Philosophy 300: Moral Philosophy

**Humans, when perfected, are the best of animals, but, when separated from law and justice, the worst of all.**

—Aristotle, Politics 1253a31-33

Our objective in this course is to develop an appreciation for three leading approaches to moral philosophy (or three types of ‘moral theory’) in the Western tradition through a careful reading of classical texts. Though our focus will be on the classical writings, we’ll also read some important contemporary expressions of each approach.

**Theory:** 1. A sight, a spectacle. Obs. rare. 2. Mental view, contemplation. Obs. 3. A conception or mental scheme of something to be done, or of the method of doing it; a systematic statement of rules or principles to be followed. {ad. late L. theria (Jerome in Ezech. XII. xl. 4), a. Gr. a looking at, viewing, contemplation, speculation, theory, also a sight, a spectacle.}—Oxford English Dictionary

**Requirements**

This is a seminar-style course, so your regular attendance and thoughtful participation are all-important. Occasional absences will diminish your grade; frequent absences will lead me to ask you to drop the course. Reading the assigned works carefully before you come to class is essential. Please always be sure to bring the readings to class with you, including the ones on e-reserve.

Your final grades will be based on the following percentages:

1. **Five Short Papers (2-3 pages): 90%** (For each short paper, you will submit a draft for peer review and then a rewrite—so you will actually submit 10 short papers for a minimum of twenty pages, but the grade you receive for each paper will based on your rewrites alone.)

2. **Participation: 10%**. This portion of your grade takes into account (a) your preparation of written responses to the material, posted on Blackboard; (b) your attendance and the quality of your informal comments in class; (c) other short assignments.

I will set out (and we will discuss) the criteria in the light of which your papers will be evaluated so that you know what to look for as a writer and as a peer-editor. In assigning final grades I will take into account the extent to which your work improves over the course of the term.

Please note: All of the assignments are due according to deadline. As a rule, I won’t accept late work or ‘make-up’ work.

Please note also that you must participate in the workshops in order to receive credit on the papers for which they are designed. I won’t evaluate a paper that has not been workshopped! For each workshop, you will read a colleague’s paper and provide critical comments on an editorial rap sheet that we will carefully review in advance (this is ‘peer-editing’). This sheet will be submitted and evaluated along with the rewrites; outstanding editorial work will lift your final grade by 1/3 of a letter (e.g., from ‘B’ to ‘B+’), and poor work in this area will lower it by the same increment.
If you have to miss a class or anticipate difficulties in meeting an assignment, talk to me about the situation as soon as you can.

**Short Papers**
The point of the short papers is to give you a chance to develop a position on a relatively focused and fundamental topic connected to our readings.

You will be divided into two writing groups: Alto and Bass. With the exception of the first paper, members of one group will receive a mark of “Pass (P),” “Marginal Pass (MP)” or “Unsatisfactory (U)” (with the possibility of a “High Pass” (HP) for truly exceptional work) and members of the other group will receive a traditional letter-grade. Two MPs will equal one U, and each U will reduce your final letter grade by 1/3 (e.g., from “B+” to “B” or from “B-” to “C+”). Everyone will receive marks of P, MP or U on the first paper.

**Blackboard Responses**
The responses are meant to provide short and incisive comments or questions that will enrich our discussion of the material. I will give you more detailed guidelines for these.

You will be divided into five Blackboard groups: reeds, brass, rhythm, percussion and voice.

Members of the selected group (indicated on the syllabus) will prepare a brief response to the assigned reading and post it on Blackboard by 9p of the day prior to our meeting. For example: Reeds are up on Monday, February 4. This means that members of the Reed section are to post their responses on Blackboard by 9p on Sunday, February 3. Everyone is urged and expected to read the postings before we meet; Blackboard replies from members of the other sections are warmly encouraged. Those who post for a given day will also lead our discussion of the material in class.

**Academic Misconduct**
You plagiarize when you represent someone else’s work as your own. Plagiarism is a form of theft, specifically, the theft of someone else’s thoughts (and sometimes even their words) which you then claim as your own. It’s a destructive practice and it is prohibited by the University of Montana Student Conduct Code (www.umt.edu-SA/). For the purposes of this course, examples of plagiarism range from the blatant, e.g., handing in work that you did not do (perhaps you bought a paper from the internet or simply borrowed a paper from another student) to the more subtle, e.g., using material—perhaps no more than one idea, or a sentence—from an outside source, such as a book, a website, a published or unpublished paper, without documenting that source. Let me know if you ever have questions about whether something constitutes plagiarism (asking will not bring you under suspicion!). It is also a violation of the Student Conduct Code to hand in work that you already submitted for a previous course. You will at a minimum receive an “F” on any work that involves academic misconduct; you may fail the course, depending on the circumstances. Repeat offenders will certainly receive an “F” for the course. University sanctions may also be applied.

**Required Texts** (available at the UM Bookstore in the UC)
Jeremy Bentham & J.S. Mill, The Classical Utilitarians
Moral Philosophy, Custom Coursepacket

E-Reserve (Go to the Mansfield Library homepage [http://www.lib.umt.edu/]. Under “Research Tools” click “Course Reserve Materials.” Password is: 300. Search by course or instructor name.) Please be sure to print all e-reserve readings and bring them to class with you.

Joan Didion, “On Morality”
Adam Cohen, “Judge Judy” (NYT)
Orlando Figes, “The Whisperers”
Andre Comte-Sponville, “Politeness”
Vasily Grossman, “Treblinka”
Jonathan Lear, “Radical Hope”
Ian Frazier, “The Gift”
Peter Singer, “The Singer Solution to World Poverty”; “What Should a Billionaire Give?” (NYT)
Onorra O’Neill, “The Kantian Formula of the End in Itself and World Hunger”

Notes

February 11: Last day to make various changes to your grade option, enrollment, etc.

