

Freshman Odyssey Seminar

FYOS-1001

Fall Term 2012

Call Number: 20216

Place: Peabody Hall, room 105

Time: Wednesday, 3:35-4:45 (eighth period)

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**The unrefined and sluggish mind
of Homo javanensis
Could only treat of things concrete
And common to the senses.**

--- Willard Van Orman Quine ---
philosopher/logician

To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.

--- Teddy Roosevelt ---

In the following I describe the nature of this seminar and what is required by it. I consider this syllabus a contractual agreement between you and me.

From this syllabus you can ascertain the framework of what I expect of you and what you can expect from this seminar.

This syllabus is the general guideline for the progression of this seminar. There may be times when “adjustments” will need to be made. These will be announced in class. It is the responsibility of the student to know of any announcements made in class even if that student is absent on the day of the announcements.

GENERAL COMMENTS

The thrust of this seminar will be to examine what it may reasonably mean to talk about “objectivity” in value judgments, and especially in moral judgments. In our contemporary world it is often assumed, and I emphasize “*assumed*,” that it is simply nonsense to speak even of the possibility of objectivity in value judgments. It is assumed that all such judgments are nothing more than expressions of the feelings, emotions and subjective points-of-view of the speaker making the value (normative) claim. Thus, we often hear that all morals are subjective; that whatever I prefer is perfectly all right for me to do, and that is that. Of course, attempting to

avoid painful situations and realizing that the civil (or parental) law, when broken, can lead to painful situations, we also often hear something to the effect that whatever I prefer is perfectly all right for me to do so long as I am not caught. In this case moral appeal, what I feel good about, is subjugated to fear of pain. A more “soft hearted” individual, still viewing value judgments as subjective, may say, “Whatever I prefer is perfectly all right for me to do so long as I am not caught and whatever I do does not hurt anyone else.” Here there seems to be some sort of respect for another individual. Yet, the notion of “to hurt” is left sufficiently vague and ambiguous as to be all but meaningless.

Often coupled with these sorts of subjective and emotional attitudes is another which goes something like this: “Who am *I* to say what is right or wrong for *YOU*? After all it is a matter of individual preference. I cannot possibly judge your actions. You like fried liver; I do not. That is the end of it.” Many people do feel uneasy in judging morally the actions of others. These uneasy attitudes are often strengthened by vague and ambiguous appeals to political correctness, multicultural considerations, tolerance, and/or diversity.

So, it appears to me, that there is a widespread view, although often not well articulated nor well thought out, that there is no such thing as objective value claims. Indeed, the concept of *objectivity* coupled to the concept of value *claims* is a type of contradiction; an oxymoron, if you please. That is to say, to talk of “objective moral claims” is just stupid!

The primary purpose of this seminar is to examine these claims of “value subjectivism,” and especially in the area of morality. In order to do this there are at least two over riding tasks we must face. And while these tasks can be separated for the sake of their introduction, in actuality we shall be considering them together as we proceed in this seminar.

The *first* of these tasks is to determine what we mean by “moral.” What makes an action a moral action? To answer this question will require some preliminary work on our part to become relatively clear concerning just what makes a judgment a moral one.

Suppose that I say, “Murder is wrong.” Assuming that we know what is meant by “murder” (many people wrongly and dangerously confuse “murder” with “killing”), then we may ask “Wrong in what sense?” For instance, it may have been legally wrong to have killed Hitler when he was in power in Germany. On the other hand, would it have been morally wrong to have done so? Would it have been politically wrong; economically wrong? Arguably segregation was morally wrong in the United States in the 1940s, but it was not legally wrong. Just what makes an issue a *moral* one instead of, for instance, a legal, or economic, or religious, or social issue, or political, or a matter of prudence, or even etiquette? This is not to say that one issue, say abortion, cannot have overlaps in all of these categories. Abortion may be a religious issue, a political issue, and also an economic issue. Yet, it is also claimed by some that abortion is a moral issue as well. What is it to be a moral issue?

We are looking for those more salient features which make a particular issue a *moral* one, no matter what other type of issue it also may be.

While we are more-or-less isolating what is meant by “moral issue,” and this is not easy to do, we shall also be moving to our second question of whether, yes or no, such issues may be spoken of, in any way, as objective, or whether they can only be viewed as purely subjective; purely as only a matter of personal opinion. Again there may be overlaps. But, before we can clearly discuss *this* overlapping *that*, we have to be clear just what “this” and “that” are – how they are properly defined.

So, the *second* of our tasks is to come to some understanding what is understood by “*objective*” and “*subjective*.”

These two tasks will be with us for the entirety of the seminar.

Before one can reasonably discuss, accept, or reject a claim, one must understand what that claim is asserting, and to achieve this understanding one must understand clearly the *meanings* of those terms used in the assertion to be discussed, accepted, or rejected. Here I am appealing to a basic tenant of rationality: *One must first clearly understand what is being asserted before saying that it is true or false.*

Coming to a clear understanding both of an assertion and of the terms used in making that assertion is a difficult task. One way to do this is to look for paradigm uses of the terms involved. Employing this approach, I am assuming that whatever it is to be objective, we find paradigm examples of that in such areas as mathematics and physics. This is not to suggest that these are the only places where we can speak with some confidence of what is ordinarily understood by “objectivity.” Nonetheless, they are convenient places to begin in our clarification of what we do, in fact, ordinarily mean by “objective” and “subjective.” Most would agree that if anything is objective, mathematics and physics are.

In order to clarify issues concerning us in this seminar, as we proceed we shall also be considering various particular cases – some imaginary and some not. In doing this we may encounter certain strong, even perhaps negative, personal reactions. Why might such reactions be the case?

Let me, first, suggest that some of the topics we shall be discussing, for instance abortion, are very volatile today. Many people have extremely strong emotions and beliefs concerning these topics. Second, in their strong positions people believe (and I stress “believe”) that they are absolutely right and those who differ with them are absolutely wrong. Many issues become a “black and white” situation. In a short period of time, the only thing that seems to be left is to hurl insults at one another. And all too often more than insults are hurled. Abortion clinics are bombed; physicians are killed. In all probability you are not immune from such strong feelings and beliefs. Perhaps you, too, have very deep emotions generating beliefs which you treat as absolute truths, even though you might also hold, as an absolute truth, that there are no absolute truths in the arena of morality! (No one ever promised us that we would not contradict

ourselves! We often do.)

I shall *never* ask, much less require, you to change your deep seated beliefs. However, I shall ask, and even demand, that you carefully look at them from the viewpoint of reason and not emotion. Again, this is not to require, in any way, that you change your opinions. You may; you may not. But, if there is such a transformation, then that will be the result of a search and battle on your part with yourself under the appropriate guidelines of reason. In such a battle the elements of emotion and reason are often at war with one another. Hopefully you will become more aware of this as we proceed. Having once made this discovery you will be faced with acting in accordance with it. How you act is your choice.

This brings us to another topic which may be useful to you in coming better to understand the nature of this seminar. What is my role, as the professor/facilitator? To throw light on this question, let me speak of some of my views concerning teaching.

Many professors are good or even excellent instructors. These instructors are masters of their subject matter, often doing top rate research in their areas. They can make clear very difficult concepts. Some of these professors are entertaining, and some even funny. They are often, although not always, congenial people, helpful with matters pertaining to the content of a course being presented. But while such characteristics may be necessary to being an outstanding instructor, as opposed to even a very good instructor, nonetheless they are not sufficient for being a good teacher. Some very important elements are missing.

