

COURSE OUTLINE

1. **Course Number and Name:** PH4103, History of Ethics

Prerequisites: None

Credits 3

2. **Course Description:** Why are present-day debates in ethics so likely to quickly dissolve into rancorous ad hominem attacks?

How is it that what should be the reasoned inquiry into the proper domains of justice and mercy, and into our rightful obligations to each other, so frequently becomes the sad recognition that we seem to inhabit a plurality of moral universes, with nothing but political or judicial power to adjudicate our differences?

Might a brief inquiry into the history of ethics shed light on present-day confusions and disagreements?

This course will introduce the history of ethics, exploring classical texts and contemporary views. We will consider the recent controversial theses of Alasdair MacIntyre, Eric Voegelin, and Michael Oakeshott that the philosophical underpinnings of the “enlightenment” has contributed to social disorder in the modern era.

3. **Course Goals:** This course will explore the best thinking on what constitutes and how to arrive at private and public virtue. This knowledge is the prerequisite for a life of civic virtue and ultimately public service.

4. **Course Learning Outcomes:** Students in this course will achieve the following learning indicators:

1. Identify and overcome historical philosophical biases that distort one's perception/knowledge of reality or truth.
2. Analyze the various strengths and weaknesses of the divine command ethics as this teaching interacts with a particular political regime's pragmatic requirements, e.g., marriage conventions, education of the young, etc.
3. Formulate how virtue ethics, the second traditional moral theory, is differentiated from divine command ethics and how training in the “internal goods and practice” becomes the backbone for Western education.
4. Frame, analyze, and integrate the entirety of the classical tradition of moral theory in terms of divine command, virtue ethics, and natural law as the foundation among all healthy civilizations.
5. Trace the origins and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of Enlightenment thinking, focusing on its disappointment in the success of

- resident political and religious authorities and resulting effort to establish a reliable secular “justice” over against its optimism based on the success of scientific reasoning in the discovering “universal” truths.
6. Analyze the various post-Enlightenment theories initiated during the Enlightenment that reduced life to matter and reason to calculation.
 7. Distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable “emotivist” ethical approaches to situations.
 8. Evaluate Kant’s project to reify rationalism into a universal moral law that, notwithstanding, men must choose to obey.
 9. Delineate the shortcomings of an ethical theory that attempts to quantify pleasure as the criterion for individual and social “good.”
 10. Explain the reductionism of divine command, virtue, and natural law ethics by the ethics of therapy, the need to retain the constructs without the content. Summarize with the ability to apply the various historical ethical approaches from pre to post-Enlightenment philosophy to such concepts as the good, happiness, obligation, and loyalty.

5. Course Concepts

1. Relativism, emotivism, rationalism, scienticism, ositivism
2. Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, *The Protagoras*, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Sophocles, *Antigone*
3. Abrahamic religions, The Bible, Covenant, Christianity, St. Paul
4. Divine command ethics, St. Augustine
5. Virtue ethics
6. James Burnham, *The Suicide of the West*
7. Natural law, Machiavelli, Newton, Hobbes, Locke, Hume
8. Enlightenment, philosophes, Rousseau, Kant, Kierkegaard
9. Utilitarianism, Bentham, Mill
10. Nietzsche
11. Gnosticism, Phenomenology
12. Therapeutic ethics, Freud, Adler/Reich, Jung/Campbell

6. Required Texts:

Lewis, C. S. *The Abolition of Man: How Education Develops Man’s Sense of Morality* (Harper, 2001), ISBN 0060652942, paper

MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Second edition. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1984. ISBN 0-268-00611-3

Morgan, Michael L., ed. *Classics of Moral and Political Theory*
Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992. 1st edition preferred (contains Aquinas selections omitted from later editions; later editions acceptable.) ISBN 0-87220-126-0.

