George Mason University
School of Public Policy
POGO 750.006

Ethical Challenges in Public Policy
Thurs 7:20 pm – 10:00 pm  ARL VM 476
Syllabus – DRAFT

Teacher: Robert L. Deitz, rdeitz@gmu.edu (phone: (703) 993-3480).
I am in my office (Rm 674) most week days and do not at all mind drop ins. To schedule an appointment, please phone or email me.

Purpose of Course

All of us are familiar with basic ethical notions. We learn from childhood the idea that some conduct is right and other conduct is not right. Many people believe that ethical problems arise infrequently in government and NGO offices and, even then, only with decisions made by senior officials. Not true. Ethical questions arise often, and even junior government and NGO employees face them. The purpose of this course is to examine ethical issues in governance. As an initial matter, we will study so-called meta-ethics, meaning an examination of ethics vocabulary and theory. We will study the question how we should think about ethical problems. Then we will examine a range of ethical problems in governance, some of which will be real, all of which will be plausible.

Objectives

The goal of the course is twofold. First, students will learn how to think about ethical problems. They will learn the vocabulary of thinking about ethical issues. Second, based on an examination of ethical dilemmas, they will learn how to think through ethical problems to reach a “right” conclusion.

Required texts:


**Required readings:**

On the Web:


**Class format**

The course will be conducted as a seminar rather than in a lecture format. Thus each week’s assignment must be read before class discussions each week. Active participation in class discussions is mandatory. Professionals in public policy must be able to speak effectively in small groups and to make presentations of their work. The only way to learn these skills is to practice, so students are expected to contribute to discussions and will be required to present arguments on ethical problems. It is expected that students will keep up with developments in matters relating to this course by reading a good daily newspaper. Inevitably ethical matters of current interest will be discussed in class. There will be a mid-term exam and a final exam. In addition each student will be assigned a position to take on a hypothetical ethical issue. (S)he will make an in-class presentation defending the position (s)he was assigned.

**Classroom courtesy**

Civility and respect toward all members of the class are expected. I encourage disagreements; we should thrive on them. Policy disputes are useful and illuminating. But in all cases mutual respect is the rule.

**Course evaluation**

Midterm exam: 25%
Class participation and presentation: 25%
Final exam: 50%
Class attendance is required.

**Schedule**

Week one: Introduction: what this course is about, and how it will work. Ethical issues that arise in the workplace depend upon facts: How do you know what you think you know? We will thus examine the problem of epistemology. Assignments: Book VII from Plato’s *Republic* (The Allegory of the Cave) (read up to and including the discussion of geometry, a little more than half way through the dialog). *Being Good, supra*, pp. 9-19.


Week eight: **Mid-term exam.**

Week nine: Alienation and Engagement (I). In class showing of *High Noon*.


Week eleven: Some current ethical issues: Should (may) the government lie? Specifically, should (may) the Executive lie to Congress? To the people? Are there degrees of governmental lying? Should (may) government lawyers be aggressive in their interpretations of law so as to find executive programs and conduct lawful? (Pfiffner and Deitz materials.)
Week twelve: Class presentations of ethical problems.

Week thirteen: Class presentations of ethical problems.

Week fourteen: Class presentations of ethical problems.

**Final exam.**

**Disability**

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodation, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.