Philosophical Ethics (PHIL 3000)

Spring 2018  Lecturer: Dr Piers Benn

Overview

This course is largely an introduction to some central historical and contemporary ethical theories. These include Aristotle’s ethics, natural law ethics, deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics and feminist ethics. The differences between these approaches will be illustrated from time to time by reference to practical moral issues. For example, there are interesting questions about the scope of beneficence (should we give all our spare time and money to the very needy? Should our moral concerns extend to animals and human foetuses?), human rights and especially the alleged right to free speech, questions about the ethics of harming others, and the relevance of feminist ethics to some of these questions. Of course, most of us do not consciously apply theories to our moral deliberations, but act intuitively and not always consistently. But underlying the course is the suggestion that moral deliberation is a rational process, and that there are better and worse ways to argue about morality.

Additionally, the course begins by asking some basic questions in moral theory – in particular, about moral relativism, egoism and altruism, and the relation between ethics and religious belief.

Learning objectives

- To gain knowledge and understanding of major historical ethical theories, and to make comparisons between them.
- To apply these theories to some practical issues.
- To gain a critical understanding of some general issues in moral theory and normative ethics, in particular relativism, egoism and the purported relation between moral norms and divine commands.
- To gain skill and confidence in critical thinking, the assessment of arguments for soundness, dealing with counter-arguments to one’s own positions and debating issues in class.
- To appreciate the relevance of reason and argument to the formation of moral views.
- To find the material interesting, and not worth pursuing only because you are being assessed on it!

Attendance

An attendance register will be taken at every class. This is to comply with the UK Border Agency requirements, and with Fordham’s policy. You must attend every class, unless you are ill or have been granted compassionate leave. Absence should be notified to me in advance, unless in exceptional circumstances. Unexplained absences will be notified to the Faculty Office and a doctor’s note may be required. No more than two excused absences are allowed.
Punctuality for classes – both for the first sessions and the sessions after the break – is also expected. Lateness, unless genuinely unavoidable, is disrespectful – and all late arrivals are disruptive to the concentration of the lecturer and other students.

Participation in class is strongly encouraged and will form 10% of the assessment. Part of the purpose of this course is to help you to express your views and arguments confidently, coherently and politely – while allowing others a chance to do the same. If you feel you are not being given an adequate chance to contribute, please let me know. However, I recognise that many good students are not naturally vocal.

ASSESSMENT

You will be required to submit TWO pieces of coursework. Questions will be given out during the course, together with submission requirements. Additionally, 10% of the assessment will be based on class participation.

First assessed coursework: an essay of approximately 1500 words. **Deadline: Tuesday 27th February. Weighting: 30% of overall grade.**

Second assessed coursework: an essay of approximately 2000 words. **Deadline: TBA. Weighting: 60% of overall grade.**

All submitted work will be assessed according to the following criteria:

1. **Knowledge and understanding**
   You should display knowledge of the ethical issues involved and of the relevant arguments. The content should always be relevant to the matter under discussion.

2. **Quality of argument**
   It is important not only to show knowledge of what writers claim, but also to display an ability to argue for your own conclusion(s), anticipating and dealing with counter-arguments. This requires flexibility of thought and ability to weigh up claims in the light of opposing claims.

3. **Evidence of reading**
   You should show knowledge and understanding of appropriate literature. You should integrate your sources into your work rather than merely regurgitate their content, and show understanding of their relevance to the points you are advancing.

4. **Independence of thought**
   You should show that you have developed your own lines of thinking and show flexibility in dealing with the arguments and facts. You are not required to be genuinely original - i.e. produce arguments that no one has ever thought of before (!) - but you should do more than paraphrase existing literature, however faithfully.

5. **Clarity and structure**
   You should write clearly, in good English, with well-chosen words and correct grammar, syntax and punctuation. Your argument should be clearly structured and easily
discernible. It is helpful to indicate where the argument is going, at suitable points in the essay.

**Late submission and extensions**

Work that is submitted late, without an agreed extension (or beyond an agreed extension) will be penalised as follows: one grade for work submitted up to five working days late, two grades for work submitted between six and up to ten working days late. (For example, up to five working days late, an A- will become a B+, a B+ will become a B. Work that is more than ten working days late will not receive a grade. A working day is any day when the Fordham office is open.

Extensions can be granted if there are valid grounds. These are normally limited to serious illness, or the death or serious illness of a close family member. If you think you will need an extension, you should contact me as soon as possible before the deadline.

