

COMM 388
ETHICS IN HUMAN COMMUNICATION
Fall 2013, T-Th 12:30-2 pm

Professor Stephen O'Leary
Office: ASC 206B
Hours: Tuesday 12:30-1:30, Thursday 12:30 2:30 and by appointment
Phone: (323) 712-5869 (cell)

This course presents an introduction to the language of ethical philosophy as it deals with communication. Competing concepts of communicative ethics, as articulated by Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Machiavelli, and others, are compared and evaluated in the context of rhetoric and the philosophy of communication. The primary question that this class seeks to address is one that obsessed the ancient Greek philosophers who first developed rhetoric as an art of spoken communication: What is the relationship of virtue and eloquence? As you will see, this question is a complex one that does not admit simple answers. Among the secondary and related questions we will focus on are: How do different conceptions of communication, of ethics, and of human nature affect the way that we think and argue (that is, communicate persuasively) about moral dilemmas? In what ways is communication a central concept for various ethical theories? What ethical standards are appropriate to communication in private and public life? Should there be different criteria for ethical communication in personal relationships and in such public forums as political debate and advertising? What role should logic and emotion play in our ethical judgments of public and private argument? Are there certain practices or types of communication (such as lying, or emotional appeals) which are always, or should always be considered, unethical? If not, under what circumstances are these practices justifiable? What are legitimate and/or preferable criteria for judging any action, especially communicative action, as ethical or unethical?

Required Readings:

Plato, **Phaedrus** (trans. WC Helmbold)
Plato, **Gorgias** (trans. WC Helmbold)
Aristotle, **Ethics** (trans. Thompson)
Machiavelli, **The Prince** (translated by Robert M. Adams; be sure to purchase ONLY the Norton Critical edition (2d ed.), as there are various works assigned from this volume not available in other editions)

These books will be available at the campus bookstore. Additional readings will be assigned on a regular basis from class handouts and/or from a course packet which will be available for purchase at Magic Machine in University Village.

Grading: My mission in this class is not to stuff your minds with information which you can conveniently forget as soon as the course is over; rather, the goal of the course is nothing less than to make every student (a) a more ethical communicator and (b) a more informed critic and consumer of public and private communication. You are entitled to think that these goals are unrealistically high; however, if you are not prepared to at least attempt to meet them I encourage you to drop the class. Those who are inclined to stick it out will do well to note that these expectations are reflected in my grading policy for the course. Since I do not desire or expect you merely to spew back information, but intend to see that you actually are able to apply the concepts of the course in your own communication, your participation in class discussions is crucial if you wish to get a good grade in the course. You will find that it is nearly impossible to participate successfully in class discussions without regular attendance and without completing the reading assignments. Accordingly, all students are expected to; attend class regularly (attendance will be taken; each student is allowed a maximum of three unexcused absences); do all of the assigned reading; and (verbally) contribute their own perspective to class discussions.

Ten percent of your final grade will be determined by attendance and participation. Grades for this portion of the course will be determined as follows: consistent attendance (i.e., warm body in the classroom with no more than three unexcused absences) gets a C; consistent attendance with some verbal contributions to class discussions gets a B; consistent attendance with outstanding contributions to class discussions which show evidence of careful reading and penetrating insight into course concepts and theories gets an A.

Thirty-five percent of your grade will come from quizzes. There will be eight quizzes, all short-essay in format, testing you on recent reading. You will drop the lowest quiz grade.

The final exam is worth twenty-five percent of your course grade. All questions for the exam will be distributed in advance so that you may study for them (though you will not know which questions will be on the test).

In the final weeks of the semester, all students will produce an essay that applies theories and principles learned in class to a significant ethical issue in our public life. Your essay must present an analysis of the prevailing arguments on this issue, and demonstrate a clear understanding of the burdens of ethical advocacy by offering and defending a judgment of your own. All students will be required to summarize their written essay for the class in an oral presentation, (there will be a separate handout that describes this assignment in more detail). It will be worth thirty percent of your final grade.

The total grade will therefore be computed as follows:

Participation/attendance:	10%
Quizzes: 8 @ 5% each, drop lowest	35%
Paper and class presentation	30%
Final examination	25%