

ETHICS Syllabus

PHIL 2170

Spring 2011

MWF 2:00 - 2:50

ADM 303

Dr. Seth Holtzman

office: 308 Administration Bldg,

phones: 637-4229 office; 636-8626 home

hours: MWF 3-5; TTh 10-11, 11-12 if no meeting; & by appt. **email:**

sholtzma@catawba.edu

Course summary:

This course provides an introduction to ethics. It is not an indoctrination course, not a religious ethics course, and not an open and unguided debate about specific ethical issues. Rather, the course examines the realm of ethics: its scope, discourse, problems, theories, issues, and nature. We will study the subject matter of ethics and the sort of thinking and reasoning specific to ethics.

Ethics is that area of the culture that deals with what we ought (not) to be and to do as persons, that is, as the kind of being we are, rather than as the particular individuals we are. But unlike science, for example, ethics is a highly controversial and problematic area of the culture. Although we find ourselves committed to ethical judgments and using ethical discourse and engaging in ethical reasoning, many cultural critics have pointed out that we are not really comfortable in the arena of ethics. We will see if those critics are correct, and if so, why ethics poses problems for us.

We will work out of our ordinary understanding of ethics. We will read stories, raise examples from real life, and consider how we actually think about and employ ethics. We will confront some abstract ethical and philosophical ideas, but they will tend to arise naturally from the concrete ethical problems, issues and reasoning we consider.

Class format will be mostly lecture and guided discussion.

<u>Expected learning outcome</u> <i>Successful students will demonstrate:</i>	<u>Means of Assessment</u> <i>By being successful on:</i>
an understanding of what the subject of ethics is	Essays, position paper, midterm, analytical paper, final exam
an awareness that deep assumptions in the culture lead us toward ethical relativism or subjectivism	Essays, midterm, final exam
an understanding that only an ethical objectivism or realism is tenable	Midterm, final exam
an ability to connect abstract ideas in ethics to concrete ethical cases	Position paper, midterm, final exam
a sensitivity to ethical issues and an ability to reason about ethics	Essays, position paper, midterm, analytical paper, final exam

Requirements and grading:

1) Attendance is required; you cannot learn the course on your own. In class I will sometimes elicit your grasp of the readings, lecture, and course. Your participation through questions and discussion is important, too. You need to be present, mentally active and prepared. Class participation can raise your final grade by up to 1/3 of a grade.

2) Any ten of the short essays on the readings. These assignments are listed in the "Topics and Readings" section at the end of this syllabus. Roughly ½ to 1 pages each, these essays force you to wrestle

with the readings and tell me how much you are absorbing. You may work on readings with classmates. But on written assignments, reach your own thoughts. I will drop your lowest essay grade. Late essays will not be accepted; missed essays count as an "F". Together, they count **15% of your grade**.

3) A cumulative take-home midterm exam, testing your understanding of the readings and issues and problems presented in the course. Handed out Friday, Feb. 25th, due Friday, Mar. 4th. Not handwritten. **25% of your grade**.

4) A 3-page position paper on an assigned case study. Assigned Monday, Mar. 28th, due Friday, Apr. 1st. **10% of your grade**.

5) A 5-7 page analytical paper on a relevant topic of your choice. Due May 2nd. **25% of your grade**.

6) A cumulative final exam. You will be tested for your overall grasp of the course, not for memory of specific facts. I might pass out a list of study questions a week or two in advance. Blue book required; write in pen. Exam date: Thursday, May 5th, 3:00--6:00pm. **25% of your grade**.

Requirements for written work include these:

Responsiveness to the Assignment

Writing should fulfill the purpose of the assignment directly and completely.

Content

Writing should reflect an understanding of the subject. Your writing should make good use of the relevant concepts, distinctions, positions, and reasons included in course readings or brought out in lecture or in discussion. Writing should be organized so ideas are arranged logically and clearly. Main points should be supported by substantial and relevant details. Your work should be backed by good reasons. Your claims and reasons should be consistent with each other. You should anticipate and respond to any reasonable objections.

