**DA4710: Critical Thinking & Ethical Decision-Making**

**Naval Postgraduate School**

**Summer Quarter 2020**

**Course Syllabus**

**Instructor:**

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**Course Details:**

This course is an introductory survey of the foundations of critical thinking and ethical reasoning.

In the first part of the course, we will begin with questions such as: What does it mean to ‘think critically’? What tools and concepts are required to reason well? And how do we structure our arguments clearly and persuasively? We will seek to answer these questions by studying the basics of elementary logic, logical fallacies, and how to read and write philosophy.

With these skills in hand, we will then move on to discussing one of the central fields of philosophy called moral theory—or, more generally, ethics. While ethics, as a discipline, consists of many different questions and ideas, we will focus on moral theories of right action. We will survey the three main ethical theories—utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics—and take stock of their advantages and disadvantages, while looking at some practical applications.

**Goals for the Course:**

Throughout this course, I will not tell you what you ought to do, nor what specifically to think. It is not my goal to give you clear-cut answers for morally fraught scenarios, much as you might want them—nor will I expect that you can arrive at such clarity yourselves. I will not insist you agree with me on how best to approach such scenarios; in fact, I *welcome* productive disagreement with me and your classmates as a way of helping us build our skills together. I will not expect you to memorize a code, recite dogma, or inculcate in yourself my preferred set of norms.

What, then, **are** the goals/expectations/objectives of the course? Quite simply, this course centers on exploring a distinctive **methodology** for how to approach moral problems—one that is rooted in philosophical ethics, but is broadly applicable to a wide range of pursuits. My goal is to teach you the foundations of this methodology sothat you can apply it in your everyday life, in your other academic pursuits, and in your professional lives as servicemembers.

**Course Administration:**

* ***Readings***: All course readings will be posted/shared online. No textbooks needed.
* ***Late submissions***: No late submissions will be accepted without prior authorization.
* ***Absences***: Please notify me of any expected absences. Plausibly excused absences will be treated with charity. As for unexcused absences: while there is no strict requirement for attendance, such absences will be noticed, noted, and will negatively affect your overall grade, at least in indirect ways.
* ***Academic integrity*:** It is your responsibility to ensure all work maintains the standards of academic integrity that are incumbent upon you as citizens, scholars, servicemembers, and students at NPS in particular. Any standard citation style is acceptable, provided you are consistent. In addition to standard citations, I would encourage you to cite any aid/assistance you receive from classmates, friends, or others, as this ensures that any potential cross-over among ideas is made clear before submission.

**Course Requirements and Grading Distribution:**

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| Assignment | Length | Points | Due Date |
| Critical Reasoning Project | 2-5 pages | 200 | 16 August (before midnight) |
| Presentation | 10-15 minutes | 250 | 6 September (before midnight) |
| Term Paper | 5-8 pages | 350 | 19 Sep (before midnight) |
| Active Participation/Discussion |  | 200 | Throughout term |
| Total |  | **1000** |  |

**Specifics on each assignment will be provided plenty in advance of the due date. Below are brief summaries of each assignment.**

***Critical Reasoning Project***

Seek out one or two instances in popular media (including op-eds, TV shows, books, Tweets, etc.) in which people with sufficiently large platforms (i.e., not random people on Twitter) have reasoned in a way that involves logical fallacies or some other form of problematic reasoning that we have discussed in this class. (I.e., don’t just pick an instance in which they have said something you disagree with; find an issue with the reasoning overall.) Explain the claim/argument in question, what the fallacy/error is, why it is a fallacy/error, and offer a reply on behalf of the author (e.g., is there a way of revising the idea so that it is not problematic in the way you’ve identified?)

***Term Paper***

For the essay, you will be paired with another student in the class to give feedback on their essay (and they will do the same for yours). You will send a full, good faith, first draft of your essay to your peer-editor in class. Peer edits are not graded, but successful completion of a peer edit is a prerequisite for your essay to count as submitted. The essay itself will examine your understanding of the basics of ethical theory. You will not be required to do any outside research for this essay: everything you need will be contained within the readings of the course.

***Presentation***

You will record either a slide-show presentation, or some other form of video presentation, in which you explain and explore the ethical questions that arise in a work of art—e.g., an episode of a TV show, a movie, a song, a novel, or some other work of art. The goal is to apply the tools and lessons in the course to a part of popular culture, with a special focus on analyzing its ethical issues.

***Active Participation/Discussion***

You are expected to have carefully read the required readings before each class, and to have thought about them. I expect that you will come to class with questions about the readings—e.g., issues about which you were unclear, responses or objections to the argument, connections with other material, and alternative supporting arguments. Since our class will be largely discussion-based, I expect all students to meaningfully participate in our class discussions. The best participants are those whose efforts center on developing ideas, whether critically or through raising helpful clarificatory questions. I am not shy about cold-calling, so consider yourselves warned in advance!

