

Ethical Theory

Wednesday, January 19

OVERVIEW

We will talk about what a philosophical approach to ethics involves and what ethical theories are.

Consequentialist Theories

Monday, January 24

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 26

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?"; we will only discuss pp. 72-81.²

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.

Monday, January 31

BENTHAM'S UTILITARIANISM

Our previous readings tackled a particular problem. Today's reading presents a general theory of ethics: utilitarianism. Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) gave the theory its name and its first comprehensive formulation. Bentham's formulation has five parts: (1) a theory of the good, (2) a theory of motivation, (3) a moral theory, (4) a theory of sanctions, and (5) the utilitarian calculus. Our next author, John Stuart Mill, is going to revise each one of them. Read Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, chaps. 1-4.³

Wednesday, February 2

MILL'S HEDONISM

Mill's version of utilitarianism departs from Bentham's in several ways. 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 7

MILL'S MORAL THEORY

Bentham's version of utilitarianism is called *act utilitarianism*: it tells us to choose the act that maximizes utility. Mill proposes *rule utilitarianism*, which 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 9

NEGATIVE RESPONSIBILITY AND INTEGRITY

Bernard Williams (1929-2003) objects to utilitarianism's doctrine of negative responsibility, which holds that we are just as responsible

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).

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

Note Draft due Saturday.

Monday, February 14

DOES VOTING MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

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? Voting seems to be like that. While it makes a great deal of difference who wins the election, your particular vote is so unlikely to change the outcome that it is hard to see why voting is worth the effort. Barnett argues that this is mistaken and that the numbers really do pencil out for voting on consequentialist grounds. As a special treat, the author will be here to present his paper to us. Read Zach Barnett, "Why You Should Vote to Change the Outcome."⁶

Wednesday, February 16

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

Note Paper due Saturday.

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

⁶ Zach Barnett, "Why You Should Vote to Change the Outcome," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 48 (2020): 422-446.

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

Monday, February 21

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

Wednesday, February 23

DISCUSSION OF THOMSON'S ARGUMENT

Today's class is devoted to discussion of Thomson's argument. Read Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion."

Note Paper topics distributed.

Monday, February 28

DO NUMBERS COUNT?

Suppose you had to choose between saving many people or only a few. 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 and that, when it comes to saving lives, the numbers of lives involved do not count. Read Taurek, "Should the Numbers Count?"⁹

Wednesday, March 2

YES THE NUMBERS SHOULD COUNT

Jonathan Glover notes that Taurek's math is funny. If there is only one person to be rescued, you should do it: 1 is greater than 0. But if you have to choose between saving two and saving one, you should weigh the two and the one equally: $1 + 1$ equals 1. Read Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives*.¹⁰

Note Draft due Saturday.

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.

¹⁰ Jonathan Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 203-210.

Monday, March 7

ARE THERE ABSOLUTE RIGHTS?

Many of us are inclined to say that torture is always wrong. Alan Gewirth (1912-2004) tries to defend that belief against the charge that refusing to torture someone could have disastrous consequences. Read Gewirth, "Are There Any Absolute Rights?," pp. 7-16; we will not discuss the first section."

Wednesday, March 9

MORAL LUCK

Deontological approaches to ethics rely on a distinction between what we intend to do and the consequences of our actions. As we saw in the Gewirth reading, one thought behind that is that you are only responsible for what is in your control. Nagel presents several cases in which this does not seem to be true. In these cases, whether you do the right or wrong thing seems to be a matter of luck. Read Nagel, "Moral Luck."¹²

Note Paper due Saturday.

Monday, March 21

KANTIAN MORAL THEORY

We began the class with a discussion of how consequentialists deal with famine. Onora O'Neill uses the same problem to introduce a general deontological theory of ethics, namely, Immanuel Kant's claim that the foundational principle of ethics is that we should treat others only as ends and never as mere means. Read Onora O'Neill, "The Moral Perplexities of Famine Relief," pp. 285-94; we will only discuss sections 22-29.¹³

Wednesday, March 23

GEWIRTH'S ETHICAL RATIONALISM

Gewirth seeks to show 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," 1-5, 11-24; we will not discuss section 2.¹⁴

¹¹ Alan Gewirth, "Are There Any Absolute Rights?," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, (1981): 1-16.