One such element which distinguishes excellent teaching from excellent instruction is the insight that teaching is concerned not only with material to be learned, but the learning of that material in such a way that it makes a profound difference in the overall life of the learner, and I am not referring merely to the economic life of that learner. Teaching is an activity, a process, of helping both the student and the teacher *to transform* his or her life in view of a set of values appropriated to human life *at its best*. (The notion of *human life at its best* itself demands a good deal of discussion.) Every great teacher — Socrates, Jesus, The Buddha, Confucius, to mention but a few — has instinctively realized, practiced, and helped in this transforming process. I certainly do not wish to engage in the worse sort of hubris and compare myself favorably to such teachers. Nonetheless, the deep foundation from which I do labor as a teacher is always to treat each student as a valuable human being who is seriously seeking guidance and insight in order to transform his or her life into something better as a human being.

Thus, in part, my view of teaching differs from instruction, and even extremely good instruction, in that teaching is an activity, by which, and through which, the teacher becomes a *catalyst to help* someone literally change his or her life toward the best of human living. This has certainly been the case with those who, in my life as a student, I look back upon as great teachers. This is the golden tradition of teaching which I attempt, even if often poorly, to keep alive and to pass on to future generations.

I must attempt to avoid confusion here. I maintain that a good teacher is a catalyst to help the student in a life transformation toward the best that a human can be. This must not be confused with what may be called the “dictatorial instructor.” The good teacher should never attempt **to impose** his or her views about any particular topic onto a student. In a word the good teacher must never attempt **to force** the student to agree with the teacher. To do so is to practice tyranny. This is not to say that I shall not *vigorously attack* your views (even when I happen to agree with them). I shall. But, in doing this I am in no way attempting to impose my views on you. Unfortunately, such practices are found in the classroom, usually, although not always, when an extremely liberal or an extremely conservative stance is embraced by the instructor. So, the good teacher is a catalyst to help bring about self-examination, not to dictate dogma, leading to a better life.

Here we must be careful, for the **kind of change** which hopefully will begin to take place itself must be stressed. That change is not necessarily the change of acceptance to rejection, or rejection to acceptance, of a particular personal position on some given topic. Such change might occur. It might not.

Suppose that Alice holds a certain position on same-sex marriage. She believes that it is morally wrong. Now a reasonable question to ask is why does she think this? It may be that this is simply what her religious leaders have told her all of her life. It may be that this is what her parents believe. It may be that this is what her friends believe. Certainly these are not exclusive. Nonetheless, such observations point merely to various “causes” influencing what Alice holds to be true. In none of these cases is Alice thinking for herself about the topic of same sex marriage. She is not seeking evidence from which she can construct consistent arguments in support of her claim. She is merely mouthing what has been taught to her as “gospel truth.” ***She is substituting motivation to believe for evidence for what she believes.*** She is not thinking for herself.

Let us suppose, however, that Alice begins to examine her view and seeks evidence for her view that same sex marriage is wrong. She might not find any of her present reasons very strong. She looks for evidence and arguments, not merely authority, to support her view. Let us further imagine that over a period of time she does present such arguments to herself and to others. Let us also suppose that these arguments are critically attacked by both her and others and yet manage to stand against the attacks. Alice still maintains her original position concerning same-sex marriage. While Alice will not have changed her position on same-sex marriage, her life will have been transformed. Something important will have changed, and that is the ability to think for oneself with rational arguments based on the best evidence obtainable at the time. So, while one might change his or her views about a specific topic, this might not be the case. What might change is the understanding of that topic and how it is defended or rejected. In this transformation we each become free to think rationally for our own self! In doing this we bow to the opinion or authority of no one. We do, however, ***bind ourselves to the principles of rationality while following them whole heartedly.*** Thus, we become our own person, and not the person of some one, or some thing, else.

I am here for you, *not* to provide answers, for only each of you can do that for yourself. Nor am I here to impose answers on you, for no one ought to do that. I am here to help you in a journey of transformation. In doing this what I can, and shall, offer you are glimpses of a method, a type of general road map, for that life journey.

The teacher is a catalyst to help the student seriously examine his or her deep and cherished views guiding his or her life. I believe that Socrates was correct when he observed that the unexamined life is not worth living. I further believe that living the unexamined life is an extremely dangerous thing to do, although many people do just this as they become more and more involved in making good grades, earning a living, paying bills, raising a family, acquiring things and positions, voting, and the like.

To be a catalyst is also to be a challenge. Indeed, it is to be an irritant. For the most part we really do not like many, and especially radical, changes in our views of our self, of our bodies, of our world, of our religion, of our goals in life, of are our conceptions of right and wrong, of our abilities to be “free,” and so on. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are far too comfortable in our self-certainties; in our “obvious truths” about so many different things. “Leave me alone; all I want is to be happy,” is often what is heard and thought. On the other hand, I want to make you uncomfortable in where you are with yourself, but I want to do this by making you question in a rational manner your beliefs. Once more, I do not want to force my positions on you, even though at times we might seriously disagree about some particular issue. So, I see my task as that of making you think rationally, critically, about your self, your world, your values, and your goals.

Admittedly to do this, to think critically about such matters, is often strange and difficult. There are various reasons for this. Some of these, such as the present comfort factor, I have already mentioned. There are others as well.

For instance, as humans we are many things. One of these is that we are biological entities of a certain sort. We are animals of a certain sort. (Note that I am not suggesting that we are merely animals although some people do hold to this position.) Now the sort of animal we are may be, in part, indicated by suggesting that we are pack animals; that is, social animals. Unlike turtles, we humans naturally go about in groups of those who we perceive to be of our own kind. We seek shelter and protection in groups. Our survival itself demands group living. We seek companionship, recognition, honors, power, wealth, and social activities in groups. All of this points to the fact that we radically, not merely accidentally, depend on one another. These are simply observable facts about us as human beings.

Too often, as pack animals, we simply follow the dictates of our group. We want, and want badly, acceptance; not truth. We exclude, and often viciously, those who do not agree with our group. Too often as pack animals we follow what appears to us as “intuitively correct” – we say, “obviously this is the way things are.” This is to say, we follow what we have been taught in our lives from very early ages by authority figures such as our family members, our religious leaders,

our friends – all being key figures in our various groups. Indeed, some of this is appropriate and even necessary for the cohesion of the society of which we are members and on which we essentially depend. However, this “habituation in custom” is far more appropriate at younger ages than it is in adulthood. In any event, it is uncomfortable to change any of those attitudes instilled at an early age and growing so strongly out of our various groups. Nonetheless, I shall demand of you that you rationally examine many such attitudes. Again, this is not so that you will agree, or disagree, with certain positions, even though in the end you may do one or the other. I, better to say the laws of rationality, demand this so that, hopefully, you will lead a far better human life than you otherwise would have.

I shall demand of you, first, that you learn to think rationally and not merely to memorize, to repeat, or to emote over how you *feel about* something. Our feelings may be important motivators to action. They are never reasons in support of truth. Nor are our *mere* beliefs supportive reasons for the truth of some position. After all our beliefs may be wrong and we not even realize it. Remember, beliefs, like feelings, may motivate us to action. They may even explain why we acted in the manner in which we did. Even so, *they do not justify that action*.

I further maintain that if the content of a course is not shown to relate directly to the life of the student as that student is living it in present moment and as that life will continue to develop, then that course is of little worth from the viewpoint of education no matter how fine the course might be in terms of instruction, information delivered, entertainment value, and job preparation. It is not a great task to stand before a class of even hundreds giving forth facts and figures. Even so, at the end of the day what the student has learned is some information about a particular subject matter. Yet, the question of what impact this makes on the overall life of that student as a human being still goes begging.

Too often students come back to Athens to see me after graduation and tell me how irrelevant much of their college “education” has been to them. They feel cheated. So, the question remains, “What relevance does this class have to the present life of the student? Furthermore, what will all of it mean ten, twenty, thirty years from now? These are vitally important questions from the viewpoint of teaching as facilitating life transformations over long periods of time and transformations for the better assuming that we can come to some understanding of what this “better” is.

