

## Ethical Theory

*Monday, January 25*

### OVERVIEW

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

## Consequentialist Theories

*Wednesday, January 27*

### 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.<sup>1</sup>

*Monday, February 1*

### 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?"<sup>2</sup>

*Wednesday, February 3*

### 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)

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

*Monday, February 8*

#### **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.<sup>4</sup>

Note Paper topics distributed.

*Wednesday, February 10*

#### **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

Note Draft due Saturday.

*Monday, February 15*

#### **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

<sup>3</sup> 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).

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

what Williams means by “integrity” and whether the examples he gives tell against utilitarianism or not. Read Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” 93-118.<sup>5</sup>

Wednesday, February 17      **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.”<sup>6</sup>

Note Paper due Saturday.

Monday, February 22      **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.”<sup>7</sup>

## Deontological Theories

Wednesday, February 24      **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

---

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism,” in *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

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

<sup>7</sup> 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.

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."<sup>8</sup>

*Note* Paper topics distributed.

*Monday, March 1*

#### 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 3*

#### 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?"<sup>9</sup>

*Note* Drafts due Saturday.

*Monday, March 15*

#### 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: here 2 is equal to 1. Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives*.<sup>10</sup>

*Wednesday, March 17*

#### 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."<sup>11</sup>

*Note* Paper due Saturday.

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

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

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

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

Monday, March 22

**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."

Wednesday, March 24

**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."<sup>12</sup>

## Metaethics

Monday, March 29

**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 was an inherent gap between natural facts and evaluative ones, such 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 based on non-natural facts. Read Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, selections and Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 1-21.<sup>13</sup>

Wednesday, March 31

**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,

---

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

<sup>13</sup> 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).

he maintains, do not make assertions that could be true or false. Rather, they express our attitudes. Read Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*.<sup>14</sup>

Monday, April 5

#### 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 Mackie sees it, our moral language does make assertions about how things really are; it's just that they are all false. Mackie denies that this would have significant consequences for moral belief, but it is not easy to see why that would be so. Read Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*.<sup>15</sup>

Wednesday, April 7

#### 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 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.<sup>16</sup>

Monday, April 12

#### 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.<sup>17</sup>

Note Paper topics distributed.

<sup>14</sup> A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1946; New York: Dover Publications, 1952), 102-120.

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

<sup>16</sup> Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas L. Sturgeon, "Moral Explanations," in *Arguing about Metaethics*, ed. Andrew Fisher and Simon Kirchin (New York: Routledge, 2006), 117-44.

Wednesday, April 14

**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.<sup>18</sup>

Note Draft due Saturday.

Monday, April 19

**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 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*, 20-24 and American Anthropological Association, “Statement on Human Rights.”<sup>19</sup>

Wednesday, April 21

**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.

---

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

<sup>19</sup> American Anthropological Association, “Statement on Human Rights,” *American Anthropologist* 49 (1947): 539-43

*Monday, April 26*

**THE OBJECTIVITY OF GOOD**

Despite having defused subjectivism, Williams remains 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 28*

**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 3*

**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 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 5*

**REVIEW**

We will talk about the final exam. The exam itself is scheduled for Tuesday, May 11, 2:00 - 5:00 p.m. We will have to make arrangements for people in different time zones, obviously.

**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
A-	11
B+	10
B	9
B-	8
C+	7
C	6
C-	5
D+	4
D	3
D-	2
F	0

Table 1

11.5 < A	≤	12.0
10.5 < A-	≤	11.5
9.5 < B+	≤	10.5
8.5 < B	≤	9.5
7.5 < B-	≤	8.5
6.5 < C+	≤	7.5
5.5 < C	≤	6.5
4.5 < C-	≤	5.5
3.5 < D+	≤	4.5
2.5 < D	≤	3.5
1.0 < D-	≤	2.5
0.0 ≤ F	≤	1.0

Table 2

**INSTRUCTOR**

My name is Michael Green. My office hours and email address will be posted on the Sakai site.

**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. 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](mailto:writing.center@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.