Contemporary Ethical Theory

PHLU 4913

Course packet

Instructor: John Davenport
Fall 2003

Monday - Wednesday 11:30 - 12:45
Contents of Course Packet:

1. Syllabus
2. Handouts
3. Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” from *Existentialism and Humanism*
9. Christine Korsgaard’s “The Authority of Reflection” in *The Sources of Normativity*
Contemporary Ethical Theory

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Instructor: John Davenport
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Office Hours at LC: Mondays 2 - 4 PM. Thursdays I’m at RH, Tuesdays/Fridays home with kids.

Précis of the Seminar:
This seminar will be an intense discussion of some of the most fascinating and challenging developments in 20th-century ethical theory (focusing largely on the analytic tradition). Because this is a seminar, active class participation and the student’s own research and written work will be crucial. We will have anywhere from 50 - 100 pages of reading per week, depending on difficulty. We will survey the 'great debate' that continues today between three broad approaches:

1. the utilitarians who focus on the results or consequences of actions, rules, and policies;
2. the neo-Kantians, who focus on the intrinsic rightness, justice, or fairness of actions and policies (i.e. do they respect each individual person as having inviolable intrinsic value?);
3. and neo-Aristotelians who want a broader approach including virtues of character and ethical ideals as guides to forming life-projects and relationships.

In discussing these approaches to moral theory, we will look at some of the 20th century's most impressive writers on the theory of moral norms, including some from each of these traditions: John-Paul Sartre, Richard Hare, John Rawls, Thomas Scanlon, Christine Korsgaard, Alasdair MacIntyre, Bernard Williams, and Derek Parfit. We will focus in particular on contemporary neo-Kantian or deontological critiques of utilitarianism, arguments against moral egoism, critiques of the individualism and impartiality of utilitarian and deontological ethics, and the alternative conception of virtue ethics towards which these critiques perhaps point.

However, this course does not cover three other important movements in 20th-century ethics, which are not part of mainstream Anglo-American moral philosophy, and require their own courses:

1. new natural law ethics (Grisez, Finnis), which tries to develop a neo-Thomistic account of moral norms based on an objective conception of basic goods, rather than on a metaphysical conception of natural human functions, or our natural telos.
2. contemporary continental ethics of alterity (e.g. Levinas, Marion);
3. Discourse ethics, in particular the neo-Kantian moral theory of Jürgen Habermas, and its associated deliberative theory of democracy.

In passing we will also discuss some famous problems in 'meta-ethics' including: the problem of moral relativism; the relation between ethics and psychology; the meaning of moral terms; whether our identities are socially defined or freely chosen; and whether intrinsic value is 'real' outside or minds, or only a projection of human consciousness or society. Many of our examples will concern
questions pertinent both for individuals trying to decide how to live their lives, and to people trying to envision a just government. However, although two the works we consider will be related to the foundation of political ethics, we will be looking at them more as contributions to the theory of moral norms rather than with regard to their political implications (e.g. for democratic theory).

This course is primarily intended for Philosophy majors and minors, but may also be helpful for students interested in political theory and the philosophy of law. It presupposes only the core philosophy courses, although some familiarity with the history of modern philosophy would also be helpful. At the start, we will briefly review the central tenets of Kant’s and Mill’s work as an introduction to our themes, and then concentrate on key primary readings in 20th century ethics. By the end of the course, students will have a good general knowledge of several important developments in moral philosophy in the 20th century. This will be a sufficient basis for further graduate study, or for studying closely related work in political philosophy and constitutional law.

Texts:
Smart and Williams, Utilitarianism: For and Against (Cambridge): ISBN: 052109822X
My Course packet, including all the other readings. Students pay for this with a money order.

Assignments:
20% Class participation.
20%: 1 short essay (6-7 pages) with a choice between particular questions on the readings;
20% 1 report to the class on a given reading for the day (3-page written summary and questions)
40% Final Research Paper (14 pages+)

Tentative Schedule

9/3: Introduction: Utilitarianism vs Deontology
1. Introduction to the course
2. Overview of the structure of moral theory
3. Handout on Mill’s utilitarianism.
4. Handout on Kant’s categorical imperative.
5. Discussion of the main differences between these theories.

Part I: Deontological Critiques of Utilitarianism

9/8 - 9/10: Sartre and Intuitionism
1. Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism” (in course packet)
2. W. D. Ross, The Right and the Good, chapter 2 (course packet)

915 - 9/17: Williams’s Critique of Act-Utilitarianism
1. Bernard Williams’s critique in Utilitarianism: For and Against
2. Recommended: Williams, “Persons, Character, and Morality,” Moral Luck ch.1 (course packet)
9/22 - 9/24:  Hare’s Indirect Utilitarianism
1. R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason*, chapters 2, 3 & 7.
3. Discussion of the implicit subjectivism in Hare’s principle of universalizability.

9/29 - 10/1:  Rawls’s solution to the subjectivism of Hare’s principle
1. *A Theory of Justice*, chapter 1, chapter 2 §§10-17, and chapter 4  §40 (course packet)
2. Handouts

10/6 - 10/8:  A psychological pluralist neo-Kantianism: Christine Korsgaard
1. Korsgaard, “The Authority of Reflection,” in *The Sources of Normativity*, ch.3 (course packet)
2. *First paper due*

10/13:  Columbus Day (no class).

Part II: Critiques of Egoism and Impartiality

10/15 :  Feinberg’s critique of egoism, with developments
1. Feinberg, “Psychological Egoism” (course packet)
2. Handout on Feinberg.(course packet)

10/20 - 10/22:  Parfit on Indirect Moral Egoism
3. Derek Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons*, chapter 1
1. Derek Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons*, chapters 2 and 4.

10/27 - 10/29:  Stocker’s critique of utilitarian and deontological moral theories
1. Stocker, “The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories” (course packet)

11/3 - 11/5:  Raz on Universalism and Particularism

11/10 - 11/12:  Raz and Sandel on ends essential to the self
1. Raz continued.


Part III: Neo-Aristotelian Virtue Ethics


11/24:  MacIntyre’s neo-Thomist social ethic:

12/1 - 12/3: MacIntyre continued.

12/8: Final Paper Due.