

## *MORAL PHILOSOPHY, Spring 2010*

Clemente Course in the Humanities™

New Bedford, MA

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### *Course overview*

Most of us believe that we can judge right from wrong. Many of us believe that we know what it is to live a moral life. However, few of us are in a position to defend these beliefs, few of us have examined them in the cold, clear light of day and few of us have been placed in a position where these beliefs suddenly stop making sense. The study of moral philosophy can offer us a way to examine critically our moral principles, to uncover the foundations of morality and to give us a rationale for our judgments of right and wrong. Ultimately, we may wish to follow Socrates in his search for the truth in order to live a good life.

### *Course Structure*

The course is in five sections. The first section will examine the life and thought of the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. It will also provide an introduction to what philosophy “is” and how to “do” philosophy. The second section asks the still unanswered question posed to Socrates: Why should I be good? The third section examines the work of Aristotle, another ancient Greek philosopher, and considers how his philosophical thought might answer this question. The fourth section covers the work of two central figures of Western moral philosophy from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill. Among other things, we will explore the differences between their “ethics of action” and Aristotle’s “ethics of character.” The final section examines questions raised by the work of Kant and Mill about the need for goals and ideals that reflect human capacities, both our moral strengths and our moral weaknesses.

### *Course Objectives*

The objectives of this course are to introduce students to some of the different traditions in moral philosophy and to questions about the foundations of our moral thought. Students will learn how to read some classic texts of moral philosophy for both their content and their

argument structure. Students will also learn to produce arguments of their own and to develop the necessary writing skills to express those arguments.

### **Course Expectations**

Philosophy requires discussion. Please come to class having done the readings and be prepared to discuss them with both me and the others in the class. You cannot explore the ideas of the readings or raise arguments to support or critique these ideas unless you have done the readings carefully and thoroughly before the class session for which they are assigned.

### ***Course Policies***

Assignments should be typed in a 12 pt. font without large margins or spaces between paragraphs. It is not my policy to accept late papers unless you have a legitimate excuse and you have discussed it with me prior to the due date of the assignment.

### ***Schedule***

#### ***Section One: Introduction to moral philosophy and the notion of the good life.***

Monday, February 15<sup>th</sup> – Introduction + The allegory of The Cave (handout) + discussion of syllabus and assignment questions

Monday, February 22<sup>nd</sup> – Reading: Plato, *Apology*  
Includes session w/Dr. K.Torrens on arguments

Thursday, March 4<sup>th</sup> – Plato, *Crito*; finish *Apology*

Monday, March 15<sup>th</sup> – Plato, *Crito*

#### ***Section Two: Why should I be good ? The importance of morality.***

Monday March 22<sup>nd</sup> – Plato, *Republic* (handout) 358a-362c  
Includes session w/Dr. Jen Riley on writing

Thursday, April 1<sup>st</sup> – Plato, *Republic* (handout) 358a-362c + Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus” (handout)

***Section Three: What sort of person should I be ? Aristotle and virtue ethics.***

Monday, April 5<sup>th</sup> – Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, selections: Book I, Chapters 1, 4, 7-10; Book II, Chapters 1, 4, 5-9.

Monday April 19<sup>th</sup> – Aristotle, selections: Book III, Chapters 1-3; 6-9; Book IV, Chapter 1

***Section Four: What are the foundations of morality ? What ought I to do ?***

Monday, April 26<sup>th</sup> – Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapters one and two

Thursday, April 29<sup>th</sup> – Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, first section (9-22)

Thursday, May 6<sup>th</sup> – Kant, second section (22-57)

Thursday, May 13<sup>th</sup> – **PORTFOLIO**

***Monday, May 17<sup>th</sup> – Section Five: Moral Ideals/Moral Heroes.***  
Martin Luther King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” Mohandas K. Gandhi, “The Practice of Satyagraha.” (handouts)  
**PAPER DUE**

## ***ARISTOTLE 384 B.C.-322 B.C.***

TODAY'S OBJECTIVE: To get you to see that much of what Aristotle has to say about virtue (and especially specific virtues) still holds in the 21st.

NOTE: Aristotle has a reputation for being a somewhat confusing writer.

### Book I, Chapter 1

Everything aims at some (different) good.

### Book I, Chapter 4

Happiness is the highest of all goods.

Happiness is defined as “living well and doing well”; however, people do not agree as to what this is.

### Book I, Chapter 7

Everything we do has an end. But we want that end for the sake of something else: a good.

CG: For example, we exercise to get healthy. But why do we want to be healthy?

Happiness is the only end we choose for itself (its own sake).

CG: It is the supreme good or ultimate end of action.

See introduction vxii – for a good overview of the next section.

### Book I, Chapter 8

Happiness is a life of virtue. Living virtuously brings pleasure. However, we also need “external goods” (15 and 16).

### Book I, Chapter 9

Is happiness acquired through learning, habituation and cultivation or is it the result of fate (1)? It is better to be happy through our own efforts

and therefore this is the way we become happy (5). The happy person is one who is a good person who does fine actions. This is throughout a life.

