Proposal for a Junior-Senior Cluster Course

Title of proposed course:  PHL 202, Elementary Ethics

When will this course be offered?: Each term during 1996-1997, and each term in the following years.

Title of cluster: Morality

Name of cluster proposal coordinator: Byron L. Haines

A. Course Description (100 words or less).
This is a general introduction to ethical theory. It will consider such questions as whether there are objective moral distinctions, what makes right acts right and wrong acts wrong, and how we can know (if we can know) the moral character of human actions. Standard ethical theories such as utilitarianism, Kantianism, and Ross’s theory of prima facie duties will be considered. Some attention will be given to the question of how these philosophical questions about morality are, and are not, relevant to moral practice.

B. Course Development.
This is an existing course.

C. General Education Goals.
I. Inquiry and critical thinking. Students will be expected to learn to distinguish between questions that must be addressed by empirical methods and questions that must be addressed through reflection and thinking. They will expected to evaluate, in terms of validity and soundness, arguments for and against ethical theories. This will involve also learning how to critically evaluate arguments.

II. Communication. Students will be expected to present in writing critical discussions of specific arguments, as well as to produce longer essays which critically discuss ethical theories themselves.

III. Human Experience. Morality is, of course, central to human experience.

IV. Ethical Issues and Social Responsibility. Although there is more to socially responsible behavior than thinking, thinking well is an important ingredient of behavior well.
D. Course Outline.
Sections of this course will be taught by Byron Haines, Peter Nicholls, Dan Passell and Larry Bowlden. A current list of topics and assignments is attached.
Philosophy 202 is an introduction to ethical theory. Although some effort will be made to show ways in which ethical theorizing can be relevant to moral arguments which are found in the context of moral practice, the focus of the course will not be upon actual moral problems (as, is, for example, the Contemporary Moral Issues class) but upon the nature of moral reasoning itself and on the characteristics (e.g. right and wrong, good and bad, wise and unwise) that are attributed in the course of moral reasoning. A central question will be whether or not moral characteristics (e.g. right and wrong, good and bad) really are objective features of the human world, or whether talk about such matters is to be understood along the lines of talk about matters of taste, custom, etiquette, etc. In this regard we will critically discuss certain versions of ethical relativism, i.e., views to the effect that right and wrong are relative to what individuals or groups believe to be right and wrong. We will also consider some of the relations between morality and self-interest: in this context we will critically consider the view (psychological egoism) that all human actions are (and necessarily are) motivated by a concern to secure some benefit for the agent. We will also consider some of the connections between morality and the promotion of human welfare. Is a person, to be acting rightfully, to be acting at all times on the basis of what actions will promote the most favorable balance of good over bad consequences for all persons affected by those actions? The view (often called utilitarianism) that this is true will be critically considered. Using the ethical theories of Kant and Ross as taking off points, we will also consider whether there is any significant moral knowledge that can be gained a priori (i.e. by reflecting on the nature of persons, relations between persons, and actions that may be performed within the context of those relations).

For what this is worth, the instructor does believe that there are objectively right and objectively wrong actions, but doubts that all of the considerations that count in favor of the rightness or wrongness of an action can be reduced to a single principle (in the manner, for example, a utilitarian would suppose), and suspects that the belief that there must be such a principle rests on a misconception of the nature of moral reasoning and moral wisdom. Moral wisdom, so the instructor will suggest, consists not in the acquisition of a moral principle from which we can deduce answers to moral questions, but in attention to varied moral considerations (e.g., truthfulness, the alleviation of suffering, etc.), the judicious weighing of those considerations within concrete moral contexts, and, especially, the imagination to resolve moral dilemmas. Although there will not be time in the course for complete consideration of all of these matters, some elaboration will be attempted, and criticism eagerly sought.

The Text for the course is James Rachels, The Elements of Moral Philosophy, 2nd Edition, available at the PSU Bookstore. There is also a packet of readings available at Clean Copy on 6th Ave. The readings in the packet come from Byron L. Haines, Ethics: Elementary Readings. Anyone who has this book will not need to buy the packet. One additional paper, Haines, "Rationality and the Basis of Natural Rights," will be available in the library reserve room. The method of instruction will be informal lecture. The instructor will regularly present issues, positions, and arguments, but thoughtful participation from the class will be encouraged. The main writing assignments for the class will be a take-home mid-term examination and a take-home final examination (although the instructor reserves the right to give a small in class exam, for testing purposes; should that prove necessary). There will likely be some small writing assignments early in the term.

