

Ethical Theory

Wednesday, January 23 **OVERVIEW**
We will talk about what a philosophical approach to ethics involves and what ethical theories are.

Consequentialist Theories

Monday, January 28 **SINGER ON FAMINE**
Philosophy involves assessing arguments, attempts to show that a particular conclusion follows from a set of premises. In the essay we will discuss today, Peter Singer tries to establish a general moral principle with an argument. How does his argument work? Specifically, how does he move from his example of a drowning child to conclusions about what we are required to do in the case of famine? Singer gives different formulations of his principle. What are the argumentative advantages and disadvantages of each? Does his argument do a better job of establishing one rather than the other? Read Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," paying special attention to pages 231-33 and 241.¹

Wednesday, January 30 **SHARED RESPONSIBILITY**
Cohen accepts the bulk of Singer's argument but rejects his conclusion. With some qualifications, he believes we are primarily responsible only for doing our share to alleviate suffering. What is his argument for this conclusion and how would Singer reply? Read Cohen, "Who is Starving Whom?"²

Monday, February 4 **BENTHAM'S UTILITARIANISM**
Jeremy Bentham's (1748-1832) version utilitarianism is composed of five parts: (1) a theory of the good, (2) a theory of motivation, (3)

¹ Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229-43.

² L. Jonathan Cohen, "Who Is Starving Whom?" *Theoria* 5 (1981): 65-81.

a moral theory, (4) a theory of sanctions, and (5) the utilitarian calculus. We will try to identify each of the five parts because Mill is going to revise them all. Read Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, chaps. 1-4.³

Wednesday, February 6 **MILL'S HEDONISM**

The reading presents Mill's version of utilitarianism. We will pay special attention to Mill's distinction between higher and lower pleasures (see chap. 2, par. 4-10). This represents a substantial alteration to Bentham's theory of the good and how the utilitarian calculus works. We will want to understand both what Mill means in saying that some pleasures are of higher quality than others and also how he tries to show that his distinction is accurate. Read John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chaps. 1-2.⁴

Note Paper topics distributed.

Monday, February 11 **MILL'S MORAL THEORY**

Bentham's utilitarianism is a version of what is called act utilitarianism: it tells us to choose the act that maximizes utility. Mill advocates something called rule utilitarianism: it tells us to follow the rule that would maximize utility if everyone followed it (see chap. 2, par. 19). Mill also has a far less egoistic psychological theory than Bentham does and, accordingly, a different theory of the sanctions that enforce moral behavior (see chaps. 3-4). Read Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chaps. 3-4

Wednesday, February 13 **UTILITARIANISM AND JUSTICE**

Mill recognizes that one of the chief objections to utilitarianism concerns justice. Utilitarianism is concerned with the social good and that can conflict with individual rights. Like Bentham, Mill tries to show that once we understand the psychology underlying our beliefs about justice and morality, we will realize that these beliefs are either implicitly utilitarian or indefensible. Read Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chap. 5.

³ Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ed. Mark C. Rooks, British Philosophy: 1600-1900 (1789; Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corporation, 1993).

⁴ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Mark C. Rooks, British Philosophy: 1600-1900 (1861; Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corporation, 2000).

Note Drafts due Saturday.

Monday, February 18

NEGATIVE RESPONSIBILITY AND INTEGRITY

Bernard Williams (1929-2003) objects to utilitarianism's doctrine of negative responsibility, which holds that we are just as responsible for what we could prevent as we are for what we do. In particular, he maintains, adopting it is incompatible with maintaining one's integrity. We will talk about what Williams means by "integrity" and whether the examples he gives tell against utilitarianism or not. Read Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," 93-118.⁵

Wednesday, February 20

COLLECTIVE ACTION

What should consequentialists say about cases where what any individual does makes no noticeable difference but the collection of individual actions makes a huge difference? For example, if I drive a car, no one will notice the difference in air quality but if we all drive cars, we will notice the difference. Read Jonathan Glover, "It Makes No Difference Whether or Not I Do It."⁶

Note Paper due Saturday.

Monday, February 25

THE REPUGNANT CONCLUSION

Derek Parfit (1942-2017) shows that plausible consequentialist assumptions seem to lead to a repugnant conclusion, namely, that we should vastly increase the world's population to the point where everyone alive will be miserable. Read Parfit, "Overpopulation and the Quality of Life."⁷

⁵ Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," in *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

⁶ Jonathan Glover, "It Makes No Difference Whether or Not I Do It," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 49 (1975): 171-209.

