

# Trinity Term 2007: Ethics Syllabus

## Details

Tutor: Seth Lazar  
Course: Ethics

## Course Outline

The purpose of this course is to provide an introduction to the study of ethics. We begin by asking whether there is really a single subject to study here, as opposed to a variety of different conventions and preferences, none with objective authority. In the first week we address the debate between objectivism and relativism generally in moral theory, looking, in second week, with more focus at what makes an individual life good, and whether there are any objective standards here. The next three weeks then focus on different traditions within ethical theory which have attempted to find some way of either systematising our moral intuitions, or comprehending the impossibility of systematisation. We start with consequentialism, intuitively the most appealing ethical system, which states, broadly, that we should act so as to realise the most valuable outcome available to us. Next we consider Kantian ethics, both Kant himself and modern variants of deontological thought. These thinkers argue that in some situations morality requires us *not* to realise the most valuable outcome, because, for example, doing so would mean treating some individual as a means to the greater good, not as an end in himself or herself. Virtue ethics, in its modern form, arose in response to the perceived shortcomings of both consequentialism and Kantian ethics, particularly their apparent over-confidence in attempting to systematise the irreducible complexity of our moral judgments. Virtue ethics states that, rather than focusing on what is the right thing to do, we should concentrate on being the best people we can be. In the remaining three weeks we move to a lower level of abstraction, and consider some more specific issues, with which all moral theories must come to terms. We focus first on rights, asking how they can be grounded, and what rights there are, before moving on to the concept of equality. If it is generally agreed that equality is something that we should aim at, in exactly what does equality consist? Equality of respect only, or concern, or indeed goods? Finally we address the problem of moral responsibility: how is it possible to ascribe moral responsibility, when two people, intending and acting identically, can produce completely different outcomes, purely as a matter of chance?

## Essays

You will write one essay for each of six out of the eight tutorials, in response to your choice of *one* of the questions set. These should be at least 2500 words in length, and should be emailed to me before 1700hrs on the day before your tutorial.

## Syllabus

### 1. Objectivism and Relativism.

#### *Questions*

1. What is the relation between moral properties and non-moral properties?
2. Can one be an objectivist about morality without being a realist?
3. Can moral judgements be explained without postulating moral facts?
4. 'If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe' (Mackie). Has the objectivist an effective reply?
5. 'Moral relativism is the moral theory which best supports toleration of others' moral
6. views'. Discuss.
7. 'Moral experience presents moral values as being objective, or real'. Does this put any
8. constraints on what could be an adequate moral theory?
9. In what ways is morality relative?

#### *Core Reading*

Ayer, A. J., *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Pelican, 1971 [1946]), preface and ch. 6.  
Dworkin, Ronald, 'Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It', in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1996), Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 87-139.  
Harman, Gilbert, 'Moral Relativism Defended', *The Philosophical Review* (1975), Vol. 84, No. 1, pp. 3-22.  
Quinn, Warren, 'Putting Rationality in its Place', in *Morality and Action*, by Warren Quinn, edited by Philippa Foot (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 228-255.  
Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), section 9.  
Mackie, J. L., *Ethics : Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin, 1990), chapter 1.

#### *Additional Reading*

Railton, Peter, 'Moral Realism', in *The Philosophical Review* (1986), Vol. 95, No. 2, pp. 163-207.  
Stevenson, Charles L., 'The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms', in his *Facts and Values: Studies in Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 10-31.  
Sayre-McCord, Geoffrey. 'The Many Moral Realisms', in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy, Spindel Conference, 1986: Moral Realism* (1986), Supplement to Vol. 29, pp. 1-22.  
Lycan, William G. 'Moral Facts and Moral Knowledge, in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy, Spindel Conference, 1986: Moral Realism* (1986), Supplement to Vol. 29, pp. 79-94.  
Sturgeon, Nicholas, 'What Difference does it Make whether Moral Realism is True?', in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy, Spindel Conference, 1986: Moral Realism* (1986), Supplement to Vol. 29, pp. 115-142.  
Williams, Bernard Arthur Owen, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), chapters 1-4.

