

Contemporary Moral Issues
Fall 2006
Phil 125V (BGeX)

Contact information

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Office hours: Monday and Wednesday, 10:20 a.m. – 11:20 a.m., and by appointment.

Peer facilitator: Daniel Hurlbert (hpdanie@bgsu.edu)

Course webpage: on MyBGSU, you will find the syllabus, notes, study questions, and paper topics.

I may have reason to email you during the semester. Because I have access only to your BGSU email address, you must either occasionally check that address, or set it up so that it forwards messages to the account you normally use. You are responsible for making sure you receive any information I send via email.

Meeting times and places

2:30 p.m. – 3:45 p.m., Tuesday and Thursday, 206 Olscamp.

Required texts

1. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 5th edition, Rachels & Rachels (McGraw-Hill).
2. *The Right Thing to Do*, 4th edition, ed. Rachels & Rachels (McGraw-Hill).
3. *The Handbook of Epictetus (The Encheiridion)*, ed. White (Hackett).

All texts are available at the BGSU bookstore. In addition, there will be a couple of readings on e-reserve.

Course description

In this course you will (i) gain knowledge of the basic views and ideas in ethics, and (ii) apply that knowledge to important moral problems. We will begin by examining topics in meta-ethics, including moral relativism, the relationship between morality and religion, and morality and self-interest. Then we will consider four important normative ethical theories: utilitarianism, deontology, virtue theory, and stoicism. Along the way we will apply our knowledge to concrete ethical problems such as abortion, euthanasia, aiding the needy, and the treatment of non-human animals. At the end of the course, you will be able to describe in detail the major ethical theories and evaluate particular views about moral issues – including your own – in light of them.

Learning outcomes

A. Specific course learning outcomes:

At the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. Understand the main ideas of historically important moral theories.
2. Using these ideas, recognize morally relevant features of certain acts (e.g., euthanasia, abortion) and states of affairs (e.g., third-world hunger).
3. Identify, analyze, and think critically about the reasons – explicit or implicit – people (including you) have for their ethical views.
4. Construct both oral and written arguments in defense of these views.

B. BGeX learning outcomes:

1. Recognize and describe values that arise in the methods or content of the subject area.
2. Identify ways in which these sometimes unexamined values shape or relate to academic and/or public discussion of issues.
3. Understand, articulate, and evaluate reasons and justifications that can support their own and others' value choices.

C. Department of Philosophy learning outcomes:

At the completion of baccalaureate degree studies in Philosophy, students will be able to:

1. Read and comprehend sophisticated philosophical texts;
2. Critically evaluate philosophical arguments;
3. Construct and defend philosophical arguments in well-organized, clear, and concise prose;
4. Demonstrate mastery of basic philosophical concepts and methods in both oral and written contexts;
5. Apply critical thinking and argument-evaluation skills to those philosophical issues and arguments that present themselves in everyday life;
6. Engage in rational, civil discourse about complex and emotionally laden topics in a manner that is respectful of others.

D. Learning outcomes for all BG perspective courses:

1. Communicate effectively by gaining proficiency in reading, writing and presenting.
2. Think critically through investigating and creative problem solving.
3. Participate effectively and lead through active engagement with diverse groups and teams of individuals.

Assignments and grading

1. Quizzes (2): 10% each, 20% total.
2. Question sets (4): 5% each, 20% total.
3. Paper: 3 – 4 pages: 30%.
4. Final exam: 30%. This exam will be cumulative, but weighted toward material covered after the two quizzes.

Check the schedule of readings for assignment due dates.

A note on the question sets: these will be composed of 3 – 4 questions on the reading assigned for the day the set is due. So, the question set due 8/31 will be composed of questions about the reading assigned for 8/31. The questions will be posted on-line one week before they are due, and once you have done the reading, it should only take you about 10 – 15 minutes to do them. No late question sets will be accepted, as the answers to the questions will generally be given in class that day. Note that there will be five question sets available for you to do, but you are only required to turn in four of them. This means you can skip one with no penalty. Or, you can turn in all five, and I will count your four highest grades. Question sets will be graded on a scale of 0 – 5, with 5 being the best score. It should be pretty easy for you to get an ‘A’ for this part of the course.