Execution

Writing should use precise words and well-constructed sentences that clearly represent the writer's reasoning. Writing should adhere to conventions of grammar, capitalization, spelling, and usage. The writing style should be appropriate to the academy. Your work should be clearly written, its claims precise, its structure clear, with an explicit overall direction. It should be intelligible to an interested student.

Citations and Documentation

Writers must clearly differentiate their own material from source material. Writers using material not their own, or that is not common knowledge, must document the source of the information using a standardized (i.e., either MLA or APA) method or abbreviated method allowed by their instructor.

Other requirements: on time, typed, paginated, tidy (stapled or bound), standard margins and fonts, and dark print. Failure to meet these requirements will hurt your assignment grades. Any papers should have a cover page with your name, course name and number, date, my name, and a title.

"A"	Superior mastery	A+ 97-100	A 93-96	A- 90-92
"B"	Good mastery	B+ 87-89	B 83-86	B- 80-82
"C"	Satisfactory achievement	C+ 77-79	C 73-76	C- 70-72
"D"	Less than satisfactory achievement	D+ 67-69	D 63-66	D- 60-62
"F"	Unsatisfactory achievement			

I use +/- grades, though A+ is not a possible final course grade. Grades can and should measure achievement only, not effort.

Texts:

- 1) Morality Play, by Jessica Pierce
- 2) a coursepack in the bookstore
- 3) handouts

Reading and taking notes:

I expect you to do all readings; to do well in the course, you will need to. Some of the material is easy and accessible on your first attempt. Other assignments are quite taxing and will probably require multiple readings. I suggest the following strategy for any difficult reading: read it once quickly simply to get the gist; then read it carefully for details, not worrying about the overall picture; then read it normally, fitting the details into the overall picture.

Lectures can track the readings but also range far afield. Come to class having done the readings. You are responsible for them all; the final exam will assume you have read them. Since lectures cover material not in the readings, this is another reason to attend class.

Most students take sketchy notes. Perhaps they think they cannot both take notes and listen, or perhaps they do not grasp the value of taking notes. Learn to write while you listen; it can be done, and it usually enhances your grasp of what is said. Take as many notes as you can, without losing too much of what is said. Writing down only key terms and definitions is not enough in this class. Your notes are an invaluable resource for understanding the course and for the final exam.

Absences and violations:

To keep attendance--and learn your names--I will institute a seating chart in the first few classes. Choose a permanent seat; see me to change it. I will use the chart to check attendance promptly at the start of class. If late, you might be counted absent; if late enough, you do count as absent. Avoid tardiness; if you are often late (w/o good reason), I will choose to count you as absent. Sleeping and other forms of mental disconnect in class count as an absence. When absent, you are responsible for missed assignments and classroom material. Get notes from a classmate. If you still have questions, you may contact me.

No absences are excused. After 3 penalty-free absences, which you needn't explain to me, further ones lower your final grade: minus 1/3 grade for 4-5 total absences, 2/3 for 6-8, minus 1 grade for 9-10. Missing class right before or after a vacation counts as a double absence. Over 10 absences for other than an emergency is automatic grounds for an "F" (or an "I"), regardless of your grades. Tell me if you are missing class due to required school-sponsored activities.

Respect the people and ideas in our class. I don't care if you bring a drink, sport a hat, or wear rags. I do care that you pay attention to me and to others (so, no cell phones or activated pagers/beepers/watches), you are on time and ready to work, you bring a positive attitude to class even if you are struggling, and you contribute positively to class.

Cheating, working with someone to complete individual assignments (unless specifically allowed), as well as falsifying an emergency to skip class or an assignment, all violate the Honor Code. So does plagiarism, employing a writer's ideas (and even words) without giving the writer due credit. See me for help about borrowing someone's ideas or words for your use. No electronic devices are allowed during an exam, except for simple watches, computers (if specifically allowed), and any needed medical devices. Specifically, cell phones and any devices that allow for texting are prohibited. Violation of this policy can result in an "F" for that exam.

