Introduction to Ethics

PRE-111 (3 Credits)

W 6:00PM-10:30PM (Omaha)

Instructor: Lee Tasey
Office Hours: Arranged
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Man I was mean but I’m changing my scene
And I’m doing the best that I can
I admit it’s getting better
A little better all the time

“Getting Better” by The Beatles

PRE 111 Introduction to Ethics fulfills the requirement for a Foundational Area of Knowledge in *In Search of Meaning and Values*. A course that fulfills this requirement will assure that students consider the importance and significance of what it means to be human. In this class, students will work to:

1) consider ways that humans have come to understand the meaning of existence
2) evaluate the philosophical or spiritual implications of human actions and policies
3) develop an understanding of their ethical values

PRE 111 will seek to accomplish all of these learning outcomes
Course Readings:


Course Description:

An examination of philosophical theories on the foundations, principles, and applications of ethics. Upon completion, students will be able to describe the theories of Egoism, Virtue Ethics, Utilitarianism, the Social Contract, and Kantian Ethics. Also, students will be able to apply the insights of these theories to contemporary moral issues.

The word “ethics” comes from a Greek word that means “character.” Ethicists try to discover what is right and wrong in the realm of human behavior. Over the next eight weeks, we’ll study the major ethical theories from antiquity to the present. We’ll also look at moral issues facing us today. Our guides through the ethical landscape will be influential persons such as Moses, Aristotle, Epictetus, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, the Buddha and Carol Gilligan, just to name a few. We’ll be looking at questions such as “What makes an action right or wrong?” and “Can there be morality without religion?” and “Why should I be moral?” and “What is the good life?”
Learning Outcomes:

1. students will understand the major ethical theories from antiquity to the present (e.g. virtue theory, divine command theory, deontology, utilitarianism, egoism, feminist ethics, etc.)

2. students will be able to apply various ethical theories to a number of contemporary moral issues

3. students will see the complexity of moral issues and will think more carefully about them

4. students will develop a tolerance for doubt, diversity and uncertainty

Learning Strategies

In order to fulfill the learning outcomes of PRE 111, various learning strategies will be used. Strategies include but are not limited to the following: lectures by the instructor, small group discussions, video clips on You Tube, guest speakers (ministers, philosophers, social workers, government and law enforcement officials, etc).

Learning Assessment:

Attendance, Participation & Attentiveness (APA): Attendance is mandatory. The material we’ll cover in class may not be found in the readings. Participation is expected. Learning to express your ideas orally is a huge part of a college education; it also makes class discussions more interesting. Attentiveness is also expected. You may use laptop computers for class notes only. If you use a laptop for the Internet, email or video games, you will lose the privilege of using a laptop for the rest of the semester. Finally, if you are disruptive in class (talking while the instructor is talking, sleeping, texting, or flirting), you’ll be asked to leave for the remainder of the class. APA will account for 40% your grade.
Ethics Journal: You will write a one-page journal entry for each ethical theory/work of fiction that we study. The goal of keeping a journal is to reflect upon what you’ve learned each week. How are the ethical theories/works of fiction challenging your current viewpoints about human nature, right and wrong, or the good life? What insights have you gained about what it means to be a human being? You are responsible for seven journal entries. The journal entries should be at least one typed double-spaced page, though students may write longer journal entries. The Philosophy & Ethics Journal will account for 40% of your grade.

Ethics Essay: Your essay will be 3-5 pages and will discuss an ethical topic (either one in Prager’s book or a topic of your own choosing). Imagine that your essay were to appear in Think a Second Time. What topic would you discuss? What insights/advice would you offer to the world about your topic? Your essay should include three parts: 1) choosing an ethical topic 2) showing how others have addressed the topic and 3) showing how you would address the topic. The Personal Philosophy & Ethics Essay will account for 20% of your grade. Note: The Ethics Journal should be stapled to the Ethics Essay and submitted as a whole one week after our last class meeting. Late work will be accepted with the consent of the instructor.

What to Expect in Class:

Expect to be challenged. This class will challenge your most deeply held convictions. Get used to it. You won’t grow as a human being unless you wrestle with points of view—religious, political, and ethical—in opposition to your own.

Expect to read and write. This isn’t a “coasting” course. You must do the readings and come to class ready to discuss them. This will be a boring class if I’m the only one up here talking.

Expect to pay attention in class. Don’t talk while the instructor is talking. Don’t talk while a colleague is talking. Raise your hand if you have a question and wait until you’re called on to speak.
Expect to be in class until at least 10:00AM.

If you arrive to class late, don’t ask the person next to you what you’ve missed. Wait until the break or after class to ask this and related questions.

Expect the instructor to teach the class. Don’t think you can teach the class. Many students enroll in the courses offered at Doane College. Expect to hear from all of those students.

Expect to keep all books, notebooks and pencils on your desk until class is over. Don’t put them away early. Don’t do anything that suggests class is over when it isn’t; doing so will trigger the “off” switch and students will stop paying attention.

Expect to listen to the instructor and the guest speakers. Without listening, we can’t access the diverse lives, experiences and beliefs of those who share this planet with us.

Expect to turn your cell phone off at the beginning of class—and keep it off.

**Grading Scale**

100-95 = A  
94-90 = A-  
89-87 = B+  
86-84 = B  
83-80 = B-  
79-77 = C+  
76-74 = C  
73-70 = C-  
69-67 = D+  
66-64 = D  
63-60 = D-  
59 & below F
A Note on Plagiarism

All written work must be in your own words. Borrowing a person’s words or thoughts without a proper citation is a crime. If I find you guilty of plagiarism, not only will you earn a free trip to the Dean’s Office, you may also fail the course. Play it safe—don’t steal.

A Note on Courtesy

We live in the twenty-first century. Everybody should act civilized. When the instructor is talking, nobody talks. When you’re talking, nobody else talks (including the instructor). And finally, if you disagree with someone, attack the person’s argument, not the person.

Tentative Class Schedule

Week 1: What is Philosophy? What is Ethics?

Week 2: Theories of Human Nature: Moses, Hobbes, Rousseau and Sartre

Think a Second Time: xi-16

Different Seasons: “Apt Pupil”
Week 3: The Ancient World: Aristotle and Virtue Ethics

Think a Second Time: 17-54

Charlotte’s Web

Week 4: The Ancient World: Epictetus & Stoic Ethics

Think a Second Time: 55-85

Different Seasons: “Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption”

Week 5: The Medieval World: Judaism, Christianity, Islam and the Divine Command Theory

Think a Second Time: 89-103, 132-138

Save Me From Myself


Think a Second Time: 139-149, 156-178

Different Seasons: “The Body”
Week 7: The Modern World: Kant & Deontology
          Mill & Utilitarianism

Think a Second Time: 179-194, 197-213

Of Mice and Men

Week 8: Buddhist Ethics

Think a Second Time: 232-253

Buddhism for Beginners
Ethics Journal (at least one typed double-spaced page for each entry)

#1 “Apt Pupil”

#2 Charlotte’s Web

#3 “Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption”

#4 Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Divine Command Theory) & Mustaine

#5 “The Body”

#6 Of Mice and Men

#7 Buddhism for Beginners

Ethics Essay (3-5 typed double-spaced pages)

Imagine you’ll submit an essay to Think a Second Time. What ethical topic would you talk about? What would you tell the world about it? Choose a topic, briefly talk about what others have said about it, and then offer your own insights to the conversation. Be honest. Make it real. Tell the truth.

Note: The Ethics Journal (seven entries) and the Ethics Essay are due one week after our last class meeting. Submit all assignments to Mr. Tasey’s third floor mailbox (bottom/left-hand side).