

Problems of Philosophy

Tuesday, August 29

OVERVIEW

We will talk about five groups of problems. Ethics is the study of good and bad and right and wrong. Political philosophy addresses questions about the state. Epistemology is the study of knowledge. Metaphysics concerns the nature of reality. Finally, questions about the meaning of life and the afterlife are pretty much what they seem to be.

Ethics

Thursday, August 31

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

Tuesday, September 5

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 pages 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.

Thursday, September 7

THOMSON ON ABORTION

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. She thinks you have the right to detach yourself, even at the cost of the other person's life. Read Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion."³

Tuesday, September 12

CRITICISM OF THOMSON

Christopher Kaczor believes that abortion is wrong. The readings for today's class begin with a summary of his case against abortion; this amounts to variations on the argument that fetuses are persons for moral purposes. Then he challenges Thomson's contention that the right to abortion can be justified even if fetuses are persons. Read Kaczor, "Abortion as a Human Rights Violation," pages 86-87, 126-35, 150-58.⁴

Political Philosophy

Thursday, September 14

IS THERE A DUTY TO OBEY THE STATE?

The state is hierarchical; its officials have authority over those who governed by it. In today's reading, Socrates (c. 470-399 BCE) confronts the state's authority in a particularly dramatic way. He has been condemned to death for reasons that he believes are unjust and he has to decide whether to escape or accept the sentence. He takes a philosophical approach to making his decision: he considers *arguments*. We will be especially concerned with analyzing

³ Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1 (1971): 47-66.

⁴ Christopher Kaczor, "Abortion as a Human Rights Violation," in *Abortion Rights: For and Against*, by Kate Greasley and Christopher Kaczor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 86-164.

the three arguments he refers to: “the one who disobeys does wrong in three ways” (51e). Read Plato, *Crito*, paying special attention to 49d-53a.⁵

Tuesday, September 19 **SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY**

According to Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), the ‘natural condition’ of humanity is full of conflict. That is the central part of his justification of the state. In chapter 13, he identifies three causes of war: competition, diffidence (i.e. a lack of confidence), and glory. We will talk about how these three explanations work. In chapter 17, he proposes a social contract as the solution to the problem. When thinking about this, bear in mind that Hobbes has to identify a source of conflict that the state can solve. Read Hobbes, *Leviathan* chaps. 13 and 17.⁶

Thursday, September 21 **FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION**

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) argues for extensive protection of individual liberty based on utilitarian reasoning; that is, he argues that protection of individual liberty best promotes the overall good. In particular, Mill maintained that liberty of expression is needed for the pursuit of the truth. The important thing to bear in mind is that his argument is meant to defend individual liberty even when it is used poorly. Read Mill, *On Liberty*, selections from chapters 1-2.⁷

Epistemology

Tuesday, September 26 **PLATO ON KNOWLEDGE**

This dialogue is on the topic of whether virtue can be taught. It is most famous for a discussion of a problem in geometry, namely, how

⁵ Plato, *Crito*, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997). The numbers and letters are called Stephanus numbers. They refer to pages and sections of a 1578 edition of Plato’s works edited by Henri Estienne (Stephanus in Latin). Stephanus numbers serve as a universal reference as most editions of Plato have them in the margins.

⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Mark C. Rooks, British Philosophy: 1600-1900 (1651; Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corporation, 1993).

⁷ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. Mark C. Rooks, British Philosophy: 1600-1900 (1861; Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corporation, 2000).

to construct a square that is double the size of a given square. We will pay special attention to that because Plato was very impressed by mathematics as a model for knowledge in general. Read Plato, *Meno*, paying special attention to 82a-86c.⁸

Thursday, September 28 **THE PROBLEM OF INDUCTION**

I think I know things using inductive reasoning, that is, by moving from observations of the past to conclusions about what the future will be like. For instance, I think the fact that the sun has always risen in the past enables me to know that it will rise tomorrow. Hume argues that those inferences are groundless and that we have as much reason for believing that the sun will rise tomorrow as we do for believing that it will not. We will pay special attention to Hume's argument that attempts to justify these inferences based on past experience involve reasoning in a circle (see paragraphs 6-8 in part 2). What does that mean? Where is the circle? Read David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section 4.⁹

Tuesday, October 3 **MIRACLES**

Hume has two kinds of arguments that, he believes, show we can never have good enough evidence to believe that a miracle happened. The first part of the chapter is devoted to an argument that seems to show that, by their very nature, miracles are unbelievable. The second part of the chapter is inductive: all the past cases of reported miracles have turned out to be false, therefore, any future reports can be dismissed. Can Hume show that we should dismiss reported miracles out of hand, without investigation? What distinguishes the case of the sun from the one about the queen's resurrection? Read Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Section 10.

Thursday, October 5 **CRITICISM OF HUME**

Lewis points out a significant problem for Hume's naturalism. Why does Hume get to use assumptions about the uniformity of

⁸ Plato, *Meno*, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997).

