

Great Conversation 310: Virtue with and without God

Autumn, 2014

Professor John Barbour

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Office hrs: Monday, Wed, & Friday 2:30-3:30 (Mon, often 3:15), and by appointment

I. Purpose and Goals of the Course

This course receives credit for the EIN (Ethical Issues and Normative Perspectives) General Education requirement. It assumes that students will have completed the Great Conversation five-course sequence. Most versions of “the Con” study the critiques of religious belief offered by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, all of whom thought that religion interferes with the possibility of genuine moral deliberation and choice. In contrast, Dostoevsky tried to show that without faith in God, “all is permitted” and there can be no virtue. These thinkers raise a crucial question: Is virtue possible without religious faith? To deepen our thinking about this question we will read philosophers and theologians who have argued one way or the other, as well as narrative texts that explore the moral choices of characters with and without religious faith.

II. Required Books (for sale in the Bookstore)

John Barbour, *Renunciation*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (enlarged edition, 1997)

Albert Camus, *The Fall*

Albert Camus, *The Plague*

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*

C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (third edition, 2007)

Sinott-Armstrong, Walter, *Morality Without God?*

(other readings marked with * are on course site on Moodle)

III. Requirements for the Course

1. Close reading of assigned texts, on time. Please bring your book to class.
2. Attendance and participation in class discussions. These affect your grade (25%).
3. Two essays, each about 1500 words or five pages (25% each).
4. Final take-home essay examination (25%).

IV. Class Schedule

9/5 Introductions: to the Course and to each other

I. George Eliot's *Middlemarch*

9/8 *Middlemarch*, book 1

9/10 *M*, book 2

9/12 *M*, book 3

9/15 *M*, book 4

9/17 George Eliot's life and religion: "George Eliot's Religious Pilgrimage" by Peter C. Hodgson*;
Greg Pence, "Virtue Theory"*

9/19 *M*, book 5

9/22 *M*, book 6

9/24, *M*, book 7

9/26 *M*, book 8

II. A philosophy of virtue: Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (third edition) with an interlude on Ben Franklin

9/29 *AV*, chapters 1-3

10/1 *AV*, ch 4-5

10/3 *AV*, ch 6 & 9

10/6 *AV*, ch 10-11

10/8 *AV*, ch 12-13

First paper due.

10/10 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, pp.

Fall Break

10/15 *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, pp.

10/17 *AV*, ch 14 & 15

10/20 *AV*, ch 16 & 18 and "Prologue: *After Virtue* after a Quarter of a Century"
Recommended: "Postscript to the Second Edition"

III. Some Christians on Virtue

10/22 Martin Luther, "Two Kinds of Righteousness"*
Gilbert Meilaender, "Thinking about Virtue" and "The Examined Life is Not Worth Living: Learning from Luther"*

10/23 (evening) Film: "Bonhoeffer"

10/24 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "After Ten Years" (pp. 3-17) and discuss film

10/27 John DeGruchy, "Editor's Introduction to English Edition" *
In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 271-312
(Focus on entries for 4/22, 4/30, 5/5, "Thoughts on the Day of Baptism", 5/20, 5/29)

10/29 In *Letters and Papers from Prison*, pp. 312-419. (Focus on 6/8, 6/27, 7/8, 7/16, 7/18, 8/21, 8/23 and "Outline for a Book")

10/31 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, pp. 1-56

11/3 *Four Loves*, pp. 57-90

11/5 *Four Loves*, pp. 91-141

11/7 Some controversial Christian virtues:
Barbara Andolsen, "Agape in Feminist Ethics"*
Sidney Callahan, "To Bear Wrongs Patiently"*

IV. Secular/Humanist/Atheist Ethics

11/10 Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality Without God*, pp. xi-52

11/12 Ibid., pp. 53-112

11/14 Ibid., pp. 113-157

11/17 Camus, *The Plague*, to page 99.

11/19 Ibid., pp. 99-185

11/21 Ibid, pp. 189-308

11/24 No class; instructor at professional meeting

11/25 (Tuesday, 3. p.m.) Paper due

Thanksgiving Break

12/1 Camus, *The Fall*, chapters 1-3

12/3 *The Fall*, chapters 4-6

V. An ambiguous case: "Renunciation is a piercing virtue" (Emily Dickinson)

12/5 Barbour, *Renunciation*, chapters 1-4

12/8 *Renunciation*, chapters 5-8

12/10 *Renunciation*, chapters 9-12 and epilogue

12/12 Last class. Grand synthesis and prepare for final exam

12/15 (Monday) 2-4 p.m. Final Exam

Class participation: explanation of grade

A: Regular attendance; frequent contributions to discussion; contributions reveal a clear comprehension of the readings and issues being discussed; contributions are insightful and advance or deepen our conversations; efforts to help the class work well together as a group.

B: Regular attendance; steady and solid contributions to discussion in terms of the above criteria.

C or below: Erratic attendance; infrequent contributions to discussion; lack of preparation.

Links to useful information:

On academic integrity at St. Olaf College:

<http://www.stolaf.edu/stulife/thebook/academic/integrity.html>

On the honor system:

<http://www.stolaf.edu/stulife/thebook/academic/honor.html>

On disability services for students:

<http://www.stolaf.edu/services/asc/sds.html>

If you have a documented disability for which accommodations may be required in this class, please contact Connie Ford (ford@stolaf.edu) or Laura Knobel-Piehl (knobel@stolaf.edu) in the Academic Support Center (507-786-3288, Buntrock 108) as soon as possible to discuss accommodations. If you have already arranged accommodations through Student Accessibility Services, please ensure submission of your accommodation letter within the first two weeks of class and initiate a conversation with me about the accommodations.