

PHIL 3400
University of North Texas
SPRING 2009
M/W/F 11-11:50 am

Dr. Wilkerson
Office: ENV 320F
Hrs. Friday Noon-1 pm
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Ethical Theory

Course Description:

In the Preface to *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas bluntly and trenchantly asserts “ [e]veryone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality.” In Philosophy 3400 we will pursue in earnest the question of the legitimacy of morality, particularly as the notion of right and wrong behavior concerns the social and political context. Accordingly, students will be introduced to selected texts from the Western philosophical canon that in some way or another reflect and define our tradition’s notions about ethics. In doing so, we will draw upon key sources of our moral, social, political, and cultural philosophical inheritance, attempting not only to comprehend this inheritance but also to apply the various resulting ethical theories to contemporary moral and political challenges. Class discussions will focus on the problems that truth, justice, and human nature have posed for moral thinkers over the last 2500 years. Rather than serving as guides for ethical behavior, these texts will be read in their contexts as exemplars for asking and responding in a philosophical way to moral problems. Presumably, we will be unable to see every author’s thoughts as sound (we may even disagree amongst ourselves). However, by trying to understand these texts on their own terms--in addition to whatever moral perspective we wish to impose upon them as readers—we will be developing the kind of critical savvy, patience, and ethical awareness that is essential for our own moral health and for the well-being of our social environments.

Required Texts:

Students are assigned six texts: Gross’ *Neighbors*, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, Rousseau’s *On the Social Contract* (Hackett), Kant’s *Basic Writings of Kant* (Modern Library), Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (Routledge), Nietzsche’s *Beyond Good and Evil*, and Vattimo’s *Nihilism and Emancipation: Ethics, Politics, and Law* (Columbia). In addition, we will read a number of short essays to be handed out in class. All assigned selections are required reading and students will need to bring the assigned texts to class.

Attendance Policy:

Regular attendance is required. To help promote attendance and generate a vibrant atmosphere for class discussion, the following policy will be implemented: 5 absences may (at the discretion of the instructor) lead to the loss of ½ letter on the student’s final grade. In addition, ½ letter may be taken off the final grade for every two absences after the first 5 (*viz.* 7 absences will lead to the loss of a full letter grade, while 9 absences will lead to the loss of 1&1/2 letter grades and so on).

Course Requirements:

This Ethical Theory class is reading and writing intensive. Students will be asked to produce two Interpretive Essays (5-7pp, typed). **Late papers will not be accepted.** Papers are due at the beginning of class on the given date *unless* we make other arrangements *before* the assignment is due. Students who fail to produce an Interpretive Essay should not expect to pass the class. During the semester, students will also produce two short (2-3 pp) Summary Papers surveying one day's assigned readings. The readings to be summarized will be determined by the dates chosen for completion of the two summary papers. That is, each Summary Paper should address the particular reading assigned for the day the paper is due. One of these summaries will be presented orally in class. Each student is responsible for setting his/her own schedule for the writing and oral presentation of the summary papers and shall notify the instructor of his/her intentions no later than January 30. (Students should attempt to schedule one summary paper by March 6 and one thereafter.) The Interpretive Essays will each count 30% towards the final grade; each of the Summary Papers and the Oral Presentation will count 10% (30% total). Class participation will constitute the remaining 10% of the final grade.

SCHEDULE

Section One: The Contemporary Problem of Evil and the Question of Forgiveness

January

W/21	Introduction to Course
F/23	Discuss: Jan T. Gross' <i>Neighbors</i> (Introduction and pages 1-29)
M/26	Discuss: Jan T. Gross' <i>Neighbors</i> (pages 30-55)
W/28	Discuss: Jan T. Gross' <i>Neighbors</i> (pages 56-124)
F/30	SUMMARY PAPER SCHEDULE DUE. Discuss: Jan T. Gross' <i>Neighbors</i> (cont.)

February

M/2	Discuss: Martin Luther King's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" (handout)
W/4	Discuss: Derrida's <i>On Forgiveness</i>
F/6	Discuss: Derrida's <i>On Forgiveness</i>
M/9	Discuss: Derrida's <i>On Forgiveness</i>

- W/11 Discuss: Derrida's *On Forgiveness*
- F/13 Artist's Talk: Loli Kantor, "A retrospective on work portraying Jewish lives and communities in Eastern Europe";

Section Two: Virtue Ethics

- M/16 Discuss: Plato's *Republic*, Book I (handout)
- W/18 Discuss: Plato's *Republic*, Book I (cont.)
- F/20 Discuss: Plato's *Republic*, Book II (cont.)
- M/23 Discuss: Plato's *Republic*, Book II (cont.)
- W/25 Discuss: Plato's *Republic*, Book IV (cont.)
- F/27 Discuss: Plato's *Republic* (Book VI pp193-201)
- March
- M/2 Discuss: Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I (pp 1-27)
- W/4 Discuss; Aristotle Books II (pp 28-47) and III (ch.1-5; pp 48-63)
- F/6 Discuss: Aristotle Books IV (ch. 3 pp 89-95) and V (pp106-136)
- M/9 Discuss: Aristotle Book X (pp 248-269)
- W/11 Discuss: Aristotle (cont.)
- F/13 MID-TERM ESSAY DUE: Discuss: La Rochefoucauld's *Reflections or Aphorisms and Moral Maxims* (handout)

MARCH 16-22 SPRING BREAK (NO CLASSES)

Section Three: Ethics and Borders

- M/23 Discuss: Rousseau's *On the Social Contract* (Book I)
- W/25 Discuss: Rousseau's *On the Social Contract* (Book II-III)
- F/27 Discuss: Kant's *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*

- M/30 Discuss: Kant's *To Eternal Peace* (435-475)
- April
- W/1 Discuss: Kant's *To Eternal Peace* (cont.)
- F/3 Discuss: Derrida's *On Cosmopolitanism*
- Section Four: Modern Ethical Theory and Its Critics
- M/6 Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* (151-163)
- W/8 Discuss: Kant's *Fundamental Principles* (164-182 [4:425])
- F/10 Discuss: Kant's *Fundamental Principles* (182-202)
- M/13 Discuss: Mill's "On Liberty" and "Utilitarianism" (handout)
- W/15 Discuss: Rawls' "Justice as Fairness" (handout)
- F/17 Discuss: Rawls' "Justice as Fairness" (handout)
- M/20 Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (Preface and Part One)
- W/22 Discuss: Nietzsche (Part Two)
- F/24 Discuss: Nietzsche (Part Five)
- M/27 Discuss: Nietzsche (Part Seven)
- W/29 Discuss: Nietzsche (Part Nine)
- May
- F/1 Discuss: Vattimo's *Nihilism and Emancipation* (cont.)
- M/4 Discuss: Vattimo's *Nihilism and Emancipation* (cont.)
- W/6 Discuss: Vattimo's *Nihilism and Emancipation* (cont.)
- F/8 Discuss: Vattimo's *Nihilism and Emancipation* (cont.)

WEDNESDAY, MAY 13 AT 10:30 AM: FINAL PAPER DUE

