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PHIL 295.01: The Ethics of Place

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The University Of Montana

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Course Syllabus: Phil 295

The Ethics of Place

But it is not to be grasped on the basis of personal existence or of that of two personal existences, but of that which has its being between them and transcends both. In the most powerful moments...it becomes unmistakably clear that it is not the wand of the individual or of the social, but of a third which draws the circle around the happening. On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge where *I* and *Thou* meet, there is the realm of "between."

This reality, whose disclosure has begun in our time, shows the way, leading beyond individualism and collectivism, for the life decisions of future generations....This reality provides the starting point for the philosophical science of man; and from this point an advance may be made on the one hand to a transformed understanding of the person, and on the other to a transformed understanding of community.

—Martin Buber

Fall Semester, 2000

University of Montana

Class Times: Tuesday & Thursday, 9:40–11:00

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Course Description

This course begins with the notion that being in a particular place, with its particular characteristics, is an irreducible and foundational aspect of our experience of value and meaning, and thus, also of our ability to do ethics. But despite, or perhaps because of, the obvious importance of place in the processes of perception, judgment, action, and evaluation which, together, constitute the ethical response, “place” has rarely been taken seriously either as an object of or a condition of ethical reflection and engagement. The closest we have come to an ethics of place is an environmental ethic which seeks to recognize both the intrinsic value of nonhuman entities, including habitats and ecosystems, and the responsibilities we have by virtue of the systemic effects of our actions and technologies. But even this reflects only a very partial and limited recognition of the interdependence of persons and places, and of the ethical implications of this interdependence. In this course, we will try to achieve a richer understanding of what it means to be in place, and consider what such an understanding might mean for ethical theory and practice.

The course will be conducted in seminar format. Students will have the opportunity to read and discuss excerpts from various works of philosophy, literature, and social science, approaching them as tools which can be used to formulate personal responses to such questions as:

- Are there any facts about human nature or the human condition which dictate how we ought to live?

- What, if any, forms of attachment to material things and to places contribute to human flourishing?

- Is it possible to make generalizable statements about which kinds of things, or which characteristics of places, seem to be particularly valuable (or particularly undesirable) for living a good human life?

- What is our personal responsibility for the character of the places we co-inhabit with others, and for the things which occupy these places? How can we meet this responsibility, individually and collectively?

Course Objectives

Upon completion of this course, students should be able to:

1. Recognize that there are additional ways of approaching and framing ethical questions, beyond those reflected in person-centered ethical theories, and determine when it may be helpful to use these alternative approaches.

2. Be aware of various philosophical and scientific approaches to conceptualizing the connections between persons, places, and things, and be able to use this information to reflect on their own interpersonal and material circumstances.

Assigned Readings

There are two basic texts for this course:

- *The Only World We've Got* by Paul Shepard
- *Community and the Politics of Place*, by Daniel Kemmis

In addition to these books, there will be a number of brief excerpts, chapters, articles, etc. from other works which will be available from the reserve desk in the library. See schedule below for the titles of these works, and the dates by which you should have them read.

Course Requirements & Grading

This course is offered on a pass/fail basis only. To pass, you will need to attend class meetings (unless excused by instructor), and to participate actively in class discussions, demonstrating that you have read the materials and given some thought to the discussion questions provided in this syllabus. Each student will also have the opportunity to write and present to the class three brief (3-5 pages) reaction papers, each focusing on one of the discussion questions listed in the syllabus, or on any theme or issue related to the course material that is of particular interest to the student. For those students who desire more feedback on the quality of their work than a P or an F, I will be happy to offer comments and suggestions on your written work and class participation.

Reading/Discussion Schedule

This is an experimental course, which means, among other things, that we will quite literally be experimenting with and combining a number of different ideas and approaches in order to evaluate the basic hypothesis of the course: that the ways in which people and places mutually shape each other are of fundamental ethical importance, requiring new tools and ways of doing ethical analysis that traditional ethical theories cannot, by themselves, provide. The reading materials and discussion questions presented below are intended to provide some basic, initial theory and speculation about the person/place relationship, and a vocabulary we can use to eventually discuss an ethics of place. As you can see, this schedule takes us through roughly the first half of the course. After that, my hope is that you will have identified a particular area of interest or concern that you would like to explore in more depth. In the second part of the course, then, I will provide different reading materials for students in accordance with their particular interests, and our class time will consist in large part of sharing the results of your research and discussing its potential uses.

Material marked * is on reserve in the Library

Tuesday, 9/5: Introduction

Review of Syllabus, discussion of course focus and methods

Thursday, 9/7: Moral Luck

Reading: *Excerpt from *The Fragility of Goodness*, Chapter 1, by Martha Nussbaum

Discussion: Given that each of us, individually and collectively, constitute part of that amorphous “external world” upon which other people depend and over which they have little or no control, to what extent are we responsible for the character of that world, and for its effects on people we may not personally encounter?

Tuesday, 9/12: Human Flourishing

Reading: **Human Flourishing and the Appeal to Human Nature*, by Douglas Rasmussen

Discussion: Is “human flourishing” intelligible and appropriate as a goal of ethical thought and action (as opposed to, or in addition to, more conventional concerns such as rights and duties)? Is it possible ethically for an individual to flourish at the expense of others, either directly or indirectly?

