

Dr. Benjamin Huff
benjaminhuff@rmc.edu

office: 240 Copley, x7216
office hours: Mon 2:15-3:15pm
Tue/Wed/Thur 2:30-3:30pm
or by appointment

Philosophy 212: Ethics

Spring 2010

In this course we will consider in a quite broad way the question, "How should one live?" Ethics, as a philosophical activity, aims to identify and evaluate standards for human action. We will read a selection of the most influential works of philosophical ethics from Plato (c.400 B.C.) to Rawls (20th century). These texts approach ethics from a range of angles, asking questions such as, "What kind of life is the most valuable and satisfying?", "What are our ethical obligations, and what is their source?", "How can a society be made just and stable?", and "How much should we give up in order to help others?" We will try to understand the different forms these questions can take in different times and places, but also to apply timeless insights to the world we live in today, which with its wonders and horrors, through technology has become a kind of global village.

Course strategy

The goal of the course is for you to participate in a philosophical conversation across the ages about ethics: to *do* philosophy. We will be reading some of the most intelligent, interesting, and influential perspectives on ethics in the history of the world, and considering how far they help us to answer ethical questions today. The questions we will consider are not easy questions, and the texts are not easy to understand. Developing your own thoughts in response, in an intelligent way, is also not a simple business, and this is crucial to your participation in the conversation. It will take a significant amount of work from you, for you to be able to participate in a substantial way. The assignments in this course are designed to help you do this.

A text-centered course

Since our goal is to participate in a conversation across the ages, nearly everything we do will be tied to the people we are conversing with, and they are present through our texts. The texts in this course are different from many that you have read before, and a major goal of the course is to help you learn to read them for yourselves. They are densely packed with meaning and ideas, and require patient chewing. Be prepared to read and re-read, in order to master them. Reading assignments are intentionally short, to allow you to do this. Lecture and discussion in class is designed to help you digest the material in the texts, to practice applying it to concrete, familiar situations, and to develop your own thoughts on the themes they discuss. Lecture and discussion are designed to *enhance and build on your reading* of the texts, and *will not replace it*.

Essays and tests will be based mainly on our course texts. What we do in class is designed to help you understand and respond to our texts. Accordingly, *it is imperative that you consistently read the assigned texts before each class meeting*. When you read before

class, you usually will not completely understand the text, but after discussing it in class, you should understand the main ideas well. If you come to class without reading, you may feel that you are understanding the class discussion, but you will not recognize how the discussion connects to the texts, and when you go back to the texts, you will be confused. It is essential that you be able to understand the texts on your own in order to do well on papers and exams. Papers and exams are designed specifically to send you back to the texts, to clarify and deepen your understanding of them, and in many cases to develop new perspectives *beyond* what we were able to explore in class.

Active Reading

To participate in this conversation, you will need to read the texts seriously, multiple times. These are not flat, pre-digested textbooks, with facts laid out like insects pinned to a board. You will not understand them fully the first time you read them. However, you won't get to the second time unless you read them the first time! and the second time will feel a lot like the first time unless you make a real effort to understand them, while reading them for the first time.

Read the text listed for each class period *before* coming to class, and read *actively*. Reading actively means reading as though you were listening to a human being, with whom you can have a conversation, and responding appropriately with thoughts, questions, and feelings of your own. The way to respond to a book is to write. Read with a pencil in your hand. Mark passages you find particularly interesting, or puzzling, or convincing, or exciting, or infuriating. Write questions and comments in the margins. Thoughts that won't fit in the margins, write in a notebook or on a separate piece of paper, and bring all of it to class.

I will sometimes hand out reading questions to help you read actively. These questions will give you some landmarks to watch for as you read. Having something you are looking for helps you to read with a purpose, actively. It also helps you to check whether you are understanding the text. In some cases I will ask a question so that you will pause and examine something you might otherwise not notice.

The readings are not long, but they are dense. You will need to read them more than once to do well. You should read them at least once, and *often more than once*, *before* we discuss them in class. During and after class, you should review the texts to solidify your understanding in light of class discussion. You will then need to return to the texts again as you work on your papers, and again as you prepare for exams. Make friends with our texts and get used to spending time with them. They are a window into the minds of some of the most remarkable people who have ever lived, and may change the way you see and approach your own life.

