

Contemporary Ethics: A Multicultural Approach

George K. Bluh
Greenfield Community College

Course Description

Contemporary Ethics is concerned with theories of how people ought to live together as social beings. Students will examine such issues as euthanasia, abortion, world hunger, war, capital punishment, and the environment from the standpoint of race, ethnicity, and gender. The knowledge gained in this course should heighten students' understanding and appreciation of the values of others as well as their own.

Addendum to the course description. Because course descriptions are often lacking in clarity and conveyance of purpose behind the offering, your instructor feels it necessary to express briefly the rationale for presenting this course. We live in a complex and rapidly changing world, and it seems alarmingly evident that the changes are not for the best. Amid the conflict that arise in our society, and the larger society of which we are but a small part, we are rapidly discovering ourselves having to participate in critical decisions which impact on diverse peoples and human situations. That the meaning of fairness and justice in all cases has taken on a new significance. It is hoped that this course will raise awareness of what it means to be just and fair in this ever changing baffling world.

Upon completion of the course. students should:

1. Understand the nature and meaning of ethical knowledge, and be able to identify moral and ethical issues.
2. Have gained facility in applying ethical theories and strategies toward the resolution of ethical moral dilemmas.
3. Understand the role of values in a complex and diverse world.
1. Understand what determines rightness and wrongness of actions.
5. Understand what determines rightness and wrongness of public policies.
6. Understand the distinction between the realm of individual responsibility and community
7. Understand the meaning, implications, and application of the concept, cultural relativism.
- X. Understand and appreciate the role of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender, as well as other aspects of diversity, in the process of arriving at just and fair ethical decisions, as well as in the application of the above listed objectives.

Course Requirements

Participation and Attendance	40%
Position Papers (5)	40%
Final Research Essay	20 %

Concerning the first requirement: ethics is a branch of philosophy, and nothing of importance will happen in a philosophy class till people start talking, this means discussing principles and issues. All are qualified to enter into the process. it is a vital component of the course.

Concerning the second requirement: the positions papers involve the student taking a question or issue related to the topical area under study and, within the space of two typewritten pages, take a position of the respective issue or question, and logically, and as forcefully as possible, defend the position. There will be five such papers required, though we may cover more than five topics.

Concerning the third requirement: The final assignment calls for a paper of five pages, no more. The paper should focus on a topical area related to the course material, draw from sources that are beyond the text, i.e. print media and topical books. The strongest suggestion that can be made is that the choice of topic be one that engages the interest of the student. I urge all students to not hesitate to consult with me on the choice of topic as well as problems and issues which come up during the process of writing the paper.

Students should arrange a meeting with me at anytime they feel the need for discussing class matters. Good communication can overcome a great many difficulties. It may also have an impact on how much you get out of the course.

Special Needs Students

Students having special needs should arrange with the Learning Center to keep me informed of the specifics of those needs and how they can be best accommodated.

Method Of Instruction

The instructional approach used in this course stresses open, directed, and purposive discussion. Where coverage of specific course content, as in the introduction of new areas of concern, the lecture method will be employed, with questions from the class encouraged at any point in the process.

Course Reading

May, Larry and Shari Collins Sharratt, *Applied Ethics: A Multicultural Approach*, Englewood Cliffs.NJ. Prentice Hall, 1994.

Course Schedule

The topical areas of the course will follow a sequence close to that of the text. There may be some alteration of the pattern based on student interest. We will spend approximately four class sessions per topic, following the introductory materials.

Introduction: Two class sessions (more if necessary)

Basic traditional and contemporary theories of ethics as well as related structural concepts that have become part of ethical language will be covered during the introduction. The purpose here is to acquaint students with the wide range of thought that has been given to ethics, moral issues, and the increasing wider range of cultural situations to which ethicists are drawn.

Questions to consider:

1. Why a multicultural approach to ethics?
2. What does ethics concern?
3. From where do we derive ethics?
4. How are ethical judgements made?

5. What do we mean when we use the term Western values? Non-western perspectives?

Readings: Introduction to the text.

Topic One: Human Rights

One of the most important principles that can be imparted to the student of philosophy is that nothing should be taken for granted. This should be a first order principle. The principle can be justly applied to the question of Human Rights. As we observe the world shrinking in effect, to become in reality what had been touted as the "global village," we realize that in some of the societies with whom we deal the people suffer severe oppression, exploitation, and deprivation in a multiplicity of forms. Many of these cases are culturally white-washed and we continue to do business as usual. Is this justice? Is this fair-mindedness?