Thursday, 9/14: The Conditions of Human Flourishing, I

Reading: **A Theory of Motivation*, by Abraham Maslow

Discussion: Do individuals have an ethical responsibility, to themselves or others, to pursue their own “self-actualization” to whatever extent they can? If so, what would this mean in concrete terms for individuals? For society?

Tuesday, 9/19: Conditions of Human Flourishing, II

Readings: *Introduction to *Nature and Madness*, by Paul Shepard
Chapter 6, The Dance of Neoteny and Ontogeny, from *The Only World We've Got*

Discussion: Do you agree that human beings need significant involvement with natural environments in order for “normal” sociomoral development to reach its fullest potentials? If Shepard is right, what are some of the ethical implications of his argument?

Thursday, 9/21: Conditions of Human Flourishing, III

Reading: Chapter 9, The Desert Fathers, from *The Only World We've Got*

Discussion: To what extent are our cultural values, ideals, and sense of life's possibilities shaped by our material environment? Can you think of examples in which your sense of your own possibilities are shaped by family, friends, and/or material environment? Do you experience changes in your sense of self or your values when you change from one environment (e.g., school) to another (e.g., home)?

Tuesday, 9/26: Conditions of Human Flourishing, IV

Reading: *First Part, from *I and Thou*, by Martin Buber

Discussion: If, as Buber suggests, I-Thou (or I-You, in this translation) encounters are the necessary condition for becoming a genuine "I"—if we become our genuine selves only in I-Thou relationships—what sort of characteristics must places have in order to facilitate I-Thou relations among the people in them? For example, what sort of conditions should we try to create in this classroom if both you, as students, and I, as teacher, are to be our genuine selves during this time together?

Thursday, 9/28: Conditions of Human Flourishing, V

Reading: **The Nature of Beauty* by George Santayana

Discussion: To what extent is our sense of what constitutes a good human life an aesthetic sense rather than a logical deduction or rational judgment? What should be the relative importance, in ethical decision-making, of the good (human flourishing) and the right (moral rules and principles)?

Tuesday, 10/3: Human Flourishing and Society

Reading: *The Grand Inquisitor, from *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Dostoyevsky

Discussion: To what extent is flourishing dependent on the individual's own efforts, or on broad social conditions? Can individuals flourish without in some sense setting themselves against aspects of their culture which are stultifying or oppressive? How do we help or hinder each other on the way to human flourishing?

Thursday, 10/5: Review and Summary

Reading: *Excerpts from the first and second *Duino Elegies*, by Rainer Maria Rilke

Discussion: Any questions, comments, ideas, objections, etc. that students may have to the material covered so far.

Tuesday, 10/10: Dynamics of the Person/Place Relationship I

Reading: **How Moral Psychology Changes Moral Theory*, By Mark Johnson

Discussion: What kind of ideas are ethical ideas, and where do they come from? If, as Johnson argues, moral thinking is metaphorical and grounded in bodily experience, what sort of moral metaphors are we likely to generate in places where we are constantly

surrounded by mass-manufactured commodities, and inundated with commercial advertising?

Thursday, 10/12: Dynamics of the Person/Place Relationship, II

Film: The Stanford Prison Experiment and/or The Milgram Obedience Studies

Discussion: To what extent are we subject to unconscious influences which may be triggered by certain characteristics of the places we find ourselves in, leading us to act in ways we would normally consider unethical? Does understanding these vulnerabilities help us to avoid this problem? If we know that these vulnerabilities exist, can we or should we insist that organizational or situational dynamics which rely on them to produce compliance are unethical in all circumstances, or only when the desired behavior is questionable?

Tuesday, 10/17: Dynamics of the Person/Place Relationship, III

Reading: *Group Inclusion and the Salience of Moral Principles, by Dean Anderson

Discussion: If we are indeed predisposed (but not, of course, compelled) to respond to moral distress in the ways described in this essay, and if these predispositions no longer can be relied on to produce good ethical choices in contemporary environments, which may be too large and impersonal to provide the necessary safeguards of small group life, what can we do to help make sure contemporary groups provide ways of avoiding inappropriate deindividuation?

Thursday, 10/19: Dynamics of the Person/Place Relationship, IV

Reading: * Excerpts from Chapters 4 and 5 of *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, by Albert Borgmann.

Discussion: How do the various things in your life influence your thinking and decision-making? Are you content with this situation? How can we be responsible for material culture, individually and collectively?

This completes the first part of the course. In the second part, you will be asked to choose a particular area of interest (from the topics covered above, or feel free to propose some other topic not included here), to do some independent guided reading in that area, and to share this work with the class in the form of 3 brief reaction papers which you will present to the class. The first of these papers should describe the problem/interest area you are studying, and the resources you are using; the second should outline some of the salient ideas you have gained from your study; and the third should offer your personal reflections on how these ideas can be used to address concrete ethical problems you are concerned about. We will make up a schedule for the presentation of these papers, which will be used

instead of general readings to provide discussion topics. Each student should include the book *Community and the Politics of Place* among your reading materials during the second part of the course. It provides a good discussion of some of the weaknesses of conventional ethical and political theories, as well as some practical examples of how people can go about the practical work of making the places they inhabit as conducive to human flourishing as possible.