

## PHIL 260: Ethics

Spring 2007; David O. Brink

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Course Website: <http://philosophyfaculty.ucsd.edu/faculty/dbrink/courses/260-07>

This seminar will look at questions about the **normativity of ethics**. Ethics appears to be a normative discipline. It doesn't just describe; it (also) prescribes. It tells us how we should or ought to behave or feel. In this sense it is practical. But it is, or at least appears to be, practical in another sense as well. Ethical claims seem to exert a special pull on most of us. It would be odd if we accepted a conception of morality about which we were systematically indifferent. That might not look like a plausible moral code. Or we might think that morality ought to move us, even if or when it does not. This would be to ascribe some kind of practical authority to morality. In examining the normativity of ethics, we will look at alternative conceptions of its **motivational pull** and its **normative authority** and what assumptions they make about or what implications they have for issues about the status of moral judgments, the nature of human motivation, the nature of practical reason, and the scope and content of morality.

### Moral Motivation

We might begin by thinking about issues involving moral motivation. Some familiar claims about moral motivation generate a puzzle. **Cognitivists** interpret moral judgments as expressing cognitive attitudes, such as belief, rather than noncognitive attitudes, such a desire. **Internalists** believe that moral judgments necessarily engage the will and motivate. But it is also a common view that motivation involves **pro-attitudes**, such as desires, and that no belief entails any particular desire. These assumptions are in tension.

1. Moral judgments express beliefs.
2. Moral judgments entail motivation.
3. Motivation involves a desire or pro-attitude.
4. There is no necessary connection between any belief and any desire or pro-attitude.

Different views in metaethics and moral psychology can be understood as responses, explicit or tacit, to the tension created by this quartet of claims, responses that avoid the tension by denying at least one of the constituent assumptions on the strength of others. **Noncognitivists** (e.g. Ayer, Stevenson, Blackburn, and Gibbard) reject (1), claiming that moral judgments express desires or other pro-attitudes, rather than beliefs. **Externalists** (e.g. Foot and Brink) reject (2), claiming that motivation is not internal to moral judgment, as such. **Rationalists about moral motivation** reject (3) or (4), claiming either that normative beliefs can motivate without the benefit of desires (e.g. McDowell) or that normative beliefs necessitate the desires that are necessary for moral motivation. (e.g. Nagel).

If moral motivation can be and is consequential on beliefs about the normative authority of moral requirements, then the issue about normative authority is prior to the issue about motivational pull.

## The Authority of Morality

Another way to think of the normativity of ethics is, not in terms of whether morality does motivate, but in terms of whether it should. One way to understand this aspect of normativity is in terms of the authority of morality or the relations between moral demands and practical reason. But the authority of morality raises its own puzzles. It is common to think of morality as both objective and impartial, in particular, as containing various other-regarding duties of cooperation, forbearance, and aid that apply to agents independently of their own aims and interests. Most of us also regard moral obligations as authoritative practical considerations. But heeding these obligations appears sometimes to constrain the agent's pursuit of his own interest or aims. If we associate rationality with the agent's own point of view, we may wonder whether moral conduct is always rationally justifiable. We can capture this tension in terms of a puzzle about the authority of morality.

1. Moral requirements include impartial other-regarding obligations that do not apply to agents in virtue of their aims or interests.
2. Moral requirements necessarily provide agents with reasons for action.
3. Rational action is action that advances the agent's aims or interests.
4. Fulfilling other-regarding obligations need not advance the agent's aims or interests.

(1) expresses a commitment to morality's **objectivity and impartiality**; (2) is a **rationalist** thesis about the authority of morality; (3) reflects common assumptions about practical reason, viz. that it is **instrumental** or **prudential**; and (4) reflects a common view about the **independence** of different people's aims and interests.

This allows us to see some familiar positions as responses, express or tacit, to this underlying tension that reject some assumptions constitutive of the puzzle on the strength of others. For instance, some **relativists and minimalists** (e.g. Callicles, Harman, and Gauthier) reject (1), claiming that moral requirements must be relativized to and further the agent's aims and interests. **Anti-rationalists** (e.g. Foot) reject (2), claiming that immoral conduct need not be irrational. Those who see practical **reason as impartial** (e.g. Kant, Nagel, and Korsgaard) reject (3), claiming that an agent has non-derivative reason to benefit others. Finally, some metaphysical egoists (e.g. Plato, Aristotle, Bradley, Green, and Brink) reject (4), claiming that properly understood, people's interests are interdependent such that acting on other-regarding moral requirements is a counterfactually reliable way of promoting the agent's own good.

This framework for thinking about the normativity of ethics is one part (one-third) of a book manuscript I'm trying to begin work on. So I hope to present some of my own material during the seminar, though I will try to present material in a way that aims to impose useful analytical structure on the readings and issues. For this reason, I don't think that we will do student presentations in this seminar. But I do hope 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. Also, I am pretty open to students working on figures or topics that intersect those I address in the seminar but that we do not ourselves focus on together in the seminar (e.g. issues about virtue and happiness in Greek ethics, Hobbes' contractual account of justice, Hume's reply to the sensible knave, Gauthier's contractual theory of morality, Gibbard's noncognitivist account of traditional marks of ethical objectivity, or Smith's preferred solution to his moral problem).

Though I will be constructing my own philosophical narrative about the normativity of ethics, the issues are sufficiently central and my own approach will aim to be sufficiently self-contained that I hope this course could serve as a useful introduction to some selected topics in ethical theory that wouldn't presuppose too much by way of background.

## 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 at least 15 pages. The first paper will be due sometime around May 2; the first draft of the second paper will be due sometime around May 25, and it will be returned with comments around June 4; the revision will be due during exam week, probably on June 11. (These dates are somewhat tentative and subject to minor revision.) 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 (I list them in the order in which they will be relevant).

- Required:
  - Michael Smith, The Moral Problem (Blackwell, 1994)
  - Immanuel Kant, Practical Philosophy, ed. M. Gregor (Cambridge)
  - Thomas Nagel, The Possibility of Altruism (Princeton, 1970)
  - Christine Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity (Cambridge, 1996)
- Recommended:
  - Allan Gibbard, Thinking How to Live (Harvard, 2003)
  - David Gauthier, Morals by Agreement (Oxford, 1986)
  - Derek Parfit, Reasons and Persons (Oxford, 1984)

Readings from the required texts will be supplemented with materials on reserve (electronically, wherever possible). Required and recommended readings can be found on the Syllabus.