

Prof. Moris Stern  
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CUNY – Brooklyn

Office Hours: TBA, and by appointment (Boylan, 3316)

PHIL 3306 – **ETHICS & SOCIETY**

### Objectives for the Course

- 1) Students will be able to identify arguments and distinguish premises and conclusion, in general – and specifically, in relation to the key philosophical questions with regard to the moral social issues examined in the course
- 2) Students will be able to formulate an argument in support or in opposition of a claim, in general – and specifically, in relation to the key philosophical questions with regard to the moral social issues examined in the course
- 3) Students will be able to evaluate (by providing reasons) the validity and/or cogency of an argument, in general – and specifically, in relation to the key philosophical questions with regard to the moral social issues examined in the course
- 4) Students will become informed about the key philosophical questions with regard to the moral social issues examined in the course – as well as the answers to these questions and the problems with these answers that make the issues an object of an ongoing debate

### **Course Description & Objectives & Expectations:**

The class is an introduction to philosophical thinking about applied societal ethics: what is the good and the right with regard to specific issues that we as a society face?

We will investigate, analyze and generate conclusions with regard to arguments from multiple sides concerning the following societal moral issues: abortion, ethical treatment of animals, alleviation of starvation and poverty, the death penalty, war, terrorism, torture, drug use and drug persecution. Before we begin the above inquiry, the course will be initiated with a short introductory survey of the history of philosophy and the three main contemporary theories of morals. The three theories are Utilitarianism (the good is whatever produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people), Kantianism (the right is what is done out of respect for absolute dignity of persons with free and rational will), and Virtue Ethics (the good is whatever cultivates habitual actions that produce individual human being's happiness). As a second part of this introduction, we will also cover the basics of construction and evaluation of arguments in general, during the course of which issues of egoism, relativism, and impartiality will be analyzed.

#### *I. Objectives/Goals*

**Understanding** — When the course is complete, students will know the following concepts, among others:

- argument, coherence, egoism, relativism, impartiality, utilitarianism, Kantianism, feminism, virtue, rights (negative and positive), duties (negative and positive), dignity, utility, happiness.

**Application** — Students will illustrate the above concepts by:

- 1) analyzing these concepts in terms of their constituent concepts
- 2) analyzing one's own experience in terms of these concepts
- 3) analyzing these concepts in terms of their problematization by counterarguments in the context of abortion, ethical treatment of animals, alleviation of starvation and poverty, the death penalty, war, terrorism, torture, drug use and drug persecution

**Experience** — The experiences that students will engage in during this course will be:

- 1) reading, analyzing and thinking about philosophical text
- 2) discussion with classmates
- 3) writing short paper assignments

**Values** — Students will learn the value of:

- 1) reading, analyzing and thinking about complex texts
- 2) discussing with peers
- 3) thinking deeply about ethics and the concepts of philosophy of ethics in the context of abortion, ethical treatment of animals, alleviation of starvation and poverty, the death penalty, war, terrorism, torture, drug use and drug persecution

## II. *Expectations*

### **Instructor's Duties and Responsibilities**

- be available by email and respond within 24 hours
- be available for office hours, in order to discuss the subject matter of the class, your progress in class, etc.
- provide clearly explained assignments – reading, discussion, and writing – and give you sufficient time to complete these without rush
- provide a clear explanation of what will be expected for successful assignment completion and how it will be graded

### **Student's Duties and Responsibilities**

- read the assigned material before discussions
- read the assigned material again before working on writing assignments
- hand in paper assignments on time
- always be courteous in your discussion to members of this course community

## **Course Assignments and Grading Policy:**

### I. 4 Written Assignments – PAPERS. Each Paper is 25% of the grade.

- a) There will not be any revisions for papers – do your best and

incorporate what you learn from writing earlier papers into later papers

b) All papers will be submitted through Blackboard and all plagiarism will be reported to the Dean

## II. Participation & discussion in class & CLASS DISTRACTIONS & ATTENDANCE GRADE POLICY (concerning *absences* and *text-messaging*, *web surfing*, etc.)

