

PHIL 1102: Values in the Modern World
University of Memphis

Course description

From the course catalog: “Values in the Modern World” is an “introduction to such social and ethical questions as: What makes a happy life? What justifies ideas of good and evil? How should we live with others? What is the role of science, religion, sex, and race in society?”

What does it mean to study value? In particular, what does it mean to study value philosophically? Generally, philosophers want to know if our claims to value are *justified*. Do we have good reason to value the things we do or make the value claims we make? When we judge actions wrong or right, or people good or bad – can we defend those claims? What about when those claims conflict, as they obviously do in our world? Can we reconcile those differing claims? Are there universal moral principles that can be proven to apply to all persons?

This course will try to answer such questions. Other questions include: (1) How do “modern” systems of morality differ from ancient ones? (2) Why be moral at all? Why isn’t it permissible to pursue our own happiness or good, as egoists like Ayn Rand or Friedrich Nietzsche argued? (3) The answer to the last question might seem clear if you are religious: We must be moral – and especially we must abide by duties to others – because it is the mandate of God. But, can we prove that God exists at all? (4) Morality seems to presuppose that we are *free* to choose our actions – that we have a free will. Can we prove this? (5) What about real, concrete moral problems facing our world right now, like racism? How can philosophy help us understand or solve these ethical challenges?