

Ethical Theory

PH 301A
Wed, Fri 2-3:15
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Office hours: Tue, Thu 3:30-5:30
Wed 1:00-2:00, 3:30-4:30

*“Morality is not properly the doctrine of how we may make ourselves happy,
but how we may make ourselves worthy of happiness.”*

Immanuel Kant, Critique of Practical Reason

Course Description

The Ethical Theory course engages students in an inquiry concerning the nature of the moral good, the structure of moral agency, and the criteria for making choices that promote human well-being. The primary purpose of the course is to clarify what constitutes moral living—its deliberating, judging and acting—so that we may have a better sense of how to live well as human persons. This capstone course culminates the moral inquiry that runs throughout the Mount curriculum. Through this requirement, the Philosophy Department seeks to

1. stimulate in students lifelong reflection on moral issues.
2. foster in students a critical examination of a variety of views concerning moral action.
3. develop students’ ability to make well-reasoned judgments regarding moral principles which may serve as a guide for action in particular situations.

Through this requirement, the Department also seeks to promote the following University curriculum goals:

1. develop an understanding of the Western humanist tradition, particularly as that tradition has been interpreted in Catholic thought and practice, by (1c) deepening understanding of the major developments of Western history, culture, and methods of inquiry.
2. develop the skills of analysis, communication and problem solving that enable students to appreciate, critique and contribute to the Western tradition by developing (2a) reading and writing skills and (2e) the ability to recognize and evaluate claims of intellectual authority.
4. develop an understanding of the nature of the good and a commitment to its practice, particularly in regard to justice, dignity, freedom, and responsibility to human communities, by (4a) developing and understanding the good as presented in classical, Christian, and modern thought.
5. encourage the development of a personal synthesis of learning and a capacity for life-long inquiry by encouraging students (5a) to integrate learning across courses and disciplines and (5d) to connect their learning to their lives as scholars, professionals, citizens, and people of faith.

Course Texts

The following materials can be purchased in the bookstore:

1. Aristotle. *Introduction to Aristotle*. Trans. Richard McKeon. McGraw Hill.
2. John Stuart Mill. *Utilitarianism*. Ed. George Sher. Hackett.
3. Immanuel Kant. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. James W. Ellington. Hackett.
4. Louis Pojman. *Moral Philosophy*. 2d edition. Hackett.

Various handouts will be distributed during class as appropriate.

Course Requirements

READINGS

The majority of the readings for this course will be from three great classics in ethics, each meant to introduce you to different ethical traditions. Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* introduces virtue ethics, Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* deontology, and Mill's *Utilitarianism* consequentialism. These classics will then be supplemented with shorter contemporary work in support of each of these traditions. You will also read an excerpt from Aquinas on natural-law theory, a fourth ethical tradition, having important similarities (and dissimilarities) with the other three. The course starts, however, with a contemporary debate about whether ethical values are relative, objective, or absolute.

You will not do well in the course unless you read the texts carefully and thoroughly. Not only won't you be able to keep up with discussion. But you simply won't be able to do anywhere near a decent job on papers and the exam.

ATTENDANCE & CLASS PARTICIPATION

Plato argues, quite convincingly, that philosophy is best done through dialogue. For that reason, attendance and class participation are required. This does not mean that you will be penalized for not attending every class and not participating fully in each. But it does mean that you are to miss class only for serious reasons, and at no time to miss more than three classes over the semester without penalty. That penalty will be to lower your course grade one third of a letter for each missed class beyond three.

Regarding participation, since this is a senior capstone course the expectation is that you will actively engage the material. Consequently you must come to class having done the reading (and *all* the reading on the day that it is assigned) and prepared to discuss it. Nonetheless "active participation" does not necessarily mean asking questions every class period; it can include things like remaining attentive and respectful of others, meeting with me during office hours, and talking to (including emailing) me outside of class. (Please note, however, that attentiveness and respectfulness are necessary but not sufficient conditions on receiving high marks for class participation.)

PAPERS AND OTHER WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

There will be two papers, the first on Aristotle and Aquinas, the second Kant and Mill. Each is to be 4–6 standard, *stapled* pages long, is to be handed in at the start of class

on the day that it is due, and will be penalized one letter grade for each day late. In addition, there will be other occasional writing assignments, some done in-class and others at home, throughout the semester. These will be 1-page long, and those done at home must be handed in at the start of class on the day that it is due or will be penalized one letter grade for each day late.

