

“ETHICS & THE HUMAN CONDITION:” NIETZSCHE & LEVINAS

FALL SEMESTER 2020

OLLI @ Duke University

Instructor: Kenneth M. Chiha

THURSDAY 3:30 - 4:45pm

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course focuses on foundational ethics and the task of moral thinking by considering two philosophers dynamically opposed in the history of Western moral discourse: Friedrich Nietzsche and Emmanuel Levinas. We will examine their methodological approaches through short, close text readings, lectures, and active class discussions. We will start by reading selections from Nietzsche’s “On the Genealogy of Morals.” We will assess Nietzsche’s conception of the historical development of morality, its origins and causes, and his desire to move beyond the destructive impact of our moral tradition. We will then read excerpts from Levinas’s “Difficult Freedom” and “Totality and Infinity.” This will offer us a glimpse into an opposing model of ethics where the concept grounding the human condition is “obligation to the human other.” Our goal will be to come to a better comprehension of each ethical model and its implications for our understanding of the human person and society.

CLASS SESSIONS & READING ASSIGNMENTS

PART I: FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE (1844-1900 CE)

Session 01 / September 17th

- **Discussion Topics:** Setting the Stage
Class Introduction/Syllabi Overview, Defining Our Terms, Nietzsche Biography

Session 02 / September 24th

- **Discussion Topics:** Nietzsche On the History of Morality, The Two Types of Morality, and “*Ressentiment*”
 - **Reading:** *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 15-23 -- Preface: 1-8, 24-27, 33-46 -- 1st Essay: 1-3, 7-13

Questions to consider as you read in preparation for class discussion:

1. What is the central question (subject) Nietzsche is exploring in this polemic?
2. What does Nietzsche mean when he says prior attempts of understanding morality lack an historical awareness (i.e. “unhistorical”)?
3. What are the two types of people in the world and how does this relate to the two types of morality that developed in history?
4. What is Nietzsche’s understanding of “*ressentiment*” and how does it relate to his notion of “slave morality?”
5. What does Nietzsche mean when he states that “you cannot separate the doer from the doing?”

Session 03 / October 1st

- **Discussion Topics:** Nietzsche on “Good vs. Bad” / “Good vs. Evil” and the Origin of the “Bad Conscience”
 - **Reading:** *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 46-56 -- 1st Essay: 14-17; 84-96 -- 2nd Essay: 16-24

Questions to consider as you read in preparation for class discussion:

1. How does Nietzsche account for the origin of the soul?
2. How does Nietzsche distinguish between “Good and Bad,” “Good and Evil,” within the distinctions of his moral system?
3. What does Nietzsche mean by the “bad conscience” and how does he describe its origin?

Session 04 / October 8th

- **Discussion Topics:** Nietzsche on the Commonwealth, the Will to Power, “Creditor-Debtor Relationship,” and Altruistic Morality
 - **Reading:** *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 46-56 -- 1st Essay: 14-17; 84-96 -- 2nd Essay: 16-24

Questions to consider as you read in preparation for class discussion:

1. How does Nietzsche account for the emergence of the commonwealth and how does it relate to his notion of the “Will to Power?”
2. What is the “Creditor-Debtor” relationship? How does it relate to altruistic morality?

Session 05 / October 15th

- **Discussion Topics:** Nietzsche on Ascetic Ideals, “Truth Claims,” Science, the Value in Art, Meaning, and Suffering
 - **Reading:** *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 148-156, 162-163 -- 3rd Essay: 24-25; 28

Questions to consider as you read in preparation for class discussion:

1. Why is Nietzsche so critical of ascetic ideals?
2. What is Nietzsche’s attitude toward the possibility of making “truth claims?”
3. What is Nietzsche’s understanding/criticism of science?
4. Why does Nietzsche see value in art?
5. What does Nietzsche say about ascetics, meaning, and suffering?

PART II: EMMANUEL LEVINAS (1906–1995 CE)

Session 06 / October 22nd

- **Discussion Topics:** Levinas Biography and Levinas on the “Ethical Relation,” Human Freedom, and Obligation to the Other
 - **Reading:** *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 16-23.

