Course Description

The goal of this course is to work on and improve the ability of students to think about complex, difficult pieces of writing and respond to them on their own terms and in novel situations.

The medium through which we will develop ourselves as thinkers will be ethics, specifically ethical theory. This course will cover some of the most important moral philosophers and theories in the Western philosophical tradition. We will cover Utilitarianism (Mill), Deontology (Kant), and Virtue Ethics (Aristotle). We will cover how each ethical theory would determine what is of moral significance and the ethical value of particular actions. To this end, we will discuss the readings in class. Students will also write papers that will require them to understand the arguments that the authors in the texts that we cover. By the end of this course, you will hopefully be able to explain why these authors accept the ethical theories that they do, where their ethical principles come from, and how those general principles might apply in specific ethical cases.

The skills in this course, however, will be applicable in any field or discipline that you go into. No matter where you go or what you do, you will need to read, understand, and respond to what other people have said. This course will be an opportunity for you to engage with novel information and practices that you probably are not familiar with, which is exactly the kind of “fish out of water” experience you will need to learn this specific skill.

Instructor

Michael Otteson

Email: all contact with me should occur over the Canvas messaging system.

Office Hours: by appointment

Required Texts

*Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill

*Grounding for the Metaphysics of Moral*, Immanuel Kant

*Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle

I have assigned reasonably priced editions/translation of each of these texts. However, they are all free online. If you have other editions of them, you are welcome to use them, but you will be responsible for figuring out how the reading assignments on the syllabus correlate to your text. The additional readings will be posted to Blackboard. You will also need to bring the texts with you to class, so keep that in mind as well if you use an alternative method for obtaining the texts.

Any additional readings on the syllabus will be posted to Canvas.

Assignments

*Reading Questions:* 20%

The academy (including and especially the literal Academy where Aristotle studied and gave birth to the Western intellectual tradition) is about the intellect. It is about the mind’s ability to
grasp and comprehend truth and goodness (and beauty). To this end, the three questions of academia are as follows:

“Huh?”

“Really?”

“So what?”

“Huh?” is about what someone has said. It is the ability or process of understanding what another person has tried to communicate. This is an act of interpretation. Whenever someone says something, it is always a separate process for the listener(s) to determine what the person said. This may seem trivial, but it is not (especially in a field like philosophy). Interpreting what other people have said is often ambiguous, difficult, or contested. This does not mean there are not right answers, or that some answers are not better or more plausible than others. However, it does mean that a simple question like “huh” is actually an exercise or activity of the intellect, not a matter of vain or rote repetition or regurgitation.

“Really?” is about justification or reasons. That is, it is about determining why someone believes or defends something that they have said. It is the process of both understanding why another person holds the position that they do and evaluating for yourself whether or not those reasons or arguments are satisfactory. This is also an exercise of the intellect. Rationality is about the search for reasons. Why do we believe as we do? Why should we act or behave in a certain way?

“So what?” is about why something matters. It is determining the value or importance of information, concepts, ideas, or arguments within a human life. Why does something matter to us? Should we care about something? How does it make us wiser, more thoughtful, or better?

For every day that we assigned readings in class, you will need to send to me your answers to these questions in regards to the readings for the day. You will take no more than three sentences (for each question) to explain about each reading the “Huh,” the “Really,” and the “So What.” In other words, you will briefly explain what the author said, why the author said it, and why it matters or potentially matters for their larger project, ethics, or human life generally. Your answers to these questions will be due thirty minutes before the beginning of class. I will use them (as should you) to facilitate class discussion. It will prepare you to engage in a rigorous examination and consideration of the text in conjunction with myself and your classmates.

This is a lot of work. However, it is work that is essentially for developing critical thinking skills that you will use everywhere. As Aristotle and the other virtue ethicists know, any skill requires practices to master. There is no way around improving other than doing it over and over again with an eye towards improvement. Furthermore, I will not grade these responses on content. If you have made a good faith effort to do them, then you will get your points for the day. However, I will give you seven days during the semester where you don’t have to turn in questions. That is to say, of the days where we have assigned readings, if you respond to the questions above on all of those days except seven, you will get full credit for the semester.
I will also say that if you do these reading questions consistently, you may very well have written your long papers by the time we are done.

*Exegetical Papers: 60%*

The goal of this course is to examine complex and difficult texts about a weighty topic (ethics) and correctly explain key concepts from them. This process of interpretation is sometimes called “exegesis.” These assignments are way to practice this skill. For each ethical theory that we cover, I will give out a prompt. It will ask you to explain a key concept or idea from each ethical theory in less than four pages. You will need to find key passages from the text where each author discusses the relevant topic, quote that author, and explain what they mean in your own words. Because I want you to improve over time, I will give special consideration to papers later in the semester if you show a lot of improvement. Your reading question responses should help you immensely when writing these papers, to the point where you may have already put down a great deal of the relevant discussion necessary for the papers.

*Final Exam: 20%*

There will be a final cumulative exam that covers material from all aspects of the course. Preparing for this exam will help you review and understand the material from this course. It will include material that is not directly covered by the papers. Your reading questions should help you prepare for this exam.

**Course Schedule**

*Week 1*

1/18 MLK Day
1/20 Introduction
1/22 Republic I

*Week 2*

1/25 Republic I
1/27 Republic II (to 367e)
1/29 Mill Chapter I

*Week 3*

2/1 Mill Chapter II
2/3 Mill Chapter II
2/5 Mill Chapter III

*Week 4*

2/8 Mill Chapter IV
2/10 Mill Chapter V
2/12 Mill Chapter V

Week 5
2/15 No Class
2/17 Peter Singer – “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” – Utilitarianism Paper Due

Week 6
2/22 Kant, Preface, First Edition
2/24 Kant, First Section
2/26 Kant, First Section

Week 7
3/1 Kant, Second Section
3/3 Kant, Second Section
3/5 Kant, Second Section

Week 8
3/8 Korsgaard – “Kant’s Formula of Universal Law”
3/10 Korsgaard – “Kant’s Formula of Universal Law”
3/12 No Class

Week 9
3/15 Korsgaard – Kant’s Formula of Humanity
3/17 Kant, Third Section
3/19 Kant, Third Section

Week 10
3/22 Korsgaard – Right to Lie
3/24 Discussion Day
3/26 Nicomachean Ethics (NE) I.1-7 Kant Paper Due

Week 11
3/29 NE I.8-13
3/31 NE II.1-4
4/2 NE II.5-9

Week 12
4/5 NE III.1-5
4/7 NE III.6-12
4/8 (Friday Schedule) NE IV

Week 13
4/12 NE V.1-6
4/14 NE V.5-11
4/16 NE VI.1-8

Week 14
4/19 NE VI.9-13
4/21 NE VII

4/23 NE X.7-8, Julia Annas – “Applying the Virtues to Ethics” Virtue Ethics Paper Due

Week 15
4/26 Julia Annas – “Virtue Ethics and the Charge of Egoism”
4/28 Discussion Day
4/30 Finals Week – Virtue Ethics Paper Due

Week 16
5/3
5/5