¹² Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 24-38.

¹³ Onora O'Neill, "The Moral Perplexities of Famine Relief," in *Matters of Life and Death* ed. Tom Regan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980): 260-98.

¹⁴ Alan Gewirth, "The Epistemology of Human Rights," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 1 (1984): 1-24.

Metaethics

Monday, March 28

FACTS AND VALUES

Philosophy in the twentieth century was dominated by an alleged gap between facts and values. One way of putting this was expressed by David Hume, namely, that an “ought” cannot be derived from an “is.” Another expression of the basic idea was advanced by G.E. Moore. Moore thought there is a gap between natural facts and evaluative ones, such that no natural facts could make anything good. Where Hume thought that our values had to be the products of human psychology and social conventions, Moore thought that they were non-natural facts. Read Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, selections and Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 1-21.¹⁵

Wednesday, March 30

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*.¹⁶

Monday, April 4

ABSURDITY

We act as though our values are objective. We try to figure out what is genuinely important and live our lives accordingly. If there are no objective standards for values, however, what does that mean for us? Are all our efforts to live good, meaningful lives absurd? Read Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd.”¹⁷

Wednesday, April 6

MORAL AND SCIENTIFIC OBSERVATIONS

Gilbert Harman tries to show that ethics are subjective by contrasting ethical thought with the sciences. He maintains that the observations that we make when examining the natural world are best explained

¹⁵ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Mark C. Rooks, The Complete Works and Correspondence of David Hume. (1740; repr., Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corporation, 1995); G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).

¹⁶ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1946; New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 102-120.

¹⁷ Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 716-727.

as encounters with objective reality. By contrast, he believes, moral observations are best explained as the products of our upbringing and psychology. Our moral thoughts would be the same even if there were no moral facts to observe but the same is not true of observations in the sciences. Read Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, 3-10.¹⁸

Note Paper topics distributed.

Monday, April 11

REPLY TO HARMAN

Nicholas Sturgeon disputes Harman's argument. He thinks that moral facts do explain what we observe in people's behavior and that there is no significant difference between moral and scientific observations. Read Nicholas Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations," 130-39.¹⁹

Wednesday, April 13

AMORALISM AND SUBJECTIVISM

Williams contrasts two different challenges to morality. Amoralists reject morality entirely. Subjectivists accept a moral system but think that there is no reason why the system they accept is superior to any other. He contends that the lesson of the Amoralist is that morality is rooted in sympathy for others. His chapter on subjectivism is mainly concerned with distinguishing different theses from one another and setting up the project that will occupy the next two chapters of the book: determining whether subjectivism can be "defused," that is, shown not to be harmful to moral thought. Read Williams, *Morality*, 3-19.²⁰

Note Draft due Saturday.

Monday, April 18

MORAL RELATIVISM

Moral relativism is a form of moral subjectivism according to which each society has its own moral code and there is no saying that one code is superior to another. Would the truth of moral relativism change anything about how we behave? The American Anthropological Association's "Statement on Human Rights" contends that societies whose members accept moral relativism

¹⁸ Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹⁹ Nicholas L. Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations," in *Arguing about Metaethics*, ed. Andrew Fisher and Simon Kirchin (New York: Routledge, 2006), 117-44.

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

will be less prone to interfering with one another. Williams disagrees. If moral relativism means each society has its own code, that leaves everything exactly where it was. Read Williams, *Morality*, 20-25 and American Anthropological Association, "Statement on Human Rights."²¹

Wednesday, April 20

DEFUSING SUBJECTIVISM

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

Note Paper due Saturday.

