Syllabus for PHIL 270

Business Ethics

(Fall 2015)

Room, Time: Biddle 102, Wednesday 3:05-5:35
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Office: West Duke, 102
Office hours: Most Tues/Thurs 11:30-12:30; or by appointment
(NB: there are Philosophy Department meetings at least once a month on Tues @ 11:30)

Abstract Synopsis of Course:

This course is primarily about how “things” ought to be in the world of business, not how things are. It is about evaluating, justifying or criticizing things, not merely describing them or explaining why they are the way they are. Of course, figuring out and justifying how things ought to be done or organized requires a keen understanding of how and why things work the way they do in the real world of business, and what the feasible options for improvement are. But you cannot explain how things ought to be done merely by showing how they are done. What are these “things” in the world of business that this course is concerned with? One of our most fundamental objectives in this course is answering that question. We will be concerned not only with the way individuals — employees, managers, investors, customers — ought to behave; but also with the design and justification of various kinds of business firms, and with various kinds of markets and market regulations. How individuals ought to act depends in part on the roles they have within organizations (like firms, NGOs, government agencies), and how organizations themselves ought to act depends in part on the rights and obligations of individuals within and outside of them, and in part on the design and rationale of the markets and political systems they are operating within. Almost every topic we discuss in this course will involve ethical thinking within and across at least two of these “levels” of individual, organization, markets, legal systems, and societies and their governments.

Figuring out what you ought to do as a professional businessperson is not a simply a matter of making ethical decisions in the face of challenging questions. It is also about figuring out what the questions are and recognizing when you are in a situation that calls for serious ethical deliberation and argument. Effective ethical thinking, like effective management more generally, springs from the art of asking the right questions. And justifying one’s views and decisions about controversial matters is not merely a question of “proving” them; it is about engaging with those who disagree and communicating arguments that might have a chance of persuading them if they are being reasonable.

This course aims to develop these capacities of asking pertinent ethical questions in the business world, and of developing and justifying reasonable answers to them. Please consult the activities, course requirements, and provisional schedule of topics and readings, for a much more concrete picture of how we will be doing this throughout the semester.
Course Requirements and Grading Scheme:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mid-term exam (in class, October 7)</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Final take-home exam</td>
<td>30</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Team case study project (October 17)</td>
<td>20</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Presentation of team case study</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>“Editorial Assistant” memo on a class-set of case studies (6 November)</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Individual paper asking and answering a question about your team's case study (20 November)</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Participation</td>
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Mid-term and Final Exams:

All of the Mid-term, and most of the Final, will consist of questions on specific details in the required readings and in the classroom activities. Each week I will give examples in class, or in post-class materials, of the kinds of short-answer or multiple-choice questions that could be posed on that week’s material. The Final Exam will also feature questions on a case study drawn from the submissions by the class teams.

Team Case Study Project:

This project is the heart of the course, and will feed into every element of the grading scheme except the mid-term exam. A typical “team” will be a partnership of two, or in some cases three, students. Your first task is to identify a real issue or event with ethical implications. You will then prepare a case study that could be (and perhaps will be) used in a business ethics class. It should be about 5-10 single-spaced pages, with a reasonable number of appendices, and an additional page with a short number of “study questions” along with your explanation for why a business ethics teacher might want to have students discuss those particular questions. After submitting the written version of the case for grading, every team will have a chance to present their case to the class. Feedback from the grading of the case, and from the class discussion, can be used by teams that want to re-submit a revised version of their case to improve their grade later in the term. All members of the team will receive the same grade on the written and presented case (items 3 and 4 from the grading scheme, above). In addition, each member of the team will submit, later in the term, his or her own short paper analyzing an ethical or normative issue within his or her team's case study (item 6 from the grading scheme).

“Editorial Assistant” Memo:

Once the team case studies have been submitted they will be compiled and given to every student in the class. Each student will read and report back on the set of cases as if they were the assistant to a publisher of case studies in business ethics who had just received a pile of submissions. Your task will be to write a memo to the “publisher” that gives a ranking of the set of cases (according to ranking criteria that you develop, explain, and justify), and that provides specific feedback on how the individual cases could be improved. You will be graded primarily on how well you demonstrate an
understanding of what a case study in business ethics is supposed to do, and of how well each of the ones you have read measures up to this standard. Does it identify an interesting or challenging situation that can help students of business ethics to better understand the rationale and application of basic concepts and theories? Does it ask the kinds of questions that will facilitate this understanding? Does it provide the relevant kind of information to enable students to develop reasonable answers to the questions? Is it written in an accessible and engaging manner? Note: the rankings and the critiques provided in these “Editorial Assistant” memos will not affect the grading that the case studies themselves will receive. We shall, however, compile the specific feedback on each of the cases so that it can be used by any team wishing to revise and resubmit its case.

Participation:

This class is largely about the art of asking questions and engaging in justifications and critiques – and class discussions are our most important means of developing these skills. Some of these discussions may be spiced with fun and humor, but good participation always requires courtesy and respect among the member of the group. (And in the 21st century, courtesy and respect cannot be maintained in the presence of extraneous device-usage.) Everyone is expected to come to class having read the assigned materials. If for some exceptional reason you were not able to read all of the materials for a particular class, indicate this to me before we begin and I will not cold-call you to explain the readings or cases. Attendance is mandatory, and unexcused absences will be recorded. If you have a medical, or similarly grave, reason for missing class, please drop a short note to both the professor and the TA.

Readings

All readings and cases will be available on-line or on Sakai.