Religion and Ethics
Or: God and the Good Life

REL 364 – Fall 2014
T/Th 11:00-12:20
ZHS 360
Prof. David Albertson
Office: ACB 227
Office hours by appointment (email: dalberts@usc.edu)
Religion and Ethics

What counts as a good life? What is human excellence, that is, what does it mean to be a human being? What is “the Good,” and how does it relate to “God”? What is the difference between seeking a just community and seeking righteousness before God? What is the academic discipline of “ethics,” and how (and why) does one go about doing it?

Conflicting answers have been given to such questions in the history of western religious thought, answers which may still inform the possibilities for ethics (religious and otherwise) in the present. The goal of this course is not to consider discrete, contemporary moral issues. Rather, it serves as an historical introduction to western religious ethics, especially as influenced by Christianity, and provides a preliminary training for considering difficult contemporary questions. The goal of the class is to equip students with the historical knowledge necessary to think on their own about how to relate religion and ethics in the present.

Our class time together will be spent trying to make sense of primary texts. We will first acquaint ourselves with the Greek sources that influenced Jewish, Christian and Islamic ethics themselves. We then read selections from over a millennium of religious writings, before considering modern critiques of such religious approaches to ethics in general. What is left in western ethics if religion is removed?

Required texts

1. Reading selections available on Blackboard (see “Assignments”)
2. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics (Penguin)
3. Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (Cambridge)
4. Nietzsche, Genealogy of Morals (Cambridge)
5. Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling (Cambridge)

Preparing for class

Instead of being guided by a textbook, in this class we are going to read the important texts ourselves. The major goal of this course is for you to have the liberating and empowering experience of encountering the primary sources yourself and making up your own minds about the different ethical universes they represent. Once you know these texts, you will have no need of a textbook.

The texts we will read together are all primary sources and sometimes difficult. Hence the key to success in this class is setting aside adequate time to actually read all of the assigned texts, taking notes, and answering any assigned study questions. After you’ve done that and participated in class, you should have no problems in the other assignments. Our class discussions will assume that you have completed each reading assignment; reading quizzes will always draw from study questions; and the midterm and final will simply review issues we have discussed in class.

That said, since these are difficult texts you may not understand everything in them. This is to be expected, and this is what makes these texts worth reading. When this happens, simply make a note of the passage and keep progressing through the assigned reading.

To promote engagement with each other and with the texts, we will not be using laptops (or cellphones) in the classroom. Always bring your texts with you to class. Although several readings
will be distributed via PDF on Blackboard, you will need to print these out and bring them with you to class. This will also allow you to mark up your texts as you read (a skill you should begin cultivating).

**Assignments and grades**

- Participation in discussion of texts (20%)
- Surprise reading quizzes (10%)
- Midterm exam 1 (20%): Unit I
- Midterm exam 2 (20%): Unit II
- Final exam (30%): half on Unit III, half cumulative or applied

**Attendance policy**

Your absence diminishes the quality of our discussions. One absence will be excused without affecting your preparation grade. If you have a good reason to be absent more than once, such as illness, please notify me of your situation by email at least 24 hours in advance.

**Plagiarism**

It is your responsibility to understand and abide by the University’s standards for academic integrity. Failure to do so will result immediately in an “F” grade for the course, and university policy prohibits you from withdrawing after the fact. I am always happy to discuss any questions you have about what constitutes plagiarism. Asking questions is not evidence of guilt.
University policies

*Students with disabilities.* Any student requesting academic accommodations based on a disability is required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester. A letter of verification for approved accommodations can be obtained from DSP. Please be sure the letter is delivered to me (or to TA) as early in the semester as possible. DSP is located in STU 301 and is open 8:30 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The phone number for DSP is (213) 740-0776.

*Academic integrity.* USC seeks to maintain an optimal learning environment. General principles of academic honesty include the concept of respect for the intellectual property of others, the expectation that individual work will be submitted unless otherwise allowed by an instructor, and the obligations both to protect one’s own academic work from misuse by others as well as to avoid using another’s work as one’s own. All students are expected to understand and abide by these principles. Scampus, the Student Guidebook, contains the Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00, while the recommended sanctions are located in Appendix A: [http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/](http://www.usc.edu/dept/publications/SCAMPUS/gov/). Students will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for further review, should there be any suspicion of academic dishonesty. The Review process can be found at: [http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/](http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/).

