

JTH 5320: God and Ethics

Spring 2015

Prof. Alan Mittleman
Wednesday, 11:40-2:15pm

Office Hours: Wednesdays, 9:00-11:00 am
Kripke 604

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This course will focus on the relationship between religion and ethics, with special reference to the Jewish tradition. We will read several classics, Western and Jewish, as well as several contemporary essays. In this way, we will consider how Jewish authors have assimilated philosophical teaching external to Judaism. Although we will note matters of historical influence, our main concern is conceptual. We will explore such issues as: does ethics need God? What does Judaism add to ethics? How do Jewish thinkers appropriate and transform secular ethics? Is a theistic ethics defensible today? That is, if ethics can be constituted naturalistically, has Judaism become irrelevant to ethics? Or, on the contrary, is secular ethics merely formal or thin without religious ethics?

The course will be a mix of lecture and discussion, with as much of the latter as possible. Everyone is expected to have read the material assigned for each session thoroughly and to participate in the discussion of the readings. From time to time students may be asked to lead the discussion on the primary texts or scholarly essays.

Students are encouraged to do background reading on the major thinkers in online resources such as *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [<http://plato.stanford.edu/>]. Podcasts on ethical (and many other) aspects of Plato, Aristotle, and Maimonides may be downloaded at: <http://historyofphilosophy.net/>, as well as through iTunes at no cost.

Grading will be based on two papers, one of 5-7, the other of 10-15 pages, both of which will be critical responses to the reading.

Course Goals: The goals of the course are to increase our knowledge of moral philosophy and of Jewish ethics and to engage the questions listed above with insight and rigor. These goals will be met by close reading, intensive seminar discussion, and papers which show a serious critical engagement with a selection of the material.

Academic Integrity Statement: Students in this class are expected to maintain academic integrity. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated in this class. Students are expected to bear individual responsibility for their work, to learn the rules and definitions that underlie the practice of academic integrity and to uphold its ideals. *Students are asked not to use electronic devices such as laptops, smart phones, and tablets in class for any other purpose than note-taking.*

Required texts:

Books:

Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (recommended: Oxford World's Classics, David Ross, ed.)*

Plato, *Euthyphro* [this text is easily available in various translations online, for example: <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyphro.html>]

Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (recommended: H.J. Paton, trans.)*

Maimonides, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, Weiss and Butterworth, eds.*

Robert Garcia and Nathan King, eds. *Is Goodness without God Good Enough?**

Books with (*) have been ordered for this course at Book Culture

Articles and sections of texts (available on Blackboard):

Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, [selections]

Lenn Goodman, "Ethics and God" (*Philosophical Investigations* 34:2, April 2011)

Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Book III

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, *Thirty Six Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction* (pp. 302-323)

Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of God* [selection]

Reading Assignments:

Week 1	1/21	<i>Euthyphro</i> (all)
Week 2	1/28	Goodman, "Ethics and God"; Wyschogrod, from <i>Body of Faith</i> Garcia & King, Introduction
Week 3	2/4	Garcia & King, Part I (pp. 25-46); Part II, chapters 4, 5
Week 4	2/11	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Books I, II, III
Week 5	2/18	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> , Books IV, V, VI
Week 6	2/25	Maimonides, <i>Eight Chapters</i> Maimonides, <i>Laws of Character Traits</i>
Week 7	3/4	Maimonides, <i>Guide for the Perplexed</i> (selections);
Week 8	3/11	Kant, <i>Groundwork</i> , Preface, Chapters I, II

Week 9	3/18	List College Spring Break (Graduate Students: read Andrew Chignell on Kant in Blackboard)
Week 10	3/25	Kant, <i>Groundwork</i> , Chapter III and Kant, <i>Religion</i> , Book III
Week 11	4/1	Cohen, <i>Religion</i> (excerpts)
Week 12	4/8	Pesach Break
Week 13	4/15	Cohen, <i>Religion</i> (excerpts)
Week 14	4/22	Garcia & King, Part III class ends at 1:55 for Yom HaZikkaron
Week 15	4/29	Goldstein, <i>Thirty-Six Arguments for the Existence of God</i>