

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY NORTHRIDGE  
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES  
RS 361OL: Contemporary Ethical Issues  
Fall 2014  
Fri, 11:00 AM-1:45 PM  
ONLINE

Dr. James D. Findlay, Instructor

Office Hours, M/W 11:00 AM-12 Noon, Mon. 3:30-4:30 PM ONLINE, or by appointment.

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**Course Description:** This course takes a multi-faceted approach to the study, exploration, and practice of ethics and ethical decision-making. We will begin by exploring what ethics is, and some different forms it has taken over time. Then, we will apply principles and positions in making ethical judgments to a range of current issues. We will focus especially on matters related to contemporary life in an inter-connected globalizing world, as well as how students can wisely and effectively shape their own decisions in their careers and lives as citizens of a complex and diversifying society.

In the process of exploring ethical issues, both individually and in conversation and dialogue, we shall examine a range of traditions, while keeping in mind that each of us is responsible for our own lives and our place in the world and on the Planet Earth. Thus, the course seeks to utilize insights from the past, including major religious and philosophical traditions, sort out various conflicting claims, and ultimately empower each student to develop his/her own thinking and action in contemporary society.

**Student Learning Outcomes for RS 361: Contemporary Ethical Issues**

Emphasizes the development of skills in critical thinking through analysis of such contemporary ethical issues as abortion, euthanasia, genetic engineering, sexual behavior, racism, gender bias, punishment, animal rights, the environment, and the relationships between religion and morality.

- 1) Students will be able to articulate, orally and in writing, the diversity and distinctiveness of the moral values implicit in and the ethical arguments currently employed within various religious and secular traditions.
- 2) Students will demonstrate an understanding of the influence of diverse religious and secular traditions on moral attitudes and behaviors.
- 3) Students will be able to develop oral and written proposals for resolving current moral dilemmas in society.
- 4) Students will be able to recognize and critically evaluate their own and others' assumptions and biases as they play a role in - - and sometimes distort - - their thinking.
- 5) Students will demonstrate oral communication skills and mindful listening through conversations in the classroom about the moral values and forms of ethical thinking of fellow students.

## **Student Learning Outcomes, Courses in the Arts and Humanities**

Goal: Students will understand the rich history and diversity of human knowledge, discourse and achievements of their own and other cultures as they are expressed in the arts, literatures, religions, and philosophy.

### Student Learning Outcomes

Students will:

1. Explain and reflect critically upon the human search for meaning, values, discourse and expression in one or more eras/stylistic periods or cultures;
2. Analyze, interpret, and reflect critically upon ideas of value, meaning, discourse and expression from a variety of perspectives from the arts and/or humanities;
3. Produce work/works of art that communicate to a diverse audience through a demonstrated understanding and fluency of expressive forms;
4. Demonstrate ability to engage and reflect upon their intellectual and creative development within the arts and humanities;
5. Use appropriate critical vocabulary to describe and analyze works of artistic expression, literature, philosophy, or religion and a comprehension of the historical context within which a body of work was created or a tradition emerged;
6. Describe and explain the historical and/or cultural context within which a body of work was created or a tradition emerged.

**Required Texts:** *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction: Second Edition*. Harry J. Gensler. New York: Routledge, 2011. *Virtues: For Another Possible World*. Leonardo Boff. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011. Gensler's volume is available both in print and online, through our Oviatt Library website, as an electronic book. Other readings are available online, or as ERes files. The ERes password for this course is **1756**.

### **Course Requirements:**

ALL STUDENTS registered for this course will have access to and must utilize CSUN's Moodle system for online classes. Access is available by logging onto moodle.csun.edu.

\*Regular attendance for all online Moodle Collaborate sessions noted on syllabus. These will take place on Fridays, 11:00 AM – 1:45 PM. Unexcused absences will be noted, and will adversely affect each offender's final grade.

\*Posting on all online Forums and the Chat (Debate) in a timely and thorough fashion. Since careful online records are provided by Moodle software, failure to participate in online Forums and other assignments will result in both a lower level of learning course material and a lower grade.

\*Careful reading of all assigned materials and posted responses to readings BEFORE the date indicated on the syllabus.

\*Students MUST have access to their my.csun.edu e-mail address, since all communications from Instructor will be directed to their CSUN e-mail address.