Topics and Readings

I. The Scope of Ethics

1) summary of Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim handout

Is ethics simply about what overt acts we perform or fail to perform--and about how well or poorly we perform them? Is there anything more to ethics than our actions? Is character an ethical issue? How are actions related to character?

2) Joyce Carol Oates, "Four Summers" cp

The ancient Greeks believed that a "curse" could hang over a family. Is Sissie "cursed"? A character structure seems to be passed on from parent to child, one that traps instead of frees. Are there moral implications here?

ESSAY #1: Describe the character structure Sissie inherits from her family. What is immoral about it?

3) W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief" handout

What does Clifford contend is a part of ethics? Why? After his examples and his statement of his position, why does he then shift the discussion by saying, "It might be said that..." What is the point of his doing this? Which of his own lessons is he here trying to live up to? What are his arguments against his opponents?

ESSAY #2: What does Clifford fault the ship-owner for, whether or not the ship sinks? How is this a moral fault?

II. Pre-modern Ethics: ethics is objective

4) "Plato: Republic" cp

Glaucon asks Socrates to show why ethics is good. That is, why be ethical? Glaucon holds that ethics is bad, for it requires people to act against their self-interest. He says that people wouldn't be ethical if they thought they could get away with immoral actions. Glaucon's story about the ring of Gyges is intended to illustrate this view. How does Socrates respond? Does ethics go beyond what we take to be our self-interest? How are ethics and self-interest related? What does Plato contend is the foundation of ethics?

5) "The Good Life" (Aristotle) cp

What is his account of happiness? What is the essence of a human being? What does he mean by an ethical "virtue" (excellence)? Does this have a connection to feelings? What is the connection between reason and the "mean"? What is the role of habit-formation? What is practical wisdom? Do we have any test for our judgments? What is the role of responsibility in ethics? What is the "highest good" for a human? Why is it so difficult to become wise?

ESSAY #3: Summarize Aristotle's account of ethics. Why think that he believes that ethics is objective?

6) Epictetus handout

What is the will? What does it do? What does it control? Does anything control it? What is (not) fully in our control? What does the issue of control imply for how to live? What produces happiness? Why and how should our will be “in harmony with the will of Nature”?

ESSAY #4: What is his account of the moral life and how we achieve it?

III. The Problem of Ethics in the Modern Era

7) C. S. Lewis, The Abolition of Man cp

What does Lewis see as the implications (for ethics) of “The Green Book”? Why are its authors so concerned about “debunking” feelings and emotions? On what ground does Lewis disagree? What is his basis for talking about “right” feelings, the feelings we ought to have? What philosophical issue does he see as the basis for his disagreement with those authors? What implication does that issue have for the distinction between education and propaganda?

8) Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Judge Not?” cp

What does Elshtain contend is our position about judging? Why? Why does she support judging? Does she connect judgment and feeling? What is her distinction between judging well and judging poorly? What happens to us if we don’t both develop and use well our power of judgment? In what way does she support the idea that we should not judge others?

ESSAY #5: Why does Elshtain contend we should judge others?

9) Robert Bellah, “The Pursuit of Happiness” cp

What do Bellah’s sociological interviews about people’s moral lives show? What underlying commitment(s) about the nature of morality do the people have? Why is Bellah concerned about their commitments?

ESSAY #6: What do all interviewed believe about the nature of morality?

10) David Hume on “Understanding Morality” cp
(& Treatise, pp.414-16, handout)

Why does Hume contend that feelings (passions) are non-rational, that reason is unconnected to ethics, and that our ends are subjective? What implications are there for the possibility of moral truth and falsehood?

IV. Finding a Foundation for Ethics

11) Emmett Barcalow, “Moral Philosophy” cp

What distinguishes a universal moral judgment from an absolute one? Why think there can be no absolute moral principles? Is there any reason, then, to formulate “unqualified” principles?

ESSAY #7: What distinguishes a universal judgment from an absolute one? Why reject absolute moral principles? Is there then still logical room for universal moral principles?