**For the class participation element of the assessment** (10%) I am not looking for frequent interventions – ‘more’ is not necessarily ‘better’. I am rather looking for considered interventions that are relevant to the point being discussed and that take account of how the discussion has already been proceeding. I am not looking for the ‘right’ views or passionate views – rather, for well-articulated, coherent and thoughtful contributions.

Some of you will have a chance to make presentations, but time will not allow all to do so. The quality of presentations (especially in respect of knowledge/understanding, relevance and ability to engage in discussion) will count towards the class participation grade.

**PLAGIARISM**

This means passing off someone else’s work as your own, or reproducing previous work of your own without due acknowledgement.

All plagiarism must be avoided. The work of others includes, among other things, the work of academic authors, material from the internet, material distributed in class and the work of fellow students.

Clearly, I do not expect your work to be literally original – expressing ideas that no one has ever had before. You will need to refer to and draw on appropriate literature. What is important is that your work should be independent. The best safeguard against plagiarism is to acknowledge quotations and sources and make it clear when you are referring to, or expounding, someone else’s work.

The following is an extract from Fordham’s policy:

**The Undergraduate Policy on Academic Integrity**

A University, by its nature, strives to foster and recognize originality of thought, which can be recognized only when people produce work that is theirs alone and properly acknowledge information and ideas that are obtained from the work of others. It is
therefore important that students must maintain the highest standards with regard to honesty, effort, and performance.

As a Jesuit, Catholic University, Fordham is committed to ensuring that all members of the academic community strive not only for excellence in scholarship but also for integrity of character. In the pursuit of knowledge and personal development, it is imperative that students present their own ideas and insights for evaluation, critique and eventual reformulation. As part of this process, each student must acknowledge the intellectual contribution of others.

For inclusive information on the University's policy on cheating, plagiarism, falsification and unapproved collaboration among other things, please visit our website. [http://www.fordham.edu/academics/handbooks_publication/undergraduate_facult/the_undergraduate_pol__80570.asp](http://www.fordham.edu/academics/handbooks_publication/undergraduate_facult/the_undergraduate_pol__80570.asp).

**Office hours**
I shall be available for consultation for one hour after class, except on days when the class does not meet. I can also meet you individually by prior arrangement.

**READING MATERIAL**

Suggested reading for each topic is given below. On occasion, I shall point out a book or article as essential reading. Some of the material is introductory and should be helpful. However, since there is a vast literature on every topic, you can read only a small proportion of it. You should get into the habit of finding things for yourselves and deciding whether they are useful.

**SOME SCHOLARLY JOURNALS IN ETHICS**

Ethics
Philosophy & Public Affairs
Journal of Applied Philosophy
Philosophical Review
Journal of Philosophy
Journal of Political Philosophy
Nous
Philosophy & Phenomenological Research
Utilitas
Mind
Philosophical Studies
Not all these journals are devoted exclusively to ethics, but they all contain important articles in this field.

When researching for your essays, you may find helpful the following search engines (among others), available directly and/or through the Digital Resources of the Senate House Libraries:

- JSTOR
- Periodicals Index Online
- Ingenta
- Philosopher's Index
- Academic Search Complete
- ATLA

In addition, the following are often very helpful:
- Google Scholar; Google Books; PhilPapers

Sometimes you will be able to find online access to the articles, through these search engines. Do not rely exclusively on internet access, however. Recent articles are often only accessible in the library.

**LIBRARY RESOURCES**

For this course, it will be helpful to use the Heythrop philosophy library. Philosophy books are in the main library and journals are housed in the Copleston Wing. See especially BJ – Ethics. Enthusiasts may also wish to use the London University Senate House Library (Malet Street WC1), though you will need to check registration procedures and fees. Do not forget that Fordham too has online library resources.

**COURSE BIBLIOGRAPHY**

**Some useful background books for the course include:** (*indicates a useful introductory textbook)


*James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (sixth edition ed. by Stuart Rachels). McGraw-Hill 2010. **This is particularly useful, and it is a good idea to buy it.**


Peter Singer, ed. *Ethics* (Oxford Readers series), OUP 1994. (A comprehensive collection of classic readings with brief introductions). **It is a good idea to buy this.**


The *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessible online through the Heythrop College Library and Learning Resources, are also useful for learning how to the use key technical terms used in the course. (The Stanford Encyclopedia also has the advantage of being open access and directly accessible via the internet).
CLASS TIMETABLE

Week 1  16th January 2018

General introduction to the course.
Moral relativism: what is it, and should we accept it?