Please let me know if you have a disability so we can make accommodations.
Schedule of Readings and Assignments

This is a tentative schedule; we will probably make some changes to it as we go.
ER=electronic-reserve; HO=handout; CU=The Classical Utilitarians.
Everything not so designated is in your coursepacket.

January

W23 Introductions; Webb, “How to Live” (HO)

Platonic Prelude: Some Doubts and Demands
M28 Sedaris, “Tricked” (HO); Rep. I 327a-336a (Cephalus and Polemarchus)
*Paper #1 due
W30 Rep. I 336b-349c (Thrasymachus); Didion, “On Morality” (ER) and Cohen, “Judge Judy” (ER)

February

M4 Rep. 341c-end of Book I (S’s reply to Thrasymachus) Reeds
W6 Rep. II 357a-367e (Ring of Gyges) Brass
M11 Lecture by Tushar Irani, Pope Room of the Law School. (Attendance Required!)
W13 *Paper #2 due; workshop

Paper #2 rewrite due Friday, Feb. 15 by 4p in LA 101 (mailbox ‘Clarke’)

Aristotle’s (‘Virtue’) Ethics: The Human Good
M18 No class: ‘Washington-Lincoln Day’
W20 Aristotle, Politics, I i-ii, III vi-vii and ix; Nicomachean Ethics (EN) X.9; Flges, “The Whisperers” (ER) (political animals) Rhythm
M25 Aristotle, EN 1.1-12 (the telos of human life) Percussion
W27 EN 1.13-EN II (character-related virtue); Comte-Sponville, “Politeness” (ER) Voice

March

M3 EN III.6-IV.9 (some character-related virtues) Reeds
W5 *Paper #3 due; workshop

Paper #3 rewrite due Friday, March 7 by 4p in LA 101 (mailbox ‘Clarke’)

W12 Lear, Radical Hope, excerpt (pp. 1-91) (ER) (Crow courage). Focus on pp. 55-91. Brass

Utilitarianism: The Capacity for Sympathy
M17 Hume, Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, I-III Rhythm
W19 Hume, Enquiry, V-VII, IX Percussion

M24-W26 Spring break

M31 Bentham, Principles of Morals and Legislation, chs. I-II and IV; “Push-Pin versus Poetry” (CU); Nozick, “The Experience Machine” (HO)

April

W2 Mill, Utilitarianism, chs. 1-2 (CU) Voice

*Prof. Lissa Merritt, Philosophy Forum April 3* Highly Recommended!

M7 Utilitarianism, ch. 3; Singer, “Pamine, Affluence, and Morality” Further reading (optional): Singer, “Singer’s Solution to World Poverty,” “What Should
Paper #4 rewrite due Friday April 11, by 4p in LA 101 (mailbox ‘Clarke’)  

Kant’s Ethics: Autonomy and Respect  
M14 Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”; Grounding, Preface and Section I  
Brass  

*Prof. Donald Ainslie, Philosophy Forum April 15* Highly Recommended!  
W16 film: The Ghosts of Abu-Ghraib; Read: Danner, “Abu-Ghraib: The Hidden Story” and “Torture and Truth” (ER)  
M21 Grounding, Section II (406-427) Rhythm  
W23 Grounding, Section II (427-end) Percussion  
M28 O’Neill, “Kantian Formula of the End in Itself and World Hunger” (ER) Voice  
W30 *Paper #5 due; workshop  

May  
5-9 Finals Week  
Paper #5 rewrite due Monday May 5 by 12p in LA 101 (mailbox ‘Clarke’)  

Papers  

Mechanics  

No title pages, please, but do give each paper a title. I appreciate good (original, on point) titles as well as artfully bad ones (these often involve intentional puns or misspellings). Please also indicate on the first page whether you are an alto or bass.  

Length: The first three papers should not exceed 600 words total. The fourth and fifth papers should not exceed 900 words total. Please note the word count at the top of your paper. Papers that exceed the maximum length may be penalized. You may use double or single-spacing, but please print double-sided pages in order to keep paper use to a minimum.  

Deadlines: All papers are due according to deadline. Please remember, too, that you must participate in the workshops in order to receive credit for your papers.  

Topics  

First Paper Topic  
Are there important senses in which the narrator of the story has indeed been ‘tricked’? Defend your answer with specifics from the story. 600 words.  

▲Due January 30 in class. Workshop.  

Second Paper Topic  
What lesson does Glaucon want us to take away from the story of the Ring of Gyges? Given this, how convincing is the story? 600 words.  

▲Due February 13 in class. Rewrite due February 15 by 4p in LA 101.  

Third Paper Topic  
Aristotle claims that the virtues are the principal component of a good (‘eudaimon’) life, i.e., that you cannot live well without them.
Critically assess this claim through a careful discussion of one of the virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Books II-IV only). 600 words.

▲Due Weds. March 5 in-class. Rewrite due March 13 by 4p in LA 101.

**Fourth Paper Topic**
Critically discuss one element of Mill’s *Utilitarianism* (chapters 1-3 only). 600 words.

▲Due April 9 in class. Rewrite due April 11 by 4p in LA 101.

**Fifth Paper Topic**
How valuable is Kant’s categorical imperative as a guide to action? Critically discuss using examples of your own. 600 words.

▲Due April 30 in class. Rewrite due, May 5 by 12p in LA 101.