12) Emmett Barcalow, “Moral Philosophy” cp

Why think there is some standard against which we should judge the principles, laws, and moral judgments we accept? Why do some people contend that religion provides that standard? Why locate the religious standard in God's command? What is the Divine Command Theory of morality? What are its two main versions? How do they help with the issue of wanting to follow moral dictates? What are some problems with the theory? Can we know what God wants--and know it without error? Has our understanding of God changed over time? Can we take X to be a Divine Command unless X agrees with what we take (or will take) to be good? Is there a problem inherent in grounding ethics in religion?

ESSAY #8: Is there a problem inherent in grounding ethics in religion?

13) Exodus excerpts handout

In Chapter 22 and 23, there are many Divine commands, some ritual and some ethical. Are we to follow them (all)? What about the one about the "first-born" in 22:28? Or the one about the poor in 23:10? In Chapter 20, we see the traditional "10 Commandments", but later in Chapter 34 what do you make of another version?

14) Stanley Milgram, "Obedience to Authority" handout

What was Milgram testing? What did he expect to find? What did he find? What was the ethical dimension of his experiment? Who "passed" the ethical test? Why? Who failed"? Why? Is there a problem inherent in grounding ethics in authority?

ESSAY #9: Is there a problem inherent in grounding ethics in authority?

15) Bruno Bettelheim, A Good Enough Parent cp

General advice takes the form of rules, such as "Do X" or "Do not do Y". Why is Bettelheim so wary about issuing general parental advice? Aren't rules important or even necessary? Can't we live by them? What problems are inherent in being rule-governed?

ESSAY #10: Is there a problem inherent in grounding ethics in rules?

6) E. M. Adams, "Ethics and the Aims of Education" handout

Why does Adams claim that feelings tell us about reality? What about feelings does he identify as noteworthy? What does he think this forces us to accept? What is a "value"? What is moral virtue? Is there a problem with grounding ethics in feelings and emotions?

V. Ethics and Personhood

17) E. M. Adams, "Persons and Morality" cp

How does personhood relate to morality? What does moral discourse tell us about living a life? How does living a life require that one have a self-image? What does he contend is the defining responsibility of personhood? Does it matter what sort of life we live? What are the two different accounts of the moral purpose of life? Which does Adams accept, and why?

ESSAY #11: Why think that personhood and morality are inseparable?

18) E. M. Adams, "Character" cp

What separates humans from animals? What is the relationship between our "self-concept" (or "self-image") and our identity? What is our character? What are the criteria for judging character? What is the defining characteristic of personhood? What implications does our normative conception of personhood have for normative social thought and for a world view?

19) Roger Eddy, "The Afternoon Tarzan Came to Tea"; and "The Day I Threw the Football Game" cp

What do these stories show about how to reach good judgments, about character development, about virtues and vices, and about testing one's moral judgments?

ESSAY #12: What is the moral dimension of the first story?

20) M. Scott Peck, "The Case of the Spider Phobia" cp

What is Billie's life like? Why does she go into psychotherapy? What does she discover about her life? What does she discover about her mother? What does she discover about her spider phobia? What is a phobia? What does her therapist help her realize? What is the nature of the evil here?

ESSAY #13: What is the moral dimension of this case study?

21) Kevin Bales, "The New Slavery" cp

The title of Bales' book is Disposable People. What does he mean? What distinguishes the "old" slavery from the "new"? What does slavery do to a person? Is it morally wrong?

ESSAY #14: Why is slavery immoral?

22) Philip Hallie, "From Cruelty to Goodness" cp

What does cruelty amount to? What does it affect in a human being? In what way does Hallie connect cruelty to power? Why isn't kindness the opposite of cruelty? What does the case of Le Chambon show about cruelty and its opposite? What does it show about the people of Le Chambon? Why does Hallie reject the view in the letter from Massachusetts?

ESSAY #15: What does Hallie believe constitutes a morally good person?

23) Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" cp

What ethical judgments and principles does King defend? What does he think justifies them? How does he ethically justify civil disobedience? Whom does he believe is ethically at fault? How does he think one must prepare oneself for it? Why? Does he contend that there is a necessary connection between morality and community?