## 2. Subjective and Objective Theories of Well-Being.

### *Questions*

1. What role does pleasure play in well-being?
2. If there were no beings with desires or preferences, could anything be of any value?
3. Why should I regard accomplishment as conferring value on my life?
4. Can a good life fail to be virtuous?
5. Am I the best judge of my own happiness?
6. 'We desire things because we think they are good; we do not think they are good because we desire them'. Is this a fatal objection to desire-based theories of well-being?

### *Core Reading*

Griffin, James, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), chapters 1-4.

Nozick, Robert, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), pp. 42-45.

Raz, Joseph, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), chapter 12.

Sen, Amartya, 'Utilitarianism and Welfarism', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 76/9 (1979), 463-89.

### *Additional Reading*

Ng, Yew-Kwang, 'Welfarism: A Defence against Sen's Attack', *The Economic Journal*, 91/362 (1981), 527-30.

Sen, Amartya, 'A Reply to `Welfarism: A Defence against Sen's Attack'', *The Economic Journal*, 91/362 (1981), 531-35.

Hurka, Thomas, *Perfectionism* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

Parfit, Derek, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), appendix I.

Dworkin, R. M., *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 2000), chapter 1.

## 3. Consequentialism.

### *Questions*

1. In what sense, if any, is consequentialism alienating?
2. 'If there were a fire where five people will die unless you save them at the cost of your own life, morality does not require you to save them'. Do you agree?
3. 'Mill's "proof" of utilitarianism is the best argument for utilitarianism that there is'. Discuss.
4. Is it an objection to a consequentialist theory that it cannot be used as a guide to action?
5. Does consequentialism pose a threat to individual rights?
6. Can utilitarianism give an adequate account of the value it is aiming to maximise?

9. To what extent can a consequentialist allow that one should not reason in consequential terms?
10. Is consequentialism the kernel of truth in utilitarianism?
11. Can consequentialists give an adequate account of personal responsibility?

### *Core Reading*

Mill, John Stuart, 'Utilitarianism', in *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*, edited by Mary Warnock, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003 [1861]).

Pettit, Philip, 'The Consequentialist Perspective', in *Three Methods of Ethics*, edited by Marcia Baron, Philip Pettit, and Michael Slote (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1997), pp. 92-174.

Williams, B., 'A Critique of Utilitarianism', in *Utilitarianism: For and Against*, by J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 77-150.

Rawls, John, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), sections 5, 6, 30.

Raz, Joseph, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), chapter 11.

Railton, Peter, 'Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 13/2 (1984), 134-71.

Scheffler, Samuel, *The Rejection of Consequentialism: Revised Edition*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), chapter 2.

### *Additional Reading*

Anscombe, G. E. M., *The Collected Philosophical Papers of G.E.M. Anscombe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981). 'Modern Moral Philosophy' in volume entitled 'Ethics'.

Pettit, Philip, 'Consequentialism', in *A Companion to Ethics*, edited by Peter Singer, (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1991), pp. 230-240.

Griffin, James, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement, and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), chapter 5.

Griffin, James, 'The Human Good and the Ambitions of Consequentialism', in *Social Philosophy and Policy* (1992), Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 118-132.

Singer, Peter, 'Is Act-Utilitarianism Self-Defeating?', in *The Philosophical Review* (1972), Vol. 81, No. 1, pp. 94-104.

Brink, David O., 'Utilitarian Morality and the Personal Point of View', in *The Journal of Philosophy* (1986), Vol. 83, No. 8, pp. 417-438.

## **4. Kant and Deontological Ethics.**

### *Questions*

1. How might a deontologist explain why it is wrong for me to kill another person, even if
2. that is the only way to prevent two or more killings by others?
3. Are there any categorical imperatives?
4. What is it to treat someone merely as a means? Why is it wrong?

5. Is there an important moral difference between so acting that a person's death foreseeably ensues in consequence of your action and deliberately killing them?
6. Would it be wrong of a vet to cut up one healthy cat to save five other cats?
7. If a couple choose to have a second child to be a playmate for their first, are they failing to treat humanity as an end in itself?
8. Is the imperative that one never treat a rational being as a means only, but always also as an end, just another way of representing the requirement that one act only on those maxims which one can will to be universal laws?

