Philosophy: Introduction to Ethics
Course No. 05-09-211-01
Fall 2008-9, Tu/Thur 4-5:40
Bldg. 76, Room 1125
Mr. Robison, Hale Chair in Applied Ethics

Go to courses on my webpage for all information about the course.

(1) Office and hours: 1116, College of Liberal Arts; Tuesday & Thursday, 3-4, by appointment and by e-mail.

(2) Required Texts, none available at the bookstore, all downloadable:


   John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, as pdf

(3) Aims of the course: We will be examining three competing ethical theories. We shall find that each provides a different vision of what kind of life we ought to lead, that each is plausible (though each has its problems), that it seems not all can be true, and that we will be unable to determine if any one of them is the correct vision. We shall thus be left with three different views about how we ought to live our lives -- those of Aristotle, Kant and Mill. This should not lead to skepticism about the possibility of leading a moral life, but the beginning of clarity about what it must be like to lead such a life. We shall find that the theories agree on much about what we ought to do -- not lie, for instance -- although they disagree about the reasons.

   We will also be discussing issues about which intelligent people disagree, and the heuristic assumption we shall make is that resolution of disagreements regarding ethical issues is possible. It is an heuristic assumption because it sets the ideal: we strive for understanding of the issues and of the views of all those who make different judgments, and we presume that it is our failure if we do not find a way to reconcile those judgments through better understanding.

   That is not to imply that all ethical issues can be resolved, only that we should presume that they can be resolved. At the least we should give resolution our best shot.

   We should come to see that not everything goes in ethics -- i.e. it is not true that everyone can believe whatever they want; so not every solution is morally viable or reasonable. We should also come to see that some ethical issues are complicated (e.g. abortion) and so not readily resolvable.

   All the theories we examine assume that we need to provide reasons for moral judgments. We will make the same assumption. It is not enough to say of abortion, for instance, "I don't think it's right" or "It's just wrong." When you make moral judgments, you have an obligation -- a moral obligation, I would argue -- to provide reasons for your judgment.

(4) Requirements:

   (a) Attendance and participation are presumed. We will be discussing issues in
class that you will not be able to read about, and the fruit of these discussions will make their way into your exams. So a crucial element is to attend classes and to participate in discussion: if you do not understand something, you should ask about it. One prerequisite of doing philosophy is the realization that we do not know a great deal and a great deal of what we think we know is likely false or misconceived. In any event, the aim is to understand, and you not likely to understand these issues well without a thorough discussion of them. You will not obtain extra credit for attendance and participation, but your grade will be negatively affected -- because you will miss things necessary for the exams and papers.

(b) Exams -- Five -- the 2nd, 4th, 6th and 8th weeks and the final. Each is worth 25 points. Only four exams -- the four highest unless you are a masochist -- will be counted towards your final grade. If you take all five, I will thus drop the lowest grade. If you decide not to take one exam, that is the one you have dropped. If you decide not to take two, you will have dropped one and gotten a zero on the other, etc. No make-ups are possible.

(c) Micro-essays -- We have four speakers coming in as part of the Hale Ethics Series and as part of the class. You will be asked to bring a hard copy of a micro-essay on that speaker’s presentation to the exam following that presentation (except for the last presentation when the micro-essay is due the following Thursday). That will be part of your exam. You should familiarize yourself with what it is to write a micro-essay.

(d) Grades -- Based on the usual arrangement: 90 to 100 equals an A, and so on, with 100% of your grade determined by the exams.

(5) Honor policy -- I presume honesty, am embarrassed to bring up the issue, and find it hard to believe that someone could contemplate dishonesty in a course in ethics. But, just so you will know, I will flunk for the course anyone found cheating.

(6) I do not give incompletes. Plan your life -- and your time -- accordingly.