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PH 705 Ethical Theory and Christian Moral Frameworks

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PH 705 Syllabus
Ethical Theory and Christian Moral Frameworks
Spring 2008
Instructor: Kevin Kinghorn

I. WELCOME FROM KEVIN KINGHORN

Welcome! Let me start off by clarifying the subject matter of this class. Within the field of ethics, there are three general 'levels' of ethical inquiry. (Or, we might say that there are three kinds of things a person could examine.) First, there is the subject matter of applied ethics (sometimes called practical ethics). In applied ethics, we take a specific topic—abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research, etc.—and try to arrive at the conclusion whether some act of euthanasia is a good thing or a bad thing. Or perhaps we try to determine whether it is a morally right act or a morally wrong act. So, in applied ethics we try to reach a conclusion about the moral status of an act of euthanasia, or war, or stem cell research, etc.

The second 'level' of ethical inquiry is called normative ethics. Discussions in normative ethics focus on the question of what makes any action good or bad (or right or wrong). Put another way, the question in normative ethics is: What conditions have to be met before we could call any action good or bad (or right or wrong)? For example, someone might claim that an action is right if it corresponds to the will of God; or if it stems from a loving motivation; or if it is performed by a virtuous person; or if it has the consequence of advancing the well-being of the most people, or advancing the well-being of the most sentient creatures. Whereas practical ethics, as we saw, is a discussion about whether a particular action (e.g., going to war) is right or wrong, normative ethics ‘takes a step back’ and asks: “Well, what is it that makes any action right or wrong?”

The third ‘level’ of ethical inquiry is called metaethics. In metaethics, we take a further ‘step back’ from normative ethics and examine the meaning of ethical terms themselves. What is the meaning of terms like ‘right’ or ‘good’? The metaethicist notes that, in both practical ethics and normative ethics, we use these terms over and over. The metaethicist then asks us to define these terms that we’ve been using. What do people mean when they make a moral statement—e.g., that “slavery is wrong”? Is this statement simply an expression of the speaker’s own emotional reaction to the thought of a human being kept in bondage? Is it a prescription, or directive, by the speaker that people not enslave other humans? Is it an observation that, as a society, we’ve agreed that
slavery is a reprehensible violation of another person’s rights? Is it a claim that, as an objective fact about our world, slavery is wrong—regardless of whether anyone recognizes this fact? And if so, is this objective fact something we can discover in the natural world (like scientists discover that lemons contain vitamin C) or must we use some special ‘moral sense’ in order to apprehend this fact? These questions are ones that metaethicists address.

Of the three ‘levels’ of ethical inquiry, this class will cover the 2nd and 3rd (normative ethics and metaethics). In not covering the subject matter of applied ethics, I should stress that this does not at all mean that the subject matter of this class is somehow not practical. Indeed, I see the material in this class as exceedingly practical. And I’ll offer two reasons.

First, in order to engage properly with any issue in applied ethics—e.g., whether euthanasia is wrong, whether stem cell research is a good practice, etc.—, we must first arrive at a normative ethic. After all, if we are to determine whether any particular action (e.g., a stem cell experiment) is morally right or wrong, we must first have an understanding of the conditions under which any action becomes right or wrong. If we are to engage in serious moral inquiry, we must settle upon the conditions for moral goodness or moral rightness; and then we will be in a position to discuss whether some particular action meets these conditions. Moreover, before we can engage fully in normative ethical questions like the conditions for goodness or rightness, we must first come to an understanding of what terms like ‘good’ and ‘right’ mean. Are these terms used, e.g., to express a personal emotion? To make a claim about some objective fact? To do something else? Only after settling questions about the meanings of moral terms can we then go on to use them in normative ethical—and then practical ethical—discussions. So, in sum, any serious discussion of euthanasia, stem cell research, just war, etc. will need to build upon the conclusions one reaches on meta- and normative ethical issues. True, much of the public debate about just war and stem cell research does not make reference to the meta- and normative ethical assumptions that each debater is making. And the result is that we often talk past each other and inevitably confuse a number of issues that need to be kept distinct.

