

PHIL 382R: Human Nature and Morality in Early Modern Philosophy Spring 2008

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Course Description

How is morality related to human nature? Are we by nature selfish—motivated at bottom by self-interest? Or are moral principles an expression of a natural or innate impulse to care about others? These deeply important questions have a fascinating history. In this course, we shall explore one of the most exciting and fruitful periods of this history, as we read a variety of central authors in early modern European moral philosophy (from roughly 1650 to 1800). As philosophers of this era sought to understand human behavior and the nature of morality in the wake of revolutionary developments in science, religion, and politics, they developed new ways of exploring very old questions. How are moral judgments connected to reason and our emotions? Are human beings capable of governing themselves by reason, or are emotions and desires—“the passions”—in control? What is the nature of moral obligation? What is a conscience, and what authority does it have over us? They also began to ask new questions, such as: Are selfish pursuits more beneficial to society in the long run than virtuous behavior? We shall explore these issues in modern moral thought as philosophers, seeking answers to live questions. But we shall also be working as intellectual historians, tracing the contours not just of philosophy’s history, but also of the pre-history of sociology, psychology, and economics.

Required Texts:

François de La Rochefoucauld, *Maxims* (Penguin)

Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees and Other Writings* (Hackett)

Joseph Butler, *Five Sermons* (Hackett)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* (Hackett)

David Hume, *Moral Philosophy* (Hackett)

- The above books are available at the campus bookstore. You must purchase the editions selected for this course.

Course Requirements

- Low-stakes writing assignments (20%)
- Two high-stakes essays (40% each)
- Attendance: If you miss four classes, your final grade will drop by one letter grade. If you miss five, it will drop by two letter grades. Etc., etc.
 - Exceptions will be made only in cases of catastrophic illness.
- Participation, and overall progress will also factor into final grade, particularly in borderline cases.

Course Expectations

- Many of the readings for this course will be quite demanding. You should expect to devote at least two to three hours to each reading assignment. (Some background in philosophy is assumed.)
- You *must* bring the assigned reading to class each day.
- Though there will be a mix of lecture and discussion, the emphasis will be on the latter. Therefore, I expect you to participate.
- Daily reading questions, announcements, assignments, etc. will be posted on the Learnlink conference for the course. So you should check the conference on a daily basis.
- In addition to the essays, there will be opportunities in and out of class to practice writing and to improve your grasp of the material through writing about it. These no-pressure assignments will not be graded, but I expect you to take them seriously.

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.
- We have one further goal. Our aim will be to learn how to use historical texts as intellectual resources—to understand how to engage with them in order to find answers to pressing questions, as well as challenges to our assumptions about how to ask the right questions in the first place.

The Details

- Essays will be graded on a block scale. This means no pluses or minuses.
 - However, final course grades *will* include pluses or minuses, depending on how the numbers turn out.
- My policy regarding *late papers* is simple: they drop one letter grade per day.
 - 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.

Low-stakes writing

- Throughout the course of the semester, you will be asked to engage in a number of writing exercises. Some of these will be done in class, some at home; some in groups, some solo. Expect the occasional “pop” writing exercise.
- You will be asked to do these assignments because I believe (a) that writing helps us read and think more carefully, and (b) that in order to learn to write well, we must write often.
- However, *these assignments will not be graded*. The feeling that someone is looking over your shoulder can hinder the writing process. So this course will give you many opportunities to write without being judged. (Believe it or not, my hope is that these exercises will even be fun.)
- But these low-stakes exercises *will* factor into your final grade. Each low-stakes assignment you submit will be marked as either “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory.” If you do the assignment, and put in at least some effort, you can count on the former mark. Less than minimal effort will be considered unsatisfactory. If you satisfactorily complete *all* of the low-stakes assignments, you will earn a score of 95 (A) for this portion of the grade. If you satisfactorily complete *all but one*, your score will be 85 (B). *All but two* yields 75 points (C). If you miss three or more of these low-stakes assignments, you'll earn a score of 55 (F) for this portion of the grade. (Again, bear in mind that some of these will exercises will not be announced in advance.)

High-stakes writing

- There will be two relatively brief (3-5 pages) high-stakes essays—one at the end of the semester and one in the middle.
- These will be graded on a block scale, according to high standards. In the case of the high-stakes assignments, I *do* expect polished written work. If you are accustomed to handing in first drafts, you will need to break this habit in order to do well in this course.
- If you earn less than a B on the first of these essays, you will be permitted to rework your paper and resubmit for further evaluation.