Discussion

Discussion is a central part of a philosophy class. In order to participate fully in discussion, be sure to read the assigned text carefully before coming to class. Then be ready to ask good questions and actively participate in the discussion as it unfolds. *You should come to class each day with at least one question or comment based on your thoughtful reading of the assigned text.*

Active participation in class discussion means that you have your own thoughts, your own questions, your own sense of some issues that you want to explore. I will often ask what you thought of the text at the start of class, and part of how class runs will depend on your responses, then and throughout the class period. I expect you to read and think about the text before coming to class, and if you have done so, you will have something to say. If I get the sense that not enough of you are reading carefully, I may introduce additional incentives (e.g pop quizzes).

In addition to informal participation in class discussion, I may make a few small assignments that will count toward your participation grade.

There is much more of value in these texts than we will be able to address during class time. I encourage you to discuss them with classmates outside of class, for example forming reading groups. I also encourage you to pursue topics further with me right after class, or at another time in my office.

Essays

Essays are academically the most important parts of the course, because in them you will develop your thinking in the greatest depth. In your essays you have the opportunity to make your most serious contributions to the philosophical conversation we are pursuing, because you have the time to develop and revise your thoughts carefully on a specific topic. Essays will require you to engage critically with the course texts and their topics. You will examine and assess the reasoning and evidence in favor of the ideas in our texts, and you will articulate and support your own judgment.

The essay assignments I distribute will be fairly specific; follow them carefully! These are not book reports. You will usually have to summarize some idea(s) from the text, but this is only a preparatory step to the real work – often evaluating the idea, and articulating your response, or sometimes developing an original interpretation where you develop ideas beyond the point to which they are presented in the text. A paper that does not address the assignment has failed, no matter what else it does. *A paper which summarizes what one of our authors or texts says without presenting your own assessment or synthetic judgment is only half of a paper.* As you write, be sure to use the space allotted in a way that reflects the importance of the critical and synthetic portions of the paper.

Custom topics: Much of the point of essays is for students to develop their own thoughts in writing. If you would like to write on a topic of your own choosing, you may describe the topic in a paragraph and submit it in writing for my approval before writing your paper. In most cases your topic will need some refinement, to make it clearer and deeper, before I approve it, so leave time for this. Custom topics should engage both the claims and the reasoning of our course texts, and present reasoning of your own. You may propose a custom topic at any time until the last class day, but may only turn in one custom paper in a given week.

Exams

Exams test both comprehension of the course texts and your ability to think critically about the texts and their themes. You will need to be able to explain key ideas from our reading in your own words, to show how they fit together, and to use

them intelligently in new ways. Exams will include both short answer and essay questions. You will also need to be able to identify passages we have read, by author and/or work, and to interpret them intelligently during the exam. Get used to reading the texts.

I will distribute a study sheet including sample exam questions in advance, to help you study. However, the best way to prepare for the exams will be to read carefully, participate actively in class, and re-read the texts in light of the discussion. Don't wait until the week before to start preparing for the exam! You will get much better results, with less effort, if you put in the time consistently along the way.

Grading and submission policies

The various kinds of work you perform for the class will receive the following weights in your grade for the course.

<i>Area</i>	<i>Percentage of grade</i>
Class participation	14%
4 essays (about 4 pages each)	52% (13% each)
Midterm exam	10%
Final exam (cumulative)	24%

I will distribute at least five essay assignments, spaced through the semester, of which you must complete at least four. Four essay grades will count toward your course grade. I strongly encourage you to write the first essay; philosophical writing is different from other writing, and you may not be satisfied with your first attempt. You may drop a low grade on one of the first two essays if you write a fifth essay that is better.

Essays are due at the beginning of class on the specified day. Essays are to be turned in in hard copy. If special circumstances prevent you bringing a hard copy by the start of class, essays I receive by email attachment in a standard format (RTF, PDF, Word) by the start of class will count as having been turned in on time, but you should bring me a hard copy at your first reasonable opportunity. I will not grade your paper unless you give me a hard copy. Late essays will receive a penalty of one grade step (e.g. B to B-), and one additional step for each additional day late, not counting Sunday. Thus, a paper turned in after class on the due date (before midnight) will be penalized one step; a paper turned in the following day (before midnight) will be penalized an additional step.

Exams and the quiz must be taken in class on the specified day. Given serious reasons (e.g. job interview, College-sponsored sporting event), I may give permission to take the midterm exam early. *You must attend the final exam to pass the course; plan accordingly.*

As in other classes at Randolph-Macon College, I will use the full range of letter grades.

Communicating with me

I will hold office hours Monday through Thursday afternoons. You are welcome to come and talk with me about the course material and assignments at these times, or make an appointment with me for another time.