Therefore, in this seminar, as in all of my classes, I hold each of you to be a highly valuable individual who is on a quest of a personal transformation. As one of my former professors at Sewanee once told me, we must move either toward the light or toward the dark. That is certain, for it is certain that we cannot merely stand still. Move we must. Which way we move, however, is in the power of each of us to decide, to implement, and to follow. Each one of us decides whether to become more like the angels of light or like the demons of darkness. This is our individual choice and obligation at this place and at this time – not somewhere else at some other time. Here; now! Each of us, myself as well as you, is at a particular point in our lives in this journey. Only if this seminar can, in some way, speak to that point is there a possibility that

it will be successful for you in aiding you to make proper choices leading to a better life. I hope for your success in these choices.

And so I look upon teaching, as opposed to instruction, first as a sincere involvement with students as valuable human beings in a particularly difficult moment of life as they attempt to move into adulthood. Second, I see teaching as always making clearly relevant to the current and future life of students whatever topic is being taught. Certainly, the good teacher must be a master of the material being presented, must be able to “translate” that material into a form understandable by students, and must present it in an engaging manner. But, good teaching goes further than good instruction. And so, in the end, I view teaching, but not instruction, as a *mutual* journey of teacher and student, within the academic life, and as life transforming. In all of this comes the true joy and hope of both teaching and learning.

MORE SPECIFIC COMMENTS

First, let me speak of *grading* as everyone seems to be vitally interested in grades. This course is taught on an “S/U” bases. One either does satisfactory work or unsatisfactory work. As the professor I am the final judge of what is satisfactory and what is unsatisfactory. However, I am not an arbitrary judge. First, I have more than forty-five years of teaching experience and a fair amount of experience being a student as well. But, second, there are requirements and expectations for you to fulfill in this seminar in order for you to do what I consider satisfactory work. Traditionally these requirements and expectations are clear. If, however, you do not understand something concerning them, then it is your prerogative and responsibility to ask for clarification. ***Here you must take responsibility for your own life.***

What are these requirements and expectations?

The first of these is that you are dedicated to being a college student and are here for the primary reason of achieving a college education. I presume that you are not here primarily to socialize and let personal matters interfere with the achieving of that education. Thus, you have mastered time management and set your goals for success in you college classroom work. I realize that the transition from high school to college is challenging, and for some even shocking. Be challenged! Be shocked! But, be disciplined!

This second of these requirements is that you have a high proficiency in English, both grammar and vocabulary; that you can speak well; that you can write well. In college language is your primary tool. Not to have this tool well mastered, and not to use it well, assures dismal results if not failure. In this class it is assumed that you will speak well, and often, during the seminars and that you will write well in your written assignments.

More specific to this course, the third of the requirements for success is that you are required to keep a weekly journal. ***You will submit these at regular dates through eLearning Commons.*** You must write you journals in **WORD**. Save, and send, each journal with the extension of

<[your last name] Journal [appropriate Roman numeral]. doc>. Thus, I would save my second journal as

Harrison Journal II.doc

If I cannot “open” your submission I count it as not received.

There may be some initial machine/programming issues here in submitting your first journal submission. If so, we shall figure out what to do about them.

On the first page of each journal submission entry you are to write

**YOUR NAME
HONORS SEMINAR
SPRING 2012**

This will help me to identify YOUR Journal on eLearning Commons.

Each journal submission will have several assignments.

Thus, when beginning *each* week’s entry, write this:

**Assignment [Appropriate assignment numeral]
[Appropriate date; e.g.,]**

Let us suppose that you are submitting the first journal. Then you would have typed before beginning your first assignment of that journal:

Assignment 1
15 August 2012

Doing this will allow me to see easily which assignment you are considering.

You are to number consecutively all pages throughout each journal submission. Put these page numbers at the center bottom of each page.

Each week of the semester you are to write *two to three (2-3) full pages* in your journal (Use 12 pt. New Roman font with one inch margins)* It is best that you do this over the week and NOT wait until Tuesday to write the entry for the week.

Periodically (see the “Date Assignments” following) you will turn in a journal submission through eLearning Commons. I shall comment on what you have to say and then return your work to you. In this way we can carry on a written “dialog.”

What of the contents of these assignments? About what are you to write? To answer this question, consider the purposes of these notebooks. There are primarily two purposes. One of these is *to convince me* that you are *seriously reading* the assigned readings, class handouts, and the like. Second, I want to see that *you are applying* what you have read AND heard and discussed in our weekly seminar meetings to various questions, problems and issues we raise in the seminar, in the readings, and in your personal life. Another way of putting this is that I want to see your thought process at work in relation to various problems as you use the tools offered to you in this seminar to do such thinking.

You will always use the best of correct grammar, spelling and locution in expressing yourself. Language is your tool. Bad tools, or the bad use of them, produce bad results!

Here are some further points in helping you to satisfy, and to satisfy well, these requirements.

Unless you are otherwise instructed, at the beginning of each assignment entry you *may* always consider these questions:

1) What is the most important “insight” I heard today in seminar and/or I have read in this week’s assignment and handouts, and why?

2) What is the most confusing “insight” I heard today in seminar and/or I have read in this week’s assignment and handouts, and why?

3) What is the most contentious “insight” I heard today in seminar and/or I have read in this week’s assignment and handouts, and why?

These question aids are to be employed only when you yourself seem to have nothing to say. Even so, in such cases, realize that it is *never* sufficient merely to list short answers to these question aids. You *MUST ALWAYS* ask “WHY do I answer in the way in which I do?” That is to say, always give reasons for your positions; for you beliefs.

Such “reasons” may be of at least two types.

First, there are causal reasons and personal motivations for holding a position, for reacting to a certain “insight,” and the like. Such causal reasons might be a matter of where you were born, the social class in which you were raised, the religion (or lack of religion) of your family, what your friends think, external threats, your particular emotions about something (someone) you like or dislike, or the like. These sorts of reasons supply **MOTIVATIONS** and/or **EXPLANATIONS** for why one believes in a certain way at a certain time in a certain set of circumstances. Further, motivations are important not only for beliefs but also for actions.

In general, each of us acts on the beliefs that we have, and the stronger a belief, the more likely we are to act upon that belief. So, people have beliefs that often led to actions. Even so the

strongest of ones believes, motivate by this-or-that, could be wrong. Thus, it is always appropriate to ask just why a person has that belief. In this sense of “why?” the answer is usually given as a causal motivation or explanation. Yet, even if we were quite clear in all of this, such motivations or explanations would not be justifications for beliefs, much less actions issuing forth from those beliefs. ***We can surely understand why some one was motivated to do something and still raise the question was what that person did acceptable; was that a reasonable action?***

Remember that we often act in terms of our beliefs, and that the stronger a belief is, the more likely we are to act in accordance with that belief. But, here is the grave danger in all of this. Our various beliefs can be wrong. NO human is absolutely correct about all things at all times. Knowing how we came about acquiring a belief does not guarantee that the belief is correct even though it may provide an explanation of why we have that belief. So, there is always the real possibility that we are acting, or are going to act, in accordance with wrong beliefs. Yet, to act in accordance with a wrong belief certainly increases the probability that we shall act wrongly; that we shall not act in accordance with our own best interests; that such actions will lead to painful results.

A second sort of reason that we may give for our beliefs is found not in motivations or explanations but in arguments. Here we attempt to present ***evidence*** in a rational and cogent manner to support our views. In that we attempt to do this we are objective. For arguments are, by their very nature, public things open to public debate in accordance with public criteria for success or failure of the acceptance of evidence and argument. It is in evidence and arguments that ***JUSTIFICATIONS*** are presented, if presented they are, for positions which we accept or reject. As this seminar proceeds we shall see more clearly what constitutes an argument and what is entailed in these “justifications.” So, keep these questions before you: “What is a justification, what is it to give a justification, and why is giving a justification important?”