Questions to Consider

1. What do we mean when we use the term "human rights"? Doesn't everyone have human rights?
2. Are human rights universally recognized? If not, why not?
3. Should what are considered universally recognized human rights override religious, social and cultural traditions?
4. What criteria should be applied in determining the credibility of a human right?
5. What are some of the issues raised regarding gender and sexual preference *re* human rights? Reading Assignment: Read Part I, Human Rights, Page 14 to 68, May & Sharratt.

Topic 2 Environmental Ethics

Environmental Ethics breaks new ground in Western traditional ethical thought and practice. While Buddhist and Taoist traditions, as well as native American, have found a special place for nature, stressing the role of harmony between humankind and the natural world, Western society is new to this realm of sentient involvement. As a consequence of elevated awareness of the value of the natural world, the environment, a whole set of new concepts, values terms, paradigms, have invigorated and enlarged the vocabulary of ethics. In all, it is a fresh application of the first principle, not taking anything for granted....least of all the very Earth we live on.

Questions to Consider

1. What does it mean to say that the environment possesses no inherent right to protection?
2. How do we distinguish "intrinsic" value from "instrumental" value, and how does the distinction apply in determining questions of environmental protection?
3. Given the views of the Taoists, Buddhists, and other Asian thinkers, can you defend the view of the "deep ecologists" or "universalizable"?
4. How would you mark off the the interface zone of the political and the ethical in the case of Eastern Europe, or for that matter, Taiwan? You may want to do some outside reading for this topic.
5. What are the essential justifiable, questions raised by the environmental feminists?
6. You are invited to contribute your questions/issues/dilemmas for further discussion.

Readings: May and Sharratt. Part II Pages 71 to 131.

Topic 3 Hunger and Poverty

The problem of hunger and poverty as one of global dimension ratchets upward the old questions of duty and obligations. In other words, for example, is the consumer of a double cheesburger in Chicago consuming unethically? This can be the case if the cattle providing the beef for that hamburger came

from a rainforest that once supported a large number of indigenous people, but having been turned over to grazing cattle, supports only one. Are those people who are among the relatively fortunate, affluent few obligated to share some of their wealth with the less fortunate, here and abroad? What about the basic question of the load bearing capacity of the land...of Earth...should serious attention be directed to effective birth control, population control, rather than rely on famine, epidemics, war and an array of disasters that Nature affords us on a regular basis?

Questions to Consider

1. What are the ethical implications of interference with the "load carrying" capacity of a region by outsiders, i.e. cattle people moving into the rainforest, radically altering the life-sustaining, activity of the indigenous peoples?
2. What, fundamentally, should be the obligations of the wealthy nations, with surplus agro production, toward the peoples of the Third World? How are these obligations justified?
3. Singer asserts that if a wealthy state can prevent suffering without sacrificing anything of comparable moral worth, then it is obligated to do so. Do you agree?
4. Not all agree with Singer. Arthur asserts that there are cases when the duty of benevolence override property rights. There may be, however, an obligation (a duty) not to consume. What are your thoughts on this issue?
5. What are our obligations to keep informed about human disaster beyond our door....famine, atrocities, etc.?
6. How can we assure that the human factor will always be safeguarded in Third World countries when developed nations enter with culturally/economically disruptive programs?
7. What special problems do you see connected with hunger and poverty?

Readings May and Sharratt, Part III, pages 134 to 194.

Topic 4 War and Violence

We live in a time of war and violence. Our media, print and electronic, are saturated with daily accounts of brutality and holocaust. We learn our geography as we learn of tragedy and bloodshed abroad, and at home. Sarajevo, Rwanda, Somalia, Cechens, Tutsi and Hutu are now part of our vocabulary. The media have made us aware of a world of suffering, and this knowledge demands of us that we make choices, take action, if we are to consider ourselves ethical beings. Or, in fact, does knowledge of gross injustice, genocide, such as on East Timor, impose on us ethical restraints? This topical area will address a multitude of issues as they bear on race, gender, religion, and ethnicity. There seems to be few places where the question of diversity as a variable in determining ethical conduct is more keenly felt.