### Book I, Chapter 10

But this is odd. Do we have to wait until someone is dead until we pronounce him or her happy (1)? No, Aristotle is arguing for a life of virtue, not a life of fortune. Fortune is unstable, while virtue can be stable throughout someone's life. A truly good person will deal well with misfortune and thus will not be unhappy.

### Book II, Chapter I

Virtue is of 2 types: virtue of thought and virtue of character. Virtue of thought is taught. Virtue of character comes from habit. We are not born virtuous; rather we are able by nature to become virtuous. In the same way that I become a musician by playing an instrument, I become just by repeatedly performing just actions.

### Book II, Chapter 4

What does it mean to say that we become, for example, just by performing just actions? It is not enough that we just do the action. We must do them in the way that, for example, a just person would do them: we must know what we are doing; we must choose to do the action; we must be in a firm and unchanging state (here he seems to mean we must be that kind of person).

### Book II, Chapter 5

Virtue is either a feeling, a capacity or a state. It cannot be a feeling or a capacity. Thus it is a state.

CG: I am afraid you are just going to have to accept this as an argument!

### Book II, Chapter 6

What kind of state is virtue? The virtue of a human being will be the state that makes a human being good and makes him perform his function well.

(10) Feelings and actions (which are what virtue of character is about) have two extremes, one of excess and one of deficiency. The intermediate between the two is virtue: it is the mean between two vices. This is relative to the individual. What might be brave for me to do might not be brave for you to do.

For example, too little pity is a bad thing, but too much is also bad. The virtuous person is one who has feelings “at the right times, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way” (11). The same follows for actions.

(18) Not every action or feeling has a mean. Some things are just automatically wrong.

### Book II, Chapter 7

List of excesses and means – handout

### Book II, Chapter 8

Not much going on here. The crucial point to notice is that sometimes one extreme is closer to the mean than the other (6-8).

### Book II, Chapter 9

It is hard to find the mean. We need to understand our own tendencies and pull ourselves in the opposite direction. We are not blamed if we deviate a little from the mean. However, we cannot say easily in general what actions might be blamed. These judgments will depend on the particulars of the situation.

## Background to Trial

Socrates never wrote anything down; he discussed philosophy in the streets of Athens. His mission was to expose the ignorance of those who thought themselves wise **and to try to convince people that we are each responsible for our moral attitudes**. He focused on finding out the truth, acquiring knowledge and the understanding of life and morality.

### Reading guide for the *Apology*.

The reading is like Plato's *Republic* in that it is in numbered sections which are then divided up into lettered sections, for example, 26c. Within each section you can then count off each line, for example, 26c3.

These questions will help you work your way through the main points of the *Apology*. Some are included for you just to follow the structure of the argument. Others are important because of their philosophical content (11 and 13 in particular).

### *General question*

This is Socrates' defense against the charges of 24b-c. Does it read like the speech of someone who is on trial potentially for his life ?

(1) What point is Socrates making in 18a ?

(2) Socrates does not begin by defending himself against the specific charges. Instead he focuses on old slanders. Why does he do this, and what are these old slanders ?

(3) What is Socrates saying in 20c3-23b about his wisdom, his unpopularity and his occupation ?

(4) 23c-e. Is Socrates responsible for the behavior of the young men who follow him ? What does Socrates say is the real reason people are angry at his relationship with the young men ?

*24b – Socrates says he has now dispensed with the “old charges” and he is ready to defend himself against the charges brought by Meletus.*

(5) Socrates then gets Meletus to be specific about the charge of corrupting the young.

What does Meletus believe ? 25 a

(6) 25b-26a – We will discuss Socrates’ rebuttal of the corruption charge in detail in class. What is his basic argument ?

*26b – Socrates then turns to the other charge(s): not believing in the gods of the city and believing in other new spiritual things.*

(7) 26c – He asks Meletus to clarify the charge(s). What is the charge ?

(8) 27a-28a – We will discuss Socrates’ rebuttal in detail in class. What is his basic argument ?

(9) Socrates says he does not fear death. 29 a-b – What is the connection between fearing death and ignorance ?

(10) 29d-30e – Why will Socrates not stop his work as a philosopher ?

*Socrates then explains that he is not politically active and has had no interest in politics.*

*He then explains that he will not bring his family into court in order to appeal to the emotions of the jurors. He asks only for impartiality.*

***Vote: 280 guilty; 221 innocent***

**Meletus asks for death as the punishment. Socrates offers a counter proposal. See the editor’s introduction for the workings of the Athenian justice system.**

(11) 38a6 – “the unexamined life....” is the famous phrase associated with Socrates. What do you think it means ?

***Vote: 360 death; 141 fine***

(12) What does Socrates have to say about death in 40b-41b ?

(13) 41c9-41d – What do you think Socrates means when he says that a good man cannot be harmed either in life or death ?

