

Ethics

PHIL 321-01, Fall 2009

T/Th 1:00 – 2:15 Humanities 219

Instructor: Avery Kolers
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Hours: T/Th 11:00 – 12:30, and by appt.
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Required Texts:

- Brenda **Almond**, *The Fragmenting Family* (Oxford University Press, 2005).
- Noah **Feldman**, *What we Owe to Iraq* (Princeton University Press, 2006).
- James **Rachels** and Stuart Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 6th Edition (McGraw-Hill, 2009).

Books are available in all nearby bookstores, through the local or online used market, and at online textbook rental sites. You must use the current edition of Rachels.

Purpose and Aims of the Course:

Every philosophy course has two subject-matters. The first is the **content**. The second is a **distinctive way of interacting with the content**.

Content:

Philosophical Ethics is the attempt to develop systematic theoretic accounts of right, wrong, good, and bad. It is commonly divided into three parts or “levels”: *normative* ethics is the study of general accounts of what determines the moral properties of some action, behavior, character trait, etc.—what sorts of things are right or wrong, good or bad, etc.; *meta*-ethics is the study of the nature of moral properties—what it even means for something to be right or wrong; and *applied* ethics brings to bear theoretical ethics onto familiar social practices and institutions, or special types of problems—business ethics, medical ethics, environmental ethics, etc.

In general, what distinguishes these levels of ethics is less their methodologies – though those differ somewhat, too – than the questions they ask. That said, however, the questions at each level intersect with the questions at other levels, so no complete moral theory at any one level could remain entirely oblivious to implications at the other levels. Normative ethics addresses *how we ought to live (and why)*, and *why we should care about the “ought”*; applied ethics asks *how we ought to behave in specific contexts of one sort or another*, and *how normative ethics determines or is determined by our answer to that question*; and meta-ethics addresses *what moral values are*, and *how we could know them*.

There is a highly developed tradition of engagement with these questions in western philosophy. So the content of the course includes not just the questions listed above, but also some familiarity

with who said what, when, and why.

Two crucial points about this course. First, the course is most centrally engaged with *should* questions, not *is* questions. We assume that such questions can have better and worse, and indeed true and false, answers – though just what might make such answers true or false is also part of the content of this course. To be sure, we must come to terms with the variety of moral worldviews, but we are free to declare some or indeed all of them incorrect, if that’s what seems to be the case. Second, the course is designed for students who are interested in moral philosophy and/or are Philosophy majors. It is **not** primarily intended to fulfill ethics requirements in Business, Nursing, etc. While everyone is welcome in this class, if you are not interested in philosophical ethics you might prefer to enroll in PHIL 222 (contemporary ethical problems), PHIL 225 (business ethics), PHIL 323 (Medical Ethics), or PHIL 328 (Environmental Ethics). The course is driven by theories, not case studies.

That said, however, we will also undertake two extended case studies: the question what we owe to Iraq, using the short book of that title by Noah Feldman; and at somewhat greater length, the problem of how we ought to structure families in our society, using Brenda Almond’s *The Fragmenting Family*. We will want to know what we ought to do in these cases, and also whether ethical theory helps us decide, or whether the cases help us decide among ethical theories.

By the end of the semester you should have gained and/or improved upon the following **content-related** skills and knowledge:

- Familiarity with main philosophical theories of normative ethics and their main proponents;
- Familiarity with some major questions in meta-ethics and how they affect the possibility of finding a general theory of normative ethics;
- Understanding of the main questions that ethical theories are taken to have to answer, and the main criteria of success in developing an ethical theory;
- Understanding differences among moral, religious, social/cultural, and other sorts of values, and the distinct standards to which each sort is answerable.
- Familiarity with some significant moral questions regarding war and the war in Iraq, in particular; and with family structure; and with some factual background with which moral responses must grapple.

Interacting with content

Philosophy is in the first instance a particular way of interacting with what you read, hear, and think. The fundamental questions are “what does this mean?” “is this true?” and “if this is true, what are its implications?” In order to answer the first question we engage in *conceptual analysis*, which is a fancy word for *definition*. But philosophical definitions are not dictionary definitions; we don’t care how a word is generally used, but what the concept is. In order to answer the second question we engage in *argumentation*: the identification of premises and relationships among them; the drawing of distinctions as needed for disambiguation; inferences; the assessment of theses and inferences. And in order to answer the third question we set up a claim against other salient theses and determine whether they are compatible or incompatible,

and why. In other words, philosophy is in the first instance not merely “love of wisdom,” but *thinking about thinking*.