Questions to consider as you read in preparation for class discussion:

1. How does Levinas initially describe the “ethical relation?” How does he connect it with human freedom/sovereignty and obligation to the other?
2. How does Levinas correlate ethics and moral relation with our vision of God? What are the implications of this claim?
3. How does Levinas connect the notion of “ritual law” to “social justice?”

Session 07 / October 29th

- **Discussion Topics:** Reconciling Particularism with Universalism, Divine and Human
 - **Reading:** *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, 16-23.

Questions to consider as you read in preparation for class discussion:

1. What is Levinas' understanding of both divine and human capabilities for pardoning human crimes and activities? How does this relate to his argument about human moral obligations to the other?
2. How does Levinas explain Jewish election, particularism, and its connection to universalism and citizenship in modern states? How does he connect this with his ethical theory?

Session 08 / November 5th

- **Discussion Topics:** Levinas on Speech/Discourse, The "Face," and Human Responsibility

- **Reading:** *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 194-204; 215-219.

Questions to consider as you read in preparation for class discussion:

1. What does Levinas mean when he claims that "speech proceeds from absolute difference?" How does this relate to his understanding of discourse and the "formal work of language?"
2. How does the "face" put the "I" in question (i.e. as a "moral summons," etc.)?
3. Explain Levinas' central claim that the Other, "rather than limiting the freedom of the same, founds and justifies it by calling it to responsibility..." "...by arousing my goodness."

Session 09 / November 12th

- **Discussion Topics:** Discourse as "Rupture and Commencement" / The "Interpersonal" as "Asymmetrical"

- **Reading:** *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, 194-204; 215-219.

Questions to consider as you read in preparation for class discussion:

1. In what ways is discourse both a "rupture and commencement" by conditioning thought? Discuss why the "essence of discourse" is ethical. What is its relationship to "reason?"
2. Why does Levinas argue that "interpersonal" takes place in a space that is "asymmetrical?"

Session 10 / November 19th

- **Discussion Topics:** Concluding Reflections & Review of Nietzsche and Levinas

STUDENT INVOLVEMENT / CLASS DISCUSSIONS

Students of all levels are welcome – from the novice to those with training in the area. All are expected to schedule an adequate amount of time for readings between class sessions. The level of dialogue and quality of student involvement with the topics and readings for each session largely determines the pace of this course.

This course primarily follows a seminar format. The instructor will provide some background material, but much of the class time will be devoted to discussion. Your preparation, enthusiasm, willingness to ask questions, pursue insights, share knowledge, and your serious engagement with the ideas of your fellow classmates will greatly contribute to the success of this course. My hope is that all of us will grow throughout this course, not only in terms of gaining new knowledge of content, but in the very process of mutual learning within our community. Therefore, I expect you to have completed the assigned readings on time and that you make substantive contributions during each class session. I look forward to the frequency and quality your participation in your comments, questions, and interactive discourse, as you raise new perspectives or concerns based on the course material and actively engage the claims of your fellow classmates.

In order to help facilitate this dialogue, students are asked to prepare responses to central questions or particular themes related to the readings. Prior to each class, I may note some questions for your consideration related to the next class's readings. You also may prefer to select a particular passage or selection from the reading that you found very significant or compelling. The purpose of these questions or selections is to stimulate class discussions, keep each particular session focused, help you to better organize your own thoughts and inquiries, and aid in your thoughtful preparation for class.

ENTHUSIASM

- Laugh at most (if not all) of my jokes

COURSE READINGS

1. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale. Ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc., 1967. 15-23; 24-27, 33-56; 84-96; 148-156; 162-163.
2. Levinas, Emmanuel. *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*. Trans. Seán Hand. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. 16-23.
3. Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969. 194-204; 215-219.

Note: Since we will often refer directly to sections of the assigned texts for analysis during class discussions, please have the appropriate texts with you during every class. Only the Nietzsche book needs to be purchased prior to class. Excerpts from the Levinas texts will be available on the course webpage.