⁹ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Mark C. Rooks, *The Complete Works and Correspondence of David Hume*. (1777; Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corporation, 1995).

nature and natural laws? He denied that we have any reason to believe in them! Does a supernatural source for natural order help? Read C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001): 159-71.

Tuesday, October 10

NATURAL RELIGION

There are roughly two kinds of evidence that God exists. On the one hand, miracles are evidence that God exists because only God could disrupt the order of nature. On the other hand, the natural order of things is also thought to be evidence that God exists as only God could produce an orderly universe. Hume seeks to show that we cannot move from observations of natural order to conclusions about a provident, that is, caring and just, God. Read Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sect. 11.

Metaphysics

Thursday, October 12

FREE WILL AND COMPATIBILISM

The problem of free will is generated by two seemingly incompatible beliefs. On the one hand, the course of our lives is determined by factors outside of our control, ranging from our upbringing to the laws of physics. On the other hand, we very much believe that we are free to choose what we do and our practices of holding people responsible for their behavior seem to assume that this is so. Hobart believes that freedom is compatible with determinism, meaning that our behavior can be free even if it is caused. He argues against those who believe that freedom and determinism are incompatible with one another and, in particular, with so-called libertarians who believe our behavior is free from any causes. Read Hobart, "Free Will as Involving Determinism and Inconceivable Without It."¹⁰

Thursday, October 19

FREE WILL AND INCOMPATIBILISM

Hobart is a compatibilist; he believes that freedom is compatible with determinism. Rosen is an incompatibilist; he believes the opposite. In particular, he argues that it would be unfair to hold people responsible

¹⁰ R.E. Hobart, "Free Will as Involving Determinism and Inconceivable Without It," *Mind* 34 (1934): 1-27.

for doing things that they were predestined to do. Read Rosen, “The Case for Incompatibilism.”¹¹

Tuesday, October 24

SUBTLE COMPATIBILISM

Harry Frankfurt’s project is to say what is distinctive about persons. Unlike those who maintain that persons are distinguished from other creatures by virtue of their ability to reason, Frankfurt maintains that the distinctive feature of persons is found in their ability to govern their behavior. Pay special attention to what he means by terms like “first order desire,” “second order desire,” “wanton,” and “person.” He applies these concepts to the problem of free will in the third section. In a nutshell, he is a compatibilist who does not think that everything you do because you want to do it is something that you do freely. Read Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person.”¹²

Thursday, October 26

LOCKE ON IDENTITY

One set of metaphysical questions about identity concern how things can remain the same despite undergoing changes. John Locke (1632—1704) is especially concerned with the identity of persons. He seeks to show that a person is distinct from various substances, such as physical matter or an immaterial soul. Rather, a person, according to Locke, exists over time by virtue of its memories of its past experiences. Today we are going to talk about Locke’s way of discussing identity in general; we will talk about his views about *personal* identity next time. Read Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, chap. 27, sections. 1-13.¹³

Tuesday, October 31

LOCKE ON PERSONAL IDENTITY

A person, according to Locke, is a thinking substance. But the identity of a person over time is not the same thing as the identity of a substance over time. People can switch substances and remain the same, he believes. What is essential to remaining the same person is remembering past

¹¹ Gideon Rosen, “The Case for Incompatibilism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 64 (2002): 699-706.

¹² Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person,” *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 5-20.

¹³ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Mark C. Rooks, *The Philosophical Works and Selected Correspondence of John Locke* (1690; Charlottesville, VA: InteLex Corporation, 1995).

experiences. The examples, such as the one involving the prince and the cobbler are important for understanding what he means. If you can switch material bodies, why can't you switch immaterial souls? Read Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, chap. 27, sections 11-end.

Thursday, November 2

WILLIAMS ON PERSONAL IDENTITY

Williams thinks Locke's cases went by too quickly. When you look at them more carefully, he thinks, it isn't obvious at all that people can switch bodies. In particular, if you consider what it would be like to think about being involved in one of those cases yourself, you wouldn't be so sure that Locke was right about them. At the end of his essay, Williams discusses what appears to be a unique feature of human beings. For most things, there need not be a determinate answer to questions about whether they survive some changes. Sometimes, there is no saying one way or the other. People seem to be different: I will either be there or I won't. Read Williams, "The Self and the Future."¹⁴

Tuesday, November 7

PARFIT'S BRANCH-LINE CASE

Could I survive being duplicated? On the one hand, no: two can't be one and there's only one of me. On the other hand, yes: two is more than zero. More to the point, the process of being duplicated seems to be the same as having an ordinary, ongoing life. Only doubled, of course. Read Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pages 199-217.¹⁵

Thursday, November 9

PARFIT'S COMBINED SPECTRUM

Given what I am made of, how could it be the case that questions about my identity over time must have determinate answers? This is not the way it works for the identity of physical objects: they can change in ways that leave their identity indeterminate. Something similar is true of minds: change the qualities of my mind enough, but not too much, and you will not be able to say whether it is the same mind or not. This contradicts Williams's point. Read Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pages 229-43.

