

## Phil 160: Introduction to Ethics Spring 2008

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### Course Overview:

This course will be a survey of some major topics and views in philosophical ethics. It will be divided by topic into three units.

**Unit 1: Two Classic Normative Theories.** a normative theory is a theory of what kinds of actions count as ethical actions. After some introductory material, we will look at one of the most influential normative theories in philosophical history, utilitarianism, and its chief rival, deontology. We will read both classical and contemporary accounts of these views, as well as some criticisms of each.

**Unit 2: Virtue Ethics.** Virtue ethics shifts the focus from *action*, the central notion in utilitarianism and deontology, to *character*. Virtue ethics tries to give a theory, not just of *doing* good, but of *being* good. Here we will look at portions of what is arguably the greatest ethical treatise in western history, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. We will also read a contemporary proponent of virtue ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre.

**Unit 3: Meta-Ethics.** One very general way to describe meta-ethics is as the branch of philosophy that deals with topics not directly related to issues in normative theory. Here we will consider questions like, "Are there moral facts?", "Are people motivated to perform a good action just because they recognize it to be good?", and "Is morality relativistic (in any important sense)?"

### Readings:

Please note well: there are *no* textbooks for this class. All readings will be posted as PDFs on the course website.

The URL for the website is as follows:

<http://www.people.umass.edu/cox/160.html>

The readings for the course will be manageable, although probably more difficult than you are used to. Reading philosophy is not like reading for many other disciplines. When we read a philosophical paper, while we are certainly interested in 'what the author thinks', i.e., his opinion, our main purpose will be to understand how he *argues* for his opinion. The greater

part of the work in philosophy is not in generating opinions, but in generating careful, logical arguments in support of them. For this reason you should try to read the text more than once. Three readings is ideal (twice before the lecture and again after you hear the lecture), but I realize this may not always be practicable. As a minimum I suggest reading twice: once before the lecture and again afterward (taking notes as you read helps as well). Pay attention to the sometimes tedious argumentative details that you might overlook if you were reading for, say, a literature or history class—these will be the most important parts.

### **Assignments and Grading:**

**Take-Home Assignment 1: 20%**

**Take-Home Assignment 2: 20%**

**Mid-Term Examination: 25%**

**Final Examination: 25%**

**Attendance and Participation: 10%**

**Take-Home Assignments:** There will be two take home assignments during the semester, the first due on Feb. 21, and the second due on April 29. For each one, I will give you two questions to answer, about a week before the assignment is due. You will then have a week to prepare written answers to the questions. We will talk in more detail about these as the time for the first one approaches, but here are a few guidelines.

- (i) Your answer for each question should average around a half a page in length, 12-pt. typeface, single spaced.
- (ii) You are allowed to consult me during your preparations, either by email or in person.
- (iii) You *are allowed* to consult one another during your preparations. However, you may not copy answers from one another—every student must write his answer in his own words. If you *talk* to other students about your answers, I advise you to *write* your answers in isolation. This minimizes the risk you will fail to use your own words. Any answers that resemble one another too closely will be considered candidates for cheating, and subject to the appropriate penalty (see below).

**Exams:** There will be two exams in the class, a mid-term (March 13) and a final (date to be announced). Each exam will consist of two parts. The first part, called "short-essay", will require you to rehearse specific arguments from our readings. The second part, called "long-essay", will require you to discuss a broader issue or doctrine from our readings, often asking you to piece together an author's complete view on an issue. I will give you a pool of possible exam questions to study before each test. I will try to give you these study guides about one week prior to the exam date.

**Attendance and Participation:** The attendance and participation grade will be based on two things: (i) attendance and (ii) your level of preparation for class. You will begin the semester with the full 10%. Penalties will be introduced for:

- (a) Absences. Any more than three absences will result in a loss of 5%. Any more than five absences will result in losing the full 10%.
- (b) Indications that you are not prepared for class (you clearly haven't done the reading, etc.)
- (c) Failure on occasion to contribute to class discussion. Contribution can be by

asking questions, or by answering questions I may ask you in class.

**Academic Dishonesty:**

Academic dishonesty comes in two primary forms: plagiarism and cheating. Plagiarism is intentional or unintentional use of someone else's words as your own. Do not plagiarize. Cheating is any attempt to violate the rules or understood conventions pertaining to exams, quizzes, or similar assignments. Do not cheat. **Academic dishonesty on any assignment will very likely earn you a failing grade for the class. There will be no compromises.** If you have any questions about academic dishonesty, ask me, or consult the student conduct code.