

PHILOSOPHY 320
Ethical Theory

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Office Hours:

COURSE REQUIREMENTS: One short paper (5 pages), one longer paper (7-8 pages), many shorter assignments at my whim when I think they'll help with the discussions, and class participation. The shorter assignments will very likely include answers to questions regarding the readings, possible quizzes on the readings, and possibly one presentation on the readings.

GRADING: Ordinarily, 50% of the grade will be determined by the longer paper, 40% by the shorter paper, and the remaining 10% will reflect successful completion of the shorter assignments and possibly a presentation. Where class participation was either extremely good or extremely poor, this may effect grades that are near the dividing line between one grade and another.

BOOKS TO BUY:

Peter Singer, Ethics (Oxford; OUP, 1994)

Various Authors, Course Packet - available from UNL Bookstore.

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS: The class will concern itself with two broad areas within ethics, metaethics (defined below) and normative ethics. Since several days will be taken up with student presentations, work on papers, and other exercises as needed, the exact dates on which these topics will be discussed cannot be predicted in advance, but those who attend class will have no trouble keeping track of where we are. Typically, discussion of each reading assignment will take one day. Students are responsible for having done the reading prior to the lectures on the topic in question, though they may wish to reread them afterward.

I. METAETHICS: Metaethics is the study of the nature and status of moral judgements. What does it mean to say that something is right or good? Are there "objective" answers to questions regarding moral values? Are such answers true? Might they be relative, and if so to what? How can our accounts of such judgements make sense of our claims to moral knowledge? The first half of the semester will be spent on such issues, and various responses to them.

Assignment 1: Introduction.

A. Some Problems with Ethics: (Reduction, Internalism, Epistemology.)

Assignment 2: Principia Ethica, Chapter 1 (Cambridge; Cambridge Univ. Press, 1903), in packet.

Assignment 3: David Hume, excerpt from Treatise of Human Nature (1988), Selection 33 in Singer.

Assignment 4: Gilbert Harman, "Ethics and Observation," The Nature of Morality (OUP; Oxford, 1977) pp. 3-10, in Packet.

B. Some "Solutions" to the Problems:

1. Noncognitivism:

a. emotivism:

Assignment 5: A. J. Ayer, Language, Truth and Logic excerpt, selection 39 in Singer.

b. prescriptivism:

Assignment 6 & 7: R. M. Hare, The Language of Morals, pp. 1-16, 137-150, in packet.

2. Error Theories:

Assignment 9: J. L. Mackie, Ethics, Chapter 1 excerpt, Selection 42 in Singer.

3. Externalist Reductions:

Assignment 10: Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," in packet.

Assignment 11: David Brink, "Externalist Moral Realism," Southern Journal of Philosophy (1986, Supplement) pp. 23-40, in packet.

4. Internalist Reductions:

Assignment 12: Roderick Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," in Sellars & Hospers eds. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 12, No. 3. (Mar., 1952), pp. 317-345 in packet. If this isn't in the packet you can get it at this link from a University or Library computer:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8205%28195203%2912%3A3%3C317%3AEAATIO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-P>

5. Relativism:

Assignment 13: Gilbert Harman, "What is Moral Relativism?" in Goldman & Kim (eds.), Values and Morals (Dordrecht; Reidel, 1978) pp. 143-161, in Packet.

6. Non-reductive Realism:

Assignment 14: John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities" in Morality and Objectivity (London; Routledge and Kagen, Paul, 1985) pp. 110-129, in packet.

7. Prelude to Rationalism; Motivational Internalism about Reasons and limits to Rationality:

Assignment 15: Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons" in Moral Luck, (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981) pp. 101-113, in packet.

8. Rationalism:

Assignment 16: Christine Korsgaard, "Skepticism About Practical Reason," Journal of Philosophy, January 1986, in packet.

II. NORMATIVE ETHICAL THEORIES: Normative ethics concerns what things are in fact right and wrong, and what makes them so. Over the course of our lives we make many decisions about what to do, and these decisions often effect others. We often believe that some of these decisions are better than others, that some are correct and others wrong. This raises the issue of what it is that makes such actions right or wrong, or what it is that they might have in common which makes them so. It turns out that the most obvious general answers to these questions seem to conflict with settled convictions about particular cases. We will examine various theoretical responses to the issues raised.

A. Introduction:

Assignment 18: First Lecture (No Reading).

B. Utilitarianism: Simple and Complex:

1. Simple:

Assignment 19: Excerpt from Jeremy Bentham's, excerpts from Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789), Selections 77 & 53 in Singer.

2. Complex:

Assignment 20: John Stuart Mill, excerpt from Utilitarianism (1861), Selection 54 in Singer.

C. Utilitarianism, Consequentialism, Teleology and Their Critics:

1. Teleology and the right and the good:

Assignment 21: John Rawls, excerpt from Theory of Justice (Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1971), Selection 84 in Singer.

2. Consequentialism and Agent-neutral vs. Agent-relative value:

Assignment 22: **Readings:** Bernard Williams, excerpt from Utilitarianism: For and Against (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1973), Selection 85 in Singer.

Assignment 23: Robert Nozick, Excerpt from Anarchy, State and Utopia (New York; Basic Books, 1974), Selection 68 in Singer.

D. Nonconsequentialist Alternative Approaches:

1. Kantian Theories:

Assignments 24 & 25: Immanuel Kant excerpts 73 and 74 in Singer.

2. Theories of *prima facie* duties:

Assignment 26: W. D. Ross, excerpt from The Right and the Good (Oxford: OUP, 1930) Selection 83 in Singer.

3. Virtue Theories:

Assignment 27: Aristotle, excerpt from Nichomachean Ethics, Selection 2 in Singer.

Assignment 28: Philippa Foot, "Utilitarianism and the Virtues," Mind 94 (1985), in packet.

4. The Doctrine of Double Effect:

Assignment 29: Philippa Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect," from Virtues and Vices (Berkeley; U of Cal. Press, 1978), in packet.

Assignment 30: Warren Quinn, "Actions, Intentions and Consequences," from Philosophy and Public Affairs (1988), in packet.

F. Consequentialist Responses to Criticisms:

1. Minimizing the Damage:

Assignment 31: John Stuart Mill, chapter IV, On Liberty (1859) in packet.

Assignment 32: Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism and the Demands of Morality," Philosophy and Public Affairs Vol 13, No 2. (Spring 1984), in packet.

2. Rule Utilitarianism/Consequentialism (which may not be a kind of consequentialism at all):

Assignment 33: Richard Brandt, "Some Merits of One Form of Rule Utilitarianism," from Morality, Utilitarianism, and Rights (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1992) pp. 110-136, in packet.