**Course Readings**

***\*Course readings are subject to change\****

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| **Date** | **Topic** | **Required Reading/Viewing, etc. (Before Class)** |
| Late July | **Introduction to Course/Philosophy** | * Andy Owen, “Ethics on the Battlefield” * Shelly Kagan, “Why Study Philosophy?” |
| 3 Aug | **Basics of Critical Reasoning** | * John Corvino videos on YouTube ([www.youtube.com/user/johncorvino](http://www.youtube.com/user/johncorvino)): “False Dilemma”, “Equivocation”, “Ad Hominem”, “Slippery Slope Arguments”, “Begging the Question”, “What makes an argument valid?” * Michael Scriven, *Reasoning*, (selections) |
| 5 Aug | **Challenges to Critical Reasoning** | * Jonathan Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail” * Harry Frankfurt, “On Bullshit” * Tosi and Warmke, “Moral Grandstanding: There’s a lot of it about, all of it bad,” *Aeon* (<https://aeon.co/ideas/moral-grandstanding-theres-a-lot-of-it-about-all-of-it-bad>) * Neil Levy, “Is Virtue Signalling a Perversion of Morality?,” *Aeon* (<https://aeon.co/ideas/is-virtue-signalling-a-perversion-of-morality>) * *To be discussed next time, but since it’s a two-parter, get started earlier on it:* Revisionist History Podcast (Malcolm Gladwell), “The Standard Case” (approx. 40 mins) (<http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/35-the-standard-case>) |
| 10 Aug | **Methods of Moral Reasoning** | * ­Jeff McMahan, “Moral Intuition” * Shelly Kagan, “Thinking about Cases” * Normal Daniels, “Reflective Equilibrium,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (read only sections 1-3; 4 is also good, but optional): <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reflective-equilibrium/> * Revisionist History Podcast (Malcolm Gladwell), “Dr. Rock’s Taxonomy” (approx. 40 mins) (<http://revisionisthistory.com/episodes/36-dr-rocks-taxonomy>) |
| 12 Aug | **Challenges to Ethical Theory: Egoism and Relativism** | * Joel Feinberg, “Psychological Egoism” * James McBrayer, “Why Our Children Don’t Think There Are Moral Facts,” *New York Times* (<https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/03/02/why-our-children-dont-think-there-are-moral-facts/>) * James Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism” * Thomas Hurka, “Values are Not Relative” |
| **Critical Reasoning Project Due**  **16 August**  **(by midnight)** | | |
| 17 Aug | **Utilitarianism (and its discontents)** | * R. M. Hare, “A Utilitarian Approach to Ethics” * Shelly Kagan, *Normative Ethics* (selection) * Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism” |
| 19 Aug | **Applying Utilitarianism: Famine Relief & Humanitarianism** | * Peter Singer, “The Why and How of Effective Altruism” *TED Talk* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Diuv3XZQXyc>) * Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” * Benjamin Valentino, “The True Costs of Humanitarian Intervention” |
| Guest (tentative): Dr. Benjamin Valentino (Dartmouth) | |
| 24 Aug | **Kant’s Deontology** | * Immanuel Kant, “The Good Will and the Categorical Imperative” * *(Optional)* Onora O’Neill, “A Simplified Account of Kant’s Ethics” * Immanuel Kant, “On the Supposed Right to Lie from Benevolent Motives” |
| 26 Aug | **Applying Kant’s Theory: Absolute Prohibitions** | * Thomas Nagel, “War and Massacre” * Jamie Mayerfeld, “In Defense of the Absolute Prohibition on Torture” |
| 31 Aug | **Moderate Deontology** | * Philippa Foot, “The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect” * Warren Quinn, “Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Double Effect” |
| 2 Sep | **Applying Moderate Deontology: The Trolley Problem** | * Judith Thomson, “Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem” * RadioLab (podcast), “Driverless Dilemma” (approx. 40 mins; skip first 4 minutes if you want): <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/driverless-dilemma> * Patrick Lin, “The Ethics of Autonomous Cars,” *The Atlantic* (<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/10/the-ethics-of-autonomous-cars/280360/>) |
| **Presentation Due**  **6 September**  **(by midnight)** | | |
| 7 Sep | **Labor Day (No Class)** | |
| 9 Sep | **Virtue Ethics** | * Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, (selections) |
| Guest: MAJ(R) Scott Parsons (West Point) | |
| 14 Sep | **Applied Virtue Ethics: Contemporary Military Virtues** | * Peter Olsthoorn, “Virtue Ethics in the Military” * Peter Olsthoorn, “Courage in the Military: Physical and Moral” |
| Guest: Dr. Peter Olsthoorn (Netherlands Defence Academy) | |
| **Term Paper Due**  **19 September**  **(by midnight)** | | |