

PHIL 115: Introduction to Ethics (Fall 2007)

Dr. Eric Wilson

eewilso@learnlink.emory.edu

Office: Humanities Hall #205

Office Hours: Mondays 1:45-3:00, and by appointment

Course Description:

At one time or another, most of us have asked ourselves questions of the following sort: What should I care about? Which goals and plans are right to pursue? What kind of life should I try to live? How should I treat others? How should I treat myself? How can I determine which actions count as “morally right”? What motivation do I have for fulfilling an obligation even when doing so is not in my interest? What is happiness, and how much weight should I give it in my life? Philosophers have developed a variety of theories for dealing with questions of this sort. Moral theories, though, don’t really seek to *explain* things—at least not in the way that scientific theories aim to explain, for example, why electrons orbit the nucleus of an atom or why dinosaurs no longer roam the earth. Instead, they provide conceptual frameworks for exploring moral and practical questions in a richer and deeper way. On occasion, they even provide ways for us to answer them.

This course is designed to introduce you to three important moral theories: Virtue Ethics, Kantianism, and Utilitarianism. In each case we will read both a canonical text and a contemporary author who writes about a variety of concrete moral issues from within the framework provided by that text. Virtue ethics will be represented by Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and a number of essays by Philippa Foot. Kantianism will be represented by Kant’s *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, as well as essays by Thomas E. Hill, Jr. Utilitarianism will be represented by John Stuart Mill’s *Utilitarianism* and a series of essays by Peter Singer. We will also devote time to the question of relativism and the objectivity of moral principles, as well as questions concerning the scope of morality and its place in our lives.

Required Texts:

Aristotle, *Introductory Readings* (Hackett)

J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Hackett)

Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Hackett)

Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* (Oxford)

The above books are available at the campus bookstore. You must purchase the editions selected for this course. All other readings will be on reserve at the library, and may be downloaded from the “Course Reserves” link at the library’s web page.

Course Requirements:

- Four high-stakes writing assignments (100 points each)
- Weekly low-stakes writing exercises (100 points total)
- Attendance, participation, and overall progress will also factor into your final grade, particularly in borderline cases.

Course Expectations:

- Since this course satisfies a writing requirement, you should expect to write a lot—both in and out of class.
- Though this is an introductory course, the readings will be quite demanding. You should expect to devote at least two hours to each reading assignment. (No previous experience with philosophy is assumed.)
- You *must* bring the assigned reading to class each day.
- Daily reading questions, announcements, assignments, etc. will be posted on the LL conference. So it is your job to check the conference on a daily basis.
- This will be a discussion-based class. Therefore, I expect you to participate.
- Even when not participating, you should be *engaged* during class. I expect you to eliminate all distractions, such as laptops, cell phones, iPods, crackberries, and other electronic devices I'm too old to know about. If you must bring these into the classroom, turn them off.

Course Goals

- Our central aim will be to improve your skills in the following three areas:
 - *Interpretation*: Are you able to understand the meaning of complex texts? Can you situate particular claims in context and master an author's terminology? Can you decipher metaphor, irony, and other figurative uses of language?
 - *Logic*: Are you able to recognize and analyze important arguments? Can you identify the main conclusion of an argument? Are you able to grasp how an author's conclusion depends upon his or her premises? Can you grasp the connections among a complex series of thoughts? Are you able to supply missing premises in order to fill in the gaps of an argument?
 - *Communication*: Are you able to express yourself with clarity, precision, and style? Can you organize an essay coherently around a central point? Can you help guide an intelligent conversation by asking salient questions, offering clear suggestions, and listening closely to others?
- At this point your answer to most of these questions may be "no" or "sort of, but..." Don't worry. The goal is to work hard and improve in these areas as we go along. No one is assuming that you have *already* mastered these skills.
- This course has one additional, and rather lofty, goal. Whether you know it or not, you already think about philosophical problems and ask philosophical questions. Our course aims to enrich your understanding of these problems and questions by teaching you how to situate your thoughts within a conversation carried on by philosophers for more than two thousand years.

The Details

- There is no attendance *requirement* for this course. However, you should consider the following:
 - First, most people do not do very well in courses they don't consistently attend.
 - Second, as stated above, attendance and participation will factor into the final grade.
- This course will involve two different kinds of writing assignments:
 - *Low-stakes* writing.
 - These assignments will be read but not evaluated or criticized. They're opportunities to practice—to write without being judged. If your writing shows that

you have at least done the reading and paid attention in class, it will be marked as “satisfactory.” Less than minimal effort will be considered unsatisfactory.

