PHILOSOPHY 2120-01

ETHICS

Fall 2010

MWF 11:30-12:20

Macdonald Institute (MINS) 300

COURSE OUTLINE

Instructor: Peter Loptson
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Office Hours: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 1:30-2:30 pm, and other times by appointment.

T.A. for course: Karen Robertson
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Office Hour: Wednesdays, 1:00-2:00 pm
(Note: during the weeks of October 18-22, and November 15-19, Karen will have two office hours, Wednesdays, 12:30-2:30 pm)

Text: Oliver A. Johnson and Andrews Reath, eds., *Ethics: Selections from Classical and Contemporary Writers.* Thomson/Wadsworth. Tenth Edition, 2007.

Assignments for course: (1) Two one-page essays—5% each—summarizing and evaluating the main points of the readings assigned for Monday 20 September and Wednesday 13 October, due in class on those dates; (2) midterm test–20%–Friday 22 October; (3) term paper, approximately 2500-2600 words, typed, double-spaced–30%–due Friday 19 November–topics for the paper will be given out by Friday 29 October; (4) final examination–40%. (Note: in cases of term papers handed in late, there will be a late penalty of 1% per day for every day past the due date; in the cases of the one-page assignments the late penalty will be 10% per day.)

The midterm test and the final exam will be primarily focussed on the readings. They will consist of essay-type questions, possibly also with questions which ask you to explain the meanings of terms encountered in the readings. For the term paper, you will have a set of possible topics to choose among. In the term paper you will have an opportunity to set out your own ideas on a

moral topic or question, and argue for a view which you find persuasive.

Ethics, or *Moral Philosophy*, is the study of what is (morally) good, bad, right, and wrong, and why it is. It studies as well how we ought to live, individually, and as a society; and what we ought to do, in individual cases and situations, where moral aspects of what we are confronted with are involved; and more generally, where we try to formulate principles or policies which seem to be the best ones for handling ethical questions which an individual, and a society, may face. In approaching ethical issues philosophically, it is not assumed or taken for granted that there *is* a morally right outcome, or fact of the matter. *That*–whether there is any such thing as objective moral value or truth–is itself one of the topics or questions which moral philosophy explores. Some philosophers think that there are objective truths about what is good, or the right thing to do, and others do not. And where philosophers agree that there are objective truths as to what is right and wrong, they sometimes disagree about what those truths are, and often disagree about *why* those truths are correct, i.e., about what the basis of something's being good or bad, or just or unjust, is.

In this course we will explore whether ethics can be rationally justified. We will consider whether (so-called) morality might be purely subjective, or just a matter of individual or societal taste or preference, or a set of ideas and practices that are entirely *relative* to a particular society, or social class, or culture, or historical period. In the course of our readings we will encounter four main or central theoretical *bases* which have been advanced and advocated for an action, state of affairs, or person being good, just, or right (or their opposites). The four theories are called: 1) *divine command theory*–basically, the idea that something is right because it is what God commands, or prefers; 2) *egoism*–the basic idea here is that everyone should seek primarily their own benefit or advantage (perhaps because, as some egoists hold, that is what everyone is bound to do anyway); 3) *consequentialism*–the view that what is right and good is basically a matter of *results*, or *consequences*, especially a matter of what tends to produce the most overall *happiness*; and 4) *deontology*–where the central idea is that what is right and good is independent of any results, and that morality is fundamentally a matter of *fairness*, of ensuring that what applies in one kind of situation will apply in others that are similar. Deontology gives special prominence to *justice*, and to obligation, and duty. All moral theories need to give an account of justice, and we will go on to discuss what that very central idea involves. Some investigations of morality take still a different approach than trying to decide what makes right actions right. They focus instead on how a person should live, and what traits of character make for being a good person, and why. We will discuss some views of this kind. We will also explore a perspective that starts from the experiences of women. Some philosophers have argued that much or most of the theoretical bases itemized have tended to neglect or ignore women's lives and points of view, and have advanced *feminist* moral theories as corrective or more adequate bases for thinking about what is right and good. In addition to ethical *theory*, philosophers also explore concrete cases and situations which involve moral considerations. This area is called, broadly, applied ethics. With some ethical theory in our background, we will conclude our investigation of ethics with the discussion of some particular moral issues.

Our text proceeds in an historical order, beginning with ethical problems and theories formulated and addressed in ancient and then medieval philosophy. We go on to moral theory of the 'modern' period—for us this is the span from 1651 to 1886—and then writings from the

twentieth century. Among the philosophers whose distinctive moral theories we will be discussing are Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Hobbes, Hume, Kant, Mill, and Rawls.

Readings from our texts will be assigned for each class. It is very important that you read the material assigned before each class, and that you come to class (unless you are gravely ill!). Our aim will be to discuss and evaluate the ideas and arguments developed in the readings, and to go beyond them to try to come to conclusions that seem convincing–or to see what the problems may be with arriving at a satisfactory conclusion if a question has seemed insoluble.