

Introductory Handout Philosophy 160 Ethical Theory
Richard Arneson, instructor. Spring quarter 2014

This class meets Tuesdays and Thursdays 5:00-6:20 p.m. in HSS 1128A.

The final exam for this class will be held on Thursday, June 12, from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. If you enroll in this class, you must be free to take a regular final exam for this course at this scheduled date and time.

Some assigned readings, along with this syllabus, class notes and recommended readings, will be posted at a course web page accessible via TED. Eventually the midterm exam, the writing assignment, and advance information on the final exam will also be posted. Students should check this course web page regularly for updates.

Arneson's office hours: Wednesdays 2-3 and Fridays 2-3 in 8057 HSS Bldg.

This is a course in normative ethical theory. People make moral claims on each other, and argue about the legitimacy of such claims. They disagree about what we ought to do, and about what is really good or choiceworthy in human life. We have these disagreements in ordinary life, not just in academic journals or philosophy classrooms. Normative ethical theories try to answer the questions, what makes right acts right and good things good. We look at important rival views on these questions.

Moral codes concerning the right and the good differ from society to society and change over time within any single society. Is there some uniquely valid fundamental standard for appraising the variation or not? We study two contrasting proposals for identifying fundamental standards. One holds we should assess laws, social practices, actions and policies by their consequences. This proposal identifies rationality with maximizing the fulfillment of goals and moral rationality with maximizing the fulfillment of an impartial goal, human well-being fairly distributed. The other proposal identifies morality with orienting one's will toward respecting the dignity of persons as rational agents, which involves respecting their moral rights. The first proposal is perhaps better understood, the second is a work in progress, and most course authors are trying to develop it or figure out what it might amount to. One might opt for one or another of these proposals, try to split the difference between them, or reject the whole lot. We examine conflicting views on these issues.

Along with looking at different theories of the right and the good, we are also investigating what's right to do (what we owe to one another) and what's good (what really has value). This is an ethical inquiry into how we should live—a conversation with a long history that is ongoing and unsettled.

Another normative issue concerns assessment of people. We assess people in all sorts of ways—as handsome or not, charming or not, intelligent or not, athletically talented or not, and so on. One particular type of moral assessment of people concerns their moral blameworthiness or moral praiseworthiness. Given that someone did what was wrong, was she blameworthy for doing it? Blameworthy to what extent? There's a puzzle here, because we seem drawn to the thought that people shouldn't be held morally blameworthy or praiseworthy for what lies beyond their power to control, yet we routinely do just that—hold people variously blameworthy or praiseworthy depending on the bad or good outcomes their outcomes produced, even though the outcomes were beyond their power to control. We examine conflicting views about how to resolve this puzzle. We examine this issue in week 9.

Another normative issue concerns moral status. Many of us think that animals are morally considerable—their interests count for something—but they don't have the full-fledged moral status of human persons. Let's say a being that is a full-fledged member of the moral community, with full moral rights, is a *person*. What features must a being have, to qualify as a person? If these features vary by degree, but all persons share a fundamentally equal moral status, how is this to be explained? If we say your possession of rational agency capacity makes you a person with full rights, what do we say about human beings who lack rational agency capacity—human fetuses, young children, severely cognitively impaired individuals, severely mentally ill individuals, comatose individuals, and so on? Or should we say that all human beings share a fundamental equal moral status, and stop fretting about criteria of personhood? We examine conflicting answers to these puzzling questions. We take a look at this nest of puzzles in week 10.

At the root of ethical theory, people are trying to reflect on how to live. In the course we try to focus on issues and puzzles that are genuinely controversial and strike us as genuinely significant in ordinary life, outside moral philosophy classrooms. The goals of the class are to improve our skills at reading and criticizing challenging readings and to reflect on our own moral views in the light of the philosophical theories we survey.

Notice, there are questions that might legitimately fall under the heading of “ethical theory” that we for the most part set aside in this class. Besides questions in normative ethics, there are second-order questions concerning what kind of claims we are making, when we make ethical claims. Are ethical claims assertions that can be true or false, or expressions of our attitudes and emotions, or what? These are questions of metaethics. There are also third-order questions about what sorts of claims we are making, when we advance and debate metaethical claims. These are questions of metametaethics.---These are all perfectly good questions, but we don’t focus on them in this course. In the first week of the course, we consider John Mackie’s view that values are subjective not objective. Here we touch on metaethical issues.”

At the root of ethical theory, people are trying to reflect on how to live. In the course we try to focus on issues and puzzles that are genuinely controversial. Where (if anywhere) the truth lies is not clear.

COURSE GOALS: The goals of the class are to improve our skills at reading and criticizing challenging readings and to reflect on our own moral views in the light of the philosophical theories we survey. A secondary aim is to sharpen our analytical writing skills.

