BUS 407 – Professional and Personal Ethics

SYLLABUS (PART II) – IN-DEPTH DESCRIPTION AND THEORY OF THE COURSE

In General

Ethics is a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the general nature of moral values and the specific moral choices that result in living the “good life.”

Reflect for a while! What is your idea of the good life? Do people who are important to you–your family and friends, your lover, your living partner, your employer, your co-workers–share your view? Since this is a course satisfying the comparative values requirement, you will be comparing your values to those of others.

As you might suspect, there is no universal agreement about what is required to live the good life. We will study several ideas about it. For example, teleology (aka, consequentialism) states that the only moral actions are those that have good consequences such as increasing happiness and reducing pain. To a consequentialist, living the good life means bringing happiness to yourself and others. In contrast to teleological ethics, deontology bases moral action on duty. We have a duty to do (or not do) certain things, even if the consequences of doing our duty in a particular case are bad.

Another view of ethics and morality, aretic ethics, states that a person lives the good life by possessing certain character traits such as generosity and honesty. The traits of "good character" are called virtues.

"It is morally as bad not to care whether a thing is true or not, so long as it makes you feel good, as it is not to care how you got your money as long as you have it."

-- E.W. Teale

Applied Ethics

Where the rubber meets the road. While the above ideas of ethics are accurate ones from a philosopher’s point of view, they do not adequately capture what we will be doing in this class. The philosophers’ approach to ethics is to think about it. Their goal is to formulate logical arguments about how one should act. But this is not a philosophy course. Instead, we will be engaged in a process of learning how to actually make the right choices. True, we need to know the ideas and arguments of the great thinkers, but our goal is to apply the philosophers’ ideas so to actually live the good life. Accordingly, much of your effort will be spent in developing some skills that will help you make good moral decisions.

** In this class, we will use the terms ethical and moral interchangeably.
**Applied ethics** is first and foremost a decision-making process—a process which assures that the reasons we have for a moral choice (action or belief) are better than the reasons for some other choice.

This central idea of applied ethics says that *some choices are better than others are*. Now, if faced with a choice of either stealing or not stealing a car parked on the street because we like it, it is clear what the moral (better) choice is. Some choices, like this one, are obvious. However, we are concerned with the most difficult ones that we commonly call *moral dilemmas*.

"It don't take a genius to spot a goat in a herd of sheep."

--A Cowboy Zen Master

**A moral dilemma** is any predicament that arises from the impossibility of honoring all of the moral obligations that deserve to be honored.

**But wait! Use your imagination.** What would be a situation where the decision to steal the car or not would present a moral dilemma?

**Assess Yourself!** First, on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being best) how do you rate your present ability to make decisions about the right thing to do? Now, how do you assure yourself that your judgments and decisions about right and wrong are accurate?

**Applied Ethics and Conflict Resolution:** Anyone who has an active personal and professional life will inevitably become enmeshed in disputes with others—coworkers, employers, neighbors, and strangers. Often, our bitterest and most intractable disputes are with those we care the most about, and one measure of the good life is how we choose to resolve these issues. When we are having a conflict with another person we necessarily make decisions about how we are going to arrive at a solution to disputes. **Ethics** requires us to resolve conflicts in ways that promote the well-being of not just ourselves, but the well-being of others as well.

**Take a minute to reflect.** What are some of the conflicts you have had in your personal life that you feel were resolved well? What are some that you feel you handled badly? Are there any that you have been unable to resolve at all, or which even seem to grow worse? In reflecting back on the way these conflicts were handled, how did you decide which were resolved well and which were resolved badly?

**Use you imagination!** What are some conflicts that you can reasonably anticipate encountering in your professional life?
“For every problem there is a solution that is neat, simple, and wrong.”

--H.L. Mencken

The Moral Minimum, the *Sine Qua Non of this course*

Regardless of our individual beliefs about what is right and wrong, in this course we assume that there is a *universal* ethical standard for making decisions; this standard is called the “*minimum conception of morality*” (or, more simply, the “*moral minimum*”). The structure, content, and pedagogy of this course are built on this concept, and as you go through the process of cognitive moral development you will become more and more proficient in applying it.

In short, the moral minimum obligates all of us to be: (1) rational, and (2) impartial when making moral decisions. (Rachels, 11-15) The first requirement – to be rational – demands that we back our judgments and actions with the best reasons. This means that we must (a) search out complete and accurate facts that describe the conflict we need to resolve, and (b) apply a universal moral principle to these facts. Rationality requires two kinds of expertise that this course is designed to teach you.

- **Expertise in Facts.** Getting accurate, complete, and vivid facts of a moral dilemma (or conflict), and the ability to weigh the facts are cognitive skills that are not innate – they must be learned. A common assignment in this class is the “Evidentiary Analysis” and is designed to help you develop your fact analysis skills.

- **Expertise in Concepts.** A concept is a well-defined idea that has a name. In this course the ideas are about how to make choices – make decisions – about right and wrong (See Part I, “Core Concepts and Skills Used in Applies Ethics”). You will need to do more than memorize their definitions; you must deeply learn them.

Our goal in this course is to utilize learning theory in a way that will help you quickly attain deep mastery of the course concepts and deep skill in evidentiary analysis.

