

PHIL 408Q: Topics in Contemporary Philosophy: VIRTUE

Instructor: Kelsey Gipe

Office Hours: Wed 12-2pm

Office: SKN 1121

Email: kgipe@umd.edu

Class Times: T&Th 11am-12:15pm

Class Location: WOODS 0104

Course Textbooks – Our readings will be drawn primarily from *Virtue Ethics* (eds. Roger Crisp & Michael Slote), *Natural Goodness* (Philippa Foot), and *Unprincipled Virtue* (Nomy Arpaly).

- These works may be supplemented by additional readings posted in .pdf form on Canvas.
- A reading schedule will be posted and periodically updated on Canvas.

Course Description – Virtue ethics began with Plato and Aristotle, dropped out of favor in the 1950's and has experienced a philosophical revival in recent years. Although virtue ethical theories differ widely, there are a few features that nearly all of them hold in common: an emphasis on character, an understanding of the virtues as being essentially bound up with an individual's character, and a focus on *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing, as the ultimate end of a virtuous life.

In this course we will focus on how we are to understand the virtues, *eudaimonia*, and how the former relate to the latter. We will explore what it means for an individual to be virtuous and how this is meant to constitute or contribute to that individual's flourishing *qua* human. Additionally, we will examine some notable controversies surrounding contemporary virtue ethics, focusing on certain metaethical questions in particular.

Grading – This class will be graded using a letter+/- system: A 4.0 A- 3.7 B+ 3.3 B 3.0 B- 2.7 C+ 2.3 C 2.0 D+ 1.3 D 1.0 D- 0.7 F 0.0. Your final course grade will be an average of your grades on specific assignments weighted as follows:

Weekly Canvas Posts: 30%

Paper: 30%

In-Class Final: 40%

Grades will not be posted in the Canvas gradebook.

Weekly Canvas Posts – You will be required to submit a weekly discussion post on Canvas, which will be due by 11am each Wednesday. These posts should critically evaluate a particular problem or argument in the reading(s) for that week and should be roughly one single-spaced page in length. You will be expected to have read all of your fellow classmates' posts before class on Thursday as these posts will often be used to frame class discussions. Your lowest-scored post will be dropped before I calculate final grades at the end of the semester.

Paper – This will be a philosophy paper of roughly 3000 words. You are required to turn in a detailed outline in advance of the paper itself. I will provide you with prompts for the paper at least a week in advance of the due date for outlines. Proposals for paper topics which differ from those provided in the prompts will be subject to approval on a case-by-case basis. Once you turn in your paper, you will have a chance to revise it after I have provided you with comments. If your paper is significantly improved upon revision, your grade will be raised accordingly.

In-Class Final – This will consist of an in-class essay drawn from prompts that will be provided to you at least a week in advance of the final. This essay is to be structured in the same manner as you would a philosophy paper, (i.e., introduction, body/argument, conclusion etc.) You are expected to bring two blue books to the final.

Class Participation – There is no independent component of class participation or attendance included in the grading for this course. Students are expected to take it upon themselves as their own personal responsibility to keep up with readings, attend classes regularly, and attend instructor office hours as needed to achieve satisfactory grades on in-class exams and homework.

Office hours are meant to supplement lectures, and are *under no circumstances* to be used as a substitution for attending lectures. If students miss a class, they are expected to obtain notes from their peers. Instructor notes will not be provided to students, except in the case of a medically-documented illness or officially-documented personal emergency.

Late Work Policy –

- Late weekly Canvas posts *will not be accepted*.
- Other late assignments will be accepted, but will be docked a *full letter grade* for each day they are late, weekends included.
- If the final time for this class conflicts with another, the student may arrange to take the final early. However, the instructor requires notice of this at least 2 weeks in advance.

Classroom Policies – Don't be rude.

- If I see your phone out during class, I'll subtract points from your Canvas post for that week.
- If you must use a laptop, please sit behind the other students so that they are not distracted.

Plagiarism Policy – Any student work found to be plagiarized will result in a non-negotiable 0% grade on that assignment. All of an offending student's other assignments will be reexamined in light of a discovery of plagiarism. UMD's academic integrity code can be found here: <http://www.lib.umd.edu/tl/guides/academic-integrity>

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities – Please contact me early on in the semester if you believe you might be a candidate for special accommodations due to a medically-documented disability. Accommodations will be handled on a case-by-case basis as dictated by the general policy of the University of Maryland.