The second reason I find the subject matter of PH705 particularly relevant to us today is that we live in an era commonly called ‘post-modernism’. One of the key cultural threats to Christian influence and orthodoxy these days is often purported to be the post-modern attack on ‘objective truth’. Within these frequent discussions about ‘truth’, a number of key issues again typically become confused with one another. These issues fall within the scope of normative ethics and metaethics. If we can become clear about what distinct issues exist within these two ‘levels’ of ethics, and if we can come to see how these issues relate to each other, and if we can develop a Christian response to these issues, then we will go a long way toward possessing the tools needed for deep, serious engagement with the post-modern understandings of ‘objectivity’ and ‘truth’.
Now that I’ve introduced the course material, I’ll briefly introduce myself. I’m currently an assistant professor at ATS, having been an M.Div student at Asbury in the early 1990s. Most of classes I teach at Asbury are ExL courses (like this one 😊). One good thing about the internet is that we can live anywhere in the world and still be in the same on-line class together. For me, this is indeed a good thing, as I actually live most of the year in Oxford, England, where I have a part-time position as the philosophy tutor for undergraduates at Wycliffe Hall (one of the colleges that comprise Oxford University).

II. COURSE AND LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As with any course I teach at Asbury, the ultimate goal I have for this course is that it would help equip us: (1) to become deeper and more complete lovers of the Truth; and (2) to become more effective ambassadors of Jesus Christ.

More specifically, there are a number of course and learning objectives for PH705:

(1) We will come to appreciate the force of David Hume’s influential argument that moral statements reflect our desires, not our beliefs.

(2) We will become able to identify the modern forms of Hume’s non-cognitivist approach—such as emotivism and prescriptivism—, as well as their shortcomings.

(3) We will learn to offer a satisfactory response to J.L. Mackie’s proposal that we fall into error when we assume that we could ever perceive some ‘moral truth’.

(4) We will learn to identify and assess the constructivist challenge that moral facts exist as constructions of someone’s or some group’s judgment.

(5) We will come to appreciate the historical debate (among those who affirm the existence of objective moral facts) as to whether a study of moral facts can be reduced to a study of the subject matter within the natural sciences and psychology.

(6) We will develop an understanding of the different ways philosophers have understood the nature of ‘the good’; and we will develop our own views on whether something can only be ‘good’ if it is good for someone.

(7) We will acquire a general knowledge of the three traditional approaches in normative ethics to determining a ‘right’ action: consequentialism; deontology; and virtue theory.

(8) We will become better able to discern the un-stated meta and normative ethical assumptions within position papers on moral issues.
(9) We will gain a better understanding of the issues at play within current discussions regarding ‘absolute truth’.

(10) We will develop our own understanding of what methodology we as Christians should adopt in determining what makes for a ‘right’ action.

(11) We will gain a better appreciation for—as well as ability to assess critically—various non-theistic and theistic answers to the question ‘Why should I be moral?’

(12) We will develop our own Christian framework for ethics.

III. REQUIRED TEXTS


(2) Reading Packet (available from ATS bookstore)

Contact information for Asbury’s bookstore: (859) 858-4242
exlbooks@asburyseminary.edu

IV. COURSE SCHEDULE

9 modules will be posted in the Course Center. Each module has its own assignment. Typically, the assignment will be to read various articles and book chapters, and then post answers to questions in your team folder (as well as post responses to other team members’ posts). For modules 06 and 09, however, the sole assignment will be to write a paper. Module due dates and required readings are given below. For each due date, assignments are due by 11:59 p.m. Eastern Time that day.