Questions to Consider

1. What is meant by the phrase "just war"? How does this doctrine clash with the doctrine of pacifism? What would be strong arguments defending either doctrine? Recall the admonition to young men being drafted during the Vietnam War, "You can't choose your wars, you have to take the one you have"
2. Can there be clean wars, wars fought according to the prescribed rules of conduct, Geneva Conventions? What cultural implications are there to consider when engaged in war with an enemy representing expectations and values far different from those of your own culture?
3. What are the essential principles that define nonviolent civil disobedience? You may recall from the film "Gandhi" his saying, "I am Buddhist, Jew and Christian as well as Hindu." Is it possible that the underlying doctrine of nonviolent civil disobedience is universalizable?
4. Was the Gulf War a just war? Chapter heading, yes, and a very good question. The question seems to raise the suspicion, one that was quite common at the time, that the Gulf War was fundamentally, a petro-war. We were there because of the oil. This question came up again, in an oblique way not long after when war broke out in the Balkans, and the Bosnians were complaining that if oil were part of the Balkan agenda the U.S. would be there to settle things quickly. Think about that.

5. Looking at gender and violence, we find that women have been especially targeted as victims during hostilities as well as in domestic and other situations. To go back to the Balkan situation for a dramatic illustration, women were raped and violated as part of a tactical scheme, not only for carnal gratification, but perhaps more to demonstrate to their captive men how hopeless their situation was. The psychological devastation wreaked raised serious questions, certainly about the vapid dictum all is fair in love in war. What questions would want to raise concerning this topical area?

Readings May and Sharratt Part IV, pages 197 to 253.

Topic 5 Gender Roles and Morality

Gender Roles and Morality presents us with a topic of discussion that is crucially needed at this time in our social and cultural history. The rapid change that is taking place today calls for a radical assessment of the moral implications attending change, while at the same time a careful reconsideration of traditional cultural values that have been swept aside by the misguided and misinformed. We will look at gender roles, sexual harassment, and women's situations in differing cultural settings. i.e. American Indian and Islam. Many questions can be raised that challenge the material we will cover and this would be perfectly natural considering the enormity of the topic into which we are merely poking our noses..

Questions to Consider

1. How would you argue for or in contradiction to the assertion that men and women operate under different sets of *de facto* moral obligations?
2. What are the principal issues raised by gender specific crimes, and why do they pose a special ethical problem? You may want to consult media coverage on contemporary incidents that help support the position you take on this question.
3. The problem of sex-related crime is universal, according to the criteria of judgement with which we are familiar in our culture. We look upon sex-slavery and other expressions of egregious domination by males over women as violations of human rights as well as political and economic rights. What are your views on this critical assertion?

Reading May and Sharratt Part IV, pages 197-313.

Topic 6 Racial and Ethnic Discrimination

"Prejudice is the reason of fools." No one said before, nor since, with such incisive brilliance. When we confront the reality of prejudice and discrimination we at the same time confront a host of contradictions encumbered with dismal ignorance. We simply cannot dismiss these egregious lapses in moral conduct as "a fact of life". Jean-Paul Sartre and Hannah Arendt spent considerable time writing on the subject of prejudice, particularly on antisemitism. America's own noted humorist, in a not-so-humorous vein, wrote a brilliantly developed argument against antisemitism in an extensive essay titled, "Concerning the Jews". The basic principles apply to all manifestations of prejudice and discrimination. Some have deep and long histories, others arise from more recent conditions. Some have been only partly mitigated through heroic struggle. We will look into some of the reasons and arguments associated with racial and ethnic prejudice, hoping to at least scratch the surface, illumine the darker corners of the collective conscience.

Questions to Consider

1. The idea of affirmative action is presently being re-argued. On the bases of the arguments presented in the Boxill article, where, apropos affirmative action, does justice lie?
2. Have we gone as far as we should in achieving compensatory justice for those who had been the historical victims of discrimination?

3. What is the essential difference between "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" racism, and what are the characteristics and function of each? Is there a justifiable moral place for racialism? (Note Kwame A. Appiah's concluding remarks)
4. L. Thomas opens up some interesting ground concerning conceptual differences between sexism and racism. What have been the essential arguments raised supporting sexual discrimination? Does our gender -sexual identity supercede our racial identity? What is the moral significance of this condition?
5. Larry May explores an interesting, and challenging, aspect of racism: shared responsibility. May is saying that we all harbor racist attitudes, by simply remaining silent in the face of racial injustice or violence we share in the responsibility. Like the old saying went, "If you are not part of the solution, You are part of the problem". What are your thoughts on these propositions
6. What questions would you like to raise at this point?

Readings May and Sharratt pages 317-368

Topics 7, 8, and 9, covering AIDS, Abortion, and Euthanasia will be treated on the bases of both sufficient course time and class interest.