Once more --

NEVER CONFUSE MOTIVATION OR EXPLANATION WITH JUSTIFICATION!!!

Suppose that you want to be wealthy. Indeed, one of the primary reasons why you are in college is to prepare yourself for a high earning job. Yet, you also know that being in college is not enough. You also need to make high grades to impress someone enough to give you important job interviews. To guarantee the necessary high grades you begin to cheat on various assignments. Indeed, your grades improve a great deal. Nonetheless, this would still not be a ***justification*** of the moral correctness of your action of cheating even though it all may constitute an explanation of why you cheated driven by certain motivations to cheat.

Thus, in your weekly journal entries whenever you do consider the three questions listed above, you are also to give reasons, in the sense of argument, ***why*** you answer as you do.

To do this successfully will demand that you begin to develop a sense to proper argument. I am using “argument” in a specific way. I do NOT mean a disagreement, a fuss, a fight, a shouting match. To talk faster and louder than you opponent may show that you are foolish but never that you are correct. As we shall use the term in this seminar, fundamentally an argument is a way in which evidence is presented in support of some position. Shouting is not to present evidence; fighting is not to present evidence; fussing is not to present evidence.

Arguments are presented in the form of declarative sentences some of which denote evidence being presented in support of some position. These are called the “premises” of an argument. Then there is a statement of the position supposedly being supported by the evidence. This is called the “conclusion” of an argument. Broadly speaking there are three fundamental ways in which an argument can be faulty and, hence, unacceptable. *First*, the terms used to express the premises and the conclusion may be so confused and confusing because of vagueness, ambiguity, over complication, and the like that we simply cannot grasp what is being claimed. *Second*, even if the statement of the premises is clear, these premises might not be acceptable for various reasons. For instance, we would not accept a premise if we knew that it was a false claim. But, *third*, even if all of the premises are clear and acceptable, nonetheless they still might not support the conclusion in the way the argument suggests that they do. As we progress in our seminar, we shall see that to be able to argue well is at the very heart of what it is to be objective.

In your assignments, be strongly aware of *arguments* in which you support your position or criticize the position of others. Be strongly aware of how such arguments can go wrong. Even if we are not in a position to know why (in the sense of explanation) a person hold to certain beliefs, or performs certain actions, nonetheless we can still present arguments concerning the acceptability or not of these beliefs or actions. One does not have “to wear the shoes” of someone to say whether, yes or no, his or her actions are morally acceptable or not.

The reading assignments both in this “syllabus” and class hand-out are vital for understanding what is going on in the seminar. They present a background of the discussions and insights of objective moral decision making. NOT to read, and to read carefully, all of the assignments is to cheat yourself, me and the other members of the seminar. Since **I** take the work we are doing to be extremely important, and for all sorts of reasons, I do not like to be cheated by indifferent behavior of students. Hence, you are to convince me through your journal entrees and comments in class that you have, indeed, read and thought carefully about the assignments.

Given my comments to this point, I can now return to the question of grading. Not to write weekly assignments in accordance with the above guide lines will guarantee you a “U” for the seminar. To miss, without a proper excuse, submitting a journal at the stated time will also guarantee you a “U” for the seminar. Over sleeping, field trips for other classes, studying for other classes, weddings, long weekends, partying too much, *etc.* are some things which certainly are not proper excuses for missing an assignment date.

Your grade of “S” or “U” will also depend on class participation. Even though your assignments

are all done and yet you say little in this seminar, then that will go a long way to earn you a “U”.

I hope that we shall soon bond together as a family group. This is not to say that we shall not have disagreements, for, as in any family, we shall. But, it is to say that each of us shall make our positions known, our arguments for those positions, and our criticisms of other positions and their sustaining arguments. Indeed, here we can be neither shy wall flowers nor emotionally thin skinned. If something silly, contradictory, foolish, is said, then it is our **obligation** to point out that what was said is silly. But, equally, it is our obligation to say **WHY** the comment is silly. We ought never merely to hurl abusive comments at what someone says. We **must always support** our positions. For whenever we say that a position is unacceptable we have put forth a hypothesis in need of support. Remember, we might be wrong in our assessments of what someone else says.

Notice, and this is **important** to notice carefully, that I say if something silly or foolish is **said**, then we ought to attack **what is said** as being silly or foolish. In no way does this mean that the person saying such a thing is either silly or foolish. In a real sense we must learn to distance our own selves from our comments. For it is the case that EACH OF US at one time or another says the most outlandish things. It is the things said which are outlandish – not us. So, never attack a person – only what that person says.

In each of your written assignments there is also a matter of style and argumentation. I expect you to improve in both of these areas as you receive more and more comments from me both in our weekly meetings and in my comments on the journals which I return to you. Even so, now I want you to consider the following as helps in writing well and in arguing well.

Note that if I happen to be absent from one of our seminars, you are still responsible for a journal entry for that week. There will always be some themes about which you can think and write.

SOME FOUNDATIONAL ASSUMPTIONS OF RATIONALITY

There is an essential connection between being objective and being rational. So, at least in part, what is it to be rational? Faithfully observing the following guidelines is a beginning answer to this question. But, why follow these guidelines? Consider what it would be like NOT to follow them. Part of their justification, therefore, comes in the form of pragmatic considerations.

- 1) Nothing in reality can correspond to a verbal contradiction. There is no round square, nor has there ever been one, nor could there possibly ever be any round square. One does not need to go in search for round squares to know this.
- 2) Because someone (even a great number of people) BELIEVE that X exists, is true, or is morally, politically, financially, aesthetically, *etc.* right (or wrong), it does not follow that X does (or does not) exist, is (or is not) true or morally, politically, financially, aesthetically, *etc.*) right

(or wrong). Beliefs can be, and often are, wrong. The wisest of persons, the oldest of institutions, might be wrong in some positions they dearly hold and proclaim. A person does not have to study much of human history to find all sorts of examples of this.

3) The state-of-being (e.g., gender, religious persuasion, sexual orientation, race, and even sanity) of someone uttering X often has little to do with whether X is rationally acceptable or not. On the other hand, whether we accept or reject X may very well be influenced by our perception of the one presenting X. We must be careful of how we are influenced. And we must not confuse motivation with argument.

4) For the most part, no hypothesis or claim is to be finally accepted without evidence, argument, explanation and/or the like.

5) If something holds to be the case in one situation, then it must also hold to be the case in any similar situations unless there are strong over-riding arguments for rejection. Consistency is essential.

SOME STEPS IN REASONING AND WRITING WELL

What is it to display rational behavior? What is it to reason well? To reason well; to argue well there are certain basic points which we must all observe. Notice that to reason well we shall not bind ourselves to the dictates of any person, group, or institution for each of these may be wrong about positions they hold and proclaim. We shall bind ourselves to certain principles without which we could not even carry on a conversation, much less an argument. Here are some of the more salient principles we must always at least consciously attempt to follow:

1) Always state the hypothesis (or hypotheses) to be considered (discussed, argued, *etc.*). Point out key terms that need defining, points to be questioned, explanations needed, arguments required, and the like.

2) Always clarify the hypothesis so that both the party presenting it (*i.e.*, you) and the party receiving it (*i.e.*, the hearer and/or reader) will be discussing exactly the same thing. This is not a matter of agreement or disagreement. It is a matter of understanding.

3) Always state the methodology to be used. State how you are going to justify your hypothesis.

4) Always defend or reject the hypothesis under consideration by presenting various arguments, explanations, factual considerations, as are appropriate to both the type of hypothesis being discussed and the specific hypothesis itself.

5) Always discuss only the hypothesis under consideration. Never introduce straw men, red herrings, *etc.* into your discussion.

6) Always clearly draw some conclusion(s) and indicate new areas of discussion suggested by this (these) conclusion(s).

