

Ph4103  
History of Ethics  
C. F. Sills, Ph.D.

**Course Description**

Why are present-day debates in ethics so likely to quickly dissolve into rancorous *ad hominem* attacks?

How is it that what should be the reasoned inquiry into the proper domains of justice and mercy, and into our rightful obligations to each other, so frequently becomes the sad recognition that we seem to inhabit a plurality of moral universes, with nothing but political or judicial power to adjudicate our differences?

Might a brief inquiry into the history of ethics shed light on present-day confusions and disagreements?

This course will introduce the history of ethics, exploring classical texts and contemporary views. We will consider the recent controversial theses of Alasdair MacIntyre, Eric Voegelin, and Michael Oakeshott that the study of the movement of human thought and aspiration called for convenience "the enlightenment" may help to untangle the threads of our current situation.

**Required Texts**

Michael L. Morgan, ed., *Classics of Moral and Political Theory* (Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis\Cambridge, 1992) 1st edition preferred (contains Aquinas selections omitted from later editions) ISBN 0-87220-126-0 (paper); later editions acceptable.

C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man: How Education Develops Man's Sense of Morality* (Harper, 2001), ISBN 0060652942, paper

Sophocles, *Antigone, in the Three Theban Plays*, ISBN 0140444254 (Many translations acceptable; all available in paper)

Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1987) ISBN #0-226-71646-5

Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues*, Notre Dame University Press, ISBN 65-14713

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Second edition (Notre Dame University Press, ISBN 0-268-00611-3

Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, ed. Timothy Fuller (Liberty Press, ISBN 0-86597-095-5

Eric Voegelin, Vol. 12 of *Collected Works; Published Essays 1966-1985*, University of Missouri Press, ISBN 0-8071-1595-9

## **Course Schedule**

### **Session 1:**

Required Reading:

Morgan, Plato's *Apology, Crito* (Suggestion: Readings should be done before listening to lectures).

Lecture 1:

Introduction to Problems in the History of Ethics (includes course overview)

### **Session 2: Ethics of Divine Command**

Required Reading:

*Antigone* (Supplemental recommended reading: Genesis I-XXIII; Exodus XX; Gospel of Matthew IV, V, XVI, XXII)

Lecture 2:

Divine Command as the Basis of Ethics-a brief history and critique

### **Session 3: Ethics of Virtue**

Required Reading:

Morgan, selections from Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. (Supplemental Recommended reading: Josef Pieper, *The Four Virtues* ; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*)

Lecture 3:

Virtue as Quality and Character

### **Session 4: The Ethics of Natural Law**

Required Reading:

C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man, Antigone.*, Morgan, selections from *Epicurus & Epictetus*. (Supplemental recommended reading: Epistle to the Romans I, II)

Lecture 4:

Natural Law in the History of Ethics

### **Session 5: The Watershed: the Enlightenment as Attempted Moral Revolution**

Required Reading:

Morgan, selections from Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Hume, Rousseau.

Lecture 5:

The Enlightenment as Moral Catastrophe: the Oakeshott-Voegelin-MacIntyre thesis

### **Session 6: The Enlightenment Watershed (continued)**

Lecture 6:

The Post-Enlightenment "Climate of opinion": Phenomenalism , Rationalism, Scientism as ideologies peculiar to modernity--Influence on Ethics

Recommended Supplementary Reading:

Michael Oakeshott, "Rationalism in Politics" (In *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, ed. Timothy Fuller; Eric Voegelin, "Reason: the Classical Experience" and "On Classical Studies" (Both in vol. 12 of *Collected Works*); Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame University Press); Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (University of Chicago Press) Lectures 5 & 6 will summarize and synthesize supplemental recommended reading.

### **Session 7: Kant: The "Metaphysics of Morals"**

Required Reading:

Morgan, selections from Kant

Lecture 7:

Rationalism in Ethics I: Kant

Recommended Supplementary Reading:

Leszek Kolakowski, "Kant" in *Modernity on Endless Trial*

### **Session 8: Utilitarianism: the pseudo-science of Modernist Ethics**

Required Reading:

Morgan, Selection by Mill on Utilitarianism

Lecture 8:

Rationalism in Ethics II: The Utilitarians

### **Session 9: The Therapeutic Revolution in Ethics**

Required Reading:

Rieff, esp. chi. Introductory thru 5, and 8

Lecture 9:

Rationalism in Ethics III: the "Triumph of the Therapeutic"

### **Session 10: The Present as Crisis and Opportunity**

Lecture 10:

The Present as History: Prospects for the Retrieval of Christian Humanist Tradition: discerning the order of battle in the present-day "Culture Wars"

### **Assessments**

Students' coursework will be assessed through completion of the following:

A Term Paper (minimum 15 pp. typed, double-spaced) is required. Suggested topics available from instructor or students may choose their own topics in consultation with the Instructor. (40%)

Comprehensive Final Exam. Exam will consist of six essay questions, of which students may select three. Students have three hours to complete the Final Exam. (30%)

Contributions to threaded discussions. (30%)