

Ethics in Health and Medicine Philosophy 336.11/Nursing 336.11

Fall 2011 (L. Groarke);
Winter 2012 (C. Byrne)
St. Francis Xavier University

Dr. Louis Groarke

Office: Nicholson Hall 703,
Phone: 867-3611,
E-mail: lgroarke@stfx.ca

Class Time: Time Block E2; A3; B3;
Wednesday, 11:15-12:05; Thursday 9:05-11:05.
Room: NH342

Outside Class (for the moment): Wednesday 1:10-3:10; Thursday 11:10-1:10; Friday 11:15-12:05 and whenever I am in the office. (Lots!) If you have any concerns about the class, please come and see me in my office during regular office hours or we can arrange a meeting for some other time. Please tell me if you are planning to drop by. I am often in my office. I don't mind students stopping by; I will tell you if I am busy. Generally, just after that class would be a good time to see me. Or at our mutual convenience, by appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

“Our present discussion does not aim, as our others do, at study; for the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would be of no benefit to us.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II; 2.)

But the general run of people are as unaware of their actions while awake as they are of what they do while asleep. (Heraclitus, F1)

Entering professional life entails moral responsibility. It is not simply that professionals have a moral code they are (legally) required to follow. It is also that they are expected to perform their function in society in a conscientious and discriminating manner. Professionals—lawyers, judges, doctors, nurses, accountants, engineers, pharmacists, psychologists—have a duty to think through and

apply ethical decision-making in their employment

This is a course about moral philosophy. Morality provides the most fundamental criteria for evaluating the behaviour of human beings. Everyone needs to think about morality, but there is a special onus on professionals to be conscientious moral individuals. In considering ethical conduct and aspiration, we can focus on two somewhat distinct but interdependent tasks. Simply put, we can do theory or we can try to evaluate practices. We may try to come up with a broad, systematic understanding of what morality consists of or we may try to determine whether individual practices, acts, or policies are moral. This Fall semester course is chiefly about moral theory. But the division is not clear-cut. I do consider practical issues while discussing theory and theory while discussing practical issues.

The aim of this course is not, in the first instance, to develop professional philosophers but to provide students with a working understanding of moral decision-making that they can apply to the challenges of their own individual lives. This may be the most important course you take! Every day we all have to make decisions what we should do and what we should not do. In the course of lectures, I will touch on diverse topics and theories, but the central focus will be to elaborate a consistent, accessible, and eminently practical virtue ethics that students (and professors) can apply to their own lives.

We might say that the ancient Greeks started moral philosophy. (Although, as the text point out, one encounters similar ideas in other ancient, non-Western cultures.) We will not cover every author in the book but, depending on class interest and time constraints, we will do as many as possible. I may leave students some choice in determining which authors to consider. We will definitely both discuss and read substantial portions of works by Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Kant, and Mill. In loose theoretical terms, we will begin with what I call “nature theory,” and move on to virtue ethics, natural law, contractarianism, deontology,

utilitarianism, and liberalism. I will send out electronic versions of some primary source material and may also bring relevant print-outs and photocopies of additional readings to class. Students are responsible for all material covered in lectures.

Here are some of the questions moral philosophy tries to answer: What is the difference between right and wrong? Are there universal, objective standards of moral evaluation that apply in all times and places to all rational beings? Are human beings naturally good or evil? Are there moral exceptions? Should we ever break a moral rule? What is the purpose of human life? Is morality a necessary ingredient of happiness? Is it rational to be moral? Can we have morality without God? Is morality, mere emotion? Are moral statements “true” or “false”? How should we define words such as “right,” “just,” “virtue,” “duty”?

The second (Winter semester) part of the ethics course deals with applied ethics as it relates to health-care issues broadly construed. Nurses and doctors but also pharmacists, coaches, physiotherapists, naturopaths, parents, school teachers make decisions regarding health issues. Contemporary applied ethics specializes in highly-focused and often controversial questions about specific practices or activities. It overlaps with political and social philosophy. The methodology is both positive and negative. When we take a position on a particular issue, we need, on the one hand, to be able to critique opposing views; and, on the other hand, to be able to provide positive reasons in support of our own considered opinion.

In medicine and in health-related fields, difficult ethical questions confront us on several fronts. Here are some questions from applied ethics relating to health issues: Do we have a *right* to basic health care? How do we allocate medical resources fairly? Is abortion morally acceptable? Human cloning? Stem-cell research? The buying and selling human organs? What are the

professional duties of a doctor, a nurse, a pharmacist? Can we do medical experiments on animals? On humans? Under what restrictions? What is wrong with pushing drugs? Should we supply clean needles to drug addicts who risk getting AIDS? Should there be rules against steroid use in sports? Do patients have “a right to die” (euthanasia)? Can a doctor or nurse assist in capital punishment? Can they supervise water-boarding (i.e. torture)? This course introduces students to philosophical thinking about these issues.