⁷ Derek Parfit, "Overpopulation and the Quality of Life," in *The Repugnant Conclusion: Essays on Population Ethics*, ed. Jesper Ryberg and Torbjorn Tännsjö (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 7-22.

Deontological Theories

Wednesday, February 27

HOW DO RIGHTS WORK?

Most of the debate about abortion is about this question: do fetuses have the right to life? Judith Jarvis Thomson proposes a different way of thinking about it. Suppose a fetus has a right to life, just like an adult. Would that prove that abortion is wrong? She thinks that an analogy shows that it would not. Suppose you were attached to an adult. Would you have the right to detach yourself, even at the cost of the other person's life? Can the right to control your body be more important than another person's right to life? How do you argue for conclusions about rights? Read Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion."⁸

Note Paper topics distributed.

Monday, March 4

DISCUSSION OF THOMSON'S ARGUMENT

Thomson's argument works only if the violinist case is truly similar to most cases of abortion. Today we will talk about challenges to her analogy and how she uses sometimes fanciful examples to support her position. Read Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion."

Wednesday, March 6

DO NUMBERS COUNT?

Suppose you had to choose between helping a larger number of people and a smaller number of people. It seems obvious that you should choose to help the larger number. John Taurek argues that would be unfair to the people in the smaller group. Read Taurek, "Should the Numbers Count?"⁹

Note Drafts due Saturday.

Monday, March 11

GUEST LECTURE

Professor Daniel Rodriguez-Navas will give a guest lecture on Kant's lecture "What is Enlightenment?"

⁸ Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1971): 47-66.

⁹ John Taurek, "Should the Numbers Count?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 6 (1977): 293-316.

Wednesday, March 13

YES THE NUMBERS SHOULD COUNT

Frances Kamm and Jonathan Glover dispute Taurek's argument. Read Kamm, *Morality, Mortality* and Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives*.¹⁰

Monday, March 25

GEWIRTH'S ETHICAL RATIONALISM

Alan Gewirth (1912-2004) presents an argument that, he maintains, shows that everyone is logically committed to respecting the rights of others. If he succeeds, he will show that deontological ethics have a rational basis that binds everyone. Read Gewirth, "The Epistemology of Human Rights."¹¹

Wednesday, March 27

DISCUSSION OF GEWIRTH

Our goal last time was to understand Gewirth's argument. Today, we will talk about possible challenges to it. Read Gewirth, "The Epistemology of Human Rights."

Note Paper due Saturday.

Monday, April 1

DO INTENTIONS MATTER?

Elizabeth Anscombe (1919-2001) articulates what is called the "doctrine of double effect." This distinguishes between two acts with similar consequences on the basis of the agent's intentions. If I intend to bring about some bad consequences either as an end or as a means to an end, that is wrong. But if the bad consequences are merely an effect of my pursuit of otherwise legitimate aims, then my action can be acceptable. Anscombe states this position in part II (page 833) of her essay. Thomas Scanlon disagrees with Anscombe. He maintains that intentions are not generally relevant to determining whether an action is right or wrong. (However he describes some cases where they are relevant

¹⁰ F. M. Kamm, *Morality, Mortality: Volume 1 Death and Whom to Save From It*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 75-76, 81-87. Jonathan Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 203-210.

¹¹ Alan Gewirth, "The Epistemology of Human Rights," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 1 (1984): 1-24.

at the end of his essay.) Read Anscombe, “Mr. Truman’s Degree” and Scanlon, “When Do Intentions Matter to Permissibility?”¹²

Wednesday, April 3

HERMAN ON INTENTIONS

Barbara Herman disagrees with Scanlon. She thinks that intentions *are* usually essential to determining whether an action is right or wrong. Read Herman, “Impermissibility and Wrongness.”¹³

Note Paper topics distributed.

Monday, April 8

MORAL LUCK

Can it ever be a matter of luck whether you do the right or wrong thing? Nagel presents several examples suggesting that the answer is yes. Read Nagel, “Moral Luck.”¹⁴

Metaethics

Wednesday, April 10

EXPRESSIVISM

A.J. Ayer (1910-1989) believes that there is a sharp distinction between facts and values. In the reading for today, he proposes to analyze moral language in a way that conforms to this distinction. Our moral statements, he maintains, do not make assertions that could be true or false. Rather, they express our attitudes. Read Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*.¹⁵

Note Drafts due Saturday.