FINAL EXAMINATION

The final examination, administered during the examination period, will be cumulative.

ETHICAL THEORY RESEARCH PAPER

A major research paper is required in the senior ethics capstone course taken either as Ethical Theory (“Moral Philosophy”) or Moral Theology. The research paper extends the reflection of these courses and encourages students to do careful, sustained thinking on a topic of their own choosing over the semester. The Ethics course promotes reflection on moral agency and the goods and principles that ought to govern human action. Much of the course reflection focuses on what it means to be a moral person and whether specific practices are moral practices. To extend and deepen this reflection, you are required to write an interdisciplinary research and argumentative paper that brings you to reflect critically on a specific moral practice of your own choosing.

The Research Paper Assignment

You are required to write a 10–12-page paper drawing on philosophical inquiry and at least one other discipline to reflect on a specific historically and culturally situated moral practice. You must research and reflect on the moral practice, presenting a descriptive account of the practice and the reasoning underlying it. In developing the account of the practice, you must draw on a discipline other than philosophy. (For example, you may investigate a specific practice from the perspective of history, literature, or a natural or social science.) After coming to understand the practice and the reasoning that supports it, you must present a well-reasoned argument in support of a claim concerning the practice. In presenting your argument, you must:

1. state *a precise claim*, including any explanation needed to make it clear to a reader.
2. develop *good reasons in support of your claim*.
3. demonstrate how your position can *respond to possible objections*, i.e., your position must be developed with an awareness of and response to other positions which would present objections to your position.

The paper must evidence the results of your research which must be drawn from several and varied sources. One or two sources is insufficient, and Internet sources are insufficient. You must be careful in your selection of research material and should be wary of drawing materials uncritically from Internet sources. While your paper should not be a survey of research of views of the practice, it must evidence that you are familiar with varying positions in order to demonstrate how you would respond to objections.

Students are encouraged to consult with professors from disciplines that might deepen their understanding of the practice.

The paper must evidence your own reasoning in support of a claim you hold to be true; it may not simply present arguments uncovered in your research. The paper must evidence that you understand the claim, the issues at stake, and the background assumptions involved in it.

You must discuss with me your paper topic and submit a paper proposal, as well as first and final drafts of the paper—all according to the schedule listed on the syllabus.

Careful work must be put into the selection of the practice. Be sure to choose something that will engage your interest over the semester. Spend sufficient time reflecting on what issues are at stake in the consideration of this practice. It is expected that you will consult with professors from the disciplines bearing on your selected paper topic.

After conducting your research, you should write the first section of the paper which is a descriptive account of the practice. The paper must present an accurate account of the selected practice, evidencing and citing your research from a range of sources. This section should be no more than three pages in length. Then you should begin work on the second section of the paper which discusses the reasoning underlying the practice. This will likely involve you in research regarding a cluster of related concepts, beliefs and principles. The purpose of this selection is to deepen your understanding of the practice and the reasons persons engage in it. Then begin work on the argumentative part of the paper. You must determine where you stand regarding this practice, moving to the articulation and defense of a claim regarding the practice. You must work carefully on developing strong reasons in support of your claim. You may draw on the works of philosophers and other thinkers in developing your argument, but *the paper must state your claim and develop your argument*. If you find yourself agreeing with a thinker, you may not simply repeat his or her argument. You must instead present your way of reasoning to the same conclusion, perhaps by incorporating different or additional reasons in support of the conclusion or responding to additional objections to the claim or argument. For example, you might draw on the work of an author and yet identify what you judge to be weaknesses of the author's argument, presenting a stronger case in support of the claim. Or you might challenge premises or assumptions adopted by the author and develop what you take to be your own stronger case. But you may not simply repeat arguments drawn from readings.

The paper should conclude with a summary, including a restatement of your claim and an estimate of the strength of the case you have made for it (including any reservations or counter-evidence you recognize as possibly weakening your case). The paper must include proper citation and documentation of your research following any standard style guide and acknowledge any assistance you have received in research and writing the paper. You may not draw on or incorporate the work of other students in your paper. The essay must be well edited and carefully proofread.