Email is a wonderful technology, but it has limitations. You are welcome to email me with questions that can be answered simply. I will usually respond within 24 hours, not counting weekends. For more complex matters, however, or if you need an immediate response, it will usually be more effective to speak in person or on the phone. These may include questions about the ideas in the course, about the meaning of particular passages in our texts, or ideas you have for your papers. You may email me about these, but do not be surprised if I give only a limited response by email, and invite you to come to my office for more. I am happy to read drafts of papers if you bring a copy so we can discuss it in person. I will answer specific questions about papers by email, but I normally will not read entire drafts unless you are present.

I will occasionally send information about the class by email. Please do check your email regularly.

Course texts

Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. D. Zeyl. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1987.

Mencius, *Mencius*, trans. D.C. Lau. New York: Penguin, 2003.

Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Ellington. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1993.

J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*. Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 2002.

additional readings to be distributed, including selections from Hobbes' *Leviathan*, writings of Aristotle, and several contemporary authors.

Please bring with you the relevant texts for each day's class. While other editions of these works exist, I recommend using these editions to make it easier for us to work together as a class (same pagination, terms translated in the same way, etc.), as well as because they are excellent editions. Unless you can freely draw pictures and diagrams in the margins, and have them stay there, an electronic version is not good enough. Buy the paper book!

Academic Integrity

You, your classmates and I will be investing a substantial amount of work, thought, and energy into this course. There are few things more valuable than learning, and we are embarked on a process of learning together. Plagiarism or any other violation of academic integrity is a serious breach of the trust of your classmates and me and undermines our common project, the purposes of the course, and the point of education. If you are tempted to cheat, you need to rethink why you are in college. If you are in a bind, have the self-respect to turn in weak work rather than work that is not your own. If you turn in work that is not your own, it is quite likely you will fail the course. It is your responsibility to understand the College's Code of Academic Integrity and to follow it. If you have any questions about how the Code applies to your work in this course, ask me.

Reading Schedule (subject to change)

Feb	W 10	Introduction: Philosophical ethics in the modern age	
	F 12	<i>Gorgias</i> up to 461b (pp1-20)	preface and dialogue with Gorgias
	M 15	<i>Gorgias</i> 461b-473a (pp20-37)	dialogue with Polus I
	W 17	<i>Gorgias</i> 473a-481b (pp37-50)	dialogue with Polus II
	F 19	<i>Gorgias</i> 481b-499b (pp51-76)	dialogue with Callicles I
	M 22	<i>Gorgias</i> 499b-505d (pp76-85)	dialogue with Callicles II
	W 24	<i>Gorgias</i> 505d-521b (pp85-105)	Socrates continues alone I
	F 26	<i>Gorgias</i> 521b to end (pp105-113)	Socrates continues alone II
Mar	M 1	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> I.1-2, 7; II.1-4	
	W 3	Aristotle, <i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> II.6-7, 9; IV.1-2	
	F 5	<i>Mencius</i> Book 1A (all), 1B10-13	
	M 8	<i>Mencius</i> Books 2-4 (selections)	
	W 10	<i>Mencius</i> Books 5-6A (selections)	
	F 12	<i>Mencius</i> Books 6B-7A (selections)	
	M 15	Huff, "Filiality and the Scope of Benevolence in Mencius"	
	W 17	Midterm Exam	
	F 19	Bishop Butler, Bible selections I	
		<i>Spring Break</i>	
	M 29	Bishop Butler, Bible selections II	
	W 31	<i>Leviathan</i> xi, 1-3; xiii; xiv; Iraq blog A	the state of nature, etc.
Apr	F 2	<i>Leviathan</i> xv-xvii; Iraq blog B	natural law
	M 5	<i>Leviathan</i> xviii	establishing peace
	W 7	Kant, <i>Grounding</i> , Preface thru Ak. 399	
	F 9	Kant, <i>Grounding</i> , Ak. 399-420	
	M 12	Kant, <i>Grounding</i> , Ak. 420-428	
	W 14	Kant, <i>Grounding</i> , Ak. 428 thru end of Second Section	
	F 16	Kant, <i>Grounding</i> , Third Section	
	M 19	Kant, "On A Supposed Right to Lie," Bentham selections	
	W 21	Huff, "Objective Ethics and the Dynamics of Desire"	
	F 23	Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> I	
	M 26	Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> II	
	W 28	Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> III	
	F 30	Mill, <i>Utilitarianism</i> IV	
May	M 3	Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"	
	W 5	Rawls on Hiroshima	
	F 7	Emerson, "History"	
	M 10	Rawls, "On the Idea of Social Union"	
	W 12	Review and reflection	
		<i>Final Exam</i> – Wednesday, May 19th, 8:30-11:30am	