



## **Exchange programme Vrije Universiteit**

**Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam - Exchange programme Vrije Universiteit - 2020-2021**

## Ethics

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Course Code	G_BATRSPC216
Credits	6
Period	P6
Course Level	200
Language Of Tuition	English
Faculty	Faculty of Religion and Theology
Course Coordinator	prof. dr. D.M.K.H. Grube MA
Examiner	prof. dr. D.M.K.H. Grube MA
Teaching Staff	prof. dr. D.M.K.H. Grube MA
Teaching method(s)	Seminar, Lecture

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### Course Objective

The goal of this course is to deepen the ability to reflect on moral issues in a responsible fashion. It focusses on moral theorizing in both philosophy and theology. The theorizing is supposed to guide the student's abilities for critical reflection and enhance his/her capacity to analyze moral arguments from a philosophical as well as a theological viewpoint.

At the end of the course, students

- have heightened moral sensitivities;
- are (better) able to theorize on ethics in a morally responsible fashion;
- are (better) able to understand concrete moral problems in light of different ethical theories;
- have more knowledge on concrete ethical cases;
- have learnt that the perception of ethical issues is (to some extent) culture-dependent and that it is conceivable that there is more than one morally acceptable position;
- have learnt that moral decision-making is a complex process that defies easy and straightforward solutions and that therefore reflecting seriously on moral issues is absolutely necessary (and that it is also fun!).

### Course Content

Issues that will be discussed are, among others, the following:

-Moral Relativism/moral pluralism/moral absolutism: This is the issue as to whether there is one true (or adequate) morality, whether there are several adequate ones or an endless amount of adequate moralities ('anything goes'). Relativists suggest that there are no trans-cultural criteria with the help of which we can justify moral considerations, thus, that 'anything goes' in morality. Moral absolutists suggest that there is exactly one true or adequate morality, usually the one they or their group hold. Moral pluralists are somewhere in the middle between

both (they suggest that more than one morality can be adequate but that that does not imply that 'anything goes', i.e. not all kinds of moralities are adequate).

Possible case: How does e.g. the notion of human rights fare in light of those considerations? Does it require a morally absolutistic background rather than a relativist one? Can it be justified on pluralist grounds as well?

-Utilitarianism versus Kantianism: This is the question whether our most basic moral criteria should be moral principles, such as 'human beings should always be treated as an end in themselves and not as means to an end'. Should one make one's actions only dependent on those principles (as some Kantians suggest?). Or should one take into account the consequences one's actions have? For example, utilitarians suggest that we should take the consequences into consideration so as to maximize 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number (of people)'.

Possible example: Depending on what kind of ethical approach one embraces, Kantian or utilitarian, one will look very differently at e.g. the practice of some NGO's to pick up refugees in the Mediterranean Sea and take them to Europe. Those different approaches will determine what kind of actions one considers to be morally laudable, whether one thinks that the NGO's are morally justified to do what they do or whether they are not justified.

-Divine Command Theory versus Natural Law Theory: This is the issue of how morality is justified from religious points of view. Commonly, in Christianity and other religions, morality is justified by either the argument that something is good because God wills it so (many Protestant Christians justify morality in this fashion). Or, else, it is justified because it is in line with the order of nature, whereas nature is God's creation (thus, perfect or, at least, very good; many Catholics justify their morality in this fashion).

Possible examples: Standard examples are that Natural Law Theory has problems with accepting homosexuality (because sexuality's goal is procreation and homosexuality does not fit this bill) and that Divine Command Theory rules out e.g. euthanasia (because it is against God's will). Examples like these (and/or related ones) will be discussed. The question will also be raised as to whether Divine Command Theory and Natural Law Theory are the only ways to justify morality from a religious (Christian) point of view or whether there are religions or streams within particular religions which justify their morality in a different fashion.

### **Teaching Methods**

The course synthesizes practical issues with the theoretical reflection on it. It will utilize the case studies-method according to which specific moral issues are discussed in light of different ethical theories. It will demonstrate to what extent moral theory and practice

are interlinked and that responsible moral decision-making always entails serious theoretical reflections (and, by the same token, that doing moral theorizing without having concrete cases in mind is futile). The sessions will usually begin with an introduction into a particular theory and then be followed by an application of this theory to a practical case and this case will be evaluated in light of the theory. The cases to be chosen will be determined by the students (for examples, see above). All students are expected to be present at the sessions.

### **Method of Assessment**

Assuming that the courts can go on on campus (rather than online), all students will hold a presentation. They will choose a particular case with the help of which they clarify a particular theory and discuss this case beforehand with the instructor. In addition, the students' knowledge on ethics will be checked as well.

### **Literature**

The basic book we will use is Mark Timmons, *Moral Theory*. An Introduction, London, Boulder, etc: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002 or later editions (see also

<https://books.google.nl/books?hl=nl&lr=&id=qWGp1iK9IIAC&oi=fnd&pg=PR7&dq>  
Additional material will be announced on CANVAS.

### **Explanation Canvas**

All relevant information and other activities (discussions, etc.) will be made available on CANVAS.