### **Assignments:**

\*Three Short Essays. 2-4 pages in length. Students must utilize material from Class Learning Journal (see below) in writing these essays. Due on Sept. 5, Sept. 19, and Oct. 3. The three

short essays shall be reflections on the material explored in assigned readings, Forum posts, and discussions during Collaborate sessions in the initial weeks of the semester.

\*Mid-Term Exam. Friday Oct. 10. Taken and submitted online.

**[\*\*\*Specific aspects and focus of Chat/Debate and Student Presentations will be determined by consultation between Students and Instructor as the semester unfolds.\*\*\*]**

\*Participation in Debate (using Chat function of Moodle software). The entire class will be divided into **two groups**. Members of each group will participate in these debates, which will address ethical issues from two ethical positions: an Absolutist and a Relativist. Grade for each person will be based on BOTH participation in the chat/debate **and** a short written description by each student of how they prepared for the debate. Written descriptions must be submitted to Instructor either in printed form or online by the date of the chat/debate, Fri. Oct 9. **This assignment cannot be made up; thus, participation in the Chat/Debate is REQUIRED.**

\* Student Presentations on Ethical Issues. Class will divide into **four groups**; each group will submit a Power Point file (or other online presentation method) by 11:00 am on the date when their issue is examined. Dates for these submissions are:

Environment: Fri. Oct. 31.

War and Violence: Fri. Nov. 7.

Health and Medicine: Fri. Nov. 14.

Finance and Business: Fri. Nov. 21.

**These assignments cannot be made up; thus, submission by all group participants on the designated date is REQUIRED.**

\*MAJOR PAPER. Due on the last day of class, Fri. Dec. 5. 10-15 pages in length, double-spaced. Proper citation of sources and bibliography **MUST BE PROVIDED**. In this assignment, students shall **FIRST** (1) describe in writing their own position(s) which they have formulated for ethical decision-making in light of what they have learned and experienced in the course.

Careful and coherent arguments in support of each student's own thinking **MUST** be presented.

**THEN** (2) students will apply their own ethical judgments and arguments to an ethical issue or problem which interests them. Subject and method for this essay **MUST** be chosen in consultation with Instructor. May be submitted in either printed form or online through e-mail or Moodle, as arranged with Instructor.

\*Final Exam: Submitted Online.

**NO LATE SUBMISSIONS OF ASSIGNMENTS ARE POSSIBLE.** Thus, failure to submit a written assignment when due or to participate in the Chat/Debate or Student Presentation will result in a grade of "F" for that portion of the course.

Grading

Short Essays	10%
Mid-term Exam	10%
Chat/Debate Participation	10%
Student Ethical Issue Presentation	15%
Major Paper	20%
Final Exam	20%
Class/Forum Participation	15%

## Class Schedule and Plan

Fri. Aug. 29: Introductions, Syllabus

What is "Ethics"? What is "Morality?"

READINGS: Gensler, 1-7; ERes: "Morality and Religion"

Fri. Sept. 5: History of Ethics: China and India (chapters on Ethical Thought in China, Ethical thought in India); Ancient Greece (chapters on Socrates and Plato, Later Ancient Ethics);

ONLINE TEXT: Routledge Companion to Ethics (E-book)

ALSO: Plato's Dialogue "Euthyphro;" Selections from Aristotle's "Nicomachean Ethics" (available on Moodle Page and via ERes file)

FIRST SHORT ESSAY DUE

Fri. Sept. 12: History of Ethics: Medieval to Early Modern: Medieval Islam and Christianity; Hobbes, Locke, Hume

READINGS: Routledge Companion to Ethics (E-book); read chapters entitled: The Arabic Tradition; Early Modern Natural Law; Hobbes; Hume

Fri. Sept. 19: History of Ethics: Modern/Post-Modern

READINGS: Routledge Companion to Ethics (E-book): read chapters entitled: John Stuart Mill; Existentialism

ERes: Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysic of Morals*, pp. 21-26; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, sections entitled "The Thousand and One Goals;" "The Way of the Creating One;" B. Strassberg, "Magic, Religion, Science, Technology, and Ethics in the Postmodern World"

SECOND SHORT ESSAY DUE

Fri. Sept. 26: Types of Ethical Positions: Cultural Relativism and Subjectivism

Types of Ethical Positions: Supernaturalism and Intuitionism

READING: Gensler, 8-45.

Fri. Oct. 3: Types of Ethical Positions: Emotivism and Prescriptivism.

