

PHIL 260: Ethics
Winter 2006; David O. Brink
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Office hours: T 10-11am and W 11am-noon and by appt.

PERSONS & VALUES

This seminar will focus on the nature of persons and the role of the person in ethical theory. We will discuss different philosophical theories about the nature of persons and personal identity through time and examine their implications, if any, for our views about human happiness or welfare, practical reason, and moral theory.

Personhood seems to be a normative category; persons are beings who are bearers of rights and responsibilities. If so, what must be distinctive of persons? How do they differ from human beings and other animals? Persons seem to persist through some physical and psychological changes, but not others. What are the conditions of personal identity through time, and how are they related to a person's physical and psychological characteristics? What unites different stages of a single life, and what distinguishes stages in different lives? Some views about personal identity are **reductionist**, claiming that a person's persistence is a matter of familiar physical and/or psychological facts; others deny these reductionist claims. How, if at all, do our views about the nature of persons affect our views about personal identity? We will look at the classical debate between reductionists, such as John Locke (1632-1704), and non-reductionists, such as Joseph Butler (1692-1752) and Thomas Reid (1710-1796), and then turn to contemporary discussions, especially the imaginative and resourceful defense of psychological reductionism by Derek Parfit.

Parfit argues that psychological reductionism makes best sense of our responses to a diverse range of thought experiments -- involving brain transplants, physical and psychological scanning and modification, physical and psychological fission (and fusion), and teletransportation. He also believes that psychological reductionism has some surprising consequences. According to psychological reductionism, my survival can be indeterminate. For instance, I might know all the facts about the future, including the fact that someone will suffer tomorrow, yet, according to reductionism, I might still not know whether it will be me that suffers. Psychological reductionism also seems to imply that the difference between myself and others is a difference of degree, not kind. Is this plausible, or is the separateness of persons some deep fact? If the intrapersonal/interpersonal distinction is not a fundamental one, psychological reductionism may force us to change some common assumptions. Perhaps my relationship to my distant future self is more like my relationship to another person. If so, this may lead us to reconsider the rationality of prudence. Psychological reductionism may also lead us to see some interpersonal associations -- for instance, those involving love and friendship -- as held together by the same sort of glue that holds together a single life. How might this conclusion affect our views of self-love and friendship? If there can be interpersonal, as well as intrapersonal psychological continuity, should this affect the way that we apportion responsibility for good and bad deeds? Perhaps parents should be held responsible, at least in part, for the crimes their children commit. What about distributive justice? It is sometimes thought that the importance of distributional norms -- such as a concern for equality -- depends on the separateness of persons. Both John Rawls (1921-2002) and Robert Nozick (1938-2002) rest their influential criticisms of utilitarianism (the claim that actions and institutions should aim to maximize human happiness) on the separateness of persons. How might our views about distributive justice change if we reject the separateness of persons? The

metaphysical and normative implications of psychological reductionism are interesting and potentially revisionary. How revisionary a view is it, and is it ultimately plausible?

Our views about personhood and personal identity may also affect our views about the constituents of a good life. If so, in what ways? We will look at Aristotle's ethical theory; Aristotle treats claims about the nature of humans or persons as an important constraint on the good (the function argument), and his discussion of friendship arguably models interpersonal relations and concern on intrapersonal relations and concern. If time permits, we may also look at Samuel Scheffler's claims that the separateness of persons constrains the demands that a moral theory can make. He thinks that the need to accommodate the separateness of persons militates against extremely demanding moral theories, such as utilitarianism, and favors moral theories that are more moderate in their demands.

Our discussion will draw on contemporary writers (e.g. Williams, Shoemaker, Wiggins, Parfit, Lewis, Nagel, Nozick, Rawls, Scheffler, and Whiting) as well as figures in the history of philosophy (e.g. Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Hume, Butler, Reid, and Green).

FORMAT

I'll be presenting material in a way that aims to impose useful analytical structure on the readings and issues. Hopefully, this structure will facilitate good discussions. My views are unsettled and tentative on many topics. I look forward to learning a lot from seminar members.

REQUIREMENTS

Students registered for the seminar are required to write one short paper, approximately 6-8 pages, and one longer paper in two drafts, with the revision being approximately 14-16 pages. The first paper is due Thursday, February 9; the first draft of the second paper is due Monday, March 6, and it will be returned with comments Monday, March 13; the revision will be due Monday, March 20. The first paper will be worth 35% of the overall grade; the second paper will be worth 50% of the overall grade; and seminar participation will be worth 15% of the overall grade.

BOOKS

The following books have been ordered for the course and should be available at the University Bookstore.

Required:

Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trs. Irwin (Hackett)
Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford)
John Perry, ed. Personal Identity (California)
Samuel Scheffler, Human Morality (Oxford)

Recommended:

Jonathan Dancy, ed. Reading Parfit (Blackwell)

Required and recommended readings can be found on the Syllabus.

WEBSITE

There is a course website (<http://philosophy.ucsd.edu/~brink/courses/260-05>), which can also be accessed from my homepage and the departmental homepage. Please consult it on a regular basis for various course materials, including handouts, and periodic updates to these materials.