Monday, April 15

COGNITIVIST ERROR THEORY

J.L. Mackie (1917-1981) agrees with Ayer that there are no ethical truths. But he disagrees with Ayer’s analysis of moral language. As

¹² G. E. M. Anscombe, “Mr. Truman’s Degree,” in *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. Gideon Rosen et al., 2015, 830-36. Thomas M. Scanlon, “When Do Intentions Matter to Permissibility?” in *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. Gideon Rosen et al., 2015, 838-44.

¹³ Barbara Herman, “Impermissibility and Wrongness,” in *The Norton Introduction to Philosophy*, ed. Gideon Rosen et al., 2015, 846-53.

¹⁴ Thomas Nagel, “Moral Luck,” in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 24-38.

¹⁵ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1946; New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 102-120.

Mackie sees it, our moral language does make assertions about how things really are; it's just that they are all false. Read Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*.¹⁶

Wednesday, April 17

A REALIST REPLY TO MACKIE

David Brink is a moral realist, meaning he thinks there are moral facts that are independent of our beliefs. In this essay, Brink explains how he thinks a moral realist can answer Mackie's arguments for moral subjectivism. Read Brink "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness."¹⁷

Note Papers due Saturday.

Monday, April 22

RELATIVISM AND TOLERANCE

Anthropologists are often strong advocates for respecting the ways of other cultures. In today's readings, we will see how some anthropologists use moral relativism to argue for tolerance. Read Ruth Benedict, "Anthropology and the Abnormal" and the American Anthropological Association, "Statement on Human Rights."¹⁸

Wednesday, April 24

RELATIVISM AND TOLERANCE

Williams disputes the anthropologists' assertion that there is a connection between moral relativism and tolerance. One question to ask as you read this is, "what would it mean to apply relativism to ourselves?" That is, how should we think of our own moral codes if we assume that moral relativism is true? Read Williams, *Morality*.¹⁹

Monday, April 29

DEFUSING SUBJECTIVISM

Williams is interested in the question of whether subjectivism can be "defused," or shown not to have drastic implications for ethics.

¹⁶ J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 15-18, 27-42.

¹⁷ David O. Brink, "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62 (1984): 111-25.

¹⁸ American Anthropological Association, "Statement on Human Rights," *American Anthropologist* 49 (1947): 539-43; Ruth Benedict, "Anthropology and the Abnormal," *The Journal of General Psychology* 10 (1934): 59-79.

¹⁹ Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 20-24.

We will be especially interested in what he calls the “mid-air” position. One thing to bear in mind is that we might be deeply mistaken about objective matters; in a way, subjectivism would confer significantly greater confidence in your ethical beliefs. Read Williams, *Morality*, 26-37.

Wednesday, May 1

OBJECTIVIST REPLY

Russ Shafer-Landau believes very strongly that ethics is objective. In this chapter, he explains how he thinks we come to have ethical knowledge. Read Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?*²⁰

Monday, May 6

REVIEW

We will talk about the final exam. The exam itself is scheduled for Friday, May 17, 2:00 - 5:00 p.m. Seniors should make arrangements to take the exam this week; your grades are due Friday, May 10 at noon.

Wednesday, May 8

MORALITY AND SELF-INTEREST

One issue that has been lurking in the background of our discussion is the relationship between morality and self-interest. Can your actions count as morally good if they are motivated by self-interest? What counts as *moral* motivation as distinguished from non-moral motivation? Williams’s point of entry is a criticism of religious ethics made by Immanuel Kant. Roughly, Kant thought that God’s commands can’t be the basis of morality because he thought you should follow them only if God is good but that makes sense only if God’s goodness is established prior to his commands. Of course, you could be motivated to follow God because you fear being sent to hell, but Kant regards that as a selfish rather than a moral motivation and so the actions of the trembling believer don’t count as moral for Kant. The secular version of this would be someone who says that you should behave morally because you will suffer if you don’t: people won’t like you, for instance. Kant regards that kind of story as inadequate for the same reasons. Moral motivation, according to Kant, has to be pure: it has to be the sense of duty and nothing else. Williams finds Kant’s arguments peculiar and

²⁰ Russ Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 102-117.

tries to explain why he doesn't think it makes sense to insist on the purity of moral motivations. Read Williams, *Morality*, 63-72.