### *Core Reading*

Kant, Immanuel, Mary J. Gregor, and Christine M. Korsgaard, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Nagel, Thomas, *The View from Nowhere* (New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), chapter 9.

Kamm, F. M., 'Non-Consequentialism, the Person as an End-in-Itself, and the Significance of Status', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 21/4 (1992), 354-89.

Sen, Amartya, 'Rights and Agency', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 11/1 (1982), 3-39, sections 1 and 2 only.

### *Additional Reading*

Baron, Marcia, 'Kantian Ethics', in Marcia Baron, Philip Pettit, and Michael A. Slote (eds.), *Three Methods of Ethics : A Debate* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

Kant, Immanuel, Mary J. Gregor, and Roger J. Sullivan, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Bennett, Jonathan, "Whatever the Consequences", *Analysis*, 26/3 (1966), 83-102.

Scheffler, Samuel, *The Rejection of Consequentialism: Revised Edition*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), chapter 4.

## **5. Virtue Ethics.**

### *Questions*

1. Is singlemindedness a virtue?
2. 'Do virtues benefit their possessor? Must a defender of virtue ethics claim that they do?'
3. Can a good life fail to be virtuous?
4. Can virtue theory give a plausible account of what makes a character trait a virtue?
5. 'Virtue ethics assumes powers of ethical discernment that we do not possess and a homogenous ethical culture that no longer exists'. Discuss.
6. 'The concept of a good human life plays the same part in determining the goodness of human characteristics and operations that the concept of flourishing plays in the determination of goodness in plants and animals'. (Foot). Discuss.

8. 'The considerations to which a virtuous person is sensitive are more fundamental than the virtues themselves.' Is this true? If so, is the project of 'virtue ethics' doomed?

#### *Core Reading*

Aristotle and Roger Crisp, *Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), bk 1, bk 2 chs 1-7, bk 6 chs 9-11, bk 7 chs 1-10.

Crisp, Roger and Michael A. Slote, *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), chs. 1, 3.

Darwall, Stephen L., *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), chs. 4, 8 and 10.

#### *Additional Reading*

Crisp, Roger and Michael A. Slote, *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), chs. 4, 7, 10, and 11.

Darwall, Stephen L., *Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) ch. 5, 6, 9.

## **6. Rights.**

#### *Questions*

1. Can non-human animals have responsibilities? If not, can they have rights?
2. Can there be duties without rights or rights without duties?
3. How do we decide what rights there are?
4. 'Human rights are grounded in universal human interests'. 'Human rights are grounded in the status of personhood'. Compare and assess these views.
5. Have we any duties towards other animal species? If so, what is their ground?

#### *Core Reading*

Nagel, Thomas, 'Personal Rights and Public Space', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 24/2 (1995), 83-107.

Nozick, Robert, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974) chapter 3

Raz, Joseph, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), chapter 7.

O'Neill, Onora, *Bounds of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp. 97-111.

Feinberg, Joel, 'The Nature and Value of Rights', *Journal of Value Inquiry*, 4/4 (1970), 243-60.

#### *Additional Reading*

Dworkin, Ronald, *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge, Mass ; London: Harvard University Press, 1985), chapter entitled 'Do we have a right to pornography?'

Griffin, James, *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), chapter 11.

James, Susan 'Rights as Enforceable Claims', in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 103 (2003), 133-147.

Marx, Karl, 'On The Jewish Question', in *Early Writings*, edited by Lucio Colletti (London: Penguin 2003), pp. 211-241.

Steiner, Hillel, *An Essay on Rights* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), chapter 3.

Raz, Joseph, *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), chapters 8 and 10.

Waldron, Jeremy, *Theories of Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) chapters by Lyons and Hart.

Waldron, Jeremy, *Liberal Rights : Collected Papers, 1981-1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 203-224.

## 7. Equality.

### *Questions*

1. 'Equality matters.' 'We should give priority to the worse off.' 'We should be compassionate.' Compare and contrast these views.
2. What moral claims, if any, does equality make on us?
3. What is the connection, if any, between respecting people as equals and distributing goods among them equally?
4. 'It is obviously false that all men—let alone "all persons"—are equal; so egalitarianism as an ethical position is deluded.' Evaluate this argument.