Grading will be more or less conventional. In general, serious effort will produce at least a C grade, and serious effort plus a small amount of ability will produce a B. The grade of A will be reserved for special achievement. As much of the structure and continuity, as well as some of the content, of the course is to be provided by the lectures, this class is not recommended for students who are unable or unwilling to attend classes in a reasonably regular way. In fact, students who pay only occasional visits to the class will not be considered to have made serious effort.
Tentative Schedule of Topics and Assignments

All of the above readings except the last one come from two sources: James Rachels, *The Element of Moral Philosophy*, 2nd Edition, and a packet of readings available at Clean Copy on 6th Ave. The readings in the packet come from Byron L. Haines, *Ethics: Elementary Readings*. Anyone who has this book will not need to buy the packet. The reading assignments from the Rachels book will here be referred to as "Rachels"; those from the packet will here be referred to as "CC". Although we will not always be perfectly on schedule, and will not always be discussing precisely the topics covered in the readings - occasionally there will be arguments introduced in class that are not to be found in the readings - students who keep to this schedule will be prepared for the relevant lectures and discussions. In general, the assignments should be read before the class meets and then reviewed afterwards.

Topics and Assignment:

1. M, 03/27 Introduction to the subject and the course. Ethics as the philosophical study of morality.

2. W, 03/29 What is it to study a subject philosophically? Philosophy as an a priori inquiry.
   pp. 3-12 CC.

3. F, 03/31 What is morality?
   pp. 1-14 Rachels.

4. M, 04/03 Does morality depend upon authority? A sample ethical theory: Theological Relativism (or the Divine Command Theory)
   pp. 37-42, 13-26 CC.

5. W, 04/05 Critique of the Divine Command Theory.
   pp. 44-61 Rachels.
   review 13-26 CC.

6. F, 04/07 What understanding is to be gained through ethical theorizing?
   pp. 27-35 CC.

7. M, 04/10 Are moral distinctions objective?
   pp. 45-48 CC.
   pp. 30-31 Rachels.

8. W, 04/12 Arguments for and against subjectivism critically discussed.
   pp. 32-43 Rachels.
9. F, 04/14 The emotivist version of subjectivism.
   review last two assignments.

10. M, 04/17 Ethical relativism of the social or cultural variety.
    pp. 49-60 (Sumner) CC.

11. W, 04/19 Arguments for relativism critically considered.
    pp. 15-29 Rachels.

12. F, 04/21 Arguments against relativism.
    pp. 61-76 (Haines) CC.

    pp. 77-86 (Moor, Haines) CC.

14. W, 04/26 Ethical consequentialism.
    pp. 75-89 Rachels.

15. F, 04/28 Psychological egoism.
    pp. 139-155 (Feinberg) CC.

16. M, 05/01 Morality and Self-interest.
    pp. 62-74 Rachels.

17. W, 05/03 A sample Unitarian theory.
    pp. 157-163 (Bentham) CC.
    and 90-101 Rachels.

18. F, 05/05 Arguments for utilitarianism.
    pp. 165-177 (Mill) CC.

19. M, 05/08 Alleged counter-examples to utilitarianism and some
    of their defenses critically considered.
    pp. 102-116 Rachels.

20. W, 05/10 Rule-utilitarianism.
    pp. 185-196 (Rawls) CC.

21. F, 05/12 Rule-utilitarianism critically discussed.
    pp. 197-210 (McCloskey) CC.
    review pp. 27-34 CC.

22. M, 05/15 The categorical imperative.
    pp. 211-218 (Kant) CC.

23. W, 05/17 Kantian ethics critically considered.
    pp. 117-126 Rachels.

24. F, 05/19 Is there any a priori moral knowledge?
    pp. 221-242 (Ross) CC.
25. M, 05/22 Ross on *prima facie* duties.
   review 221-242 CC.

26. W, 05/24 Some neglected features of moral reasoning.
   pp. 243-252 (Haines) CC.

27. F, 05/26 Special and natural moral rights.

28. W, 05/31 Natural rights.
   Haines, "Rationality and the Basis of Natural Rights" on reserve
   at the library.

29. F, 06/02 Natural rights, continued.
   review and catch up...THINK!

Final exams should be considered due by Wed. June 7, though can be accepted
until 5:00pm Fri. June 9. They may be turned into my office at 427 NH or the
Philosophy Department Office, NH 471.

During the term my scheduled office hours are 11-12 MWF. I am also typically
available at 3pm ff. Mon. & Fri. Appointments can be made for 10:30am ff. on
Tue. & Thu.

My office phone: 725-3520
Philosophy Department phone: 725-3524
My home phone: 274-1082 (I don't mind being called at home on matters of
importance or to make appointments to see me.)