

SYLLABUS: MORAL THEORY (PHIL 278)
St. Olaf College
Fall 2013

Instructor: Michael Fuerstein
Email: fuerstei@stolaf.edu
Office: Holland Hall 605
Office Hours: Tuesday, 11:10-12:40 and Thursday 12:30-2, or by appointment

Introduction

Whether consciously or unconsciously, our lives are governed by moral judgments. Some judgments constrain our actions in obvious and explicit ways: we know that is (at least normally) wrong to lie, to steal, and to kill. But even seemingly mundane decisions of lifestyle seem to reflect moral judgments. To buy a nicer pair of shoes is also to consume resources that might otherwise be used to provide food or mosquito nets to the abject poor. In spite of the ubiquity of moral concerns in our lives, few of us bother to think seriously about how our moral beliefs are justified, or what sort of a thing morality is even about. Why, exactly, is it wrong to lie for selfish reasons? It is surprising how vexing a simple question like this can be.

In this class, we will scrutinize our moral beliefs, considering some of the most important moral theories, and addressing a series of questions about the status of these theories: Can moral beliefs be true and false in the way that the facts of biology can be true and false? Or are they expressions of feeling? Are moral judgments justifiable relative to some cultural background? Or are they justifiable in some absolute sense? Does morality presuppose the existence of God? Can we ever be held morally responsible? Readings will be drawn from classic and contemporary philosophical texts.

Although no prior background in philosophy is required, students will be expected to display a substantial capacity for analytical reasoning and critical thought.

This course fulfills a WRI requirement and will therefore aim to integrate the development of students' writing skills into the curriculum. Specifically, over the course of the semester we will work on: (a) writing effectively in a philosophical style and format, (b) writing as a means to philosophical inquiry, learning, and communication, and (c) improving written work through the process of draft and revision.

Administrative Details

Links to St. Olaf's academic integrity policy and honor code can be found at the following links. All students are expected to know and abide by these. Violations of these policies will result in failure of the course in all cases and will be reported to the Dean's Office.

<http://www.stolaf.edu/stulife/thebook/academic/integrity.html>
<http://www.stolaf.edu/stulife/thebook/academic/honor.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 arrange for the submission of your accommodation letter within the first two weeks of class. Accommodations will only be provided after the letter is submitted to me and with sufficient lead-time for me to arrange testing or other accommodations. Although I will

receive the letter electronically, I expect you to initiate a conversation with me about the accommodations.

Attendance, Late Assignments, and Deadline Extensions

Attendance: If you miss more than a few classes, I will mark you down in accord with the extent of your absences. Attending class is a minimum requirement for completing the course and will have no positive effect on your grade. In other words, missing class hurts you but showing up does not help you.

Late Assignments: Late papers will be marked down one fraction of a letter grade for every 48 hours that have passed beyond the deadline. Thus, an A- paper would become a B+ after two days, a B after four days, etc. The maximum deduction for lateness is two full letter grades (six days); beyond that, no additional penalty will be imposed. Final exams and blog posts will not be accepted after the deadline.

Extensions: I always grant extensions, but only under the condition that the extension is requested at least one week in advance of the deadline. I normally grant no more than a week of extra time unless you have a special reason for needing more than that.

Grading and Course Requirements

- Paper 1 (5 pages) + revision: 25%
- Paper 2 (7-8 pages): 35%
- Comprehensive Final Exam (Take-Home): 25%
- Oral Participation + 7 short (at least 130 words) blog posts: 15%

All paper assignments (including any required drafts) and the final exam must be turned in in order to pass the course.

Texts

The following texts are required for the course and are available for purchase in the bookstore. A few other readings will be posted on moodle:

- *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd ed., edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, Blackwell: 2007
- John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Hackett: 2001
- Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James Ellington, Hackett: 1993

Preliminary Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Note: This schedule is tentative and will be subject to adjustments over the course of the term. All changes will be announced by email. The authoritative schedule will be posted on moodle and updated regularly.

9/5: Course Introduction (no reading)

Why Be Moral?

9/10: Plato, "The Immoralist's Challenge"

9/12: Philippa Foot, "Morality As a System of Hypothetical Imperatives"

9/17: Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints"

9/19: James Rachels, "Ethical Egoism"

Writing Discussion #1

9/24: Nietzsche, "On the Genealogy of Morality" (Moodle)

The Nature of Morality

9/26: J.L. Mackie, "The Subjectivity of Values"

10/1: David Hume, "'Of the Influencing Motives of the Will' & 'Moral Distinctions Not Derived from Reason'"

10/3: G.E. Moore, "The Subject-Matter of Ethics"

10/8: Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended"

10/10: Michael Smith, "Moral Realism" **Paper #1, First Draft Due by 9 PM via moodle**

10/15: NO CLASS (Fall Break)

Utilitarianism

10/17: John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chs. 1-2 and Robert Nozick, "The Experience Machine"

10/22: John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chs. 3-5

10/24: J.J.C. Smart, "Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism"

10/29: Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism" (Moodle)

In-Class Writing Discussion: matters of style

Deontology

10/31: Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (excerpts)

11/5: Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (cont.) **Paper #1, Second Draft Due by 9 PM via moodle**

11/7: Kristine Korsgaard, "Kant's Formula of Universal Law"

11/12: Judith Jarvis Thompson, "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem"

Virtue Ethics

11/14: Aristotle, "The Nature of Virtue"

11/19: Aristotle, "The Nature of Virtue" (cont.)

11/21: Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach"

11/26: Rosalind Hursthouse, "Normative Virtue Ethics"

11/28: NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Break)

God and Morality

12/3: Plato, *Euthyphro* (Moodle)

12/5: Robert Adams, "A New Divine Command Theory"

12/10: Erik Wielenberg, "God and Morality" **Paper #2 Due by 9 PM via moodle**

In-Class Writing Discussion: building an argument

12/12: Concluding discussion (no reading)

Take-Home Final Exams Due via Moodle no later than 4 PM on Monday, Dec. 16