reading of papers and exchange of ideas.
Discussion: Examination of homework questions and discussion of readings

Week 7: Discussion groups: consideration of homework questions.
Paper topic: Is capital punishment morally justified?
Lecture: What is the difference between deterrence and retribution as a justification of punishment? What role does mental incapacity play in the discussion?

Week 8: Discussion group: consideration of paper topic and homeworks.
Test 2: Essay and multiple choice.

Week 9: Go over test.
Discussion groups: examination of homework questions.
Lecture: Theories of economic justice. What do utilitarian, Kantian, and Aristotelian theories say about economic justice?
Paper topic: Is health care a basic human right?
Euthanasia,” 298-311.
Paper topic: Should doctors be allowed to euthanize?

Week 10: Discussion groups: consideration of paper topic and homeworks.
Lecture: What is a moral agent? Is there a difference between killing and letting die?

Week 11: Consideration of homework.
Test 3: Multiple choice and essay questions.
Paper topic: What ethical considerations need to be weighed in the case of human cloning?

Week 12: Go over test 3.
Consideration of homework and paper topics.
Paper topic: Does morality enter into the conduct of war?

Week 13: Discussion groups: consideration of paper topic and homework.
Lecture: What are the differences between utilitarian and Kantian principles concerning the ethics of war?

Week 14: Discussion groups: consideration of homework assignment.
Lecture: The ethics of torture: utilitarian and Kantian considerations. Do animals have rights?
Paper topic: Do animals have moral rights?

Week 15: Discussion groups: consideration of paper topic and homeworks.
Test 4 (final)