Philosophy requires a certain appreciation of the reality and significance of that which is unseen or taken for granted, but no less important for that. Think of radio waves. You could live your life without ever knowing they were there—as people did until the 19th century. But they are all around us, coming from all directions, bouncing off us, sometimes (but quite rarely) tickling our ear drums. They make possible a lot of modern life. And as you know if you’ve ever operated a shortwave radio (or an FM radio in New York City), small distinctions between wavelengths can make the difference between two completely different broadcasts.

Doing philosophy is like attending to radio waves. If your radio waves or your interactions with them got out of whack, things could go quite wrong; your life might even be unbearable. Similarly, if the intellectual structure of your life got out of whack, your life might be unbearable. But if you didn’t know about radio waves, or didn’t do philosophy, you would never be able to diagnose, let alone fix, the problem.

Moreover, your own confidence that you’ve got the radio waves in check is not, in itself, evidence that they are in check. And if you are not questioning, you are not doing philosophy. Certitude is the enemy of philosophy. Memorization and absorption of facts are often *useful* for philosophy, for the sake of informing our philosophical reflection, but do not themselves constitute philosophy. But at the same time, pure speculation and rumination, mere profundity unmoored from any purpose – “Dust in the wind is all we are, dude. Dust. Wind. Dude” – also do not constitute philosophy.

Finally, philosophy is not debate. We are here to reach the truth. That is the only way to “win.” And the only way (reliably) to reach the truth is to develop and apply the philosophical skills just listed.

By the end of the semester you should have gained or improved upon the following **philosophical** skills:

- Capacity to recognize similarities among different things, and differences among similar things—to see “the unity in the diversity and the diversity in the unity”;
- Ability to follow written and spoken arguments, discerning their controversial elements;
- Ability to *construct* written and spoken arguments, appreciating where your own view may be controversial;
- Capacity to assess controversial theses, including your own, in a way that is both charitable and critical, by appeal to moral, prudential, and more broadly philosophical considerations;
- Ability to disambiguate by drawing distinctions or clarifying thoughts;
- Ability to engage, in writing, with controversial topics in a way that respects the values involved and deals honestly with those who may disagree;
- Ability fruitfully to apply your knowledge and skill-base to new moral problems that arise in future.

Evaluation:

1. Before & After assignments	3x7=	21%
2. Reading Engagements:		21
3. Midterm exam		18
4. Final Exam:		30
5. Participation:		<u>10</u>
Total		100%

1. *Before & After*. **[BA]** For each chapter of Rachels in section 1 of the course (The Possibility of Ethics), you should do two things. *Before you read*, look at the chapter title and perhaps the introduction to get a sense for what the question is, and then write up to a page laying out and briefly defending your view on the question. Then *after you read*, go back to your initial writeup and, in a page or so, reassess it. You can write an improved defense if you still believe what you thought, or rebut it if you no longer do. The point is not to fix the “before” part, but to leave it as is and then respond to it. You must then turn in both the “before” and the “after” parts.
2. *Reading Engagements*. **[RE]** Every time (except for one) that we have an assigned reading that is **not** from Rachels—6 times, by my count—I will give you a question sheet on the reading. You should expect to be graded on 3 of these over the semester. These will form the basis of class discussion. On the last day of class you may resubmit one of the ungraded ones to replace your lowest grade. **Reading engagements will not be accepted electronically** unless you have an excused absence.
3. *Midterm Exam*. This is a take-home exam to be distributed Thursday, October 8, and due Thursday, October 15. It will emphasize action-guiding theories of ethics.
4. *Final Exam*. This will be a cumulative final at the end of the semester. It will involve multiple choice, short answer, and essays.
5. *Participation*. Attendance is your business, but participation is essential to succeeding in this class. I will expect you to contribute actively to class discussions and activities. If need be, I may use the “Socratic method,” calling on people even if they do not volunteer. When you participate, bear in mind that you are one of many people in the class, each of whom has an equal right and obligation to participate on equal terms. Friendly discussion of difficult issues in a context of deep disagreement is one of the central philosophical virtues. So “perfect” participation (10/10) is near-perfect attendance **plus** not-infrequent contribution to discussions, including some contributions to challenging philosophical discussions (i.e., not just expository information, which is helpful but not sufficient). Near-perfect attendance plus silence, or regular high-quality contributions plus frequent unexcused absences, will merit 6/10.

Handing in assignments:

Presentation. All assignments should be typed in normal fonts with normal margins. If you have any questions about what this entails, ask me. I will expect all work to be spell-checked and proofread; writing will be one criterion of evaluation. All assignments should be submitted using the minimum of paper and frills—double-side if possible, no folders, etc.; just a single staple in

the top-left corner. Assignments may be submitted by email in **MS Word format or .rtf only**.