Oakeshott , Michael. *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*. Edited by Timothy Fuller. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991 ISBN 0-86597-095-5

Pieper, Josef. *The Four Cardinal Virtues*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1966. ISBN 65-14713

Rieff, Philip. *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith After Freud*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. ISBN #0-226-71646-5

Sophocles, Antigone, in *The Three Theban Plays*, ISBN 0140444254 (Many translations acceptable; all available in paper)

Voegelin, Eric. *Collected Works; Published Essays 1966-1985*. Vol. 12. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, ISBN 0-8071-1595-9

7. Recommended Reading

The Bible: Genesis I-XXIII; Exodus XX; Gospel of Matthew IV, V, XVI, XXII), Epistle to the Romans I, II

Kolakowski, Leszek. "*Kant*" in *Modernity on Endless Trial*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1997. ISBN-10: 0226450465, ISBN-13: 978-0226450469

Weaver, Richard. *Ideas Have Consequences*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984. ISBN-10: 0226876802, ISBN-13: 978-0226876801

8. Additional Resources

COURSE SYLLABUS

Course Number: PH 4110

Course Name History of Ethics

Faculty: C.F. Sills, Ph.D.

Preliminaries: (Review Announcements)

Class Participation and Performance Requirements:

Students are ultimately responsible for participating in the course through the following academic activities: uploading assignments, posting to discussion topics, responding to instructor inquiries, submitting written papers and taking quizzes and exams. Students are expected to be involved in ongoing instructional activities based on the recommended schedule for course completion as detailed in the syllabus. In order to actively participate in a course, students must make contact with their faculty mentor on a regular basis through one of the following methods:

- Uploading weekly written discussion topic responses into the Discussion section of the course delivery system for grading by your Instructor.
- Participation in discussion threads with the instructor and other students.
- Posting of other assignments as identified by the course instructor.

Assessments:

Discussion topics: After listening to the lectures, reading the required reading assignments, read all the discussion questions, then, select, write, and post an answer to two discussion questions for each session. Answers should be no between 250 and 500 words.

A term paper (minimum 15 pp. typed, double-spaced). Suggested topics available from instructor or students may choose their own topics in consultation with the Instructor. The paper will be due at the conclusion of the course.

A final exam will consist of six essay questions, of which students may select three. Students have three hours to complete the final exam.

Assessment percentages:

Discussion questions:	30%
Term paper:	30%
Final exam:	40%

Yorktown University official grade and writing rubrics are located at http://www.yorktownuniversity.com/grad_rubrics.cfm

Academic Integrity

Available both in the student and faculty handbooks.

Recommended schedule for course completion

Session 1: Introduction—Problems in the History of Ethics—Relativism and Emotivism.

Overview of course goals and themes explain why the study of ethics—moral knowledge—is important and why the history of the field has gone off track. The course begins with a study of what constitutes justice, beginning with the Platonic treatment in the *Apology* and *Crito*.

Lecture:

Audio: Part 1 (10min)
Part 2 (10min)
Part 3 (13 min)

Assignment: (Please note: **Required readings** should be done before listening to lectures. **Recommended readings** are suggestions for further reading that extend, critique, or qualify the required reading).

Required reading:
Morgan, *Classics of Moral and Political Theory: Plato's Apology, Crito*: pp. 1—31.

Discussion Question(s):

- 1) Socrates claims, "A good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death" (p. 21 in Morgan). On what does he base this optimism? After all, he has just been found guilty of a capital offense and sentenced to death by a jury of his peers.
- 2) It seems Socrates is quite modest about his own "wisdom". In the *Apology*, he surmises that his only advantage over his interlocutors is that he does not PRETEND to know what he does not know, but most of the people he disputes with are guilty of what we might call "gnostic pretense", which is pretending to a knowledge that is not actual. How would you evaluate such a claim? Is it such a small thing after all?
- 3) Evaluate Socrates' refusal in *Crito* to take advantage of his "escape option."
- 4) Socrates asks whether it is right to care so much about the opinions of the majority (p. 23, Morgan). Is this an even more pressing question today when so much effort is made by powerful interests, backed by extensive research and technologically-sophisticated means, to precisely mold "majority opinion"?
- 5) Although Morgan does not mention this, it is a remarkable fact that the vote to condemn Socrates to death was even higher than the vote to find him guilty in the first place. What factors in Socrates' attitude during his trial and the likely attitudes of the jury (a large crowd, over 500 people) might help account for this seemingly irrational outcome?