Monday, April 25

THE OBJECTIVITY OF GOOD

Despite thinking that subjectivism can be defused, Williams is dissatisfied with the distinction between fact and value. Some facts are relevant to values. The fact that this device keeps time means that it is a good clock, for instance. This might be relevant to morality if there were standards for being a good person that are similar to the standards for being a good clock. Read Williams, *Morality*, 38-54.

Wednesday, April 27

NATURAL FOUNDATIONS

Williams considers a class of attempts to base morality on human nature. The idea is that by isolating the features of human beings that distinguish them from other creatures, we will uncover the standards for determining what a good human being is. Read Williams, *Morality*, 55-62.

Monday, May 2

TRANSCENDENTAL FOUNDATIONS

This is another attempt to use an understanding of what human beings are to determine what makes them good. Here, the idea is that human nature has to be understood in relation to God. Williams defends

²¹ American Anthropological Association, "Statement on Human Rights," *American Anthropologist* 49 (1947): 539-43

this approach from an objection raised by Immanuel Kant. Kant held that those who act in fear of divine punishment act selfishly rather than morally. Williams disputes the claim that morally worthy actions must be free from considerations of self-interest. He thinks that the real problem with this attempt to find a foundation for morality lies elsewhere. Read Williams *Morality*, 63-72.

Wednesday, May 4

REVIEW

We will talk about the final exam. The exam itself is scheduled for Thursday, May 12, 2:00 - 5:00 P.M.. A short writing assignment will be given for those who mean to use the course to satisfy the writing intensive overlay requirement.

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.

INSTRUCTOR

My name is Michael Green. My office is 207 Pearsons. My office hours are Thursdays 11-12; any changes will be posted on the Sakai site. My office phone number is 607-0906 and my email address is available through the Sakai site.

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 do not make too much of them.

GRADE CALCULATIONS

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

WHAT THE GRADES MEAN

The grade of A is given to work that is accurate, elegantly written, and innovative. It adds something original, creative, or imaginative to the problem under discussion. A papers are exceptional.

The grade of B is given to work that is accurate, well written, and has no significant problems. B papers are very good and there is less of a difference between A and B work than you might think. Generally speaking, B papers are less innovative than

<i>Letter Grade</i>	<i>Number Grade</i>
A	4.00
A-	3.67
B+	3.33
B	3.00
B-	2.67
C+	2.33
C	2.00
C-	1.67
D+	1.33
D	1.00
D-	0.67
F	0.00

Table 1 Point Scale

<i>Lowest Number</i>	<i>Letter Grade</i>	<i>Highest Number</i>
3.835 <	A	≤ 4.000
3.495 <	A-	≤ 3.835
3.165 <	B+	≤ 3.495
2.835 <	B	≤ 3.165
2.495 <	B-	≤ 2.835
2.165 <	C+	≤ 2.495
1.835 <	C	≤ 2.165
1.495 <	C-	≤ 1.835
1.165 <	D+	≤ 1.495
0.835 <	D	≤ 1.165
0.165 <	D-	≤ 0.835
0.000 ≤	F	≤ 0.165

Table 2 Numerical Thresholds

A papers. This may be because the paper is less ambitious or because it is not fully successful.

The grade of C is given to 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.

The grade of D is given to work that has severe problems with accuracy, reasoning, relevance, or the quality of writing. Papers with these problems are not acceptable college-level work. Note that 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.

The grade of F is given to work that has not been completed, cannot be understood, or is irrelevant.

WRITING HELP

I should be your primary resource for help with your papers. That is 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.

In addition, there are some very good options outside the class. To begin with, the Philosophy Department has arranged for experienced philosophy student to work as what it calls writing mentors. There will be an announcement about this program early in the term. In addition, the College's Writing Center offers free one-on-one consultations at any stage of the writing process. You can make appointments through the Portal (look for "Writing Center" under "Academics") or by email (writing.center@pomona.edu).

LATE PAPERS AND ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Late papers will be accepted without question. They will be penalized at the rate of 0.083 points 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.