7) Always remember it is a hypothesis, not the presenter of the hypothesis, which is being attacked or defended. Very wonderful people can say, and believe, the most foolish things. And neither you nor I is an exception to this observation!

In keeping with my comments up to this point, following is a timely article from "U. S. News and World Report" (June 21, 2004, page 6) for you to consider seriously:

I GAVE AN INFORMAL TALK THE OTHER night and got a very odd reaction. I was speaking at a small dinner – 16 people – of a cultural group here in New York. My topic was the sometimes-demented culture of American universities. I talked about the repressive speech codes, stolen newspapers, canceled speakers; the defunded Christian groups; the distortion of the curriculum by powerful diversity bureaucracies; and the indoctrination of students, starting with freshman orientation and introductory writing courses.

Nothing in my remarks would have come as a surprise to readers of this column, and it turned out that maybe two thirds of the people at the dinner strongly agreed with my talk. But it shocked one man – a former university president of some note – who denounced my comments as "the most intellectually dishonest speech I have ever heard." I think he meant to say that he disagreed. Or maybe he thought I was attacking his old university. Nobody knows what he thought because he just repeated his "intellectually dishonest" remark and left, closing the door quickly behind him.

This will stick in my mind as a good example of what has happened to debate in this country. Given a chance to speak his piece, the college president just got mad and got out. It never used to be this way. As many reporters reminded us last week, Tip O'Neill and Ronald Reagan fought sharply during the day but enjoyed having the occasional drink or two together after work. In the old days, William F. Buckley Jr. would hold public debates with all comers (I recall Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and Steve Allen), then go out to a pleasant dinner with his opponent. Nowadays, Buckley or his adversary would probably be required to take umbrage, hurl some insult, then stomp out in a snit. I caught the tail end of the civil-argument culture when Garry Wills and I started out many years ago as the original columnists in the *National Catholic Reporter*. We would frequently attack each other's ideas, but it never affected our friendship. Why should it?

In the current *Atlantic*, P. J. O'Rourke says that, "Arguing, in the sense of attempting to convince others, seems to have gone out of fashion with everyone." O'Rourke doesn't pay much attention, he says, to talk radio, Bill O'Reilly, Ann Coulter, Al Franken, or Michael Moore because they just shout things at partisan audiences that already agree with their chosen shouter. Technology reinforces the decline of serious argument – now we can all go to a TV channel, a radio show, or a web site that will protect us from those aliens across the moat who disagree with us.

It's true that we have more semistructured *Crossfire-style* debates than ever before. But much of this is rigidly pre-programmed sniping. (I was once chastised by a TV producer for not interrupting other speakers more. What a failure!) Even when the sniping is downplayed, TV demands sharp sound bites, which pushes all talking heads toward more vehemence and simple-mindedness. Instant certainty becomes mandatory, a delivery

style many talking heads start to regret before they're even out of the studio. Where is the *real* debate?

Listening-and learning. In my remarks at the dinner, I talked about the birth of a "no debate" style on many campuses. When sensitivity and nonjudgmental is made the dominant virtues, raising arguments can be perilous – you never know which unauthorized campus opinion will turn out to be a sensitivity violation. Better to keep your head down. This is particularly true now that some speech codes explicitly say that challenging another student's beliefs is forbidden.

This is yet another perverse campus trend. Arguing is crucial to education. It's a kind of intellectual roughhouse that lets students tryout new ideas, E. J. Dionne, the *Washington Post* columnist, sometimes tells his class at Georgetown that he intends to support the argument of whichever group in the class is in the minority. He does this because he wants his students to argue as passionately as possible without fear of intimidation by a dominant group.

In his book, *The Revolt of the Elites*, the late Christopher Lasch wrote that only in the course of argument do "we come to understand what we know and what we still need to learn. . . we come to know our own minds only by explaining ourselves to others." If we wish to be engaged in serious argument, Lasch explained, we must enter into another person's mental universe and put our own ideas at risk. Exactly. When a friend launches an argument and your rebuttal starts to sound tinny to your own ears, it shouldn't be that hard to figure out that something's wrong – usually, that you don't really agree with the words coming out of your own mouth. Arguing can rescue us from our own half-formed opinions.

ABSENCES

If a student is absent from a session, (s)he is still responsible for the journal entry for that week. The professor has the prerogative to withdraw a student from the class, with a WF, for excessive absences. Three absences is considered excessive.

DATE ASSIGNMENTS*

There may be flexibility in the following. Changes, if any, will be announced in our seminar meetings. In any event, the following dates will give you a good indication of what to read and studying order to keep ahead in this seminar.

Your three journals are to be submitted on these dates:

Journal I – no later than noon on 19 September

Journal II – no later than noon on 24 October

Journal III – no later than noon on 16 November

After these dates and times eLearning Commons will not permit you to submit the required journal.

15 August (Assignment 1)

Getting started ... Today you will complete both an “Ethics Questionnaire” and a “Student Data Sheet.” You will complete two copies of the “Ethics Questionnaire.” You are to turn one of these in and you are to keep the other for your own reference.

By our next seminar meeting you will have read carefully the syllabus for this seminar through “Assignment 2”.

Also by the next seminar you will have finished your first journal entry. In this entry I want you to consider specifically these questions found at the end of the “Ethics Questionnaire”: (1) What **criteria** am I using to determine whether, yes or no, an issue is a moral (not political, economical, etc.) one; (2) If I believe that a *particular* issue IS a moral one, then what **criteria** am I using to determine if this *particular* moral action is morally permissible or not? (3) Finally, ask if you are **consistently using** the SAME criteria in each and every case, or do you tend to change you criteria of acceptability and rejection from time-to-time? Ask yourself just why is consistency important?

At the beginning of our next seminar I want you to hand in a three to four page autobiographical sketch in which you introduce yourself to me.

You might want to address such questions as why you are at the University of Georgia, what do you expect to gain from your stay here, what plans do you have for your future career, for your private life, and the like? That is, let me know, from your point-of-view, what things are now important to you in your life. Let me know what makes you “tick” as it were.

You will also give to me a recent photo of yourself of a size appropriate to put on your “Student Data Sheet.”

22 August (Assignment 2)

Hand in your autobiographical sketch along with a recent photo for me to attach to your “Student Data Sheet.”

Let us discuss the syllabus up to Assignment 3. Is there anything you do not understand? Do you have any comments to make? For instance, what is your notion of good teaching, good learning, and a good class? Indeed, what is your notion of a good student? Share some examples with us.

I have discussed what I take to be some of the essential characteristics of being a good teacher. What do you think are some of the essential characteristics of being a good student? Why do you hold these characteristics to be important?

Consider again what constitutes an ethical (moral) issue as opposed to a political one, or an economical one, or a religious one, or a prudential one. What are some of the differences between these various sorts of positions?

I now want you to go to my web page. Do this by following these steps:

- 1) Go to <www.phil.uga.edu>
- 2) Go to the "FACULTY PAGE"
- 3) Go to "HARRISON"
- 4) Go to "HARRISON WEB PAGE"

There print off a copy of "I AM MAD."

Here is a fictitious letter signed by a Mr. Jimmie Snodgrass. While the letter itself is fictitious, nonetheless it is based on several letters to the editor which I have read in various newspapers. Examples of grammar and spelling are also taken from these real newspaper letters.

Next week, among other things, I want us to discuss this letter and its author.

In your journal for this week begin with the questions suggested above on page 10. Also muse on the question, "Just what IS involved in being objective?" All of this should get your mind moving.

29 August (Assignment 3)

What is it to be objective? What is it to be subjective? That is, what criteria do we use to determine if something is objective or subjective? Try to give a definition of "objective." Suppose we were to give a definition of "square." We may say: By "square" is meant a geometrical figure having four equal sides connected in such a way to form four right angles. Following this definitional form, complete the following: By "objective" is meant _____. Do the same for "subjective."