Session Outcomes:

4. 1

Session 2: Ethics of Divine Command: This session investigates the basis for divine command ethics, both in its Biblical and pagan expressions. The Christian foundation of justice in Western civilization suffers from internal contradiction, providing critics with ammunition about its suitability as an ethical standard.

Lecture:

Audio: Part 1 (10min)

Part 2 (10min)

Part 3 (10min)

Assignment:

Required reading:

Sophocles, *Antigone*: Entire (Any widely-available translation of this magnificent classic will do)

Genesis chapters I-XXIII; Exodus XX; Gospel of Matthew IV, V, XVI, XXII)

Discussion Question(s):

1) In my lecture, I distinguish between “Problems within the Divine Command tradition noticed by those attempting to adhere thereto” and “Problems found in the Divine Command tradition by those who do not attempt to adhere thereto.” Pick one of these areas of problems (you need not confine yourself to the examples mentioned in the lecture) and develop a discussion.

2) Does Socrates show himself, despite all his skeptical questioning, an adherent of "divine command" ethics, if so, how?

Session Outcomes:

4.2

Session 3: Ethics of Virtue. The second classical tradition of moral theory—Virtue Ethics—is the subject of this session. The session briefly reviews both the pagan and Christian teachings about virtue I, respectively, Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and Augustine’s *City of God* in terms of their similarities and their differences. Alasdair MacIntyre’s reclamation from the post-Enlightenment dismissal of this traditional teaching provides an interesting alternative.

Lecture:

Audio: Part 1 (10min)

Part 2 (10min)

Part 3 (10min)

Assignment:

Required reading:

Morgan, selections from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*: pp. 235—381.

Recommended reading:

Josef Pieper, *The Four Virtues*, 206pp.

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, (sections of this work will later be assigned as “required” reading, so now is a good time to gain initial familiarity with the text.)

Discussion Question(s):

1) How does Aristotle’s account of virtues as inculcated habits differ from contemporary accounts (based on so-called “behavioral psychology”) of “operant

conditioning”? In other words, how does “virtue” differ from conditioning?

2) Are there virtues that do not appear as a mean between two extremes? What are they?

Session Outcomes:

4.3

Session 4: The Ethics of Natural Law. This session on natural law in the history of ethics is the final session on the traditional teachings of moral theory. Looking through a variety of lenses, including St. Paul, C.S. Lewis, and Tao, students will recognize affinities between divine command, virtue, and natural law based ethics, all having to do with the presence and attainability of moral truths by mankind.

Lecture

Audio: Part 1 (10min)

Part 2 (10min)

Part 3 (10min)

Assignment:

Required reading:

C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, pp. 1—81

Morgan, selections from Epicurus & Epictetus: pp. 415—441

Recommended reading:

From the Bible: Epistle to the Romans I, II

Discussion Question(s)

1) Paul claims that even those who are not Christians or Jews are “without excuse” for violating the divine moral order. How might this be seen as an example of “natural law” thinking?

2) Why does C. S. Lewis lay so much stress on contemporary trends in education in his essay?

3) How might renewed attention to natural law affect contemporary debates about abortion and the legitimacy of homosexual intimacy?

Session Outcomes

4.4

Session 5: The Watershed: Enlightenment as Attempted Moral Revolution. This session reviews the background for Enlightenment precepts from Machiavelli to Newton. The rationale that posited matter as the basis for all reality and science as the basis for all knowledge is followed through Kant to its apotheosis in the French Revolution.

Lecture (Lectures 5 & 6 will summarize and synthesize supplemental recommended reading.)