The second element of the moral minimum – impartiality – requires us to make judgments and take actions only after carefully taking into account the interests of others. The obligation to be impartial is a renunciation of ethical egoism, a concept that says that looking out for our self-interest is the only moral obligation we have. Impartiality, on the other hand, says that we can consider our own interests in our ethical decision-making, but we cannot give them undue weight relative to the interests of others.

Once again for emphasis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The <strong>moral minimum</strong> imposes on all of us two duties, or obligations:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) To be rational. In the context of ethical decision making this means that we must:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(a) First, have complete and accurate facts, <strong>and</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Then apply a universal moral principle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) To be impartial.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This is a simple formula to understand; but – as you will see – the fact that you are human makes this very difficult to apply.

**Moral Growth: Developing Cognitive Skills in Moral Reasoning and Decision-Making**

*We think we are so good!* Think again. It is part of being human that we are prone to overestimating our competence at things we are not very good at, and moral decision-making falls into that category for most people. In reality, we are often derailed by a number of systematic cognitive barriers to making effective moral choices. One such barrier is that we all have a tendency to think we are already good at moral reasoning. This is what I call the “Lake Wobegon Bias.” (Lake Wobegon is a fictional town created by humorist and storyteller, Garrison Keillor, and is a place where “all of the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all of the children are above average.”) Cognitive psychologists call this the *overconfidence bias*, but, by whatever name, it is an example of one of many cognitive problems that afflict human beings and keep us from making the best decisions we can. Another example of a cognitive bias is *evidence blindness*; this is the tendency to ignore evidence that contradicts our deeply held beliefs and pre-mature judgments about right and wrong. As described next, the problems of overconfidence, evidence blindness, and other cognition problems in moral decision-making can be avoided if we experience and feel *cognitive disequilibrium*.

**Learning to feel comfortable with discomfort:** This class will take a nontraditional approach to applied ethics; it will help you develop and improve the *cognitive skills* needed to make the best possible moral choices in your activities and relationships, both personal and professional. If you master these skills they will help promote your *moral growth* throughout your lifetime. In this course, "moral growth" refers to a process of progressively moving towards a consistent use of *universal moral principles* in deciding what we should do and believe. The fancy term for this process is *cognitive moral development*. Moral growth, i.e., moving to a higher level of cognitive moral development, most often occurs when we experience *cognitive disequilibrium*.

**Cognitive Disequilibrium** is what we feel when we realize that our way of thinking about what is right and wrong is inadequate; we then seek, consciously or unconsciously, a more effective way of thinking. (Notice that this is not the same as *cognitive dissonance*.)

Cognitive Disequilibrium is often an unpleasant experience, but like they say, "No pain, no gain." Therefore, the over-arching purpose of the "cognitive skills approach" in this course is to show you ways to become comfortable with cognitive disequilibrium and to use it to promote your moral growth.

One way to experience cognitive disequilibrium is through the process of self-assessment described earlier, but it takes time to make this a habitual practice. For those at the lower stages of cognitive moral development (see the section “Core Concepts” below), the most effective way to become aware of our biases is by interacting with others who are at the higher levels. We are not all equally skilled or equally developed morally. Those with higher levels of skill are obligated to give constructive feedback to the less skilled. But, be aware
that the very biases we are trying to overcome tend to cause us to interpret constructive feedback as insults, and we do not like to hear it! However, one of the requirements of this course is that we learn to accept and use the cognitive disequilibrium created by the mutual give and take of negative, but constructive, feedback. Every effort will be made to assure that the dignity of everyone is respected.

"Dark clouds may hang o'er me sometimes, but I'll work it out..."

--Dave Matthews Band, "Dancing Nancies"

In the Interest of Full Disclosure:

**Horribly Uncomfortable Truth # 1** – The Moral Minimum requires us to have complete and accurate facts when we go about making moral choices, but we often overlook facts about ourselves. One of the objectives of this course is to provide ways for you to examine your personal life. One ethicist refers to this as a process of discovering your “moral soul.” In this class you will be expected to question your understanding of yourself. This can be an uncomfortable task, but to “know thyself” is absolutely necessary if you are to be successful in using moral reasoning to make the moral choices you will inevitably face. Remember, cognitive disequilibrium is our friend!

**Horribly Uncomfortable Truth # 2** – There Is No "Stone Tablet" in this course, so please resist the notion that you will come down from the mountain top with a list of "Thou shall's" and "Thou shalt not's." This is not a class where you will learn a prescribed list of correct behaviors. Such a list is totally useless without knowledge of virtually every conceivable situation and conflict you are likely to be confronted with in your life; common sense tells us that is impossible! You will instead be developing a set of cognitive skills to help you determine for yourself the right thing to do in a particular situation.

**Horribly Uncomfortable Truth #3** – People often have different opinions about right and wrong, but not all opinions are equally worthy. Your opinion might be accused of being wrong, but do not be offended if that happens – learn from it!

| What do you think about this? | Isn't it true that if all we are ever told by someone are the things we want to hear that maybe they are not being honest with us? If someone will avoid the truth to protect our feelings, can we be sure they won't also lie to us for other reasons? By the same token, if we hide the truth about our feelings and judgments as we have them, aren't these “lies” to manipulate others into thinking we are someone we are not? Trust cannot exist when truth is hidden. Truth, even the hard truth, can be revealed with sensitivity and with respect. |

---

All I wanted was to live a normal life.

Wyatt, there is no normal life. There is just life. That's all. The rest is relative.