*Use of course materials.* In SCampus 2000-2001 (page 91 under Academic Policies) there is a policy which reads: “Notes or recordings made by students based on a university class or lecture may only be made for purposes of individual or group study, or for other non-commercial purposes.... This restriction also applies to any information distributed, disseminated or in any way displayed for use in relationship to the class, whether obtained in class, via email or otherwise on the Internet, or via any other medium. Actions in violation of this policy constitute a violation of the Student Conduct Code, and may subject an individual or entity to university discipline and/or legal proceedings.”
CLASS SCHEDULE

T / Aug 26       Introduction to class: What is “ethics”? Why study ethics historically?

I. Greek Ethics: What is Virtue?
Th / Aug 28     The challenge of “Thrasymachus”
Read: Thucydides, “Melian Dialogue”; Plato, Republic I/II

T / Sept 2       Plato’s answer to Thrasymachus
Read: Plato, Republic VI/VII

Th / Sept 4      Aristotle on ethics and the pursuit of happiness
Read: Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, 1-2

T / Sept 9       Aristotle’s idea of virtue and moral judgment
Read: Nicomachean Ethics, 3, 5-6

Th / Sept 11     Aristotle on true pleasure
Read: Nicomachean Ethics, 8-10

T / Sept 16      Stoic ethics
Read: Epictetus, Handbook; Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

Th / Sept 18     MIDTERM 1 (in class)

II. Biblical Ethics: What is Righteousness?
T / Sept 23      Ethics in the Hebrew Bible, New Testament and Qur’an
Read: Exodus 19-24, Leviticus 19, Micah; Romans 12-15, Matthew 5-7, 1 John; Qur’an TBD

Th / Sept 25     Augustine’s analysis of moral failure
Read: Augustine, Confessions II; City of God XIV.1, 9-13, 28

T / Sept 30      Augustine on charity, virtue and social order
Read: Augustine, On Christian Teaching I; City of God XIX.4, 13-14, 17

Th / Oct 2       Medieval Christian ethics: askesis and virtue
Read: John Cassian, Institutes, Book 5; Gregory of Nyssa, Sermons on the Beatitudes

T / Oct 7        Medieval Jewish ethics: law and virtue
Read: Maimonides, Eight Chapters, chs. 1-6

Th / Oct 9       Medieval Islamic ethics: law and askesis
Read: Selections from Al-Razi, Book on Ethics
T / Oct 14    Protestant ethics in early modernity: ethics versus true religion
Read: Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*

Th / Oct 16   MIDTERM 2 (in class)

**III. Modern Critiques of Western Religious Ethics: the Demise of Virtue?**

T / Oct 21    Kant, or ethics before religion
Read: Kant, “Preface” to *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, Metaphysics of Morals*, Section 1

Th / Oct 23   Kant on duty and happiness
Read: *Metaphysics of Morals*, Section 2

T / Oct 28    Kant on moral freedom
Read: *Metaphysics of Morals*, Sections 3

Th / Oct 30   Kant (conclusion)

T / Nov 4     Three critiques of Kant: Mill, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard
Read: *Utilitarianism*, ch. 2; *Genealogy of Morality*, preface

Th / Nov 6    Nietzsche, or the return of Thrasymachus
Read: *Genealogy of Morality*, essay 1

T / Nov 11    Nietzsche
Read: *Genealogy of Morality*, essay 2

Th / Nov 13   Nietzsche
Read: *Genealogy of Morality*, essay 3

T / Nov 18    Kierkegaard, or the religious suspension of the ethical
Read: *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 3-20; Genesis 22

Th / Nov 20   Kierkegaard
Read: *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 21-71

T / Nov 25    NO CLASS (Instructor at conference)

Th / Nov 27   THANKSGIVING

T / Dec 2     Kierkegaard
Read: *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 72-109

Th / Dec 4    Ways forward: Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche or Kierkegaard?

FINAL EXAM: Monday, May 9th, 2:00-4:00pm