Audio: Part 1 (10min)

Part 2 (10min)

Part 3 (10min)

Part 4 (10min)

Assignment:

Required reading:

Morgan, selections from Machiavelli, Hobbes: pgs 490—730.

Discussion Question(s)

1) It is sometimes said that calling the Devil “Old Nick” is a backhanded tribute to Niccolo Machiavelli. Comment.

2) Machiavelli admires the strength and grandeur of the Roman Republic, and hopes that it will inspire contemporary leaders. Does his discussion on pp. 551-557 give clues to what he hopes for?

3) Machiavelli famously anticipates Nietzsche’s critique of Christian morality as weakening our character. Or does he? Cite texts.

4) Hobbes gives the most sustained attempt in intellectual history to account for all reality, including “moral” reality, in strictly materialist terms.

To do this he must re-imagine “the passions” (pp. 589-595). Consider and evaluate three of his attempted re-definitions.

5) A presumably impossible task for the materialist is to give a count of moral decision. Yet Hobbes does not shrink from the task. Evaluate his discussion

6) Hobbes makes the startling claim that “reasoning” is simply addition and subtraction (pp. 585-589). Evaluate his claim. (If you have read Weaver, you will see how the distinction between “realist” and “nominalist” approaches illuminates Hobbes project, which may seem both sensible in many ways and yet bizarre to us. Hobbes is a nominalist.)

Session Outcomes

4.5

Session 6: The Watershed: Enlightenment as Attempted Moral Revolution. This session continues the consideration of the great movement in thought called by its adherents “the Enlightenment.” Locke, Hume, and Rousseau were well known to the founders of our country, and their ideas affected the debates concerning the structure of our public institutions.

Lecture: (Lectures 5 & 6 will summarize and synthesize supplemental recommended reading.)

Audio: Part 1 (10min)

Part 2 (10min)

Part 3 (10min)

Part 4 (10min)

Assignment:

Required reading:

Morgan, selections from Locke, Hume, Rousseau: pgs 733—987.

Discussion Question(s)

1) Locke's account of the life in "the state of nature" is markedly different from that of Hobbes. Hobbes had characterized it as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Locke, on the other hand, begins a process (that will be greatly accelerated with Rousseau) of conceiving life "in the state of nature" as a sort of abstract game of imagination, according to which certain alleged generalities about human natural and civil life can be derived. Question: does this "state of nature" form of theorizing differ significantly from "natural law" thinking? Note Locke's own rather dubious statements on p. 742. Why or why not?

2) Locke argues that the freedom, equality, and executive autonomy that claims to be the natural rights of men in the state of nature are willingly exchanged for covenants to secure those rights in a state of political society. Henceforth individual liberty must submit to general laws. How then does the political society respond to those members who find the laws no longer supportive of, but rather injurious of, their rights?

3) Locke sees property as being inherent in the self-possession of one's own body, and being extended to the products of the labor of one's body. How might one extend this beginning into a complete ethical system?

4) Hume made devastating attacks on classical conceptions of moral philosophy. He in effect denies divine command, natural law, and virtue ethics as plausible accounts for our actual moral lives. Consider his arguments from Section I of Book III, "Of Morals" (Morgan, pp. 820-828)

5) One often hears the argument that one cannot derive an "ought" from an "is". What does Hume have to say about this?

6) What is Hume's account of "justice"?

7) How did Hume's account of moral life invert the priority of reason and passion that was assumed by most others in his time?

8) How does Rousseau evaluate other philosopher's use of "the state of nature"?

9) Construct a debate between Locke and Rousseau about the inherent right to property.

10) "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." With this ringing statement, Rousseau takes up Locke's claim about the natural freedom of the state of nature, and sharply contrasts it with life in civil society. The whole movement of rejection that will culminate in the excesses of the French Revolution is summed up in this famous cry. Is Rousseau simply romanticizing the state of nature?

11) What is this mysterious "general will" whose sovereignty some will blame for the worst crimes of revolutionary passions?

12) Can men be "compelled to be free"?

