Ethics

PHIL 321-01, Spring 2011

T/Th 9:30 – 10:45 Humanities 117

Instructor: Avery Kolers
Office: Humanities bldg., room 314
Hours: T/Th 11:00 – 12:30, and by appt.
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Required Texts:

- Russ Shafer-Landau, *The Fundamentals of Ethics* (Oxford U.P., 2010). **[RSL]**
- Naomi Zack, *Ethics for Disaster* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).
- Occasional readings online or on Blackboard – as noted in schedule below.

Books are available in all nearby bookstores, through the local or online used market, and at online textbook rental sites.

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 we should care about that*; 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 an extended case study as a test of theories: the question of ethics for natural and artificial disasters as a chronic and foreseeable but, in each instance, unpredictable phenomenon. 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 policy and practice.

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. In-class exam	20
2. Take-home exam	20
3. Disaster-code Policy Brief	20
4. Final Exam:	30
5. Attendance & Participation:	10
Total	100%

1. *In-class Exam.* This exam is divided into sections including multiple-choice, short answer, and essay. It covers parts 1 and 2 of the course, with emphasis on action-guiding moral theories.
2. *Take-home Exam*. You will have a 5-day weekend (i.e. from Thursday class to Tuesday class) to do this. It will be an essay exam covering part 3 of the course, emphasizing non-action-guiding theories.
3. *Disaster-code Policy Brief*. I will give you a list of disasters. You will have to write up a 3-5 page policy brief, with defenses of core values and hard decisions, on the guiding principles for preparing for and handling that disaster.
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. *Attendance & Participation*. Attendance is required because the material is complex and learning is much less effective on your own than in a discussion environment. 5 points of the A&P grade is based on attendance; every two unexcused absences will cost one point; after your 10^{th} absence each additional one will cost 1/3 of a letter grade for the semester. The other 5 points is based on participation. 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 responsibility 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 (5/5) is not-infrequent contribution to discussions, including some contributions to challenging philosophical discussions (i.e., not just expository information, which is helpful but not sufficient). Cell phones and other electronic devices should be off or silenced and texting is not permitted. If you use a laptop or other computer to take notes you should sit in the front row. If your use of an electronic device in contravention of this policy distracts me or your classmates you will be counted as "absent" for the day. If you simply have to take a phone call – e.g. a family member is in surgery or about to go into labor – sit near the door and let me know at the beginning of class.

Handing in assignments:

Presentation. Assignments (other than in-class exams) should be typed in normal fonts with normal margins – like this document – and double-spaced. 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 one of the

following formats: .doc, .docx, .odt, or .rtf. If I cannot open your document it has not been submitted.

Deadlines. Assignments are due by the beginning of class on the day listed in the schedule below, with the exception of the in-class exam, which is due at the end of class. Late assignments will be penalized one grade per school day late, beginning at 9:45 a.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 1/11	Introduction	RSL, Introduction (look over in class)	
Part I: Is Ethical Theory Even Possible?			
Th 1/13	Anti-Objectivism	RSL, chap. 21	
T 1/18	Egoism, Psychological and Ethical	RSL, chaps. 7 & 8	
Th 1/20	Religion and Value	RSL, chap. 5	
Part II: Action-Guiding Moral Theories			
T 1/25	Consequentialism	RSL, chap. 9	
Th 1/27		RSL, chaps. 1 & 3 (chaps. 2 & 4 optional)	
T 2/1		RSL, chap. 10	
Th 2/3		Continued	
T 2/8	Kantianism	RSL, chap. 11	
Th 2/10		Continued	
T 2/15		RSL, chap. 12	
Th 2/17	Exam		In-class exam
Part III: Non-action-guiding Moral Theories			
T 2/22	Social Contract Theory	RSL, chap. 13	
Th 2/24		RSL, chap. 14	**Monday 2/28 is last day to withdraw**
T 3/1	Virtue Ethics	RSL, chap. 17	
Th 3/3		Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion" (online)	
T 3/8		Continued	
Th 3/10	Feminist Ethics	RSL, chap. 18	
T 3/15-Th 3/17	**Spring Break – No Class**		
T 3/22		Spelman, "Household as Repair Shop" (on Blackboard)	

Th 3/24		Continued	Take-home exam distributed
Part IV: Applying Moral Theories			
T 3/29	Disaster Ethics	Zack, preface (pp. xxvii-xxxi), preface to the paperback (pp. xi-xxiii), and Introduction (pp. 1-10)	Take-home exam due
Th 3/31	Action-guiding ethics and disaster	Zack, chaps. 1-2	
T 4/5	Virtue ethics and disaster	Zack, chap. 3	
Th 4/7	Social Contract	Zack, chap. 4	
T 4/12	Policy & Preparation	Zack, chap. 5	
Th 4/14	Inequality	Zack, chap. 6	
T 4/19	A Code of Disaster Ethics	Zack, conclusion	
Th 4/21	Conclusions & exam review		Disaster Code Policy Brief due
M 5/2	Final Exam		8:00 AM – 10:30 AM