

**Prof. Gaëlle Fiasse**  
**Winter 2019**  
**PHIL 634: Ethics**

Monday, 09:35-11:25 (Leacock 927)

Professor Gaëlle Fiasse

<http://www.mcgill.ca/philosophy/people/faculty/fiasse>

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Office hours: Leacock 940, on Monday after 2PM, by appointment

**Theme**

This graduate seminar will be structured around the notion of the fragility of the human being. Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), Hans Jonas (1903-1993) and Paul Ricœur (1913-2005) have all emphasized the theme in ethics of the responsibility for the "Other" and for the "fragile". In spite of their contributions, some major dictionaries of ethics do not even have an entry for the words "fragility" or "vulnerability". However, we might think that one of the ethical and political questions is that of finding the best means to help people in situations of fragility. In particular, we might concern ourselves with the crucial issue of refugees. Moreover, often, the question of the fragility echoes our own sense of self, as when physicians accompany dying people, for example, and this experience reminds them of their own mortality.

We will therefore analyze the different levels of fragility of the human being. What, exactly, is meant by fragility? What notions are associated with it? What kind of fragilities should we try to combat, or on the contrary to accept, even welcome? What are the fragilities which belong to the core of who we are? In which sense are some fragilities intrinsic to love or, on the contrary, an obstacle to it? We will also examine the question of fragility at the level of intelligence, will and memory. What helps us or hinders us in discovering what is true? How should we understand the weaknesses of the will? Or the abuses and misuses of memory, even at the political level? Indeed, these anthropological and ethical questions will lead us to the political and legal spheres. How do ideologies affect the self? What are the particular fragilities of our legal systems? And what about fragility in bioethics? Finally, what ethical attitude should we adopt in front of someone who is in a state of great vulnerability, such as a suffering patient in hospital?

To explore these different themes around the notion of fragility, we will read works by different contemporary European philosophers (articles or book chapters), including Ricœur (some articles and excerpts from *Oneself as Another, Memory, History and Forgetting*), Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics, Eudemean Ethics, Metaphysics*), Hans Jonas (*The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*), Emmanuel Levinas (*Totality and Infinity*), Jacques Derrida (*Politics of Friendship*), Hannah Arendt (*The Origins of Totalitarianism*), Giorgio Agamben (*State of Exception*), and an essay by the writer Amin Maalouf (*In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*).

**For undergraduate students:**

see: <http://www.mcgill.ca/oasis/programs/course/graduate>  
and contact me by email

## Evaluation

Participation	20 %	Attendance, in-class participation, quality of discussion and preparation
Assignments	20 %	short paper and oral presentation
Final Paper	30 %	15 pages
Oral exam	30 %	20 minutes

## Prerequisites

This course is a graduate seminar in ethics with a focus on continental philosophy. At least one intermediate class in philosophy is required. Students who choose to attend the class at this level will have acquired the skills of both reading difficult texts in philosophy and thinking critically about them before attending each session of the seminar. Students should thus be prepared to analyze every text closely.

## Commitments and use of electronic devices

I highly value a collegial environment in the classroom and mutual attention being paid to each other's contributions. Therefore, all computers, mobile phones, web-accessible electronic devices (iPads, etc.) must be turned off during the class period and stored away. As you know, it is not really pleasant to express one's views orally when others are writing emails. Exceptions for the use of computers will only be made with an official note from the Office for Student with Disabilities, but even in this case, Internet access will be prohibited during class time.

## Plagiarism

Not mentioning your sources, published or unpublished, constitutes an act of plagiarism. For instance, if you use a website without due reference in the text and in the bibliography; if you use a paper written by another (ideas or words of someone else), without making any reference to the author; if you quote a book or a paper as a reference of your own, without having read it; if you use your own work submitted for another class.

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