13) "True Christians are made to be slaves" (p. 985). How does this startling statement contribute to Rousseau's discussion of "civil religion"?

14) How does the very notion of "civil religion" contribute to problems of divided loyalty for those who have other religious commitments?

Session Outcomes

4.6

Session 7: Critique of Enlightenment: Phenomenalism, Rationalism, Scientism as ideologies peculiar to modernity--Influence on Ethics.

Lecture:

Audio: Part 1 (10min)
Part 2 (10min)
Part 3 (10min)
Part 4 (10min)

Assignment:

Required Reading:

Eric Voegelin, "*On Classical Studies*" and "*Reason: the Classical Experience*" (Both in vol. 12 of *Collected Works*); pgs 256—291

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2d edition (Notre Dame University Press) pgs 1-35, 88-120

Recommended reading:

Michael Oakeshott, "*Rationalism in Politics*" (In *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, ed. Timothy Fuller: pgs 5—41 A brilliant and engaging essay that criticizes the post-Enlightenment tendency to reduce reason to its "technical" dimensions.

Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (University of Chicago Press) A classic, beautifully written critique of modern moral thinking that focuses on the critical importance of the late-medieval debate between nominalists and realists. Contains a classic definition of “piety” as “the discipline of the will by respect”

Discussion Questions

- 1) Is it permissible today to argue that the “Enlightenment” (of all things) is precisely the "moral catastrophe" from which we have not recovered? Why or why not?
- 2) What does Oakeshott mean by “rationalism” in politics? How might “rationalism” be not a good thing?
- 3) Discuss the list of contrasts given by Voegelin between Classical and Modern approaches to “reason.”
- 4) What is your initial reaction (before reading his detailed account) to the claim of MacIntyre that the Enlightenment (of all things) is precisely the "moral catastrophe" from which we have not recovered?
- 5) Do you find it exhilarating or depressing (or something else entirely) to contemplate such a radical re-thinking of the "ethical landscape" as is projected in the opening lecture? Please keep your response, and refer to it again at the end of the course. (Question to ask yourself at end of course): Have you changed your mind? How? Why?
- 6) Think of examples encountered frequently of situations where a) the emotivist approach (the approach to ethical thinking which claims that ethical norms are REALLY reports of emotional response) strikes you as fair and reasonable; 2) the emotivist approach strikes you as infantile and irresponsible. Can you imagine having a settled and reasoned analysis that would tend to favor a) over b) or vice-versa?

Session Outcomes

4:7

Session 8: Rationalism in Ethics I: Kant: The "Metaphysics of Morals" This session examines how Kant reified reason into a law unto itself—“pure practical reason”—a capacity whose exercise allegedly results in a will always resolved to do its duty according to the “categorical imperative.” The session reveals internal contradictions between moral law and moral freedom, both attributes of Kant’s ethics.

Lecture

Audio: Part 1 (10min)
Part 2 (10min)

Part 3 (10min)

Assignment:

Required reading: Morgan, selections from Kant: pp. 988—1041

Recommended reading:

Leszek Kolakowski, "Why Do We Need Kant?," in *Modernity on Endless Trial*: pp. 44—54

Discussion Question(s)

1) How might one counter the thesis that Kant's contribution, despite its possible merits (about which see Kolakowski), is fundamentally an exercise in "Rationalism in Ethics"?

2) What is the relation between the notion of "law" as used in mathematical physics and the notion of "law" used in moral philosophy?

3) How do the realities of human sexual relations comport with Kant's "categorical imperative"? Put bluntly, is it possible to relate sexually without (in some non-trivial manner) treating another as an object? Not necessarily merely as an object, but the point stands. Does this example cast doubt on the alleged "universality" of Kant's maxim?

4) The contrast between Kant and the utilitarians on the issue of considering consequences in ethical reasoning is striking, and often remarked. Kant says consequences are irrelevant, the utilitarians say they are all that matters. Might this disjunction itself be a clue to the error of rationalism in both Kantian and utilitarian thinking?