Required Text:

Louis Groarke, *Moral Reasoning: Rediscovering the Ethical Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2011): ISBN: 9780195425611.

I may choose a second textbook for the second term (for the applied ethics component of the course).

You need to bring the book to class; use it as a study guide; highlight passages; write in the margins; it will help you when it is time to review. The book does several things: It supplies a great deal of ‘primary source’ material; passages about important moral issues from the great thinkers down through the ages. Second, it provides an explanation of those passages, situating the authors in their historical context. Thirdly, it offers a series of examples to illustrate some of the issues we are studying. And fourthly, it offers a synopsis of each chapter and study questions.

Grading:

Philosophy is a difficult subject; it requires good verbal skills and a logical mind. It is not merely a matter of memorizing theories or concepts but of applying them in an insightful way to particular issues. Some students find essay-writing a real challenge; good communication skills are an essential part of your professional success. Good papers require an adequate grasp of vocabulary, grammatical proficiency, logical acumen, a proper attention to detail, reading

skills, objectivity (distancing ourselves from our own emotional commitments), fairness (dealing with both sides of an issue), critical independence, and originality. Papers will require the application of ethical concepts studied to specific issues.

This is an academic or theoretical course, pitched at a university level. (We do, at the same time, focus on the practical implications of ethical decision-making.) Marking will be fair; tests have questions of varying degrees of difficulty; essays are evaluated impartially. I do pay attention to the averages in my classes. I mark according to my best judgment (built up over many years of teaching--I consider this an important *ethical* duty) but I sometimes “curve” class marks. Please note that I may have help in marking. You will find the course material challenging but do not be intimidated.

Mark Break-Down:

First Semester:

Mid-Term Test: 15% (Oct. 17)

Final Term Exam: 20-25%

Second Semester:

(*Possible Mid-Term Quiz 10% of second semester mark if it occurs)

Applied-Cases Essay: 25-30% (March 27)

Comprehensive Final Exam: 30%

Both semesters:

Pop quizzes: up to 10%.

Participation mark: your mark may be nudged up or down (never more than plus or minus 5%), dependent on your attendance, and participation in class discussion. The professor’s judgment in all cases is final. See “**Participation.**”

I do not plan to have 2nd mid-term quiz; I usually find that students are busy enough with their major research papers; but I will give a mid-term test if I feel the class needs some extra encouragement. I will, however, give pop quizzes from time-to-time on assigned readings or on general issues. Dates of mid-terms and

essays are tentative.

Along with the essays, there will be two comprehensive tests with questions of varying degrees of difficulty. (I do pay attention to the class averages in my courses and “curve” marks if necessary. I mark according to my best judgement (built up over many years of teaching--I consider this an important *ethical* duty). In all cases the considered judgment of the professor is final.

Attendance:

I will take attendance. Good attendance means that you come to class on time, that you don’t leave in the middle unless absolutely necessary, that you listen attentively when the professor is lecturing, that you ask good questions and contribute to discussion. You cannot do well in a philosophy class if you miss lectures. Among other things, I will use the attendance-records and participation mark for “tie-breakers.” When someone is on the borderline between two marks, I tend to bump them up if they have participated vigorously in class discussion and have not missed class. Again, the professor’s good judgement in such cases is final.

Participation:

On a related point: it is your responsibility to make this a good class through class discussion. Along with attendance, I do notice how much individuals contributed to the class. Along with attendance, I may take this into account in formulating final marks.

N.B. Any student with three or more unexcused absences risks failing the course. In order to pass the course, the student must complete all tests and assignments.) The professor’s considered judgement in these matters is final.

Class Notes:

Previously, I had students take class notes for the entire class. There is no need for this now that the textbook has been completed. All that you need is contained in an easy and accessible format in the textbook.

Re: Take-home papers:

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense. More importantly it is seriously unethical. Offenders will be harshly dealt with. This includes copying on take-home assignments and on exams.

Students are *required* to keep an extra copy of their assignments on diskette or in hard copy. If an assignment goes missing, it is the *student's* responsibility to supply a replacement at short notice. Failure to do so will result in an incomplete assignment.

Courtesy:

Philosophy may involve heated discussion of very controversial subjects: religion, politics, sex, suicide, incest, pedophilia, circumcision, etc. Students must at all times display courteous behaviour towards the professor and towards all other students. You can disagree with your class-mates but you must argue *politely*. Disruptive behaviour in class will not be tolerated, but I do hope we enjoy some vigorous debate on related issues.

(Note that courtesy does not mean refraining from arguing. Philosophy is all about arguing! Forcefully but respectfully.)

§

NB: A student must complete all parts of the course to receive a passing mark. The professor's considered decision in unusual cases is final. Please note that I do NOT allow ANY electronics in the classroom unless you have my explicit permission in advance. Permission will be given only in exceptional circumstances. Anyone granted permission must sit in the first row.

§