Overall the grading scheme for the course is: 90 and above = A; 80 – 89 = B; 70 – 79 = C; 60 – 69 = D; 59 and below = F.

Extra credit

Class is more fun when we have vigorous discussions of the readings. There is no penalty if you do not participate. However, excellent participators will be given up to 2% extra credit toward their final grades. (This matters more often than you might think.) So, for example, if your other assignments average an 88%, but you spoke up regularly and intelligently, you will get an ‘A’ for the course.

Attendance policy

Attendance will not be taken, nor will it count as part of your final grade. Experience has shown, however, that good grades are strongly correlated with regular attendance.

Academic integrity policy

If you cheat on a test or plagiarize all or even part of a paper, I will give you an ‘F’ for the course. I am very serious and completely inflexible about this. If you do not know what cheating or plagiarism is, it is your responsibility to inform yourself. BGSU’s official policy can be found here:

http://www.bgsu.edu/catalog/Acad_policies/Acad_policies2.html

Late policy/missed exam policy

I recognize all and only the standard excuses for missing an exam and/or turning in a paper late, e.g., illness, jury duty, or a family emergency. Documentation for your excuse (e.g., a doctor's note) will be required. If you are unsure about whether your absence qualifies as excused, ask me.

If you know you will be absent on the day of an exam, arrange to take it before that day. If you do not, and your absence is excused, you will be allowed to take a make-up exam; if your absence is unexcused, you will not be given a make-up.

For each day your paper is late, it will be marked off 4%. Note, days that class doesn't meet and weekend days are still days. So, if a paper is due on a Thursday, and you turn it in the following Tuesday, it will be marked off 20%. (As noted above, this excludes question sets – no late question sets will be accepted.)

Papers are due at the beginning of class. If you turn it in after class is over, it will be marked off 4% (but not another 4% until the following day).

Withdrawal policy

The university's withdrawal policy will be followed strictly. It can be found here: http://www.bgsu.edu/catalog/Acad_policies/Acad_policies15.html#withdraw

Readings

Below is a *tentative* list of readings. These are subject to change, depending on time and class interest. You are expected to have completed the relevant readings *before* class meets.

Week 1: Relativism

8/22: EM, ch. 2.

8/24: Same.

Week 2: Relativism and subjectivism

8/29: EM, ch. 3.

8/31: RD, ch. 3. **Question set #1 due.**

Week 3: Morality and religion

9/5: EM, ch. 4. RD, ch. 5.

9/7: Same.

Week 4: Homosexuality

9/12: RD, ch. 13.

9/14: Bradshaw, "A Reply to Corvino" (on e-reserve). **Question set #2 due.**

Week 5: Morality and self-interest

9/19: EM, ch. 5.

9/21: **Quiz #1.**

Week 6: Utilitarianism

9/26: EM, ch. 6. RD, ch. 8.

9/28: Same.

Week 7: Utilitarianism and the treatment of non-human animals

10/3: EM, ch. 7. **Question set #3 due.**

10/5: RD, ch. 19.

Week 8: The treatment of non-human animals

10/10: No class. Fall break.

10/12: RD, ch. 20.

Week 9: Aiding the needy

10/17: RD, ch. 15.

10/19: RD, ch. 16.

Week 10: Deontology

10/24: EM, ch. 8. RD, ch. 9. **Question set #4 due.**

10/26: same.

Week 11: Deontology

10/31: EM, ch. 9.

11/2: **Quiz #2.**

Week 12: Abortion

11/7: RD, ch. 10.

11/9: RD, ch. 11.

Week 13: Virtue theory

11/14: EM, ch. 12. RD, ch. 4.

11/16: same.

Week 14: Virtue theory

11/21: Hursthouse, "Virtue Theory and Abortion" (on e-reserve). **Question set #5 due.**

11/23: No class. Thanksgiving break.

Week 15: Stoicism

11/28: Epictetus, *The Handbook*.

11/30: Same. **Final paper due.**

Week 16: War and peace

12/5: RD, ch. 23.

12/7: Wrap-up and review.

Final exam: Friday 12/15, 3:30 p.m. – 5:30 p.m.