Does Snodgrass attempt to *define* any of his key terms? If so, where in his letter does he do this? Does he attempt to give any *evidence* for his views? If so, where in his letter? Does he attempt to *argue* from evidence to his positions? If so, where in his letter? Are his definitions and his arguments, if there are any, successful? What can we say about them that would apply not only to his definitions, but to any definition at all? To his arguments and to any argument at all?

How do you assess Jimmie Snodgrass' letter? Is Jimmie Snodgrass being objective in his assessments of AIDS and homosexuality? Defend your position. Do you believe that you are being subjective or objective in your opinions? Why?

Today I am going to pass out a piece this is a real one appearing in the "Atlanta Journal-Constitution." As you no doubt know, there is currently raging a "national debate" concerning same-sex marriage. This editorial is part of that debate. There are several questions I want you to consider in your journal entry for this week. First, what is **your** present position on the issue of same-sex marriage? What is **your** present position on a constitutional change, both at the state and national levels, defining "marriage" as a relationship between two people of the opposite sex? And, finally, following the sort of questions guiding us in discussing Snodgrass' letter, what do **you** think of the editorial piece of Ms Shaunti Feldhahn? Why?

5 September (Assignment 4)

As we did with Snodgrass, let us ask of Feldhahn, did she define any of her key terms? For instance, did she define “marriage” or “activist judge,” and if she did make an attempt, are her definitions successful? Now, as with Snodgrass, this question raises a further question which, in its turn, relates to what is meant by “objective.” The question is this: “Just what makes a definition successful or not?”

In your journal consider the criteria that a definition must follow in order to be acceptable. In doing this consider just what is the purpose of a definition.

Now, how do YOU define “marriage”? Do not look at any dictionary to answer this question. I am seeking YOUR definition and not, for instance, Webster’s.

There were numerous responses to the Feldhahn editorial. Today I am passing out to you some of these replies. Read them and notice your immediate reactions to each. Why do you think that you react in the ways that you do?

I am supposing that your reaction suggests some position that you hold on same-sex marriage. Broadly speaking that position might be one of three: (1) I am against (to some degree or another) same-sex marriage, (2) I support (to some degree or another) same-sex marriage, or (3) I really do not care one way or another about this issue. Each of these positions, of course, represents a broad hypothesis; (1) same-sex marriage ought not to be permitted, (2) same-sex marriage ought to be permitted, (3) this is not a matter of permitting or not – it just happens – so what. Your feelings (emotions) indicate which one of these positions you hold. Now, begin to examine this position in your journal. Can you support your position with good definitions, evidence and arguments?

As the seminar goes forward I want you to return to your journal entries and reread them in order to reassess your entries. Has anything changed for you? If so, why? If not, why not?

12 September (Assignment 5)

What are some of the arguments that people give against same-sex marriages? Do you think that any of these arguments are cogent? If so, then why? If not, then why?

Consider a person who is a strong upholder of the doctrine of states rights and separation of church and state. Let us suppose that this person supports a constitutional change at the national level defining “marriage” as between two people of the opposite sex. Let us also suppose that this person based some of his arguments on appeals to what he considered proper readings of the **Bible**. Do you find anything “peculiar” about these several juxtapositions of different beliefs? What? Why?

You have already given your definition of “marriage.” Now ask, “Is ‘marriage’ an ambiguous term? Does ‘marriage’ have more than one distinct meaning?” If so, does this have any consequences for your views on same-sex marriage? Consider such questions in your journal.

Again go to my web page. This time print off a copy of “MARTHA.” This is another fictitious letter. It is, however, based on facts – or certainly stories – which students have related to me.

Furthermore, the spelling and grammar come directly out of papers that have been submitted to me for grading. (You can imagine what grade such a paper receives – not a pretty sight).

At the end of this journal entry you will have five entries in your current journal: 15, 22, 29 August and 5, 12 September.* This means that you will have at least ten full pages for me to read. You are to submit all of these entries, in proper format, to eLearning Commons before our next seminar.

19 September (Assignment 6)

Be certain to have submitted your first journal through eLearning Commons.

Martha has a problem and wants her friend, Jean, to help her solve that problem. As a background consideration, how do you view Martha? What sort of person do you think she is? Why? And what do you think of Jean, and why?

To continue, ask yourself how does Martha go about trying to gain the help of Jean? Is the approach of Martha purely rhetorical or does she, at least in some instances, attempt a more rational approach? If so, in doing this does Martha attempt to define key terms she uses? If so, are these definitions acceptable? Does Martha offer any arguments in support of her position? If so, are these arguments cogent? In reading this letter ask your self what are some of the differences between rhetoric and argument; between persuasion and evidence?

Do you believe that there may be several different moral issues raised in the letter of Martha? If so, what are these and why do you think that they are moral issues? Why do you believe that these are ***moral*** issues instead of, say, economic or prudential ones?

If you see more than one – if that – moral issue in the letter of Martha, do you think that some are more “serious” or “important” than others? If so, how would you rank these issues from most serious to least serious? What criteria do you use in your ranking? Why these criteria and not some other?

If you were in Jean’s position, how would ***YOU*** react to Martha’s requests? Why? Be honest with yourself.

Consider these questions in your journal.

26 September (Assignment 7)

We need to backtrack and look once more at what we are coming to understand “objective” to mean, and how this is related to such notions as *definition*, *argument*, and even to *truth*.

Consider this scenario. Let us suppose that we were not now at the University of Georgia. Let us suppose that we were at the University of Padua in 1305. We would be, in fact, at one of the great centers of learning in the western world at that time. Imagine that we are listening to lectures concerning cosmology – the nature and structure of the universe. All of us – professors and students – firmly hold that the earth is at the center of the universe. And all of us can give good arguments based on good evidence that this is the case. As we currently look in on this scene, would we say that these very learned people in the fourteenth century at the great

university of Padua were stupid, or silly, or foolish? Indeed, these people were wrong. But, were they foolish? Were they irrational? Why would we say whatever it is we would say about their cosmological beliefs? And what, if anything, does this have to show us about being objective?

Now, suppose that we were in a class studying cosmology at Cambridge University, England. The year is 1805. We hold that the sun is at the center of our planetary system and not the earth. Is this view superior to that held by our colleagues at Padua in 1305? If so, then why? If not, then why not? Indeed, just what are the criteria we use in science to determine if one theoretical view is superior to another?

Given the nature of our two historical examples, both the views expressed at Padua and at Cambridge cannot be correct. One or the other – or, as we say today, both – must be wrong. There are at least two lessons about ourselves that we ought to learn from these examples. The first of these is that no matter how strongly we believe something to be true, it may very well be found out later to be false. This is true for those who have come before us. It is true of us. It will be true for those who come after us. This ought not to lead any of us to some sort of cynicism, however. We reason from the best evidence we have at a given time to various conclusions. That is all we can do. But, in doing this, we ought to realize that each of our conclusions is a hypothesis always open for further testing. This introduces the second very important point to be learned from our historic comparisons. Outside the realms of mathematics and logic there are very few absolute certainties in any of our lives. At the very best we can move to higher probabilities. We seldom achieve certainty about anything that we hold to be true. Even so, this is not to claim that there is no such thing as objectivity or that there is no such thing as truth. We can be objective and be wrong; we can be objective and not be certain. Nor does it follow that no positions or actions are better than any others. Indeed, we can hold a true belief but be subjective in holding that belief. How is all of this so?

Begin thinking about these issues: Do we have to be correct in order to be rational, in order to be objective? And even if we are correct, does that mean we are objective; are rational? When there is more than one overall view to consider about the same thing, then how do we go about determining which view is more preferable? What is it to make a rational, an objective, decision, in such cases? What criteria do we use in such cases?

