

AUTUMN 2025: ETHICS – PHIL 7006

Professor Dennis J. Schmidt

DESCRIPTION

Ethical questions and decisions only really emerge when there are no rules, no clarity, no obvious path to making a choice that has consequences. In short, ethics begins when one is left to make what we refer to as a judgment call – a decision that has no clear precedent – and this means that ethical questions throw oneself back to oneself: “I am responsible for what I do.” One might say that to live an “ethical life” is always *difficult* and that it begins with the *crisis* of asking “what to do?”.

Philosophy has always taken ethical concerns and questions to be at its heart, and it has understood that to be human is to have to live with this responsibility and to face this difficulty from time to time. The intention of this seminar will be to look at some of the ways in which philosophers have examined ethical issues as well as how those issues might be confronted. The 2500 year history of such efforts begins when Plato speaks of “the idea of the Good” and of what binds us to that idea and it will move through topics such as love, conscience, friendship, sacrifice, evil, responsibility, and virtue. Our aim is to look closely at some of the key arguments about these notions and to ask how, if at all, they can help illuminate the real task of living as an ethical being, as a person among others in a world larger than what we can know or define or control.

To this end, we will read a selection of texts from that history of ethical discussions. The selections will be relatively brief so that we might read them with the proper care and detail that is needed. Occasionally, we will discuss how specific ethical situations might be understood in light of those texts. But it will always be important to remember that ethical decisions are fundamentally unique and specific – they arise only when there is no rule to guide us – and we cannot even begin to imagine all of the situations in which we might find ourselves facing such questions.

Selected readings TBD, but will be from the following authors: Plato, Aristotle, St. Paul, Augustine, Meister Eckhart, Kant, Nietzsche, Arendt