¹⁴ Bernard Williams, "The Self and the Future," *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 161-80.

¹⁵ Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1987).

Death and the Meaning of Life

Tuesday, November 14

LIFE IS ABSURD AND THAT IS OK

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."¹⁶

Thursday, November 16

LIFE IS ABSURD AND THAT IS NOT OK

Rivka Weinberg agrees with Nagel that we cannot know whether our lives have objective, ultimate meaning. But where Nagel thinks this is not of much consequence, Weinberg thinks it is tremendously important and that appreciating that this is so should, in her opinion, make us very sad. Read Weinberg, "Ultimate Meaning," pages 1-17.¹⁷

Tuesday, November 21

IS DEATH BAD?

Lucretius (c. 99—55 BCE) understands that we fear death. He seeks to show that our fear is misplaced. He hopes that his arguments will make our lives better by relieving us of our anxiety about death. Read Lucretius, "On the Nature of Things," selections.¹⁸

Tuesday, November 28

IS IMMORTALITY GOOD?

Death may be bad, but Williams does not believe that immortality is the answer. Williams criticizes Lucretius for failing to consider an important distinction among desires. Some of our desires are categorical, meaning they are satisfied only if the desired aim is achieved; Lucretius treats our desires like appetites, which can be satisfied simply by going away. So death would involve a loss, contrary to what Lucretius argues. However, Williams maintains, immortals would also face a problem: they could not sustain their categorical desires and

¹⁶ Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd," *The Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 716-727.

¹⁷ Rivka Weinberg, "Ultimate Meaning: We Don't Have It, We Can't Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad," *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, 2021, 1-22.

¹⁸ Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001).

so would run out of reasons to live. Read Williams, "The Makropoulos Affair: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality".¹⁹

Thursday, November 30 **DO WE CARE ABOUT THE AFTERLIFE?**

What if you knew that the human species was going to come to an end within a generation? Scheffler uses this question to show how much we care about people other than ourselves. For example, he observes that we all know that we are each going to die; that makes us sad, but it does not fill most of us with crushing depression. By contrast, the extinction of the species would, he thinks, leave us all in despair. Read Scheffler, "The Afterlife," selections.²⁰

Tuesday, December 5 **WRAPPING UP**

We will use the last day of class to review for the exam and take a class picture.

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

Philosophy attempts to gain insight into important questions about human life through posing questions and attempting to answer them with arguments. We will cover some of these problems from these groups: ethics, political philosophy, epistemology, or the study of knowledge, metaphysics, or study of the nature of reality, and the meaning of life in the face of death.

¹⁹ Bernard Williams, "The Makropoulos Case," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 82-100, .

²⁰ Samuel Scheffler, "The Afterlife," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, ed. Mark Matheson, vol. 32 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2013), 131-81.

Students who complete the course will be familiar with some of the central ideas in philosophy. They will also have extensive experience at presenting their ideas in class discussions and writing analytical essays.

The materials make heavy demands on their readers' analytical and interpretive skills. Our discussions and writing assignments will focus on the arguments in these works. That is where your analytical skills will come into play. Since we are reading works from different periods in history, we will also have to work hard at interpreting material that is written in ways that are unfamiliar and that reflects the concerns of different kinds of societies.

ASSIGNMENTS

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

The final exam will be held on Monday, December 11 from 2-5 PM. Please do not make travel plans that conflict with the exam time; you will not be allowed to change the time.

INSTRUCTOR

My name is Michael Green. My office is 207 Pearsons. My office hours 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. In a nutshell, the average has to be greater than halfway between two grades in order to get the higher grade.

| <i>Letter Grade</i> | <i>Number Grade</i> | <i>Lowest Number</i> | <i>Letter Grade</i> | <i>Highest Number</i> |
|---------------------|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|
| A | 4.00 | 3.835 | A | 4.000 |
| A- | 3.67 | 3.500 | A- | 3.835 |
| B+ | 3.33 | 3.165 | B+ | 3.500 |
| B | 3.00 | 2.835 | B | 3.165 |
| B- | 2.67 | 2.500 | B- | 2.835 |
| C+ | 2.33 | 2.165 | C+ | 2.500 |
| C | 2.00 | 1.835 | C | 2.165 |
| C- | 1.67 | 1.500 | C- | 1.835 |
| D+ | 1.33 | 1.165 | D+ | 1.500 |
| D | 1.00 | 0.835 | D | 1.165 |
| D- | 0.67 | 0.335 | D- | 0.835 |
| F | 0.00 | 0.000 | F | 0.335 |

Table 1 Point Scale

Table 2 Numerical Thresholds

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 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.