Week 2  23rd January

Is altruism possible? If so, to what extent (if any) should we be altruistic?

James Rachels (ed. Stuart Rachels) *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. Ch. 5 and 6.
Janet Radcliffe Richards, *Human Nature after Darwin*, Routledge 2000, Ch. 7 (‘Selfish Genes and Moral Animals’). This is quite detailed and closely argued, but rewards study.
Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, entries on *Altruism* and *Egoism* (see also the bibliographies supplied).

Week 3  30th January

What, if anything, is the connection between morality and religion?

James Rachels (ed. Stuart Rachels) *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. Ch. 4.
Peter Singer, A Companion to Ethics, Part II, Ch. 7, 8, 9.
Routledge and Stanford online encyclopaedias of philosophy, entries on divine command theories of ethics, and religion and morality.
William Lane Craig v Stephen Law (online debate on the existence of God), see from 14 mins. 40 secs. (Craig) and 1 hour 7 mins. (Law). See also the informal discussion from about 1 hour 29 mins. (Google Stephen Law’s blogspot, navigate to ‘Craig debate’).

Week 4 6th February

**Aristotle and well-being (eudaimonia)**


Week 5 13th February

**Natural law ethics**

John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights*, OUP 1980 (see sections relevant to natural law ethics rather than jurisprudence).
Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online), entry on natural law ethics.
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (online) *ibid*.

Week 6 20th February

**Kant’s deontological ethics**

Piers Benn, *Ethics*, Ch. 4.

James Rachels (ed. Stuart Rachels) *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, Ch. 9 and 10.


**Week 7 27th February**

**Mill’s utilitarianism: pleasure, happiness and the Principle of Utility**


Piers Benn, *Ethics*, Ch. 3 (‘Consequentialism’).


James Rachels (ed. Stuart Rachels) *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, Ch. 7 and 8.


Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, entries on Mill, utilitarianism and consequentialism.

**Week 8 6th March**

Mid-term break

**Week 9 13th March**

**Virtue Ethics**


Piers Benn, *Ethics*, Ch. 7.


James Rachels (ed. Stuart Rachels) *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, relevant chapter.
Routledge and Stanford encyclopaedias (online), relevant entries and bibliographies.

**Week 10 20th March**

Trip to House of Commons to watch debates

**Week 11 27th March**

**How much good am I obliged to do?**

The Effective Altruism website (google it).
Richard Arneson, What Do We Owe to Distant Needy Strangers?
https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/6958/74b0c6f958aabb67357fbb5290fe309461183.pdf

On consequentialism more generally:

Piers Benn, *Ethics*, Ch 3 (‘Consequentialism’).
James Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, Ch. 6 and 7.
R. M. Hare, Moral Thinking, OUP 1981.

**Week 12 3rd April**

**Abortion and animal ethics**


Roger Scruton, Animal Rights and Wrongs, Demos 1996.

Week 13 10th April

Are there ‘human rights’? If so, what are they and how do we know we have them?

Simon Blackburn, Being Good, A short introduction to ethics, CUP 2001 (relevant sections). See the appendix containing the UN Declaration of Human Rights.
Finnis, John, Natural Law and Natural Rights (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)
Peter Singer (ed.) Ethics, Part II, B (Deciding What is Right). Oxford University Press 1994 (or subsequent editions).

Week 14 17th April

Is there a right to free speech and expression?

John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, 1859. Many editions available. (NB – this is the classic text).
Kate Manne and Jason Stanley, ‘When Free Speech Becomes a Political Weapon’, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 November 2015 (can be found directly online).

Week 15 24th April

**Feminist approaches to ethics**

Annette Baier, ‘What do Women Want in a Moral Theory?’, in James Sterba (ed.) *Ethics: the Big Questions* (Blackwell 1998), Part Four, Ch. 32 (pp. 325-31). See also other articles in that section.
John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*
Janet Radcliffe Richards, *The Sceptical Feminist*

Recent books about feminism for a general readership:
Joanna Williams, *Women vs Feminism: Why We All Need Liberating from the Gender Wars.* (Emerald Publishing 2017).

Week 16 1st May

Evaluation and overview of course.

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