William Boos
Buchanan E 367
office : 822 5636
apt : 222 2386

Syllabus for Ethics 301 (Year Course)

Our word "ethics" comes from the Greek ἔθος , or its lengthened
form ἦθος ("custom" or "habit"), and Aristotle clearly meant
his remarks in the first sentence of Ἠθικὰ Νικομαχεῖα
("Nicomachean Ethics," our first text) to refer primarily to
(human) **behavior**, of which

> "every skill and every procedure, every activity and every
> choice, seems to aim at some **good**; wherefore it has been
> well-said that the good is that at which all things **aim**."
>
> (emphases mine)

In this one quotation appear, in brief epigrammatic form,
several basic motives of the subject we will study:
1 a notion of "**praxis**" (the Greek word I translated as "activity");
later philosophers, most prominently Kant, derived from such usages
a special meaning of the word "**practical**";
2 an ideal of ('the?') **good**; and
3 an implicit thumbnail '**definition**' of this "good," as a common
focus or intentional object of every **aim** or **purpose** -- or at least
of those aims and purposes Aristotle and his source(s) considered
worthy of the name (To see the sense of this qualification, consider
a very purposeful and singleminded **fiend** -- the one most prominent
in Christian lore, for example)

The qualification I have introduced at the end of 3 is **also**
no accident. Many centuries after Aristotle, David Hume remarked
that a need for such escape-clauses is **characteristic** of allegedly
'objective,' 'fact-based' and 'value-free' 'definitions' of ethical
notions. They typically invoke **other** ethical notions, qualifications
and provisos -- in 3 above, that the **aims** must in some sense be
worthy -- in tacit but essential ways.

This is known as the "**is-ought problem**," and one of 'aims'
of this course will be to help you decide whether or not it bothers
you. Hume, who belonged to a tradition of people who believed
in a separate **moral** "sense," or at least sensibility, thought the
problem simply pointed to a predictable need to look beyond value-free
'facts' for our values. Others, less persuaded than Hume of the
unicity and **stability** of (human) "nature" and "moral sense,"
are less comfortable with it.

The difficulty arises, in effect, when 'we' try to decide
who '**we**' are, when 'we' talk about '**our**' values. It will be quite
clear when you read Hume, I think, that he basically assumed 'we'
were (are) classically-educated, comfortably situated
eighteenth-century European males. Aristotle, for that matter,
believed that some classes of humans (primarily βαρβαρικοί ,
or non-Greeks) were slaves-by-nature.

So where do we look? Do we demand an 'objectivity' and unicity
for our ethical judgments which may lie indefinitely and elusively
beyond 'our' reach?

Or do we settle, instead, for traditional notions of who 'we'
are that have (for example) tacitly or explicitly excluded women?
Or children? Or people whose minds are (sufficiently) weak?
Or who behave in disconcerting ways on buses?

Or (for that matter) the sign-adept chimpanzee mother who
signed "come, hug" to her long-separated child? Or **real** counterparts,

which may someday exist, of this year's celluloid Arnold
Schwarzenegger, who (which?) quietly "terminates" itself (with
final upraised thumb) in a vat of molten metal, to save a humanity
it still doesn't quite understand?

(People who cavalierly dismiss what is usually known as
"Turing's test" in the philosophy of mind may eventually have **ethical**
problems to resolve.)

One way to approach this problem, I think, is to try to formulate
a view which applies in more or less egalitarian ways to **any** beings
which are (arguably) sentient, and vulnerable, and (therefore)
have need of caring, and of what the anarchist Peter Kropotkin
called "**mutual aid.**"

And **this**, in turn, should naturally lead us (I think) to
issues of **social justice**, little emphasized in the brief opening
remarks from Aristotle's texts, quoted above; and to alternate
but equally venerable traditions of **social criticism**, recently
tempered by the observations of feminists, environmentalists,
'utopians' (who are often said now to be said to be utterly
discredited by the collapse of a peculiar ideology the rulers of
the USSR called "communism"; I disagree), and other dissidents.

Roughly this mixture of interests and motives, at any rate,
has guided my choice of topics, and of the texts below. I am acutely
aware that we can only read selections from the many books on this
long list (and that they will be expensive to buy, even in
paperback), but hope a broad first acquaintance with them will
be useful to you. They are (roughly) listed in the order in
which we will read them, but several permutations may take place
during the second term.

1   Aristotle, **Nicomachean Ethics**, Loeb
2   **Greek and Roman Philosophy after Aristotle**, Free Press
3   More, **Utopia**, Norton
4   Hume, **Enquiries**, Oxford
5   Wollstonecraft, **A Vindication of the Rights of Woman**, and
    Mill and Taylor, **On the Subjection of Women**, Everyman (in one
    volume)
6   Kant, **Ethical Philosophy**, Hackett

7   Rawls, **A Theory of Justice**, Harvard
8   Phillips, **Toward a Just Social Order**, Princeton
9   Pogge, **Realizing Rawls**, Cornell
10 Jaggar, **Feminist Politics and Human Nature**
11 Mansbridge, ed., **Beyond Self-Interest**, Chicago
12 Levitas, **The Concept of Utopia**, Syracuse

I will base your mark for the course primarily on one
eight-to-ten page- and one ten-to-fifteen page-essay each term,
with a mild premium (to be applied in borderline cases) for steady
class-attendance and participation. It will often be hard to keep
things halfway interesting throughout (most of) a three hour
session each Wednesday night, and I will need your help to try.

The longer paper is intended to substitute each term for a
final exam, by the way. But I will be glad to set in-class
examinations instead, if anyone prefers one.