### *Core Reading*

Arneson, Richard J., 'Equality and Equal Opportunity for Welfare', *Philosophical Studies*, 56/1 (1989), 77-93.

Frankfurt, Harry G., *The Importance of What We Care About : Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 134-158.

Casal, Paula, 'Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough', *Ethics*, (Forthcoming).

Parfit, Derek, 'Equality or Priority', in Matthew Clayton and Andrew Williams (eds.), *The Ideal of Equality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), 81-125.

Anderson, Elizabeth S., 'What Is the Point of Equality?' *Ethics*, 109/2 (1999), 287-337.

Arneson, Richard J., 'Luck Egalitarianism and Prioritarianism', *Ethics*, 110/2 (2000), 339-49.

### *Additional Reading*

Cohen, G. A. C., 'Incentives, Inequality, and Community', (1991), available at <http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/cohen92.pdf#search=%22incentives%20inequality%20and%20community%22>

Frankfurt, Harry G., 'Equality and Respect', *Social Research*, 64/1 (1997), 3-13.

Persson, Ingmar, 'The Badness of Unjust Inequality', *Theoria*, 69 (2003), 109-24.

Raz, Joseph, *The Morality of Freedom*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), chapter 9 .

### *The Dworkin/Cohen Debate*

- Dworkin, R. M., *Sovereign Virtue : The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 2000), chapters 1, 2.
- Cohen, G. A., 'On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice', *Ethics*, 99/4 (1989), 906-44.
- Dworkin, R. M., *Sovereign Virtue : The Theory and Practice of Equality* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 2000), chapter 7.
- Cohen, Gerald A., 'Expensive Taste Rides Again', in Justine Burley (ed.), *Dworkin and His Critics : With Replies by Dworkin* (Malden, Mass. ; Oxford: Blackwell 2004), 3-29.
- Dworkin, R. M., 'Ronald Dworkin Replies', in Justine Burley (ed.), *Dworkin and His Critics : With Replies by Dworkin* (Malden, Mass. ; Oxford: Blackwell 2004), 339-98.

## **8. Responsibility and Moral Luck.**

1. Can a deprived upbringing exempt a wrong-doer from blame?
2. If there were no causal explanation for our actions, would it be irrational to hold us responsible for them?
3. Is it ever appropriate to blame someone for an involuntary failing?
4. Are we morally responsible for what we believe?
5. 'I am not ultimately responsible for what I am. So how can I be responsible for what I do?' Discuss.
6. 'If an action is undetermined, then its occurrence is a matter of luck. It cannot, therefore, be a free and responsible action'. Discuss.
7. For the assignment of responsibility, does freedom matter? If not, what does?
8. To what extent am I responsible for what I do when I act on a chemically induced craving?
9. Is there such a thing as moral luck?
10. Are we morally responsible for our character?

### *Core Reading*

- Hart, H.L.A. *Punishment and Responsibility*, (OUP, 1968), esp chs 7-9
- Strawson, Galen 'The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility', *Philosophical Studies*, (1994), vol 75 pp 5-24.
- Nagel, Thomas 'Moral Luck', in his *Mortal Questions*, (CUP, 1979)
- Williams, Bernard 'Moral Luck', in his *Moral Luck*, (CUP, 1981)
- Taylor, Charles 'Responsibility for Self', in Watson, G. *Free Will*, (OUP, 1982)
- Scheffler, Samuel 'Responsibility, Reactive Attitudes, and Liberalism in Philosophy and Politics', in *Philosophy And Public Affairs*, (1992), vol 21 pp 299-323.

### *Additional Reading*

- Bradley, F.H. 'The Vulgar Notion of Responsibility', in his *Ethical Studies*, (OUP, 1927).
- Austin, J.L. 'A Plea for Excuses', in his *Philosophical Papers*, (OUP, 1961).
- Glover, Jonathan *Responsibility*, (Routledge, 1970), chs 1, 3, 4, 9.
- Duff, R.A. *Intention, Agency and Criminal Liability*, (Blackwell, 1990), chs 4, 5
- Lucas, John *Responsibility*, (OUP, 1993)

Wallace, R. Jay *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*, (Harvard, 1994)

Owen, David G., *Philosophical Foundations of Tort Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995),  
chapter by Waldron.