Advice on Writing the Research Paper

1. Don't do insufficient research on your practice or draw on unreliable sources. Be wary of drawing materials uncritically from the Internet. You are responsible for ensuring that your paper draws on scholarly works. Books and articles go through

- review process that increase the likelihood that they are of good quality. It is recommended that you consult with me or other professors about the quality of your resource material.
2. Be careful about quickly passing judgment on the practice. Be sure that you do sufficient work in understanding the reasoning underlying the practice. Avoid quick and facile interpretations of the practice. Work to understand the practice from within its cultural and historical setting, seeking to understand the practice prior to making claims about it.
 3. Only give good reasons in support of your claims. This will be the most demanding part of the assignment. Good reasons identify truths which are relevant to the claim you want to establish and which provide a basis upon which to support your claim. Don't introduce irrelevant or weak, easily challengeable reasons. Also remember you are arguing in support of a claim. Therefore your paper should not center on what you "feel" or what others have told you to believe. You must present a strong argument in support of the claim you judge to be true. Consider how people who disagree with you would challenge your reasoning. Push yourself to think carefully and deeply about the practice and your claim about it.
 4. Don't pad your papers. Don't bring in information that can be assumed to be known by the general reader or does not advance your argument. Professors have a keen eye for identifying when students are padding papers.
 5. Don't procrastinate. Procrastination is usually the major obstacle to good work. It will definitely increase stress, lessen the value of the assignment, and make doing well nearly impossible. To help you avoid procrastinating, I am requiring that you follow a schedule of submissions. Similarly, don't procrastinate printing the final version; it is your responsibility to make sure that your computer does not crash, that you have enough ink and paper, etc.
 6. Avoid assuming that this is an easy assignment. Ethics is the capstone course in the core curriculum and requires that you do the integrative work central to our curriculum. This paper should be a major project of your senior year, culminating your four-year studies. Plan carefully the time and attention this assignment requires. Also take advantage of the assistance of faculty in designing, researching and writing this paper.
 7. Don't submit loose sheets or your only copy.
 8. Don't set your expectations low. Students have done excellent papers and learned a lot through this assignment. Some have described it as the most satisfying assignment they completed at the Mount. Have this final capstone paper be true evidence of your skills, capabilities and commitments.

Examples of the very wide range of possible research paper topics:

A virtue as practiced in different cultural traditions and historical periods

e.g. Modesty, honor, tolerance, generosity, friendship

An anthropological account of practices from different traditions

e.g. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim accounts of almsgiving
Confucian accounts of filial piety

In any tradition practices of adoption, child rearing, punishment, treatment of the human body, treatment of refugees
An account of a specific historical incident from different cultures
e.g. Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki
Specific imperialist and colonist practices
Literature depicting practices from different cultures
An account of specific practices associated with particular professions
Transformations in virtues practiced within a cultural tradition *over* historical periods
e.g. Charity, fasting, just war promulgation, censorship

Department of Philosophy Policy on Plagiarism

One of the curricular goals of Mount Saint Mary's University is to develop the skills and habits of good writing. Essential to the attainment of this goal is not only the development of the ability to express clearly your own ideas but also the requirement that in any work you submit you distinguish your own thoughts from those of others and that you not submit the words or ideas of another as your own. The failure to satisfy this requirement is called "plagiarism"; plagiarism is a form of dishonesty, inconsistent with genuine scholarship, and a serious offense against university policy. This policy forbids all forms of cheating, including plagiarism, and it stipulates (1) that all offenses be reported both to the Chair of the instructor's department and to the Dean of Academic Services, (2) that the minimum penalty for the first offense will be a failing grade for the assignment or examination on which the offense occurred, (3) that the minimum penalty for the second offense will be a failing grade for the course in which this second offense occurs, and (4) that the penalty for the third offense will be expulsion from the University.

