

Course Syllabus

Course: Ethi 520; Universal and Transcultural Ethics.

Professor: William Hatcher

Duration: 30 hours (one semester).

Goals and objectives.

This course examines fundamental ethical questions from the standpoint of a comprehensive view of human nature. It is seen that the universality of essential human nature guarantees that there are universal ethical norms, while the structure of reality, and the law of cause-and-effect in particular, guarantee that autonomous individual moral action will naturally converge towards these norms. Morality is thus seen as a dynamical system in which the individual seeks consistently to maximize the twin parameters of moral autonomy and authentic well-being in his or her daily value choices. Convergence to universal norms thus results from the dynamic interaction between the individual moral actor and various portions of reality.

Method; contrast with traditional approaches.

By means of a systematic examination of the fundamental interactions between the self and different categories of the social, physical, and intellectual environment, the student will acquire a knowledge and understanding of the principles upon which these interactions are based. The essence of morality is thus the acquisition of the capacity to initiate and sustain *authentic* interactions with reality.

Traditional approaches to morality and ethics tend to stress the importance of certain ethical ideas or norm which are considered worthy of implementation. One then proceeds to examine how to induce human subjects to implement these norms. The present approach is "non-ideological" because it accords the greatest importance to the quality of human interactions rather than to the ethical norms themselves.

Of course, the importance of appropriate ethical norms is indisputable, but our approach sees them primarily as means of achieving the desired quality of human interactions rather than as ends in themselves. It is human well-being and autonomy that are to be optimized, rather than the quality of human life compromised or sacrificed for the preservation of some ethical ideology.

Course Outline

- I. Fundamental aspects of human nature.
 - A. Universal (transcultural) and particular (culturally specific) aspects of human nature.
 1. The principle of similarity and difference.
 - a. Capacities and limitations.

- i. Individual differences vs. universal capacities.
 - 2. The primary capacities of the human being.
 - a. Knowledge, love and will.
 - B. Life as a transformational/developmental process of increasing our well-being and autonomy by optimizing our capacities and abilities.
 - 1. Well-being vs. temporary pleasure and immediate gratification.
 - 2. Autonomy vs. unnatural dependencies and self-limitations.
 - 3. Dynamism and stasis; progression and stability.
- II. The process of value generation and value choice.
 - A. An interaction — the basic unit of experience.
 - 1. Discrete (material) vs. continuous (spiritual).
 - 2. Abilities, the actualization of capacities.
 - a. Knowledge; perceptions and conceptions.
 - b. Affections; desires and preferences.
 - c. Will; choices, intentionality and action.
 - B. Integrating knowledge, affections, choices and values into a coherent process of ethical development.
 - 1. The inner model and its refinement.
 - 2. Hindrances to this process.
 - a. Vanity (false self-conceit).
 - i. The origin, generation and nature of individual and collective self-concept.
 - b. Power-seeking.
 - 3. Intrinsic vs. extrinsic values.
- III. Reality and the objectivity principle.
 - A. The structure of objective reality and its relationship to the internal structure of the self.
 - 1. The law of causality.
 - B. The objectivity principle.
 - C. The reality principle.
 - 1. The law of cause and effect in the realm of values.
 - a. Feedback and evaluation; confronting the law of causality.
- IV. The basic interactions of the self.
 - A. The primacy of consciousness (self-awareness) in defining the self.
 - 1. The boundaries of the self, internal vs. external.
 - B. Categories of interactions.
 - 1. Self with self, self with the Divine, the self with another self, the self with social groups, the self with objects (ideas, values and abstract objects, the physical environment and concrete objects).
 - C. An examination of the main value principles relating to each category of interaction.
- V. Authenticity, autonomy, and convergence.
 - A. The marriage of universality and autonomy.

1. Convergence towards universal norms.
2. Unity in diversity vs. uniformity.
3. The social and collective dimension of individual ethical action.

Required texts.

The basic text is Hatcher, *Love, Power, and Justice*. Also required are Hatcher, *Logic and Logos*; Hatcher, *The Law of Love Enshrined* (particularly the two essays "The causality principle in the world of being" and "The concept of spirituality"); 'Abdu'l-Bahá's tablet "The Seven Stages of the Soul."

Collateral Reading.

Many references used in the course will be found in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, and students should have this work at hand.

Assignments.

Evaluation in the course will be based on a single term paper. The specific assignment is as follows. Consider the following propositions:

"Humans are aggressive and competitive by nature and so there is no way to avoid the prevalence of competition and power-seeking in society. Moreover, the differences between individuals and cultures are so great that there can never be any widespread agreement on something as arbitrary, subjective, emotional (and often irrational) as values."

The student is to write a substantial paper taking a clear and reasoned position with regard to the above propositions. In the course of his or her discussion, the student should refer to the material in the course and either use it or criticize it in the defense of his or her position. The grade will be 50% on the demonstration that the student has assimilated the material of the course and 50% on the quality of the reasoning in defense of the student's thesis.