COURSE TEXTS: Most of the required readings for this course will be essays that will be made available at the TED course page. There are also two required books, available at the University Bookstore: Stephen Darwall, ed., *Deontology*, and Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World*.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS: (1) regular participation in class discussion, (2) two short papers, each about three pages in length (double-spaced, normal 11 or 12 point font), on topics to be assigned in class, (3) a longer writing assignment, six to eight pages in length, topics to be assigned in class, and (4) a regular comprehensive final examination. On your papers, writing assignment, and final exam you will be graded according to the clarity of your prose, the cogency of your arguments, and the soundness of the understanding of course materials that you exhibit. The final examination will comprehend all course materials including required readings, lectures, and handouts distributed in class. (This means that merely recommended readings will NOT be covered on exams.)

To encourage keeping up with the reading class by class and week by week, there will be a class participation component of your grade. At each class meeting, there will be class discussion for a few minutes, always on questions posed in advance of class (and relating to the readings assigned for that class). This class discussion usually will take place at the start of class, before the instructor’s lecture starts, but sometimes will occur at the mid-way point. On any class day, you are always encouraged to interject questions and comment. I will take notes after every class on the class discussion, and the quality and frequency of your contributions to discussion will be the basis of your class participation grade. You may also participate in class discussion by sending me email questions or comments before class regarding some significant aspect of the assigned reading for that day. I will keep a file of these email messages for each student, and again, assessment will be on quality and quantity of your contributions.

GRADING FOR THE PASS/NOT PASS OPTION: If you are taking the course on a PASS/NOT PASS basis, you must get (1) a C- or better on the final examination as well as (2) an overall C- average on all course work in order to achieve a PASS grade, with one exception: If you have an A- or better average on the short papers and writing assignment, and adequate participation in class discussion and are enrolled on a PASS/NOT PASS basis, you need not take the final exam in order to earn a PASS grade.

Schedule of lecture/discussion topics and readings.

Week 1. March 31-April 6.

Tues: Are values subjective? Reading, John Mackie, “The Subjectivity of Values,” available at TED course page.

Thur: Are values subjective? Reading: Ronald Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It," available at TED course page.

Week 2. April 7-13.

Tues: Introduction, J. S. Mill's utilitarianism. Reading: J. S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chapters 1 and 2. Available at www.utilitarianism.org/jsmill.htm

Thur: Human good. Reading: Robert Adams, "Well-Being and Excellence"; also Richard Kraut, "Desire and Human Good" (both available at TED course page).

Week 3. April 14-20.

TUES: Human Good. Peter Railton, "Facts and Values." Derek Parfit, "What Makes Someone's Life Go Best?," appendix to Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*.

THUR: Human good. Reading Ronald Dworkin, "Equality and the Good Life," L. G. Sumner.

Short paper due in class.

Week 4. April 21-27.

TUES: Objections to utilitarianism/consequentialism. Reading: W. D. Ross, "What Makes right Acts Right?" in *Deontology*, pp. 55-80.

THUR: Objections to utilitarianism/consequentialism. Integrity. Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," available at TED course page.

Week 5. April 28-May 4.

TUES: Multi-level consequentialism. Reading: R. M. Hare, "The Archangel and the Prole"; also Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality," both available at TED course page.

THUR: Nonconsequentialism. Philippa Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the doctrine of Double Effect," available at TED course page; also Robert Nozick, "Moral Constraints and Moral Goals," in *Deontology*, pp. 83-89; also Thomas Nagel, "Agent-Relativity and Deontology," in *Deontology*, pp. 90-111.

Short paper due in class.

Week 6. May 5-11.

TUES: The doctrine of double effect. Reading: Warren Quinn, "Actions, Intentions, and Consequences: The Doctrine of Double Effect," in *Deontology*, pp. 194-211.

THUR: Constraints and Options. Judith Thomson, "The Trolley Problem," and Frances Kamm, "Harming Some to Save Others," both in *Deontology*, pp. 139-193.

Week 7. May 12-18.

TUES: Partiality. Samuel Scheffler, "Relationships and Responsibilities." Thomas Hurka, "The Justification of National Partiality.

THUR: Rule consequentialism. Reading: Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real world*, chapters 1 & 2.

Recommended not required reading: John Rawls, "Two Concepts of Rules," available at TED course page.

Week 8. May 19-25.

TUES: Rule consequentialism. Reading: Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World*, chapters 3-5.

THUR: More on rule consequentialism; criticisms of rule consequentialism. Reading: Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World*, chapters 6-8.

Week 9. May 26-June 1.

TUES: Partiality, friendship, and love. Nino Kolodny "Love as Valuing a Relationship," available at TED course page.

THUR: Moral worth and moral culpability. Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," available at TED course page.

Writing assignment due in class.

Week 10. June 2-8.

TUES: Moral worth and moral luck. Nomy Arpaly, "Moral Worth." David Lewis, "The Punishment that Leaves Something to Chance."

THUR: What makes a being (an animal) morally considerable? What makes persons morally special, and equally special? Reading: Ian Carter, "Respect and the Basis of Equality"; also George Sher. "Why We Are Moral Equals"; also R. Arneson, "Basic Equality: Unrejectable and Unacceptable."