Session Outcomes

4.8

Session 9: Utilitarianism: the pseudo-science of Modernist Ethics: Despite a similarity between the ancient Epicurean philosophy and Utilitarianism in terms of seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, Utilitarianism bases its ethical theory on scientific calculation as a measurement of moral good. This session will investigate the deficiencies of this approach.

Lecture

Audio: Part 1 (10min)

Part 2 (10min)

Part 3 (10min)

Assignment:

Required reading: Morgan, Selection by Mill on Utilitarianism: pp. 1116—1156

Discussion Question(s)

1) Like Kant, the utilitarians base their arguments on an understanding of “scientific” reasoning. But where Kant argues deductively about first principles, the utilitarians make descriptive claims with alleged prescriptive force.

Traditionally, and to oversimplify, professors of philosophy have called Kant’s approach “rationalist” and the utilitarian approach “empiricist” to highlight this difference in outlook and procedure. Can you see contemporary examples of both emphases in moral debate?

2) Unlike J. S. Mill, Bentham “bites the bullet” and recognizes that his own notion of “calculus” requires some criterion for measurement. How do you evaluate his attempts to provide such a criterion?

3) Why does Mill decline to provide this criterion?

4) Does lack of a rational criterion fundamentally undermine the utilitarian approach? Why, or why not?

Session Outcomes

4.9

Session 10: The Therapeutic Revolution in Ethics: Rationalism in Ethics III: In this session, “The Triumph of the Therapeutic,” the post-Enlightenment philosophies of Kant and Utilitarianism culminate in an attempt to reestablish a religious construct—authority (Freud) personal salvation (Jung and Adler)—without its content. The ethics of therapy mimics traditional ethical theory without providing an end, a telos, beyond its own practice. Thus, it is an ethic that cannot produce character or virtue because its criterion of truth is the unreconstructed (Rousseau’s primitive) self that is always in process of constructing and deconstructing itself.

Lecture

Audio: Part 1 (10min)

Part 2 (10min)

Part 3 (10min)

Part 4 (10min)

Part 5 (10min)

Assignment:

Required reading:

Rieff, Introduction thru 5, and 8: pp. 1—140, 232—262.

Discussion Question(s)

1) How does Rieff’s thesis illuminate the condition of “happy incoherence” that characterizes so much ethical debate?

- 2) "Where religious man was born to be saved, psychological man was born to be pleased". Comment.
- 3) While Rieff himself retains much of the anti-Christian bigotry associated with earlier rationalistic approaches, does not his own thesis provide the means to undermine many of the most prevalent objections to Christian faith, commitment, and witness?
- 4) How are contemporary debates about the role of religion in public life, the proper relations of the sexes, and the role of authority in child rearing and social life generally illuminated by Rieff's thesis?
- 5) What does Rieff mean by "the therapeutic"? Has it really "triumphed"?
- 6) Rieff ambiguously distinguishes Freud (whom he claims to be in some ways an old-fashioned moralist) from his "revisionist" therapeutic progeny. But might not Freud be more directly credited (or blamed) than Rieff seems to allow?
- 7) How does the present official status of the assumptions and outlook of the civil-rights establishment make honest and intelligent discussion of race more difficult?
- 8) How has the deployment of a sort of moral argument hindered the development of any genuine discussion about the role of massive non-European immigration into the United States?
- 9) How is it that the "enlightenment" party has won virtually all the battles in the "culture wars" this century, despite evidence that most Americans have not welcomed these developments? How does this affect the claim that the US is a "democratic" society?
- 10) Is there a valid analogy between the legitimate moral mentoring of parents and the role of "educational" elites in society? If not, why not? If so, how far does the analogy hold?
- 11) Has the loss of any universally accepted supervenient moral address made "Culture War" inevitable?
- 12) Can "Americanism" substitute for Christian faith as an organizing principle for our "New World Order"?

Session Outcomes

4.10

Term Paper Due
Final Exam