3 October (Assignment 8)

Let us continue our discussions from last week.

Again go to my web page for your third fictitious case, “THE PROBLEMS OF GEORGE.” Even though fictitious, once again, this story is based on what was told to me several years ago by a group of my student/friends. While “George” was not his real name, my friends claimed that their pastor was “George” and that this is his story. I am only reporting what I was told.

Read this case study and be ready to start discussing it during our next meeting.

In the meanwhile, as an exercise I want you to consider the following arguments. Assume that the premises – those statements citing the evidence given in support of the conclusion – are all true. Then ask your, “Does each of these arguments successfully support the conclusion?” If not, which arguments do not, and why not? If we are going to give comments in support of our

views, those comments must be related in such a way to what we are attempting to support that they do work as justifications.

- A)
 - If it is raining, then the ground is wet.
 - It is raining.
 - Therefore, the ground is wet.
- B)
 - If it is raining, then the ground is wet.
 - The ground is wet.
 - Therefore, it is raining
- C)
 - Either we are going to a movie this weekend or we are going to study, and perhaps both.
 - We are not going to a movie this weekend.
 - Therefore, we are going to study
- D)
 - Either we are going to a movie this weekend or we are going to study, and perhaps both.
 - We are going to a movie this weekend.
 - Therefore, we are not going to study.

Remember that there are broadly three different ways in which an argument can fail to do its job of supplying evidence for some position. One of these is that the premises, even if clear and true, might not support the conclusion in a logically correct way.

As an aside, I imagine that most of you would do well to take “Symbolic Logic,” PHIL 2500. This class is an in depth study of a certain sort of argument called “deductive arguments.”

10 October (Assignment 9)

You have read about George, his friends and his problem. Let us discuss some of this.

First, what sort of person do you perceive George as being? And what of his various friends? What do you think of each of them, and why?

As with the letter from Martha to Jean, so, too, in the case of George there may be several moral issues involved. If so, what do you suppose these issues are, and why?

Suppose there are several moral issues at play in the case of George. If so, do you see any of them – any one of them, perhaps – as being more serious, more morally grave, than some of the others? That is how would you, if you would, rank such moral issues from very serious to not so serious at all? What criteria did you use to do this same thing in the case of Martha? Will those criteria you used there also hold for the problems facing George? If not, then why not? Remember that consistency is one of the essential marks of being rational and objective. Once more, these are some questions for you to ponder and about which to write in your journal.

17 October (Assignment 10)

Let us return to some of the issues introduced in “Assignment 7” and “Assignment 8.”

As in science, if we are going to argue rationally in ethics, then we need a set of “first principles.” Simply having the facts is not sufficient to take us very far in our thinking. Here is a simple example, but an instructive one. Suppose we know that it is raining. We look out the window from where we are sitting and see the rain falling. Yet, because of the angle of our vision we cannot see the ground. Even so, we *assume* that the ground is wet. What permits us to make this assumption? Not merely the fact that it is raining. While it is not overtly mentioned, nonetheless we are accepting a general principle holding in all similar cases of rain. That principle is something like this, “Whenever it is raining, and there are no constraining circumstances such as tarpaulins covering the ground, the ground is wet.” The important point to be made here is this: We can never argue from one fact, or a set of facts, to another fact unless we join these facts under a general principle or, that is to say, a theory or set of “first principles.”

Furthermore, as in the case of seeing the rain fall and assuming the wet ground, often these theories go unstated in our more-or-less ordinary life. This is not the case, at least not as obviously so, in the various sciences. One of the tasks of any science is clearly to state the theories on which that science is based.

There are always possible dangers in letting our “first principles” remain unstated. First, you and I might accept the same purported events as being factual (yes, Sam did shoot Joe), but hold rather different theories on how these facts are related to other facts. (I say “But, Sam did not murder Joe” while you disagree with this claim.) Second, in merely assuming some sort of theory, or over view, and not stating it we are inviting all sorts of misunderstandings based on vagueness and ambiguity. And this sort of non-clarity in our principles is not limited to me not understanding you. It is also the case that I do not understand myself!

How could this be!?

Consider this example.

Suppose that Jean, in meeting other people, noting their habits, their likes and dislikes, always operates under some principle of tolerance. Jean is operating under a general principle of “I always ought to be tolerant of the position of others.” But, just what does this *mean*? Does acting in a tolerant manner entail acting in such a way as to accept the actions of others? Does acting in a tolerant manner entail not voicing one's own position about various matters? Does acting in a tolerant way entail not judging, and perhaps judging harshly, the actions of others? Does acting in a tolerant manner mean only attempting to understand the underlying causes for what someone else does? Jean may be confusing some, or even all, of these issues! Many people do.

To help you focus on these questions, consider recent bombings of a London subway station. In this situation several people seem to have strapped explosives to themselves. They then went into crowded pedestrian places and detonated the explosives killing themselves and over fifty others. Many others were seriously injured. Or what of female circumcision as practiced in some parts of the world where it is accepted on social and religious grounds? Now let us suppose that Jean reads about these events. Jean claims to be tolerant. But, what is her principle of

“tolerance”? What does this principle entail in her reactions to these hard situations and the overt actions she takes facing them? For instance, would she accept female circumcision as something to be regularly done in her society?

And certainly there may be more than one theoretical view to take toward a particular fact or group of facts.

Consider physics. There are various theoretical views found here. We might use Newtonian principles, or the principles of Einstein, or the principles of Heisenberg. Each would give us a different set of laws, although some of which are related in various ways. We would have classical mechanics, or relativity theory, or indeterminacy theory. And none of this is to say much about string theory. Even so, we would not be forced to say that physics is subjective, whatever that might mean if we were to say it of physics.

In a similar way there are different “theories” or sets of “first principles” in ethics. We are going to begin to look at some of these during the remainder of our time together. Before looking at such actual theories, however, read Chapter 1 in *Conduct & Character* and be prepared to discuss it during our next seminar.

Now, in this seminar, let us consider these facts. Surely in the fourteenth century the educated people of the west held that the earth was at the center of the universe. Our friends at Padua were representative of this view. Indeed, there was abundant physical evidence to support the view, as well as other sort of supporting evidence. Then, later in history, there came about the Copernican Revolution, and slowly over the next two hundred years it was gradually accepted by the majority of the learned that, not the earth, but the sun is the center of the universe. (Of course, after Einstein that view is challenged.) Let us now ask ourselves which of these cosmological views, the geocentric or the heliocentric is preferable? Once more we are led rather quickly to a more interesting question and one that is broader and deeper than the scientific one.

The question is this: When there are two, or more, competing theories, then what rational criteria are used to determine which of these theories is more acceptable than others?

I want you to continue to think about this question for this meeting of our seminar.

Read carefully the handouts for our next session.

Next week you are submit your second journal through eLearning Commons. This material includes 19, 26 September and 3, 10, 17 September.

24 October (Assignment 11)

Be certain to have submitted Journal II.

We need to consider a few ethical theories. But to do this we ought first to consider the notion of “theory,” their functions, and places in our thinking rationally. We also need to consider those criteria we use to distinguish unacceptable theories from acceptable ones.

While, in thinking rationally, facts are important, nonetheless they are not sufficient. First, we must be in a position to determine if something can possibly be a fact or not. It was not too many

years ago that people talked about evil demons being able to possess someone. Such possession was often put forth as a causal explanation for “peculiar” actions of a person. Not many people talk in this way today. Demons, for a great many people, are not considered factual although they were at one time. So, what are the criteria which determine whether something is a fact or not? Theories are helpful here.

Then even if we have a collection of facts that does not mean that they support any claim. Facts have to be ordered and, as it were, focused, to be useful. Otherwise we have merely a random “laundry list.” Again theories are helpful here.

