

Philosophy and Literature
PHIL 177

Course Content

In this course we will consider a set of related issues concerning the foundations of morality and moral decision making, as discussed by philosophers, novelists and playwrights. We will deal primarily with questions in moral psychology and moral decision making. These will include:

- Is morality objective?
- Do I have any reason to be moral?
- What is the relation between reason and desire in the aetiology of action?
- We will devote a fair bit of time to the so-called Socratic paradox, according to which knowledge is sufficient for virtue. What does this claim mean, precisely? Is it true? If it is true, what is its practical purport?

These questions will inevitably give way to some broader questions about practical reasoning, and finally to some metaphysical questions about the natures of rationality and desire.

Required Books:

- Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Oxford University Press)
- Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (Oxford University Press)
- Milton, *Paradise Lost* (Hackett)
- Plato, *Protagoras* (Hackett Pubs)
- Sophocles, *Philoctetes* (Hackett)
- Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (Penguin)

Required Work and Protocol:

- Two examinations, one at mid-term and one at the end of term.
- One written assignment, for which you have an option:

- an expository essay of approximately 2000 words, on a theme investigated in this course. I will offer essay prompts approximately two weeks in advance of the due date.
- a didactically structured work of fiction (e.g. a short story, a piece of drama, a philosophical dialogue, conceivably a piece of verse). Students taking this option should consult with me, but to note: this is not simply a piece of creative writing, but rather a tightly controlled composition with a clearly discernible thesis. I will describe this option more fully later in the term.

Dates for the Examinations:

First Examination: **Monday 3 February at 8.00**, in our regularly scheduled classroom.

Second Examination: **Friday 14 March at 8.00**, in our regularly scheduled classroom.

Due Dates for the Expository Essay or Composition

Composition: **Friday 14 March**

I will offer prompts for the essay version of your composition assignment. You are, however, welcome to ignore these suggestions and write on a pertinent topic of your own choosing, but only if that topic is approved by me at least one week in advance of the due date.

As indicated, I will discuss the non-expository option later in the term.

Whichever option you take, your written work is to be submitted electronically in a main-stream word-processing format or (if you use something non-standard) as .pdf documents, to our Canvas site. Assignments will be accepted until **23.59 on 14 March**.

Due to the extreme compression of the term, late assignments cannot be accepted; exceptions to this policy will be made only in cases of documented emergencies.

Attendance is required at all class meetings: you will lose one letter grade for each three unexcused absences.

Issues and Approaches:

We will concentrate especially on issues in ethics, together with connected issues in philosophy of mind, predominantly (but not exclusively) as they arise in literary works.

Some issues:

- What is a person's character? Are your conscious, reasoned beliefs the most important part of your character? Or are your instinctive feelings and emotions more important in determining your character?—Or is perhaps this a false dichotomy?
- Can people be held responsible for having the characters they have? If so, how so? Might it be that characters are innate, or fixed by external circumstances, including cultural and social forces beyond one's control?
- Can the Socratic claim that knowledge is sufficient for virtue be defended? In general, there are a fair number of problems which arise under the rubric of 'weakness of will.' What are these problems? Are some of them more difficult than others?
- How important is knowledge and rationally motivated belief? Is the best sort of person the one who acts from self-reflective principles, or the one who acts on sentiment? More generally, how are we to respond to Humean conceptions of belief and desire? Some of Hume's approach presupposes a clear and defensible distinction between affective and non-affective mental states. Should we accept Hume's philosophy of mind in these matters? If we do not, how will that impact our conception of weakness of will and allied issues in practical reasoning?
- How should we reach moral decisions? Should we be detached and impartial, always endeavoring to avoid being influenced by emotions and sympathies? Or should these have a role, even a prominent role, in our moral-decision-making processes?
- Morality evidently requires concern for the interests of others. But if self-interest is natural and rational, does this mean that morality is unnatural and irrational? Or is self interest rational in every case? Can someone really sacrifice her own interests for the good of others?

These are philosophical questions, the sorts of questions philosophers take up in their expository, argumentative writings. One may well ask why we should read novels, plays, and poems in an effort to answer them. Some reasons:

- We can see how naturally and easily philosophical questions such as these arise from reflection on central and unavoidable questions about human action and character—and this is what the novels I've selected aim to do. (N.b.: none of the novels or plays we'll be reading is explicitly didactic. But they do consider the questions raised above, and do advance positive views about them.)
- A dramatist or novelist presents significant features of human character for our judgment, and influences our judgment by the selection of incidents and by explicit narrative observations. Once we understand the issues, we may want to challenge the accuracy or fairness of the author's presentation of them.
- We might think that literary presentations of the issues reveal significant dimensions that philosophical discussions tend to miss or even obscure. Philosophical arguments are presented in general and abstract terms; they invite us to pronounce on the rightness or wrongness of an action from an impartial point of view; here we might think that the philosopher misses something a literary work can provide.
- On the other hand, a literary work may distort our judgment, by inviting or inducing sympathy where none is appropriate. Can philosophy help us to counteract this tendency (if it is a real tendency)?

The general aim of this course, then, is to discuss philosophy in and through literature. This is not a course in aesthetics or the philosophy *of* literature or literary criticism. We will naturally be led now and again to consider the issues that arise in these areas, because they are closely connected with some of the questions raised above. But they will not be our primary focus, which will be on the philosophical issues themselves, as they arise in the works we read.

Office Hours and Contact Information:

Office: Arts & Humanities Building 447

Office hours: W 13.00-14.00 and by appt.

e-mail: CJShields@ucsd.edu

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N.b. I prefer e-mail to telephone as a manner of student contact. I make an effort to answer student e-mails promptly, but please be aware that I measure promptness in this domain in days rather than hours or minutes.

IV. Topics and Reading Schedule

Week One:

Reading: Plato, *Protagoras*

Week Two:

Reading: Sophocles, *Philoctetes*

Week Three:

Reading: Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Week Four:

Reading: Milton, *Paradise Lost*

Week Five:

Reading: Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*

Week Six:

Reading: Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*; Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature* II.iii.3; on Canvas); Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Week Seven:

Reading: Eliot, *Middlemarch*

Week Eight:

Reading: Eliot, *Middlemarch*; Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

Week Nine:

Reading: Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

Week Ten:

Reading: Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*; Quodlibetal and Review