

Course Overview

Leisure World

2/28/09

The nation faces a perilous future on uncharted seas as we face the threat of non-state terrorism. As the most diverse nation on earth, we must maintain national security while ensuring individual freedom and privacy as guaranteed by the Constitution; we will have to walk a fine line and this will not be easy. In the final analysis, social order, domestically and internationally, will be achieved through common values and moral conduct that reflects those values. Unless we understand the critical role of trust and confidence in our relationships—personal, professional, and among nations—we will rely more and more on force to maintain social order. Conventional force will have limited utility in fighting terrorism, and indeed may be counter productive. Similarly, as we build the national will and cohesion necessary to solve our domestic and international problems, we must understand the moral dimension of this effort.

This course provides an opportunity for looking at the ethical dimension of everyday life as well as gaining a better understanding of the critical role of morality in national cohesion and international order. It is a common sense approach to the study of ethical behavior with a minimum of theory. When theory is addressed, it is discussed in plain language. Although the course requires no special academic background, it appeals to intellectual curiosity and an open mind. If you are a reflective thinker and like to question conventional thought, you will enjoy the course.

The course begins with a discussion of some fundamental concepts of ethical thought. What do “morality” and “ethics” mean? What is the relationship of the Constitution, values, and ethical obligations of ordinary citizens? What are the sources of our values and ethical principles? We will distinguish between situations involving a clear choice between right and wrong and those where there is no clear answer. Where the right thing to do is clear, but there is a personal cost to doing what is right, we will use the term “moral temptations.” Where there are no clear-cut answers, we will use the term “moral dilemmas” to describe the situation. The first category is relatively easy to deal with and we will spend little time on those kinds of situations.

This course goes beyond the usual course on ethics by looking at “macro” ethics of national and international behavior of governments and nations. The United States faces a perilous future on uncharted seas as we face the threat of non-state terrorism. As the most diverse nation on earth, we must maintain national security while ensuring individual freedom and privacy as guaranteed by the Constitution; we will have to walk a fine line and this will not be easy. In the final analysis, social order, domestically and internationally, will be achieved through common values and moral conduct that reflects those values. The principles we will discuss apply to the smallest social unit to the international system, and we need to understand these principles to understand how the moral dimension is so crucial to world order.

“Trust” is the core value in any human relationship—personal, nationally, and among nations. In the absence of trust, we will rely more and more on force to maintain social order in our everyday interactions, within the nation, and the international community. As Sissela Bok has put it, trust is the most critical element of human society—it is the heart of moral behavior:

Trust is a Social good to be protected just as much as the air we breathe or the water we drink. When it is damaged, the community as a whole suffers; and, when it is destroyed, societies falter and collapse. Trust and integrity are precious resources, easily squandered, hard to regain.... Lying , 1978, p. 28.

Trust in common everyday relations is the glue that holds society together. Whether it is the bond in marriage, the workplace, or among social circles, trust is the essential condition necessary for a society to function. As we will discuss in the class, social order can be based on common values and norms of behavior willingly adopted by members of the society, or it can depend on political authority that enforces laws by punitive measures. Most people prefer the former means of social order and indeed, the U.S. Constitution emphasizes this method. For this method of order to work, individuals must have a sense of honor that ensures compliance with agreed-upon norms of behavior and we have to have trust each other to abide by the rules. If these conditions do not exist, political order steps in to maintain social order. As we shall see, these abstract principles are challenged in the real world. It is these challenges that present moral “dilemmas.”

Trust in our national institutions, private and public, is an essential condition for national unity and cooperation to solve our problems, ensure justice and promote the general welfare, and ensure domestic tranquility. There is strong evidence that we now face a crisis of trust in our government and many of our private institutions, e.g., economic, religious. It is important for each of us to understand our role in restoring and maintaining trust in these institutions in order to keep a free society. This obligation is especially critical for civil servants—from the president to the lowest official—for if trust and confidence is lost in the national government, we face an uncertain future.

We must also understand the role of morality and diverse values in the international community. Do we rely on force alone to react to the terrorist threat, or do we enlist the common effort of the international community? Is it a realistic goal to develop a world community that shares basic values and norms of behavior (moral order) that will lessen the use of force to settle differences? What should be the role of international laws and institutions to enforce these laws? This leads to the question of what the role of morality in our foreign policy should be?

We will look at the following subjects and focus on those of most interest to the members of the class:

- The basic principles of values, morality, and moral codes.
- Morality and national solidarity, national will and cohesion.
- Civic virtue, democracy, and the Constitution
- The critical role of public servants in maintaining trust and confidence in the government.
- The role of government in regulating privacy and individual freedom. Topics will include abortion, assisted suicide, and medical care for terminal patients, etc.
- The role of government in ensuring distributive justice in such areas as health care, social security, civil rights, etc.
- The role of morality in the international community with an emphasis on terrorism, to include the role of religious beliefs in the “Clash of Civilizations”.

Course Objectives. The course is designed to develop a better understanding of moral dilemmas facing senior public officials and provides a framework for rational moral decision-making. At the end of the course, you will be able to:

- Understand the critical role of morality in your personal life, the United States as a community, and International order.
- Understand the critical importance of moral conduct by senior public officials
- Have a working knowledge of the major concepts and principles of moral thought
- Be able to apply the concepts and principles to everyday moral challenges.
- Have a better understanding of the role of morality in a pluralistic society
- Have a better understanding of what is happening on the international scene
- Have a more sensitive personal “moral gyroscope”

Course Content:

Ethics is an enormously complex subject and of necessity the course will skim the surface, but I believe each of you will enjoy the journey. We cannot get into the more esoteric theoretical issues that you will find in an academic course. We will proceed at the pace dictated by class participation and interest in particular topics. I intend to make this a genuine seminar—not a lecture. Most of the course will be discussion of case studies—we will look at real-world situations. Consequently, I will go with the flow of the class and stay with a topic until the class is reasonably ready to move on to the next step.

We will start with a discussion of the nature of our beliefs. I believe this is a necessary part of the course because many of the topics will be emotional and we each need to respect that all of us bring to the class existing beliefs about certain issues that may be in conflict, so we must appreciate that people of good will can, and do, differ. This will help us understand the sources of our values, beliefs, concepts of right and wrong and examine the validity of those sources. The first three (approximately) sessions will focus on the fundamentals of ethics, which is described in the reading in you packet titled “Fundamentals of Ethics.”

We will then turn to issues related to personal behavior (micro ethics) using a series of situations to give concrete meaning to some of the abstract principles of moral behavior. Next, we will look at ethical issues involving the national community (macro ethics). The paper “Domestic Policy Issues” summarizes the contents of that portion of the course.

The fourth segment of the course will focus on the role of morality in the international system to include a discussion of how morality fits into U.S. foreign policy, particularly the “War on Terrorism.” This portion of the course may be beyond the scope of what some may have expected when they signed up, but I believe you will see the importance of the subject. The paper “The Moral Dimension of International Relations” summarizes the contents of this segment.

Advanced Preparation: Come to class with an open and inquiring mind. If you read none of the material, you will get a great deal out of class discussions. The more you read and think outside of class, the more you will learn. I especially recommend you read the paper “How Do We Know What We Know” before the first class. This was written for

students at the National Defense University and may be too theoretical for some of you (As it was for some of the NDU students and faculty). But try to get the gist of the paper, i.e., our beliefs reflect our backgrounds and personalities and determine to a great extent how we interpret events, sometimes in starkly different ways.

Must Read: “Mind-Stretching Exercise,” a one-page exercise included in your packet. Be prepared to discuss this.