Film As Philosophy: Ethical Theory/Moral Problems is an online, writing-intensive philosophy course that uses movies as thought experiments. Thought experiments are philosophical tools for exploring and thinking about philosophical problems. The focus of this course is to think about ethical problems, and to apply ethical theory to moral problems as illustrated by several movies from a variety of genres.

Course Objectives
★ Students will be able to identify and describe major ethical theories, including Deontology, Utilitarianism, and Virtue Ethics.
★ Students will be able to identify and describe major ethical principles, and apply them to specific moral problems.
★ Students will be able to write an analytical paper that addresses a significant ethical question. They will consult and utilize the relevant literature, and demonstrate their ability to apply reasoning to the question and its resolution.
★ Students will be able to discuss their perspectives in writing and in informal conversation with classmates.

Assignments

Weekly movie
The movie should ideally be watched before the start of the week. In an ideal world, you would also finish the assigned readings before you watch the movie, so that those can be bubbling in the back of your mind as you watch. Watch the entire movie. Take notes, paying special attention to interesting moral issues or questions that come up. You’ll need these notes for your Weekly Paper and Weekly Discussion question.

Weekly Lecture
Each week, a “lecture” will be posted to Canvas. It may consist of a PowerPoint presentation, a pdf file, or a video.
Weekly Reading Assignments
REQUIRED TEXTS:
Ethics, ed. by Peter Singer http://tinyurl.com/7j4uf2y
Being Good, by Simon Blackburn http://tinyurl.com/7zt38dx
Additional reading assignments will be posted to Canvas, or will be available online.
See the schedule of movies and reading assignments at the end of the syllabus.

Weekly Paper (about 2-3 pages, double spaced) Due Thursday by 5pm.
Identify a moral problem/issue in the week’s film. Use a specific example, citing a particular scene or plot point that illustrates the problem, and how it is resolved in the film. Discuss how this problem might be resolved by applying the moral theory of the week (or a previously studied theory). Is this a satisfactory resolution? Explain why or why not. Is there a better solution?

How papers are graded
The following qualities are considered, in order of importance:

☑ Evidence of thorough comprehension of the philosophical theories. Accurate exposition, clearly presented.
☑ Ability to apply theories to the topic at hand, together with imaginative and thought-provoking ideas of one’s own. You will always get points for having interesting ideas, even if I think they’re wrong.
☑ Evidence of effort, including clarity of writing, and accuracy of spelling and grammar.

• An A paper will have all of the above qualities to a high degree, will show considerable effort, and is above average.
• A B paper is average, and will exhibit the above qualities. Specifically, a B- grade is what I consider completely average. Anything above that is better than average.
• A C paper is a little below average, and shows effort, but lacks in accuracy, clarity or comprehension, with evidence of misunderstanding of key theories.
• A D paper will show little evidence of effort and significant misunderstanding.
• An F paper will exhibit no evidence of effort, and virtually no comprehension or understanding of theories.
Weekly Discussion Question. Due Tuesday by 5pm.
Write a unique question about the moral issues in the movie for class discussion. ("Unique question" means no one else has already posted the same question.) The purpose of the questions is to generate class discussion. Questions are to be posted online (location to be determined, probably in "Discussions" on Canvas).

You must also respond to questions posted by other students. (Class participation grade)

Students will be evaluated on how philosophically interesting and sophisticated the question is and how relevant it is to the movie/week's topic. You will also be evaluated on your responses to the questions posted by other students. Your question can be related to the topic of your weekly paper, as long as you state it in the form of an actual question.

Analytical Paper:
A 6-8 page paper on a topic of your choice. Topics must be approved in advance. Papers must consider an important ethical question using a movie as an example. The movie can be from the course, but it does not have to be. You must use one or more of the assigned readings in your analysis. Detailed guidelines for your papers will be posted to Canvas by Week 3.

Facebook: Follow ("Like") the Facebook page to for course updates and announcements. Additional articles of interest to the class may be posted to Fb. You are encouraged to post to Fb. http://www.facebook.com/FilmAsPhilosophy

Grading
Grading is based on points. The point scale is fixed, i.e. grading is not based on a curve. Your final grade will be determined by the following:
1) Seven Weekly papers (35% of grade; 5 points ea)
2) Analytical Paper (30% of grade)
3) Discussion questions (21% of grade; 3 pts ea)
4) Class participation (14% of grade; 2 pts each week)

nb: The difference between grades is very small, so a single point can make a difference between, for example, a B and a BC. Since every point counts, every assignment and course requirement counts.
Schedule of Movies and Reading Assignments

★ Read all of Being Good, with particular attention to the sections assigned below under BG.
★ Read assigned selections from Ethics (E).
★ Read assigned selections on Canvas (C). Additional, optional files for your amusement and edification may be posted to Canvas or Facebook.
★ Read Online selections (O) by clicking the hyperlink below.
★ Watch all required movies no later than Monday of the assigned week.

Week 1 June 25-29 (Broadcast on VH1 June 21, 12am)
M: Groundhog Day
Themes and questions: Why be good?
BG: 1-55
E: 21-26 (Plato); 27-29 (Mencius); 29-35 (Hobbes); 188-193 (Epicurus); 224-228 (Camus)

Week 2 July 2-6
M: Quiz Show
Themes and questions: Virtue Ethics, weighing evils. Are all evils equally evil? Lying and truth. How bad is lying?
E: 26-27 (Aristotle); 118-123 (Hume); 123-131 (Kant); 185-188 (Aristotle); 274-279 (Kant); 280-281 (Kant)
Week 3 July 9-13
M: Waltz with Bashir
Themes and questions: Personal responsibility
E: 43-48 (Darwin); 48-49 (Nietzsche); 294-305 (Bennett); 339-346 (Williams)

Week 4 July 16-20 (Broadcast on TNT June 17 8:45am)
M: The Dark Knight (If you're not familiar with Batman Begins, it would help if you watch that too, especially if you're not current on the Batman mythology)
Themes and questions: good and evil, sacrifice, using evil means to fight evil. What is justified? Is Batman good? What is good?
BG: 81-102
E: 152-155 (Camus); 155-158 (Nagel); 159-164 (Mackie); 306-312 (Bentham); 312-313 (Godwin); 317-319 (Smart)

Week 5 July 23-27
M: Minority Report
Themes and questions: control, free will and morality, crime and punishment
C: Strawson, “Moral Responsibility”

Week 6 July 30-Aug 3
M: Blade Runner
Themes and questions: personhood, speciesism, moral status
C: Singer, “All Animals are Equal”; Kant, “Obligations to Animals”; Warren, “Moral and Legal Status of Abortion” (read only part II)

Week 7 Aug 6-10 (Broadcast on MoreMAXe on June 20, 7:30am)
M: Never Let Me Go
Themes and questions: ends and means, persons, moral status
BG: 116-124
E: 332 (Dostoevsky)

Sources for renting/streaming/watching movies:
* Netflix (DVD or streaming)
* Amazon.com Instant Video
* iTunes
* Cable TV
* Your local video store or public library
* Many of the DVDs are available to purchase quite inexpensively on Amazon.com (~$5)