I. METAETHICS

MODULE 01 – Due Fri. February 22: Non-Cognitivist Theories
*David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, §II.iii.3 (web)*
*A Companion to Ethics, #35 (Realism)*
*Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, chpt. 1 (RP)*
*A Companion to Ethics, #40 (Universal Prescriptivism)*

MODULE 02 – Due Wed. March 5: Cognitivist Theories, part I: Non-Realism
Mackie’s Error Theory
*J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, chpt. 1 (RP)*
Non-Relative Constructivism

*Summary of Roderick Firth’s article, “Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer Theory”, (in Course Center)

Relative Constructivism

*A Companion to Ethics, #39 (Relativism)
*Gilbert Harman, The Nature of Morality chpts. 8-9 (RP)

MODULE 03 – Due Mon. March 17: Cognitivist Theories, part II: Realism (and the Realist debate over Naturalism)

*G.E. Moore, Principia Ethica, §§ 1-15, 24-26. (web)
*A Companion to Ethics, #36 (Intuitionism); #37 (Naturalism)
*Kevin Kinghorn, The Ethics of Christian Self-Determination, chpt. 1 (in Course Center)

II. Normative Ethics

MODULE 04 – Due Wed. March 26: The nature of Goodness

*A Companion to Ethics, #20 (Utility and the Good)
*Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, bk. I. (web)
* Robert Adams, Finite and Infinite Goods, chpt. 3 (RP)
*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, “Well-Being” (Available at: plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being)
*Kevin Kinghorn, The Ethics of Christian Self-Determination (in Course Center)

MODULE 05 – Due Mon. April 7: Approaches to the question: ‘What is Right?’

*A Companion to Ethics, #17 (Deontology); #19 (Consequentialism); #21 (Virtue Theory); #22 (Rights)
*J.S. Mill, Utilitarianism, chpts. 2 & 5 (web)
*R.M. Hare, Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method and Point, chpt. 9 (RP)
*R.M. Adams, Finite and Infinite Goods, chpt. 10 (RP)

MODULE 06 – Due Fri. April 18: **First Paper**

*Chuck Gutenson, “Absolute Truth” (in Course Center)

III. God’s Relation to What is Right

MODULE 07 – Mon. April 28: The Christian approach to determining what is right

*Adams, Finite and Infinite Goods, chpts. 11-12 (RP)
*Robert Adams, Finite and Infinite Goods, chpts. 9 (RP)
MODULE 08 – Mon. May 12: Why Should I be moral?
* A Companion to Ethics, #13 (Natural Law); #14 (Kantian Ethics); #15 (The Social Contract Tradition)
* Plato, Republic, bk. 2 (web)
* T. Hobbes, Leviathan, chpts. 13-17 (web)
* D. Hume, Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, §§5, 9; Appendix II. (web)
* R.M. Hare, Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method and Point, chpt. 11 (RP)
* M.C. Murphy, An Essay on Divine Authority, chpt. 7 (RP)

MODULE 09 – Due Wed. May 21: **Second Paper**

* Note on due dates: When each module (except for modules 06 and 09) is posted in the Course Center, there will be two due dates given. One date is for your initial answers to the assigned questions within each module; the other date is for your responses to the answers your other team members have provided. Please read the modules carefully and take note of the two due dates within each module. I will post a Discussion Summary for each lesson on (or sometimes just before) the day that answers are due for that lesson. Thus, I will offer my own thoughts on the questions I’ve assigned for each module only after you’ve had a chance to wrestle with the questions yourself. (At the same time, I will provide a basic introduction to the material for each lesson; and this written introductory lecture will be contained in the module assignment itself. Also, please do feel free to post any questions you might have at any time as you go through the readings. It’s what I’m here for!) After I post my Discussion Summary, you can continue to post your responses to other team members’ answers, perhaps taking on board some of the points of clarification I try to make in the Discussion Summaries.

V. HOW WE WILL COMMUNICATE WITH ONE ANOTHER

discussion center
Every module assignment will ask you to answer 2-4 questions and to respond/reply to at least 2 other classmates’ answers.