MATERIALS

Readings will be available in the resources section of the Sakai site for this class. You will also find notes on each class session there.

GOALS

Ethical theories attempt to give a general, abstract account of ethics. We will discuss three kinds of theories: consequentialist theories, deontological theories, and metaethical theories. The first two are theories about morality. They are concerned with what makes actions right or wrong and what makes people morally good or bad. Metaethical theories are theories about ethical theories, such as consequentialist and deontological theories. Metaethical theories are concerned with whether or not there are objective truths about ethics.

The materials in the class are analytical. That means we will try to learn about ethics through arguments. Students taking the class will have extensive opportunities to develop analytical skills, both in speaking and in writing.

ASSIGNMENTS

Grades will be based on four equally weighted assignments: three papers and a final exam.

GRADING POLICIES

I am committed to seeing that my students are able to do very high quality work and that high quality work will be recognized. I do not employ a curve and there is nothing competitive about grading in my courses.

Grades apply to papers, not to people. They have no bearing on whether I like or respect you. Nor do they measure improvement or hard work: one may put a

lot of effort into trying to make a bad idea work or produce a very good paper with ease. Grades communicate where written work stands on as objective a scale as we can devise. That is all that they involve, so don't make too much of them.

WHAT THE GRADES MEAN

- A Work that is accurate, elegantly written, and innovative. It adds something original, creative, or imaginative to the problem under discussion. The grade of A is given to work that is exceptional.
- B Work that is accurate, well written, and has no significant problems. The grade of B is given to very good work. There is less of a difference between A and B work than you might think. Generally speaking, B papers are less innovative than A papers. This may be because the paper is less ambitious or because it is not fully successful.
- C Work that has problems with accuracy, reasoning, or quality of writing. The grade of C means that the paper has significant problems but is otherwise acceptable.
- D Work that has severe problems with accuracy, reasoning, relevance, or the quality of writing. Papers with these problems are not acceptable college-level work. A paper that is fine on its own may nonetheless be irrelevant. A paper is not relevant to my evaluation of work for this particular course if it does not address the question asked or if it does not display knowledge of our discussions. This sometimes trips up those taking a course pass/no credit.
- F Work that has not been completed, cannot be understood, or is irrelevant.

FINAL GRADES

Table 1 gives Pomona College's twelve point scale. Table 2 shows how numerical averages will be converted to final letter grades.

A	12	$11.5 < A \leq 12.0$
A-	11	$10.5 < A- \leq 11.5$
B+	10	$9.5 < B+ \leq 10.5$
B	9	$8.5 < B \leq 9.5$
B-	8	$7.5 < B- \leq 8.5$
C+	7	$6.5 < C+ \leq 7.5$
C	6	$5.5 < C \leq 6.5$
C-	5	$4.5 < C- \leq 5.5$
D+	4	$3.5 < D+ \leq 4.5$
D	3	$2.5 < D \leq 3.5$
D-	2	$1.0 < D- \leq 2.5$
F	0	$0.0 \leq F \leq 1.0$

Table 1 Letters to Numbers

Table 2 Numbers to Letters

INSTRUCTOR

My name is Michael Green. My office is 207 Pearsons. My office hours are Mondays 4-5 and Thursdays 11-12; any changes will be posted on the Sakai site. My office phone number is 607-0906.

WRITING HELP

I should be your primary resource for help with your papers. That's my job! That said, talking about academics with your peers is an extremely valuable part of the college experience. So I highly recommend discussing your papers with other members of the class.

If you want to go outside the class, the Philosophy Department has arranged for experienced philosophy student to work as what it calls writing mentors. Look for a poster outside of Pearsons 208. In addition, the College's Writing Center offers free, one-on-one consultations at any stage of the writing process. They

have drop-in hours and scheduled appointments. The Writing Center is located in Smith Campus Center, Suite 148 and its website is <http://writing.pomona.edu>.

LATE PAPERS AND ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Late papers will be accepted without question. They will be penalized at the rate of one-quarter of a point per day, including weekends and holidays. Exceptions will be made in extremely unusual circumstances. Please be mindful of the fact that maturity involves taking steps to ensure that the extremely unusual is genuinely extremely unusual.

To request academic accommodations of a disability, please speak with me and the associate dean in charge of disability in the Dean of Students office. This is never a problem, but it is best taken care of in advance.