CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY NORTHRIDGE

DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES

RS 361: Contemporary Ethical Issues

Spring 2016

Mon/Wed, 2:00-3:15 PM

Sierra Hall 192

Dr. James D. Findlay, Instructor

Office Hours, MW 12:30-1:30 AM, Wed. 3:30-4:30 PM, or by appointment.

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**The California Faculty Association is in the midst of a difficult contract dispute with management. It is possible that the faculty union will call a strike or other work stoppage this term. I will inform the class as soon as possible of any disruption to our class meeting schedule.**

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 dialogue and debate, 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**

This course 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 **9236**.

**Course Requirements**:

\*Regular attendance at all class sessions noted on syllabus. Unexcused absences will be noted, and will affect each offender’s final grade.

\*Respectful behavior towards all other participants in process of class discussions and activities. **This includes placing all cellphones in the OFF position, and removal of earpieces or headphones, before entry into the classroom space.** [Using smartphones and other mobile devices to access ERes readings during class discussions is an exception, but must be arranged with Instructor.]

\*Careful reading of all assigned materials by the date indicated on the syllabus, as well as productive participation in class discussions, debates, student presentations, and other in-class activities.

**Assignments**:

\*Three Short Essays. 2-4 pages in length. Utilizes material from Class Learning Journal (see below). Due on Mon. Feb. 1, Wed. Feb. 17, and Wed. Mar. 2, the three short essays shall be reflections on the material covered in readings and discussions during the initial weeks of the semester.

\*Mid-Term Exam. Wed. Mar. 16. Taken in class.

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

\*Participation in Debates. Class will divide into **two groups**; all members of each group will participate in these debates, which will address various ethical issues from differing points of view. Grade for each person will be based on BOTH oral participation in the debate and a short written description by each student of how they prepared for the debate. (Written descriptions submitted on the date of each debate). Debates take place on Mon. Mar. 7 and Mon. May 9. **These assignments cannot be made up; thus, attendance on the dates of the Debates is REQUIRED.**

\* Student Presentations on Ethical Issues. Class will divide into **four groups**; each group will lead class discussion on the date when their issue is examined. Dates for these presentations are:

Environment: Mon. April 4

War and Violence: Wed. April 13

Health and Medicine: Mon. April 25

Finance and Business: Wed. May 4

**These assignments cannot be made up; thus, attendance on the date when Presentations are due is REQUIRED.**

**\***MAJOR PAPER. Due on the last day of class Wed. May 11. 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.

\*Final Exam: Mon. May 16, 3:00-5:00 PM, Sierra Hall 192.

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

Grading

Short Essays 10%

Mid-term Exam 15%

Debate Participation 10%

Student Presentation 15%

Major Paper 20%

Final Exam 20%

Class Participation 10%

Class Schedule and Plan

Mon. Jan. 25: Introductions, Syllabus

Wed. Jan. 27: What is “Ethics”? What is “Morality?”

READINGS: Gensler, 1-7; ERes: “Morality and Religion” from Encyclopedia of Religion

Mon. Feb 1: History of Ethics: China and India

READINGS: ERes: Routledge Companion to Ethics (E-book), “Ethical Thought in China,” “Ethical Thought in India”

FIRST SHORT ESSAY DUE

Wed. Feb. 3: History of Ethics: Ancient Greece

READINGS: ERes: Routledge Companion to Ethics (E-book), “Socrates and Plato,” “Aristotle;” Plato’s Dialogue “Euthyphro;” Selections from Aristotle’s “Nicomachean Ethics”

Mon. Feb. 8: History of Ethics: Medieval: Islamic Thinkers, T. Aquinas

READINGS: Routledge Companion to Ethics (E-book), “The Arabic Tradition,” selections from “Summa Theologica” by Thomas Aquinas

Wed. Feb. 10: History of Ethics: Early Modern: Hobbes, Hume

READINGS: Routledge Companion to Ethics (E-book), “Hobbes,” “Hume.”

Mon. Feb. 15: Modern: Kant, J. S. Mill.

READINGS: Routledge Companion to Ethics (E-book), “Kant.” Immanuel Kant, “Groundwork to a Metaphysic of Morals,” 21-26. Routledge Companion to Ethics (E-book), “John Stuart Mill.”

Wed. Feb. 17: History of Ethics: Modern/Post-Modern: Nietzsche, Existentialism, Post- Modernism. READINGS: Routledge Companion to Ethics (E-book): read chapter entitled “Existentialism.” F. 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

Mon. Feb. 22: Types of Ethical Positions: Cultural Relativism and Subjectivism

READING: Gensler, 8-25.

Wed. Feb. 24: Types of Ethical Positions: Supernaturalism and Intuitionism

READING: Gensler, 26-45

Mon. Feb. 29: Types of Ethical Positions: Emotivism and Prescriptivism

READING: Gensler, 46-65

Wed. Mar. 2: Types of Ethical Positions: Consequentialism and Nonconsequentialism

READING: Gensler, 110-138.

THIRD SHORT ESSAY DUE

Mon. Mar. 7: Debate I

Wed. Mar. 9: Virtues I: Introductions (Asia, Ancient Greece, Leonardo Boff and the “Hospitality Myth”) READINGS: Gensler, 139-151; Boff, vii-x, 3-61.

Mon. Mar. 14: Virtues II: Further Exploration

READING: Boff, 121-186.

Wed. Mar. 16: MID-TERM EXAM

Mon. Mar. 21 and Wed. Mar. 23: NO CLASS SESSIONS, SPRING RECESS

Mon. Mar. 28: Issues: Environment I: Instructor Presentation

READINGS: Boff, 195-232; ERes/Moodle

Wed. Mar. 30: Environment II: Case Studies

READINGS: ERes/Moodle

Mon. Apr. 4: Issues: Environment III: Student Presentation

Wed. Apr. 6: Issues: War and Violence I: Instructor Presentation

READINGS: Boff, 233-271; ERes/Moodle

Mon. Apr. 11: Issues: War and Violence II: Case Study

READINGS: ERes, Moodle

Wed. Apr. 13: Issues: War and Violence III: Student Presentation

Mon. Apr. 18: Issues: Health and Medicine I: Instructor Presentation

READINGS: ERes/Moodle

Wed. Apr. 20: Issues: Health and Medicine II: Case Study

READINGS: ERes/Moodle

Mon. Apr. 25: Issues: Health and Medicine III: Student Presentation

Wed. Apr. 27: Wed. Nov. 18: Issues: Finance and Business I: Instructor Presentation

READINGS: ERes/Moodle

Mon. May 2: Issues: Finance and Business II: Case Studies

READINGS: ERes/Moodle

Wed. May 4: Issues: Finance and Business III: Student Presentation

Mon. May 9: Debate II

Wed. May 11: Summary and Conclusions

MAJOR PAPER DUE

Final Exam: Mon. May 16, 3:00-5:00 PM, Sierra Hall 192.

**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 recall 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 to assist students in preparation for Debates, Student 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 Bayramian Hall 408 (BH 408), and can be reached by telephone at **(818)-677-2033** or e-mail at **lrc@csun.edu**. The website is [**http://www.csun.edu/lrc/writing.html**](http://www.csun.edu/lrc/writing.html). 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.”**