If you have any general questions about assignments, sudden explanatory revelations regarding difficult material, etc.—post all such items here. Unless the class size is unduly small (which would be a rarity indeed), you will be
assigned to a team. Each team will include up to ten students. Each team has its own Discussion Center; and your answers and responses to the questions for each lesson should be posted in your team's Discussion Center. Typically, I will not post responses in the discussion threads here—though I do read through the answers and responses in each team's discussion center. If you have a particular question or issue to which you would like me specifically to respond, then please post such a question in the general Discussion Center to which the entire class has access. The day each module is due, I will post a Discussion Summary of the material just covered. Again, given that my discussion summaries come after the assignments are due, please do feel free to post in the general Discussion Center any questions about the readings that crop up along the way. Also, if you have any general questions about assignments, please post such items in the general Discussion Center. Finally, if you have any prayer requests/praises (please feel free to post them), they can go here (as well as in Asbury's general 'Prayer News' folder, which the whole ExL community can read). The Discussion Center is a Public Forum, in that all of us in PH705 can read and respond to all the messages posted there. This will be our primary method of communication with one another.

archive center
7-10 days after posting the discussion summary for each module/lessons, I will move all the threaded discussions from that module into the Archive Center. You can access and read any of the material in the Archive Center at any time during the semester, but the Archive Center will not allow you to post messages there.

my (online) office
Any personal messages to me (problems getting an assignment in on time, suggestions for how the course structure might be altered/improved, etc.) should be sent to me at my office (click on "office" icon within your PH705 folder). This is a Private Forum in that only I will see these messages, and my replies to you will go to your private mailbox. Your two assigned papers (from modules 06 and 09) should be sent to my office via an attachment to an e-mail. (This is done by sending an e-mail to my office and attaching your paper, which you will save as an "rtf document" (or .doc document if you use Microsoft Word as I do).

VI. COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING ASSESSMENTS

In addition to the required readings found in each assigned module, each assignment will ask you to answer 3-5 questions and to respond to two other classmates' posted answers. Each answer should be a paragraph or two. While we won't be too strict about making sure that every sentence is grammatically impeccable, we will stay away from 'cyber slang' and 'stream of consciousness' writing in these assignments.
The two assigned papers in modules 06 and 09 are to be formal papers. I'm of the firm opinion that, as ambassadors of Christ Jesus, we are called to communicate clearly to the world in which we find ourselves. Consequently, in assessing the overall line of argument in your papers, I will look to see whether that line of argument is clear, smooth, and uninterrupted by grammatical and spelling mistakes. With that said, I leave up to you specific format questions such as how to format footnotes if you choose to include them (they’re not required), whether to use 1st or 3rd person while writing, etc.. You are free to write in whatever style best helps you communicate your line of argument.

How grades will be assigned:

For each of the modules, each student will be expected to give thoughtful answers to all assigned questions, as well as responses to other classmates' answers to the assigned questions. I would expect the answers to each question to be thoughtful and to be 1-2 paragraphs—as opposed to superficial, 1-2 short sentences. 25% of students’ final grades for the class will stem from these posts, which constitute our online ‘class discussion’. I won’t assign a specific grade to your posts for each module; I simply make a note in my grade book that the posts either: (1) fulfilled class guidelines; (2) fell short in some way of class guidelines; or (3) surpassed class guidelines/requirements. Then, at the end of the semester I'll look through my grade book and assign a grade for this portion of your final, overall grade. And I’ll give you a friendly reminder if your posts are tending to fall a bit short of class guidelines. ☺

The remaining 75% of a student’s overall grade for the course will be determined by two papers assigned in the course. The first paper (module 06) will be a 2,000 word paper (approx. 6-7 pages double spaced) and will constitute 25% of your final grade. The second paper (module 09) will be a 3,000-4,000 word paper (approx. 10-14 pages double spaced) and will constitute 50% of your final grade.

As far as the different expectations students may bring to Asbury as to grading systems, I do note that Asbury’s academic catalog defines B-level work as that which significantly accomplishes course objectives, while A-level work is defined as that which surpasses course objectives.

