

PHIL 260; Spring 2007
The Normativity of Ethics
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Paper #2

Here are some more paper topics. I'm assuming that many of you will be considering them for your second, longer paper. (But they could also be considered for the shorter paper. Some might be better suited for a short paper and some might be better suited for a long paper, but most could be adapted (narrowed or expanded) to work for either purpose.) The longer paper is to be written in two drafts, with the revision being at least 15 pages long. Drafts are due by Friday May 25 and will be returned with feedback by Monday, June 4; revised papers are due Monday, June 11. These are only sample paper topics. I'm happy to have you choose your own topic, but I require that if you do so that you discuss and approve your topic with me in advance. I've identified initial readings for each topic. If you have any questions about what additional readings would be appropriate for a given paper topic, do not hesitate to ask me. Whether writing on a topic of your own choosing or on one of these, feel free to come talk with me about your ideas for the paper.

1. Are external reasons impossible? Explain and assess Bernard Williams's defense of internal reasons and its bearing on debates about the authority of morality. (Reading: Williams "Internal and External Reasons"; "A Critique of Utilitarianism"; and "Persons, Character, and Morality")
2. In "The Authority of Desire" Dennis Stampe defends the per se authority of desire by appeal to an analogy between the role of perception in theoretical reasoning and the role of desire in practical reasoning. Explain and assess this defense of the authority of desire and its bearing on debates about the authority of morality. (Reading: Stampe, "The Authority of Desire"; Brink, "The Significance of Desire")
3. In "Moral Relativism Defended" Gilbert Harman appeals to rationalist assumptions about morality and instrumentalist assumptions about practical reason to defend a form of moral relativism. How plausible is this view, and is it the best way of understanding the relationship between morality and practical reason? (Reading: Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended" and Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives")
4. If we start with prudential or instrumental assumptions about practical reason, how far can we go in justifying other-regarding moral demands? Here it might be best to focus on a single author and text, such as Plato's Gorgias or Republic, Hobbes's Leviathan, or Gauthier's Morals by Agreement.
5. Explain and assess the different resources of instrumental and prudential justifications of moral conduct and concern. (Reading: Parfit, Reasons and Persons, §§45-50 ...)
6. In "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives" Philippa Foot uses an analogy between morality and etiquette to challenge Kantian rationalism and to suggest that morality could be a system of hypothetical imperatives. Is her attack on Kantian rationalism plausible? Is her form of anti-rationalism attractive? Must the anti-rationalist treat morality and etiquette as on a par? (Reading: Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives" and Brink, "Kantian Rationalism: Inescapability, Authority, and Supremacy")
7. In Natural Goodness Philippa Foot repudiates her earlier anti-rationalism and grounds the authority of morality in "Aristotelian categoricals". Explain and assess this new form of rationalism. (Reading: Foot, Natural Goodness)

8. In The Possibility of Altruism Thomas Nagel argues that the failure to recognize the demands of altruism involves a form of solipsism akin to that involved in the failure to recognize the demands of prudence. How does this defense of altruism work? Is altruism rationally inescapable in the way prudence is? (Reading: Nagel, The Possibility of Altruism)

9. In The Sources of Normativity Christine Korsgaard describes a kind of dialectical progression through various flawed conceptions of the sources of normativity that culminates in a Kantian conception of rational nature as a source of normativity that recognizes an element of truth in each of the earlier conceptions. Korsgaard's own Kantian conception attaches rational significance to the agent's own "practical identity" and to other-regarding demands. Can the Kantian conception recognize the rational significance of these items, and can it treat rational nature as the condition of other values? (Reading: Korsgaard, The Sources of Normativity, chs. 1-4)

10. Consider the challenge posed to justice posed by Plato's Lydian shepherd (Republic), Hobbes's Foole (Leviathan), or Hume's Sensible Knave (Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals). Reconstruct and assess both the challenge and the response.

11. To what extent do traditional doubts about the authority of other-regarding moral demands depend upon a sharp contrast between self and others? How might accepting reductionist views about personal identity affect our views about how to answer these doubts? (Reading: Parfit, Reasons and Persons, part III and Brink, "Self-Love and Altruism")

12. How, if at all, can Aristotle show that familiar other-regarding traits, such as justice, are genuine virtues that contribute to the agent's own eudaimonia? How, if at all, is his discussion of friendship relevant to answering this question? (Reading: Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, esp. I-V and VIII-IX)