Plagiarism takes many forms and need not be intentional to be plagiarism. It can include quoting, paraphrasing, summarizing, or utilizing the published or unpublished work of others without proper acknowledgment. Most frequently it involves the unacknowledged use of published books or articles from periodicals, magazines, and newspapers. However, any unacknowledged use of another's ideas constitutes plagiarism; this includes the use of, among other things, papers written by other students, interviews, radio or TV broadcasts, any published or unpublished materials (e.g., letters, pamphlets, leaflets, notes, or documents), and so forth. Some practices to avoid (because they can be considered plagiarism) and some examples of plagiarism can be found in Diana Hacker's *The Bedford Handbook* (New York: St. Martin's Press). Consult index for her discussion of this topic.

Good writing and good scholarship require that you produce original work—in your own words. Any time you use the work, the words, or the ideas of another you *must* acknowledge this use with a footnote or other reference. Adequate acknowledgment requires that in the case of printed materials the footnote or other reference be to the specific work utilized and that it include the exact page or pages containing the utilized material; a general reference to a work or a listing in a bibliography is not sufficient. When the borrowed idea is the result of private discussions—and even in assignments intended to involve collaboration with other students—there should be a footnote or a page of acknowledgments indicating with whom the ideas expressed in the paper have been discussed. For an explanation of the correct form for footnotes and endnotes, in-text references, and bibliographical references, see Hacker.

Another form of cheating in regard to papers is to submit in one course a paper originally written for another course. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism or cheating in this or any other course, please contact your instructor before submitting any written work.

Breakdown of Grades

1. Attendance & class participation – roughly 15%
2. Two 4–6-page, and occasional 1-page, papers – total roughly 30%
3. Final examination – roughly 20%
4. First draft of research paper – roughly 15%
5. Final draft of research paper – roughly 20%

You’ll note that I say “roughly.” This is to allow me to weight some assignments slightly more if students show improvement (and, inversely, slightly less if they don’t).

Tentative Schedule

(Other than the Aristotle, Kant, and Mill, all readings are in Pojman. Occasional 1-page papers will be assigned throughout the semester.)

	INTRODUCTION
Wed 19 Jan	Introduction
Fri 21 Jan	Benedict, “A Defense of Ethical Relativism”
Wed 26 Jan	Pojman, “A Defense of Ethical Objectivism”
	VIRTUE ETHICS
Fri 28 Jan	Aristotle, Book I.1–5, 7
	<u>Due:</u> Meeting with me on or before this date to discuss research topics
Wed 2 Feb	Aristotle, Books I.13, II.1–6
	<u>Due:</u> Research proposal
Fri 4 Feb	Aristotle, Books II.7–9, VI.5
Wed 9 Feb	Aristotle, Book III.1, 5
Fri 11 Feb	Aristotle, Book VIII.2–6
	<u>Due:</u> Pick up first paper topics in class
Wed 16 Feb	Aristotle, Book VIII.13, IX.3, 9–12
Fri 18 Feb	Mayo, “Virtue and the Moral Life”
Wed 23 Feb	Re-read Mayo
	<u>Due:</u> First short paper

Natural Law Interlude
 Fri 25 Feb Aquinas, “Natural Law”
 Wed 9 Mar Re-read “Natural Law”

DEONTOLOGY
 Fri 11 Mar Kant, Chapter I
 Wed 16 Mar Re-read Chapter I
 Fri 18 Mar Kant, Chapter II
 Wed 23 Mar Re-read Chapter II
 Wed 30 Mar Re-read Chapter II
Due: First draft of research paper
 Fri 1 Apr Kant, Chapter III
 Wed 6 Apr Re-read Chapter III
 Fri 8 Apr Ross, “What Makes Right Actions Right?”

CONSEQUENTIALISM
 Wed 13 Apr Mill, Chapter I
 Fri 15 Apr Mill, Chapter II
 Wed 20 Apr Re-read Chapters I and II
 Fri 22 Apr Mill, Chapter III
Due: Pick up second short paper topics in class
 Wed 27 Apr Mill, Chapter IV
Due: Final draft of research paper
 Fri 29 Apr Mill, Chapter V
 Wed 4 May Nielson, “Against Moral Conservatism”
Due: Second short paper

CONCLUSION
Final Exam: (week of 9-13 May)

Ethics, like all branches of philosophy, can be more critical than science and more imaginative than art. It therefore can also be more difficult than either. Consequently, please feel free to approach me with any questions or concerns as the course progresses.