My general guidelines for paper grades are as follows:

A = Superior essay that shows a good and accurate familiarity with the relevant readings and material, which is integrated into a student’s own philosophically detailed, unified, flowing line of argument. This line of argument leads to a strong and well-supported conclusion that answers the assigned essay question. Various possible objections to the line of argument and conclusion are considered along the way and are dealt with adequately. Structure of paper is
clear and the overall line of argument is not at all interrupted by poorly written sentences or problems of grammar.

A- = An essay of very good quality, though the conclusion not quite as strong or well-supported as it might be; or various possible objections not fully considered and addressed; or structure and/or writing style of paper not quite of the exceptional quality that goes with an A standard.

B+ = An essay of good quality, though not every conclusion is as clearly reached and strongly supported as it might have been (sometimes due to a bit too much reliance on summaries of various authors instead of using the authors’ ideas as part of one’s own line of argument.) Or, various possible counter-arguments not noted. Or, student’s own particular line of argument not always unified, flowing, and fully clear.

B = Good individual points made, though the overall material is not always integrated into a unified line of argument pointing to a clear conclusion. Summaries of other authors are good and in general accurate, but the essay does not move on to offer enough of the student’s own assessment and interaction with the views that are summarized. Or, some sentences beginning to be a bit ambiguous or otherwise lacking in the philosophical precision needed to show a clear understanding of how all the various parts of the material fit together.

B- = Inaccuracies in assessing the material beginning to prevent a demonstration through the essay that the material has correctly been understood at all crucial points. Some good points made in the essay, but essay still lacking a cohesiveness that indicates a clear grasp of all the philosophical distinctions that need to be made within the material. Perhaps style of writing tending to be a bit sloppy in places, indicating that perhaps another draft is needed to smooth out spelling and grammar mistakes.

C range = Some confusion is evident in the attempted line of argument, indicating that the philosophical positions of the authors in the assigned readings are misunderstood on some key issues. Or, numbers of grammar and syntax problems have interrupted attempted line of argument so as to make it, from the reader’s perspective, seem confused at times.

D range = Assigned material simply not dealt with adequately. Style of writing and mistakes of grammar indicate that not enough time was spent on the essay to come to grips with the philosophical material.

VII. AVAILABLE EXL SUPPORT

Asbury has an excellent EXL staff to support you.

ExL Contact Information:
For general questions and administrative assistance regarding the ExL program, contact Dale Hale:
ExL_Office@asburyseminary.edu
Phone: (859) 858-2393

For technical support, library research support, library loans, and ExL media contact

Information Commons:
  Info_Commons@asburyseminary.edu
  Phone: (859) 858-2233
  Toll-free: (866) 454-2733

Accessing Information Commons Materials:
1. General Questions:
   ▪ The Information Commons is a "one-stop shop" for all student research, circulation and technical needs. The Information Commons hours are posted here: http://www.asburyseminary.edu/icommons/hours.shtml.

2. Materials Requests:
   ▪ To search the library catalog for available materials, click here:
     http://www.asburyseminary.edu/icommons/index.shtml
   ▪ ExL Students may request books, photocopies or emailed attachments of journal articles/portions of reference books from Asbury Seminary’s Library. Please allow 3-10 business days for all requests to be filled. Contact the Information Commons for costs and instructions on how to make requests.
   ▪ ExL students are encouraged to make use of local library resources. Students who live within a 50 mile radius of either the Florida or the Kentucky campus should come to campus to obtain their materials.

3. Research Questions:
   ▪ ExL students are encouraged to contact the Information Commons for research assistance including help choosing a paper topic, determining the best sources to use for a paper, finding book reviews, or research questions about using the online databases or any other library materials.

4. Online Databases:
   ▪ To access the online library resources including the library catalog and full-text journal databases, go to http://www.asburyseminary.edu/icommons/index.shtml and enter your 10-digit student ID# number in the login box. Your student ID# is provided on the biographical information section of the student registration webpage. Add a 2 and enough 0’s to the front to make a 10-digit number (20000XXXXX where XXXXX = your student id).

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