

True morality consists not in following the beaten track, but in finding out the true path for ourselves, and in fearlessly following it.

– Mahatma Gandhi.



Introduction to Contemporary Moral Issues

UNT Spring 2009 (Jan 20th – May 15th)

Course Syllabus Philosophy 1400

Section 1 MWF 10:00 AM – 10:50 AM ❖ ENV 115

Section 2 MWF 12:00 PM – 12:50 PM ❖ CHEM 253

Instructor: Bidisha Kumar

Office Hours: After class or by appointment

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Course Description and Objectives

What are morals and who is its custodian? Why are there so many do's and don'ts in our society? Why are the rules different for men and women? These and other questions continue to intrigue us in every age, in every society, in every situation, and context. Society has its moral precepts and guidelines delineating acceptable behavior and such codes prescribe what one should do or ought to do. As societies are diverse and dynamic so are moral principles. Therefore, how can we be sure that such principles will be applicable to all and in every circumstance and context? It is with conscious ethical reflection that such established beliefs are examined and questioned for their veracity, pertinence, followed by modifications and refinements. This course is an invitation to participate in such creative ethical reflection.

The foundation of morality should not be made dependent on myth nor tied to any authority lest doubt about the myth or about the legitimacy of the authority imperil the foundation of sound judgment and action.

Albert Einstein

In this course, we will explore the philosophical dimensions of contemporary hot-button ethical issues especially those that plague the present century: environmental degradation, global climate change, population growth and consumption patterns along with the longstanding and pressing moral problems like abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, racial equality, and war. We will examine contemporary moral issues in light of the classical theories to provide background before we get down to the issues at hand. Students in this course will learn how to apply philosophical theories to

real world problems while testing and evaluating them at the same time. Students will be introduced to both Western and Eastern philosophical takes on moral theory.

The class will be based on students' participation and deliberation in discussion and debates. Assigned readings will be discussed in class. It is therefore important that the student comes to class having read the assigned selection from the text. Class time will be spent in clarifying and evaluating the readings in a participatory manner.

The course is about applying moral reasoning to current social and environmental controversies. The course will not give the students readymade solutions for all life's difficult problems, but will prepare the students to gain an understanding of opinions other than one's own on various issues and articulate rationally one's views both verbally and in writing. This will help the students to critically and creatively reflect on the complexity and diversity of issues and their relevance in their life and prepare them to ask the right questions in approaching an issue from a philosophical point of view and with a more tolerant and pluralist mindset.

Required Texts

1. Core Reading: Mackinnon, Barbara *Ethics: Theory and Contemporary Issues* Belmont: Wadsworth, 2007.
2. Articles and handouts on special topics for reading to be distributed in class.

Assignments and Grading

Attendance = 5 percent. Students will get four free absences in all.

Unannounced Reading Quizzes = 5 percent

Discussion and class participation and debates = 10 per cent. A full score in this section includes, consistent demonstration of knowledge of the material discussed in class, asking of insightful and critical questions and regularly participating in debates.

Group/Individual Presentations of selected topics = 10 percent

Mid Term = 20 per cent

Final exams = 25 per cent

A short Position Paper (2 pages) = 25 percent [Select one of the issues covered by the course. Say precisely what the issue is and what you believe is the correct position to hold the issue. Argue for your position by stating the most powerful arguments against your view and establish what is wrong with those arguments].

Attendance and Drop Policy

Regular class attendance is important to the proper understanding of the issues discussed and hence there will be grade points for class attendance. Presence in the entire period of class is required. If known beforehand, students must inform the instructor of a late arrival or an early leave. A record of attendance sheet will be passed around at the beginning of each class. It is solely the responsibility of the student to sign the sheet of attendance. Missing more than four classes will lead to deduction of points. Excellent attendance is encouraged and carries grade points.

A student may drop the course with instructor's permission until the last day allowed by the University to drop the course. This deadline for dropping course is March 31, 2009.

Policy on Absence from Exams

If owing to either accident or illness a student is unable to take any of the two exams, a make-up exam will be made only on receipt of a letter from an appropriate medical authority. However, there will be no make-up reading quizzes.

Technology and Department Policy

Cell phones use of any kind – voice, text messaging, calculator and photography – is banned during class. Phones must be either turned off or rendered inaudible during class session. Use of laptop computers are also not allowed during class.

Students are expected to be respectful towards one another and the learning environment. In a moral philosophy class arguments are welcome and are a necessary component of philosophical thinking. However, arguments should be to arrive at a defensible position, not to humiliate or intimidate other persons.

Academic Honesty

In a class concerning ethics, I expect the students to remain moral. Cheating, plagiarism, furnishing false or misleading information are acts of academic dishonesty and will not be tolerated. Cheating during class includes assistance from others during quizzes, exams, depending on some external sources which give the student an unfair advantage. Any instance of cheating, will automatically result in an F.

Tentative Course Calendar

Ethical Theories

Week of January 19: Introduction - Mackinnon Chapter 1-3 pages 1-30

Week of January 26: Egoism and Utilitarianism – Chapters 3 & 4, pages 32-74

Week of February 2: Immanuel Kant – Deontological Ethics – Chapter 5, pages 75-96

Week of February 9: Natural Law and Natural Rights – Chapter 6, pages 97-107

Week of February 16: Virtue Ethics – Chapter 7, pages 111-132

Ethical Issues

Week of February 23: Sexual Morality, Chapter 10, pages 208-230

Week of March 2: Abortion, Chapter 9, pages 173-207

Week of March 9: Euthanasia, Chapter 8, pages 136- 172 [Mid Term Exam].

Week of March 16: Spring Break

Week of March 23: Capital Punishment, Chapter 14, pages 312- 347.

Week of March 30: Environmental Ethics, Chapter 15, pages 349-376

Week of April 6: Global Issues and Globalization, Chapter 19, pages 464-491

Week of April 13: Equality and Discrimination, Chapter 12, pages 254-279

Week of April 20: Economic Justice, Chapter 13, pages 282-310

Week of April 27: Violence/Non-violence, Defense, Terrorism and War, Chapter 18, pages 438-461. Movie on Gandhi and handouts.

Week of May 4: Pre-finals week review.

Week of May 11: Final Exam week.