Modern Ethical Theory

PHGA 5014

Course packet

Instructor: John Davenport
Spring 2007

Fridays 1-3 PM
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Office Hours: Fridays after class 3-5 in Collins 119. Some Wednesdays I will often be at RH for meetings as well. Tuesdays I will be at Lincoln Center, Mondays and Thursdays home w. kids.

Précis of the Seminar:
This course is an introductory survey of major theories and themes in twentieth-century moral philosophy, beginning with the British intuitionists, emotivism, neo-Hobbesian contract theory, and the development of utilitarianism. We will focus on arguments against moral egoism and on contemporary neo-Kantian or deontological critiques of utilitarianism before turning to some case studies (criminal punishment and euthanasia). There will a short unit on MacIntyre's virtue ethics and another natural law ethics, but these are the foci of other graduate ethics courses. Likewise, we will not cover contemporary continental ethics (e.g. Levinas and Habermas) or feminist "care" ethics, since these are also the topics of other graduate seminars. Rather, Modern Ethics Theories focuses on the 'mainstream' positions in twentieth-century Anglo-American moral philosophy that claim to provide systematic foundations for moral norms. The emphasis is on the shape and foundation of the different systems of moral norms, rather than on metaethical problems that lie in the background of these theories (such as the nature of our motives, or the kind of freedom necessary for responsibility, or the metaphysical status of non-moral or 'natural' values/goods).

This course does not assume much background other than a passing familiarity with the history of modern philosophy. 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 twentieth-century ethics, with the help of some secondary articles that help explain these works and place them in context. The course has five main units:

1. The British intuitionists, emotivism, varieties of relativism.
2. 20th century Hobbesian egoism: rational choice theories of morality.
3. 20th century utilitarianism and its problems.
5. Applications: criminal justice and euthanasia.

We will also contrast divine command and natural law theories with these 20th century developments and moral particularism at the end of the course (time permitting). Although several of the works we consider will be related to the foundation of political ethics, we will be looking at them more as contributions the theory of moral norms rather than with regard to their political implications (e.g., for democratic theory).
As a 5000-level seminar, this course is designed to serve students of widely varying levels of prior preparation in moral philosophy. Students with less preparation need only concentrate of gaining a solid understanding of the different theoretical approaches, while students with more background will be able to take on more advanced questions in the final paper with my guidance. In addition to providing a review of key themes in moral theory which could be useful for comprehensive examinations, this seminar should provide a basis for doing further work in contemporary debates.

**Texts:**
W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Hackett Publishing)

**Recommended books** (with selections also on eres)
G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Prometheus Books)

**Articles** (make copies from Eres or originals on shelf in the department lounge). Selections from:
T.M. Scanlon’s "Contractualism and Utilitarianism" in *Utilitarianism and Beyond*, ed. Sen.
Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, selections
Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness"
Bernard Williams, "Persons, character, and morality," from *Moral Luck*
Bernard Williams, "A Critique of Utilitarianism," from *Utilitarianism: For and Against*
Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), ch.14
Michael Slote, "Agent-Based Virtue Ethics," from *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Crisp and Slote
John Kleinig, *Punishment and Desert*, ch.V

**Assignments:**
12% Class participation: includes attendance and active listening, and being prepared and able to ask informed questions. I do not expect you fully to understand the readings before discussion, but please do read them before class!
20% 1 short essay in February with a choice between particular questions on the readings
20%: 1 take-home test just after mid-semester with m/c and essay questions on the readings;
20% 1 oral report on a given reading for the day (with 3-page written summary and questions)
28% 1 final paper (roughly 10-12 pages) on a topic of the student's choice, directly related to our readings but possibly bringing in other sources. (Depending on the student’s level of
preparation, this can be a critical review of two or more course readings, or an essay focusing on euthanasia or criminal justice or other applications).

Tentative Schedule

1/19: Introduction: An Overview of Moral Theories
2. Handout on Moral Relativism. Points from Timmons ch.3.
3. Historical background: Hume vs Kant. Deontic operators (required, permitted, forbidden).

1/26: Divine Command Ethics and Classical Utilitarianism
1. Timmons chs. 2 and 5;
2. Selection on command ethics from C. Steven Evans, Kierkegaard's Ethic of Love (eres);
3. Handout on John Stuart Mill and indirect utilitarianism;
5. Start discussion of Sidgwick selection from The Methods of Ethics (Eres).

2/2: From 19th Century Utilitarianism to Moore’s Intuitionist Consequentialism.
1. Continue discussion of Sidgwick selection from The Methods of Ethics (Eres).
4. Moore’s critique of "naturalism" or natural law: chapter I (Eres); chapter IV §§77-83;
5. Extra credit: Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness" (Eres).

2/9: From Moore to Ross’s Deontological Intuitionist theory of value and rights
1. Moore’s Principia Ethica continued;
2. W. D. Ross’s The Right and the Good, chapters 1 - 3; chapter 4 pp.75-96 (time permitting).

2/16: Applications: Euthanasia
1. Background: Timmons ch.4 on Natural Law ethics
2. Appellate Court case holding by John Noonan, with Handouts.

2/23: Ideal observer utilitarianism: R.M. Hare.
1. Hare’s Freedom and Reason, chapters 1-3, 6-7 (and 5 time permitting). Ch. 7 is key.
2. First paper due

3/2: Critiques of utilitarianism
3. Suggested: Timmons ch.6 on contemporary utilitarianism.

3/9: Rational egoistic (Neo-Hobbesian) contractarianism: David Gauthier
1. Prisoner’s dilemma as a critique of simple egoism;
2. Gauthier’s *Morals by Agreement*, selections on the idea of public goods (Eres);
3. *Extra credit*: Feinberg’s critique of egoism reconstructed in *Will as Commitment & Resolve*

3/16: Spring break (enjoy!)

3/23: **An objective welfarist neo-Kantianism: Rawls**
1. *A Theory of Justice*, chapter 1 (all), chapter 2 §§10-17
2. Handouts on Rawls

3/30: **Rawls continued**
3. Extra Credit: comparison with T.M. Scanlon’s "Contractualism and Utilitarianism" (Eres)
4. Take-Home test due.

4/6: Good Friday/Easter Break.

4/13: **A psychological pluralist neo-Kantianism: Christine Korsgaard**
1. Korsgaard’s "The Authority of Reflection" in *The Sources of Normativity*, Lecture 3 ;
2. *The Sources of Normativity*, Lecture 2 and "Reply to Critics" (Lecture 9), time permitting.

4/20: **Alternatives: Virtue Ethics**
1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, ch.14 on virtues and practices (eres)

4/27: **Applications: Criminal Justice**
2. Gerard Bradley, "Retribution and the Secondary Aims of Punishment" (eres).

5/4: Overflow