- concerning *distractions*
  - there is to be no text-messaging, web surfing, or other distractions in class
    - if you are using a laptop, and I see that you are using the keyboard in class, I will ask you to show me at the end of the class what you have taken as notes
  - during each class, the first instance of a distraction will receive a warning, and each following instance will lower an assignment grade by one notch: for example, if one of your assignment grades is B+, the grade for that assignment goes down to B on the first lowering, further down to B- on the second lowering, and so on
- concerning *absences*
  - all absences must provide a documented excuse (for example, a doctor's note) or be discussed and arranged with the professor
  - excessive absences especially must be justified medically
  - each unexcused absence lowers an assignment grade by one notch (see explanation above)
- Class participation and discipline will either lower or raise the final class grade – as these reflect the effort the students demonstrate in grasping the material.

### **Required Text:**

**Title:** The Right Thing To Do: Basic Readings in Moral Philosophy (6<sup>th</sup> Edition)

**Author:** James Rachels, Stuart Rachels

**ISBN:** 0078038235

- AVAILABLE AT COLLEGE BOOKSTORE

### **Course Outline & Calendar:**

Week 1 (by Sept 4th): Introduction, 1-19 (Relativism, Divine Commands, Aristotle, Natural Law, The Social Contract, Altruism and Self-Interest, Utilitarianism, Impartiality, Kant)

Week 2 (by Sept 10<sup>th</sup>) : Some Basic Points About Arguments, 19-27 (Arguments, Moral Skepticism, the Cultural Differences Argument, The Provability Argument)

Week 3(due on Sept 17<sup>th</sup>): Paper 1:

Week 4 (by Sept 24<sup>th</sup>): “Why Abortion Is Immoral,” Marquis, 81-88

Week 5 (by Oct 1<sup>st</sup>): “A Defense of Abortion,” Thomson, 88-105, “On the Moral and Legal Status of Abortion and Postscript on Infanticide,” Warren, 105-116

Week 6 (by Oct 8<sup>th</sup>): Paper 2

Week 7 (due on Oct 15<sup>th</sup>): “All Animals Are Equal,” Singer, 116-126

Week 8 (by Oct 22<sup>nd</sup>): “Torturing Puppies and Eating Meat: It's All in Good Taste,” Norcross, 126-134, “Do Animals Have Rights?” Machan, 134-147

Week 9 (by Oct 29<sup>th</sup>): “The Singer Solution to World Poverty,” Singer, 147-154, “Famine Relief and the Ideal Moral Code,” Arthur, PDF hand-out

Week 10 (by Nov 5<sup>th</sup>): Paper 3

Week 11 (due on Nov 12<sup>th</sup>): “A Defense of the Death Penalty,” Pojman, “Why the United States Will Join the Rest of the World in Abandoning Capital Punishment,” Bright, 162-174

Week 12 (by Nov 19<sup>th</sup>): “The Ethics of War and Peace,” Lackey, 192-201

Week 13 (by Nov 26<sup>th</sup>): “Fifty Years after Hiroshima,” Rawls, 201-209

Week 14 (by Dec 3<sup>rd</sup>): “What Is Wrong with Terrorism?” Nagel, 209-212, “Liberalism, Torture, and the Ticking Bomb,” Luban, 212-226

Week 15 (due on Nov 10<sup>th</sup>): America's Unjust Drug War,” Huemer, 226-240

Week 16 (Finals): Paper 4:

#### Attendance & Plagiarism

- more than 3 absences result in automatic failure of the class
- The state law regarding non-attendance because of religious beliefs (p. 53 in the Bulletin), and your class policies (e.g., attendance, participation, etc)
- if you plagiarize, you fail – no exceptions!
- University Policy on Plagiarism

The faculty and administration of Brooklyn College support an environment free from cheating and plagiarism. Each student is responsible for being aware of what constitutes cheating and plagiarism and for avoiding both. The complete text of the CUNY Academic Integrity Policy and the Brooklyn College procedure for implementing that policy can be found at this site:

<http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bc/policies>. If a faculty member suspects

a violation of academic integrity and, upon investigation, confirms that violation, or if the student admits the violation, the faculty member MUST report the violation.

### IMPORTANT NOTE

- bring the needed book to *every* class meeting
- class sessions will be heavily based on the close reading of the text
- students will take turns reading aloud
- the material is difficult, and **YOU WILL BE LOST UNLESS YOU ATTEND CLASS**
- Student Disability Policy

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations students must first be registered with the Center for Student Disability Services. Students who have a documented disability or suspect they may have a disability are invited to set up an appointment with the Director of the Center for Student Disability Services, Ms. Valerie Stewart-Lovell at 718-951-5538. If you have already registered with the Center for Student Disability Services please provide your professor with the course accommodation form and discuss your specific accommodation with him/her.