Deadlines. Assignments are due by the beginning of class on the day listed in the schedule below, with the exception of Reading Engagements, which are due at the end of class. Late assignments will be penalized one grade per school day late, beginning at 1:15 p.m. If you cannot hand in an assignment on time, you must communicate with me *beforehand*. In general, unforeseeable physical impossibility and deaths in the family are the only valid excuses for late assignments. If you submit your assignment by email, you should **cc yourself on the email** to ensure that it is sent and the attachment is included. In the event of any confusion about whether you handed in an assignment, I will request that you re-send the original, with the original date and time on it. In any case, **always keep a copy** of your assignments when you hand them in, and do not throw them away after I've returned them to you. If there are any discrepancies, I will assume my records are accurate unless you can provide me with documentation.

Disabilities: The University of Louisville is committed to providing access to programs and services for qualified students with disabilities. If you are a student with a disability and require accommodation to participate in and complete requirements for this class, notify me immediately and contact the Disability Resource Center (Robbins Hall, 852-6938) for verification of eligibility and determination of specific accommodations.

Academic Integrity: Cheating and plagiarism are immoral because a) they are *dishonest* (to me and others), in that the cheater/plagiarist presents as her/his own something that is not; b) they are *unfair* (to classmates), who work hard to meet requirements that the cheater/plagiarist circumvents; c) they violate *academic obligations* (to the university) that students voluntarily accept upon enrollment; and d) they may violate *self-regarding duties of self-development or self-perfection* (if such duties exist).

They can also get one in serious trouble. According to the University of Louisville's *Code of Student Conduct*, Section 5, "Academic dishonesty is prohibited at the University of Louisville. It is a serious offense because it diminishes the quality of scholarship, makes accurate evaluation of student progress impossible, and defrauds those in society who must ultimately depend upon the knowledge and integrity of the institution and its students and faculty." It is your responsibility to know this code and comply with its requirements. If I discover violations of this policy I will pursue the required disciplinary channels, which normally involve communicating with the dean for undergraduate affairs. If you have any questions about how to comply with this policy, ask me *in advance*.

Updates to the Syllabus: I do not foresee any need to update the syllabus as the semester goes on, but in the event of updates (such as elimination or postponement of readings), all changes will be published and you will not be held responsible for anything without at least a week's notice.

Schedule

Date	Topic	Reading	Assignment/Notes
T 8/25	Introduction		
Part I: On the Possibility of Ethics			
Th 8/27	What is morality?	Rachels, chap. 1	BA
T 9/1	Relativism & subjectivism	Rachels, chaps. 2-3	BA on chap. 2
Th 9/3	Continued	Continued	BA on chap. 3
T 9/8	Religion and ethics	Rachels, chap. 4	BA
Th 9/10	continued	continued	
T 9/15	Egoism	Rachels, chaps. 5-6	BA
Part II: Action-Guiding Theories of Ethics			
Th 9/17	Social Contract	Rachels, chap. 11	
T 9/22	continued	continued	
Th 9/24	Utilitarianism	Rachels, chap. 6	
T 9/29		Rachels, chap. 7	
Th 10/1		Rachels, chap. 8	
T 10/6	Deontology	Rachels, chap. 9	
Th 10/8		Rachels, chap.10	Midterm exam distributed
T 10/13	Fall	Break	No Class
Part III: Applying Action-Guiding Theories			
Th 10/15	What we owe Iraq	Feldman, chap. 1	Midterm exam due Last day to withdraw
T 10/20		Feldman, chap. 2	RE
Th 10/22		Feldman, chap. 3 and Afterword	RE
Part IV: NonAction-Guiding Theories of Ethics			
T 10/27	Modern Ethical Theories 4: Care	Rachels, 12.1-12.2	
Th 10/29	Maternal Thinking	Ruddick, Maternal Thinking	RE
T 11/3		Continued	
Th 11/5	Modern Ethical	Rachels, 12.3 and 13	

	Theories 5: Virtue Ethics		
T 11/10		continued	
Th 11/12		continued	
Part V: Applying Ethical Reasoning			
T 11/17	Understanding Family	Almond, chaps. 1-3 (pp. 31-38 optional)	RE
Th 11/19	Marriage & family	Almond, chaps. 3 & 7	RE
T 11/24		Almond, chaps. 8 & 10	RE
Th 11/26	Thanksgiving	Break	No Class
T 12/1	Conclusions	Continued; Rachels, chap. 13	
Th 12/3	Conclusions & Exam Review	Continued	
F 12/11			2:30 – 5:00 exam