So, there is the need of theory as well as fact. But, as we can have pseudo facts so we can also have bad theories. Thus, we are going to need to ask, if we are to think rationally, how, given opposing theories, are we going to be in a position to accept one and reject others? What rational criteria are used here?

Soon we shall be discussing various theories found in the study of ethics.

The Divine Command Theory and *Egoism* and *Relativism* are examples. In these we are presented with sets of “first principles” which supposedly supply us, just like the theories of physics, with ways of interpreting facts of certain sorts. *Egoism* and *Relativism*, in their various forms, are very popular in our own day and time. Indeed, this is where we began our journey some weeks ago when raised questions concerning “objectivity” and “subjectivity.” Now, however, we are in a better position to appreciate these theories for what they are worth.

31 October (Assignment 12)

Remember to submit your second journal today through eLearning.

Let us continue some of the threads of discussion introduced during our last meeting and readings.

I shall make available for you the reading assignments for our next session.

11 April (Assignment 13)

A popular ethical theory is sometimes called “The Divine Command” theory. There are those people who claim that something is good or bad, right or wrong, simply because God has commanded it to be so. Is this a reasonable position to hold?

Hundreds of years ago the great Athenian thinker, Socrates, raised this question, “Do the gods love something because it is loveable, or is something loveable because the gods love it?” This simple sounding question has caused centuries of theological and academic firestorms because of this parallel question: Is something good because God wills it, or does God will something because it is good? No matter which side of the question one accepts there appears to be something very wrong.

Consider in your journal what the ramifications for morality of this Socratic question are. What would be your position on the matter, and why? What ramifications does any of this have, say, on some arguments against homosexuality, same-sex marriages, abortion, and the like?

Be sure to read the handouts for the assignment for next week.

17 November (Assignment 14)

Another view of ethical theory often embraced is some form of ethical relativism or even ethical egoism.

Roughly ethical relativism claims that the standard for right and wrong, good and bad is what my particular society claims to be good and bad, or right and wrong. On the other hand an ethical egoist will claim that that standard is not anything other than what the individual holds to be right and wrong, and good and bad. Certainly this is an extreme case of individualism.

Can these positions be made clearer and at the same time follow the general guidelines of what it is to be an acceptable theory?

This question leads us into a consideration of just what guidelines are rationally and thus publicly, acceptable for judging the worth of competing theories.

Which ethical theory we embrace makes a great difference concerning what we believe, and say, and then do at the “grass roots level” of our daily living.

Now, what do you think of the rational acceptability of *Egoism* and *Relativism*? Why? That is, rationally support your views given the criteria for rationality developed to this point in our readings and discussions. Remember that we are not to confuse motivation with justification. We might “like” some form of *Egoism* or *Relativism*. They are, after all, rather popular positions today. To note that we “like” these views perhaps tells us something about our character. But, it does nothing to justify the rational acceptability of either *Egoism* or *Relativism*.

At this stage in our journey in coming to understand moral thinking as a rational enterprise, as an objective enterprise, are you beginning to lean toward one theory more than another – not that you actually accept one yet? Is there a “hypothesis” toward which you are tending more than others? If so, which one and why? Remember to be rational, to be objective, you must be consistent. That this is so often limits a sort of cafeteria approach of picking bits-and-pieces from various theories and then attempting to weave them all together to form one's own personal ethical theory.

These are good prods for your journal thoughts.

By 16 November you are to submit your third, and final, journal. The entries will include the weeks of 24, 31 October and 7, 14 November.

14 November (Assignment 15)

Submit through eLearning Commons your third, and final, journal.

Let us now briefly consider the position of Kant

Note a great difference between Kant and Mill. Mill puts his stress on the achieving of certain goals. ONLY goals are considered in saying whether some act is morally permissible or not. Kant lays his stress on intentionally following certain rules.

Consider this situation. A man, in a rather absent minded and dream like state, is walking closely behind a woman he does not know or hardly even realizes is there. Nor is the woman paying much attention to her surroundings. She absent mindedly steps off the curb directly into the path of an oncoming bus. At that very moment the man who had been walking behind her lunges forward and pushes her to safety. In the meanwhile he is fatally struck by the bus. Although being fatally struck, he does not die at once. The woman, realizing what has happened, rushes to the side of the man who, in the impact has been thrown clear of the bus. She squats in the street beside the man, looking into his dying eyes, as she puts his bleeding head into her lap trying to comfort him as he is dying.

Ask yourself, “Is this man a hero?” “Has he done a great and noble moral deed by saving the life of the woman from the onrushing bus?”

What is your answer and why?

Now, let us continue the story one line further and learn that the dying words of the man who pushed the woman out of harm’s way were, “Damn my untied shoe lace!”

What would you say now about his “good deed”? And how does this reflect on the differences between Kant and Mill? Results are important, but so are intentions, in our moral actions. Sometimes there can be apparent conflict between results and intention. And, remember, whatever position we do take in this case, in order to be rational, to be objective, we must be consistent with other cases. It can never be a matter of merely “how I feel now about this.” That is a fool’s paradise!

Then there are, of course, the great positions of Plato and Aristotle. But, our time together is drawing to a close.

In Plato and Aristotle we shall not find any emphasis on discovering, or formulating, correct rules for morally right conduct. In these writings there is no suggestion of a set of rules such as the Ten Commandments, the Principle of Utility, or the Categorical Imperative that must be faithfully followed by the morally sound person. Rather the emphasis is on developing moral character, and what is necessary for such development, in order to fulfill oneself as a human being when acting in particular circumstances. Here is a very different view from “cook book” – “rule following” – morality to which so many of us are presently accustomed.

These views of the ancient philosophers are important. The question remains however, are they rationally acceptable views. Are they objective views?

19-23 November Thanksgiving Holidays – no journal entries for this week.

28 November Final Thoughts and Seminar evaluations.

In this seminar we have begun to delve into the problems of rationality, objectivity, and moral thinking. Hopefully you have come to realize that there is much more to moral thinking than merely saying that it is all a matter of personal opinion and that so long as I feel good about it (and am not caught, and perhaps I do not hurt anyone) then it is perfectly all right morally for me to do whatever.” Or saying, “So long as I believe that it is all right to do such-and-such, then it is.” Or even saying, “So long as my society (peers) believe it is all right to do such-and-such, then it is.” We are also in a much better position to judge objectively the moral position of others if we have any pretense of maintaining that we are rational. The proper answer to “Well, while I do not like it, he does and so it is morally all right for him” is to say that this reply is mere sophistry at its worst. Likes and dislikes, feelings, beliefs can never be justifications, although they may be powerful motivators, for the truth of anything. As rational persons we seek the truth as best we can. Sometimes, perhaps often, we do not find what we seek. Yet, this is no excuse for not seeking and seeking well. This seeking demands that we monitor both ourselves and others from ignorance and self-deceit.

Perhaps some day you will take a course in ethics (PHIL 2030. Equally important would be to take courses in logic (PHIL 2500) and critical thinking (PHIL 2020). Or you might want to take my offering of Ancient Philosophy (PHIL 3000) or Plato (PHIL 4000). Such courses will help you with the background you need to think through very complicated issues – issues which might not have THE CORRECT answer, but which, nonetheless have a relatively narrow range of acceptable rational answers. To expect, and demand, “The Correct Answer” in the area of morals is really to show that one is still rather puerile. After all, life is not a matter of black and white with certain answers to our most pressing problems in living well. Nor, however, is it all relative and merely a matter of personal opinion. The wise person looks for the middle way; the balanced way.

Lastly, remember that life is an adventure – and living that life well is the greatest adventure of all. This is YOUR adventure and no one can lead it for you. Only you are basically responsible for how it all goes – well or ill. You really cannot dodge that very real responsibility although many people do try very hard to do so. In any event, I wish each of you the very best in your own great adventure of life. Thank you for joining this seminar and God bless you each!