- I will gladly meet with you to discuss any piece of low-stakes writing. So if you want to use any of these assignments as an opportunity to push yourself and take chances, please do so. The choice is yours. Like most things, what you get out of your education is a function of what you put into it.
- Some of these assignments will be done in class, some at home. Some will not be announced in advance. Their number will be determined as the semester unfolds. Expect to write on a weekly basis.
- Four *high-stakes* assignments.
 - These assignments will be both read and evaluated. Each essay will receive a letter grade.
 - Each will take the form of a short essay (500 to 1,000 words).
 - Assignments will be given one week in advance of the due date.
- For information regarding the breakdown of grades, see the grading system at the end of the syllabus.
- My policy regarding *late papers* is as follows:
 - Late low-stakes assignments will not be accepted. No make-ups.
 - Late high-stakes assignments will be accepted, but they will slide down one notch on the scale each day past the deadline (the *beginning* of class on the due date).
 - If a burdensome schedule requires negotiating the due-date, please see me in advance. I’m open to reasonable requests. I’m not open to negotiation after the deadline, however.
- You are free to contest grades you feel are unjust. But you must do so in accordance with the following policy. All complaints must be registered in writing. Complaints must be typewritten and may not exceed 250 words. They must take the form of an argument designed to persuade the teacher that his evaluation of your work is mistaken. Please attach a photocopy of the graded assignment to your complaint. I will respond to either in writing or by discussing the grade directly with you. Under no circumstances will I discuss grades before the above procedure has been followed.
- **You are obligated to abide by the Student Honor Code of Oxford College.** I encourage you to work together and discuss your ideas, but *plagiarism will not be tolerated*. Whenever you use another person’s words or ideas, you must give him or her credit. This applies to conversations with friends and class discussion, as well as anything you read (whether in print or on the Internet). Unfortunately, it is sometimes easy to fall into plagiarism without realizing it. When in doubt, cite the work that is influencing you. But if you have questions about a particular case, please ask me before it is too late—that is, *before* you hand in your essays. This policy goes for *all* writing assignments and quizzes. No exceptions.

FINAL NOTE: Since this is a writing course, it would be a good idea to buy a writing guide or style manual, if you don’t already have one. It’s hard to go wrong with Strunk and White’s book, *The Elements of Style*. I would also recommend Christopher Lasch’s *Plain Style: A Guide to Written English*. These are reliable, short, and inexpensive. I would be happy to recommend further reading to anyone who is interested. You should also check out the Grammar Girl Web site at: <http://grammar.qdnow.com/>.

GRADING SYSTEM

PHIL 115 (Ethics)

I. High-stakes writing

- You will be asked to write four short “high-stakes” essays, worth 100 points each.
- Each essay will be graded on a block scale. This means *no plusses or minuses*. The letters correspond to numerical values in the following fashion: A = 95, B = 85, C = 75, D = 65, F = 55. (Essays not turned in will receive a 0.)

II. Low-stakes writing

- There will also be a number of additional writing exercises (almost weekly). These add up to the value of *one* of high-stakes assignment (100 points).
- Some of these will be done in class, some at home. Most low-stakes assignments will be given in advance. But you should expect a few “pop” writing exercises as well.
- This writing will be read, but *not graded*. If you put in at least the required effort, you will receive a “satisfactory” for that assignment. On these, I do not expect polished work—just clear indication that you have done the reading and paid attention in class.
- If you do not turn in a low-stakes assignment, or if you turn in something unacceptably sloppy and thoughtless, you will receive a mark of “unsatisfactory” for that assignment.
 - If you receive less than “satisfactory” on *two or fewer* low-stakes assignments, you’ll get 100 points for this part of the grade. (This also allows you to miss one or two with no penalty.)
 - If you receive less than “satisfactory” on *three* low-stakes assignments, you’ll get 70 points.
 - If you receive less than “satisfactory” on *more than three*, you’ll get 50 points.

III. The numerical values will be averaged together to yield a final grade for the course, which *may* include a plus or minus—depending, of course, on how the numbers turn out. The scale for course grades is as follows: 94-100 = A, 90-93 = A-; 88-89 = B+, 83-87 = B, 80-82 = B-; 78-79 = C+, 73-77 = C, 70-72 = C-; etc., etc.

IV. I’m giving you the details in the interest of eliminating the mystery. I want you to understand exactly how grades get calculated for this course. But I don’t want you to fixate on them. Please just do your work and try to learn as much as you can. The grades will take care of themselves.