

Introduction to Ethics

Course Description

In our everyday life, we all make value judgments about what we and others should do. Many think that some of these judgments are distinctively moral, in that they generate obligations to act and refrain from acting. I may think I should eat meat because it is tasty. But, on the traditional picture, if it is immoral to eat meat, then I have an obligation to refrain from doing so no matter how tasty it is. In this course, we examine different theories of morality and the source of its apparent power to oblige us. Our focus will be on where the authority of moral norms comes from. Does the source lie in human nature and good character, as Aristotle thought? Does it instead lie in pleasure or in the pursuit of happiness, as Epicurus and Mill thought? Or does it rather lie in the nature of reason, as Kant thought? Finally, we turn to examine the cogency of the idea that morality should be understood in terms of norms that arise from one source. Does it really make sense to single out one kind of norm as moral, or is Iris Murdoch right that moral significance is more diffuse and permeating than traditional moral theories let on?

A secondary focus of this course will be on whether and how emotions and reasons are integrated in the good life. Is the standard picture on which we oppose emotion to reason right? Are our emotions as such responsive to or informed by reasons? Are our practical reasons as such emotionally laden? Philosophers who give different accounts of the source of the authority of moral norms tend to give different accounts of the relation between emotion and reason. We will investigate the connection between these two topics and try to assess which account of the relation between emotions and reasons is most plausible.

Weekly Responses

Each week in which you do not have a paper or draft due, you will be responsible for turning in a short response to me. These responses should explore in some fashion some issue from the previous week's reading or the class. These responses are meant to be open-ended, to give you more of an opportunity to grapple with the issues that are most interesting to you. It would be appropriate in these papers to, for instance, ask a question about what something means (exploring what about it you don't understand); formulate an objection to some claim made in class or by the reading; talk about some example in light of the reading/class. So long as your response involves topics from the reading and class, and so long as it shows some form of reflective engagement with them, you will meet this requirement.

I am expecting them to be 200 words or less, though you are welcome to write much longer responses if you desire. The assignment should be emailed to me by Wednesday 11pm. I will offer brief comments to each response by Friday 10am. My hope in providing feedback is to provide clear and consistent guidance on what I am expecting from the longer papers you are expected to write for the class.

Class Papers

Throughout the semester, you will be assigned to write 3 papers. For each paper, you will submit a draft to both myself and your TA. The TA and I will each write comments and schedule a meeting with you to talk about the paper. These meetings are mandatory, as are making revisions on the basis

of the TA's feedback. Two weeks after turning in your first draft, you will turn in a revised version of the paper.

For the first paper, you will be expected to offer an interpretation of some of the reading, explaining why it is a good interpretation. For the second paper, you will be expected, in addition, to explain a potential objection someone might have to the position you lay out. For the third and final paper, you will both raise a philosophical objection to the position you lay out, and provide a response to that objection.

I will hand out prompts for the first two papers. For the third paper, I will set up individual meetings with each of you in which you will come with thoughts on what topic you want to write on and we will work to refine the topic together.

Writing Lessons

One of the ultimate goals of this class is to teach you how to write more rigorously. To that end, we will devote a portion of many of our classes to discussions of how to improve as writers. For the first half of the course, I will provide handouts on the course website and we will do exercises practicing the techniques from the handouts in class. For the second half of the course, I will have a student volunteer to read one of their papers (either a draft or the final version) to the class after which you will have a discussion with one another about what you liked about the writing and about what you think might be done better.

Grading Policies

The overall breakdown of your course grade will be as follows:

- Weekly Papers: 15%
- First Paper (4 pages): 15%
- Second Paper (6 pages): 25%
- Final Paper (8 pages): 35%
- Participation: 10%

You cannot pass this course without turning in each of the three papers.

Readings

*Required Texts: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Broadie-Rowe (Oxford University Press: 2002); Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader* J.S. Mill *Utilitarianism* (Hackett Publishing Company, 2001); Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Routledge Classics, 2001). Only these editions are acceptable. All other texts will be made available online.

Part 1: Virtue Ethics

Week 1 – Ends and the Purpose of Life

Reading: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bks I-II

Week 2 – Virtue as the Mean

Reading: Plato, *The Republic*, BK IV selection (435c-441); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk III, chs. 1-5, 10-2

Week 3 – Practical Wisdom and the Happy Life

Reading: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk VI, chs. 1-7, 12-3, Bk VII, chs. 1-3, Bk X, chs. 1-8

Part 2: Epicureanism and Utilitarianism

Week 4 – Pleasure as Tranquility

Reading: Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” and “The Principal Doctrines”

Due: First Paper, draft

Week 5 – On Maximizing Pleasure, and on Kinds of Pleasure

Reading: Skorupski, *Why Read Mill Today*, 5-8; J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 1 and 2 (pgs. 1-26)

Week 6 – Justifying the Pursuit of Pleasure

Reading: J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 3-4 (pgs. 27-41); Skorupski, *Why Read Mill Today*, pgs. 8-11, 18-21; Annas, “Epicurus on Pleasure and Happiness”

Due: First Paper, final

Part 3: Deontology

Week 7: Introducing the Moral Law

Reading: Kant, *Groundwork*, Preface and Section 1 (4:387-4:405); Christine Korsgaard, “Introduction,” pgs. viii-xv

Week 8: What is the Categorical Imperative, Part 1?

Reading: Kant, *Groundwork*, Section 2 (4:406-4:24); Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Chapter 1, selection (5:19-5:28)

Week 9: What is the Categorical Imperative, Part 2?

Reading: Kant, *Groundwork*, Section 2 (4:425-4:45); Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Chapter 1, selection (5:28-5:35)

Due: Second Paper, draft

Week 10: Justifying the Moral Law

Reading: Kant, *Groundwork*, Section 3 (4:446-4:463); Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Chapter 1, selection (5:35-5:50)

Part 4: The Texture of our Moral Lives

Week 11: Personal Vision and General Concepts

Reading: James Baldwin, “Autobiographical Notes” and “Notes of a Native Son”; R.M. Hare, “Universalizability”; Murdoch, “Vision and Choice”

Due: Second Paper, final

Week 12: Can There be a Morally Neutral Moral Theory?

Reading: H.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, 9.4 (pgs. 169-173), 10.3 (pgs. 191-3), 10.6-7 (pgs. 298-302); Cora Diamond, "We are Perpetually Moralists," pgs. 79-90.

Week 13: The Importance of Our Inner Lives, Part 1

Reading: Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," pgs. 1-23; Diamond, "We are Perpetually Moralists," pgs. 91-109

Due: Final Paper, draft

Week 14: The Importance of Our Inner Lives, Part 2

Reading: Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," pgs. 23-44

Due (12/21): Final Paper, final