Course description

This course is a graduate-level introduction to ethical theory. It is divided into two parts. The first part of the course deals primarily with issues in metaethics. We will read Michael Smith’s *The Moral Problem*, along with texts to which Smith is responding (e.g. selections from Hume, Moore, Ayer, Foot, Nagel, Brink, and McDowell). The second part of the course will deal primarily with normative ethics. Here we look at works by contemporary writers in the Hobbesian, utilitarian, Kantian, virtue ethics, and theological voluntarist traditions: Gauthier, Hare, Parfit, Rawls, Korsgaard, MacIntyre, Hursthouse, and Adams.

This course assumes that seminar members have some familiarity with the history of moral philosophy: those entirely unfamiliar with Hobbes, Bentham, Mill, Sidgwick, Kant, and Aristotle should make themselves familiar with them by the time we get to the contemporary figures who work within these various frameworks. But you need never walk alone. I will organize a Hobbesfest, Classical-Utilitarianfest, Kantfest, and Aristotel fest for those interested in talking about the main lines of these views in advance of our treatment of the contemporary figures.

Course objectives

Through active participation in this seminar, you will

- Get some grip on the importance of metaethical positions
- Understand the deep differences between rival normative views
- Become acquainted with how we do ethics now
- Get prepared to pass that damned comp

Course format

The format of the course is a fairly even mix of lecture and discussion.


Course requirements

Course requirements include three short (2-3 pp.) papers, one longer (8-10 pp.) paper, a final examination, and seminar participation.

The short papers. Each of the three short papers should be a criticism of an argument offered in one of the readings for that week’s seminar meeting. Each should be submitted by e-mail as a Word document by 8 A.M. on the day that the seminar will meet to discuss that particular reading. Members of the seminar have complete freedom to decide which authors they wish to write their short papers on, subject to two provisos: at least one of the papers should be turned in no later than October 17 and at least two of these papers must be turned in no later than November 21.

These short papers have a threefold purpose. First, they serve to keep you thinking in a focused, critical way about the views we are discussing in class. Second, I will sometimes use these papers as material for critical discussion. (Because I need to read these papers quickly before class, none of these papers will be accepted after the Monday 8 A.M. deadline.) Third, one of these papers will serve as a springboard for the longer paper.

Note: These are to be short, but not sloppy. Write as if you will be offering these pieces to Analysis, or reading them at an APA meeting.

The longer paper. The longer paper should be an enlargement of one of the short papers turned in on November 21 or earlier. Apart from taking into account my critical remarks and whatever discussion of the argument occurred in class, the longer version should consider in greater detail the extent to which the criticism put forward can be answered by the view. This paper will be due December 5.

The final exam. There will be a final exam, which will also serve as the qualifying exam in ethics. It will be at the time scheduled by the registrar, unless there is unanimous agreement otherwise.

Seminar participation. Let’s not turn this into some sort of philosophical Bataan Death March toward the qualifying exam. Ethics is fun, dammit. Let’s keep it lively and interesting.

Texts

Books by Gauthier, Hare, Hursthouse, Korsgaard, MacIntyre, Parfit, Rawls, and Smith should be available at the bookstore. I will make the other materials — articles, and book excerpts — available for copying on the white shelf in NN209 with my name on it. Please return these materials promptly after copying.
Consulting

I’m around on Mondays, Wednesdays, and usually Fridays. I’m almost never around on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I also check e-mail frequently.

SCHEDULE

Sep 12  READING.  *The Moral Problem*, Ch. 1.
TOPICS.  The distinction between metaethics and normative ethics. Smith’s ‘Moral Problem’ as a metaethical problem.

TOPICS.  Can moral concepts be defined? Non-naturalistic and naturalistic definitions. Expressivism as a response to difficulties in definition.

Sep 26  READING.  Brink, “Externalist Moral Realism”; Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives”; *The Moral Problem*, Ch. 3.

TOPICS.  The Humean theory of motivation. Does the Humean theory call into question the existence of categorical moral requirements? Alternatives to Humeanism.