Course Goals and Objectives – Students will gain an understanding of concepts such as virtue, practical wisdom, and *eudaimonia*. They will be acquainted with controversies in contemporary virtue ethics and the issues at stake, as well as the placement of such controversies within a historical ethical narrative.

Over the course of the semester, students will produce and revise a conference-length philosophy paper. They will learn how to build and refine sophisticated philosophical arguments, critique the arguments presented in readings, and respond to the arguments put forward by their peers.

The ultimate aim of this course is to teach students to be better thinkers and philosophers and to give them a greater understanding of the normative and metaethical issues surrounding virtue ethics. Ideally, students will be encouraged to examine their own lives in the context of ideas such as virtue, character, and human flourishing.

Sample Canvas Discussion Post:

In *Republic X*, Socrates draws Glaucon's attention to a discontinuity between what we value as consumers of fiction and what we value in actual life:

When even the best of us hear Homer, or some other tragic poet, imitating one of the heroes in a state of grief and making a long speech of lamentation, or even chanting and beating his breast, you know we enjoy it and give ourselves over to it. We suffer along with the hero and take his sufferings seriously. [...] But when one of us suffers a personal loss, you also realize we do the opposite: we pride ourselves if we are able to keep quiet and endure it, in the belief that that is what a man does, whereas what we praised before is what a woman does. (605d-e)

The portrayal of suffering by the poet draws us in and leads us to indulge our soul's appetite to wallow in self-pity and grief. What the example above is meant to underscore is the fact that poets encourage us to indulge our non-rational / appetitive part when we engage with their fictions. This wallowing in grief is directly counter to what we take to be correct action in our actual lives, but the poet's performance basically seduces us into ignoring our rational part and indulging our appetitive one. In this way our better rational part will eventually be overwhelmed by our worse non-rational part and our souls will grow vicious and unjust.

I'm not sure that this example does the work that Socrates wants it to. This is because all it seems to me to show is that there is a disconnect between the emotions we feel and what is socially appropriate for us to express. The poet gives full affective reign to these emotions as a pragmatic measure, since it would be difficult for the audience to really understand what his character is feeling were he to merely "man up" and swallow his grief. In identifying with the character we are just identifying with the same emotions that we would feel in his place. We all feel sadness and grief. The poet is just externally expressing what we feel internally. Being the sort of person who maintains one's composure and keeps quiet in the face of inner turmoil doesn't seem incompatible with also being the sort of person who can empathize wholeheartedly with a dramatic display of raw emotion.

Now, I understand that it may be the case that what Socrates takes to be so praiseworthy is the ability to actually suppress one's emotions in the face of a rational goal. Perhaps what we actually pride ourselves in being able to do is crush down / compartmentalize potentially debilitating emotions in order to be able to actually deal with the traumatic situation in front of us in a reasonable manner. It does seem that in cases like this, our rational part does dominate our appetitive part (which presumably really wants to just curl up and cry). After all, we praise people (and rightly so) for keeping a cool head in the face of terrible situations. This makes sense to me. It may be the case that it is bad for us to keep such emotions suppressed forever, but it is clearly good to be able to keep one's composure and a level head in trying situations.

TENTATIVE Reading Schedule:

Virtue Ethics –Rosalind Hursthouse

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/ethics-virtue/>

Virtue Ethics – eds. Roger Crisp and Michael Slote

Modern Moral Philosophy – G.E.M. Anscombe

Crisp & Slote 26-44

Virtues and Vices – Philippa Foot

Crisp & Slote 163-77

Virtue and Reason – John McDowell

Crisp & Slote 141-162

Agent-Based Virtue Ethics – Michael Slote

Crisp & Slote 239-262

Moral Saints – Susan Wolf

Crisp & Slote 79-89

Natural Goodness – Philippa Foot

Introduction through Chapter 3

Foot 1-51

Chapters 4 & 5

Foot 52-80

Chapters 6 & 7

Foot 81-116

Unprincipled Virtue – Nomy Arpaly

Chapter 1: The Complexity of Moral Psychology

Arpaly 3-32

Chapter 2: On Acting Rationally against One's Best Judgment

Arpaly 33-66

Chapter 3: Moral Worth

Arpaly 67-116

Chapter 4: Varieties of Autonomy

Arpaly 117-148

Chapter 5: Blame, Autonomy, and Problem Cases

Arpaly 149-180