Types of Ethical Positions: Consequentialism and Nonconsequentialism

READING: Gensler, 46-65; 110-138.

THIRD SHORT ESSAY DUE

Fri. Oct. 10: MID-TERM EXAM

Fri. Oct. 17: Virtues I: Introductions (Asia, Ancient Greece, Leonardo Boff and the "Hospitality Myth") READINGS: Gensler, 139-151; Boff, vii-x, 3-61, 121-186

CHAT/DEBATE

Fri. Oct. 24: Issues: Environment: Case Study.

READINGS: Boff, 195-232; ERes

NO COLLABORATE SESSION THIS WEEK

Fri. Oct. 31: Issues: Environment: Student Ethical Issue Presentation  
War and Violence: Instructor Presentation, Case Study  
READINGS: READINGS: Boff, 233-271; Routledge Companion to Ethics: read section entitled “War”

Fri. Nov. 7: Issues: War and Violence: Student Ethical Issue Presentation  
Issues: Health and Medicine: Instructor Presentation, Case Study  
READINGS: ERes

Fri. Nov. 14: Issues: Health and Medicine: Student Ethical Issue Presentation  
Issues: Finance and Business: Instructor Presentation  
READINGS: ERes

Fri. Nov. 21: Issues: Finance and Business: Case Study  
READINGS: ERes  
Student Ethical Issue Presentation

Fri. Nov. 28: NO CLASS, THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY

Fri. Dec. 5: Summary and Conclusions  
MAJOR PAPER DUE

Final Exam: Submitted Online during Exam period Dec. 10-16.

### **Journal Writing and Preparation of Short Essay Assignments**

For this course, you must keep a “learning journal.” This exercise is intended to 1) improve your ease and skill in writing; 2) help you to better understand and process information from readings and class sessions; and 3) assist you in clearly articulating ideas that you develop during the course. **How you keep this journal is your own choice.** Students may use a spiral-bound notebook, a loose-leaf binder divided into sections, or an electronic journal kept on a disk or other computer drive. Whatever means you use for the journal, it is meant to be your own personal record of your learning and thinking during this course. **You are the only person who will ever read the entirety of your journal. HOWEVER, the Instructor may ask any student to submit their journal during the semester for review. This is not required of ALL students, but may be required of ANY STUDENT AT ANY TIME during the semester.**

In addition to recording information from your notes taken during class time, you should write in your journal after you have done the reading for a particular session AND after the session concludes, reflecting on new information and insights which the readings and class discussion offer you. Each week you should write **at least 2-3 pages** in your journal. Some topics you may choose to address as you write are:

1. What were the important points of this reading (or class session)?
2. Do you agree or disagree with those points or ideas? Why?

3. What questions do you have about the reading (or class session)?
4. How does the reading/class session relate to your own experience(s) and/or ideas, or to other reading and research that you have done beyond this class?

Each time that a short paper is due, you should select from your journal the entry (or entries) that you consider to be the most important to you since the previous paper, reflect on it, and compose a formal written essay based on that reflection. This essay should NOT be a summary of your notes, NOR a recapitulation of lectures, class discussions, or reading materials. Rather, it MUST be a thoughtful reflection on what you have learned and an exploration of issues that the class has raised for you. Each assignment should be 2-4 pages in length (as noted above). These papers will be graded on spelling, punctuation, grammar, coherence and clarity of written expression, and style, as well as content.

The Learning Journal should also be used by students in preparation for the Chat/Debate, Student Ethical Issue Presentations, and the Major Paper.

It is recommended that students utilize the CSUN Writing Centers in the preparation and editing of all written assignments. Instructor may require students to use the Centers for any written work, especially if a student's writing needs to be strengthened. The LRC Writing Center is located in the Oviatt Library, 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor, East Wing, and can be reached by telephone at **(818)-677-2033** or e-mail at **[lrc@csun.edu](mailto:lrc@csun.edu)**. The website is **<http://www.csun.edu/undergraduate-studies/learning-resource-center/writing-center-and-tutor-lab>**. The Pan African Studies Writing Center is in Sierra Hall 273; phone number for appointments is **818-677-2084**. The Chicano Studies Writing Center is in Jerome Richfield Hall Room 142; phone number is **818-677-7881**.

Unless arrangements are made with Instructor before the due date, **NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED, and will always receive a grade of "F."**