TOPICS.  Smith’s ‘anti-Humean’ theory of normative reasons. Smith’s analysis of rightness as a way to solve the moral problem. How Smith’s solution provides a way to frame the problems of normative ethics.

Oct 24  READING.  From *Morals by Agreement*: Ch. I, all (pp. 1-20); Ch. II, §§1, 2, 4 (pp. 21-38, 46-59); Ch. III, §§1, 3 (pp. 60-68, 75-82); Ch. IV, §§1, 2, 3 (pp. 83-104); Ch. V, §§1, 2.3, 3, 4 (pp. 113-122, 128-156); Ch. VI, all except §3.3 (pp. 157-187); Ch. VII, all (pp. 190-232); Ch. VIII, §1, 4 (pp. 233-238, 254-267); Ch. IX, skip or skim; Ch. X, §§1, 2.1, 2.5 (pp. 306-317, 326-329); Ch. XI, §§1.1-2.3, skim rest (pp. 330-349)
TOPICS.  Gauthier’s subjectivism about the good. Gauthier’s contractarianism. Gauthier’s account of the fair initial bargaining position. Gauthier’s account of rational bargaining. Gauthier’s account of the outcome. The ways in which Gauthier is Hobbesian.

Oct 31  READING.  From *Reasons and Persons*: Part I, all sections except §§7, 8, 23, 24, 34, 35 (pp. 3-17, 23-56, 67-92, 95-114); Part II, only §§45-55, 70, 74 (pp. 117-141, 184-186, 191-195); Part III, all sections except §§92-94, 97-101 (pp. 199-273, 281-287, 307-347); Part IV, skip or skim, although it’s great; Conclusion, all (pp. 443-454); Appendix I, all (pp. 493-502)
TOPICS. Alternatives to subjectivist accounts of the good. Parfit’s attempt to show consequentialism superior to Common-Sense morality. Parfit’s attempt to show consequentialism superior to the Self-Interest theory.

Nov 7 READING. From Moral Thinking: Chs. 1-3, all (pp. 1-64); Ch. 4, skim; Chs. 5-7, all (pp. 87-129); Chs. 8-9, skim; Chs. 10, §§10.7-10.8, skim rest (pp. 182-187); Chs. 11-12, all (pp. 188-228)

TOPICS. The levels of moral thinking. Hare’s argument from moral language to utilitarianism.

Nov 14 READING. From A Theory of Justice (revised edition): Chs. I-III (pp. 3-170); §40 (pp. 221-227); §§50-51 (pp. 285-301); Ch. 7 (pp. 347-396); §87 (pp. 506-514).

TOPICS. Reflective equilibrium. Rawlsian contractarianism. The critique of utilitarianism. The argument from the original position to the two principles of justice. Rawls’ Kantianism.

Nov 21 READING. The Sources of Normativity, pp. 1-166.

TOPICS. The normative question. How various solutions to the normative question fail. How only Kantianism solves the normative question.

Nov 28 READING. From After Virtue: Chs. 1-2 (pp. 1-22); Chs. 4-6 (pp. 36-78); Ch. 9 (pp. 109-120); Ch. 12 (pp. 146-164); Chs. 14-16 (pp. 181-243); Chs. 18-19 (pp. 256-278).

TOPICS. Why every non-Aristotelian view we’ve considered thus far must fail. The desiderata that an acceptable neo-Aristotelianism must meet. MacIntyre’s account of the virtues in terms of practices, the unity of a life, and tradition. MacIntyre on rules and virtues.

Dec 5 READING. From On Virtue Ethics: Introduction (pp. 1-22), Pt. I (pp. 25-87), Pt. III (pp. 163-265).

TOPICS. The extent to which virtue ethics promises an adequately action-guiding normative theory. The extent to which a virtue ethics can exhibit appropriate objectivity.

**DUE: LONGER COURSE PAPER**


TOPICS: Theological voluntarism: more alive than one might think. The power of theological voluntarism as a metaethical position. The normative implications of various formulations of the voluntarist position.