

## Contemporary Ethical Theory

PHIL 4500 Section 1

MWF 2-2:50

Business 209

Fall 2012

Instructor: Erica Holberg ([erica.holberg@usu.edu](mailto:erica.holberg@usu.edu))

Instructor's Office Hours: Mondays 10:30-12:30 in Old Main 002K  
and by appointment

### Course Description:

For the last 60 years or so, there has been a sense of dissatisfaction with the status of ethical theory, a worry that perhaps the whole project of philosophical ethics is rotten at the very core. This dissatisfaction has resulted in strong disagreements about how to answer basic ethical questions (i.e., what is the nature of ethical claims?, is morally good action the result of ethical knowledge?, etc.), and even stronger calls to radically rethink the basic philosophical questions any satisfactory ethical theory needs to answer. We will start by considering the following questions: What is ethical theory suppose to do? What do our various authors think has gone wrong in previous ethical theories? Once we have a better understanding of the different tasks an ethical theory might be asked to perform, we will read excerpts from Anscombe's *Intention*. Anscombe famously argued that in order to make any progress in ethical theory, we first need a better foundation in the philosophy of action. Finally, we will consider various attempts to follow Anscombe's call by building ethical theory upon the rational structure of action. This 'practical reason approach to morality' is one of the dominant research programs in contemporary ethics. Our aim in reading various contemporary attempts to do ethical theory is to better understand the challenges that any ethical theory must confront to adequately account for the place of ethics in human life.

### Course Objectives:

1. *Learn to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view.*  
We will be reading crucial texts in contemporary ethics. The goal is to understand the aims of the arguments presented, evaluate the arguments for their strengths and weaknesses, and to understand what assumptions underlie the argumentative steps taken.
2. *Develop skills in expressing oneself orally and in writing.* You cannot do well in this class if you do not participate in class discussion. Just as importantly, you will have three chances to get better at making a clear, persuasive, sophisticated argument in writing. Your grade is a direct result of your efforts and successes in communicating your thoughts clearly in class and in writing.
3. *Acquire an interest in learning more by asking questions and seeking answers.*  
One guiding question for this course is how, or even if, ethical theory matters.

Students are encouraged to come to class with questions, either about the previous class discussion or about the readings for that day.

**Texts:**

The course packet is available at the campus bookstore.

**Grading:**

First Paper: 20%

Second Paper: 20%

Third Paper: 30%

Homework: 10%

Class Participation: 20%

Class participation requires that you 1) ask questions, 2) contribute your own ideas and interpretations of the readings, and 3) follow up on the ideas of others.

The first two papers are to be 5 pages long, and the third paper should be 7-8 pages long. Paper topics will be distributed about a week before the draft is due. Three paper drafts and participation in the writings seminars are required. Papers are to be submitted on Canvas by **7 p.m.** I would also appreciate it if you bring one paper copy to class the next day. If you are sick and cannot attend class, you must submit a copy to me electronically using either Canvas or email, and then bring a paper copy to the next class. Students are responsible for making sure the electronic file submitted is readable by the instructor (a file I cannot open is a late paper).

Drafts are also to be distributed to other classmates by **7 p.m.** on the due date. Please be thoughtful of others and respect this deadline, so that everyone has a chance to print and read the drafts in time for the workshop. The easiest way to distribute your draft to all your classmates is by using Canvas to send an email to your writing seminar group. Please print a copy of each person's drafts (including your own) and bring them to the writing seminar prepared to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each draft.

Days that homework assignments are due are marked with an asterisk (\*). The homework questions can be found on Canvas. There are 25 homework assignments, worth 4 points each for a possible total of 100 points.

Plagiarism is forbidden. Plagiarism is a sign that the person has lost sight of one's role as a student and the ends of education. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please do not hesitate to ask the instructor.

## **Schedule:**

Monday, August 27<sup>th</sup> – Introduction

### **The Problem for Ethical Theory?**

Wednesday, August 29<sup>th</sup> – Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?”\*

Friday, September 31<sup>st</sup> – Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?”

Monday, September 3<sup>rd</sup> – Labor Day. No class.

Wednesday, September 5<sup>th</sup> – Smith, *The Moral Problem*\*

Friday, September 7<sup>th</sup> – Smith, *The Moral Problem*

Monday, September 10<sup>th</sup> – Williams, “Morality, The Peculiar Institution”\*

Wednesday, September 12<sup>th</sup> – Williams, “Morality, The Peculiar Institution”

Friday, September 14<sup>th</sup> – Foot, “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”\*

Monday, September 17<sup>th</sup> – Foot, “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”

### **The Structure of Action**

Wednesday, September 19<sup>th</sup> – Anscombe, *Intention*, §16-19 \*

Friday, September 21<sup>st</sup> – Anscombe, *Intention*, §20-23 \*

Sunday, September 23<sup>rd</sup> – First paper drafts distributed to classmates by 7 p.m.

Monday, September 24<sup>th</sup> – Anscombe, *Intention*, §24-27 \*

Tuesday, September 25<sup>th</sup> – Group Writing Seminars

Wednesday, September 26<sup>th</sup> – Anscombe, *Intention*, §28-29 \*

Friday, September 28<sup>th</sup> – Anscombe, *Intention*, §30-32 \*

Monday, October 1<sup>st</sup> – Anscombe, *Intention*, §38-39 \*

Tuesday, October 3<sup>rd</sup> – First papers due by 7 p.m.

Wednesday, October 3<sup>rd</sup> – Review of first two units

Friday, October 5<sup>th</sup> – No class. Instructor out of town.

### **Reality, Reason, and Good Action**

Monday, October 8<sup>th</sup> – Blackburn, “How To Be an Ethical Antirealist” \*

Wednesday, October 10<sup>th</sup> – Blackburn, “How To Be an Ethical Antirealist”

Friday, October 12<sup>th</sup> – Blackburn, “How To Be an Ethical Antirealist”

Monday, October 15<sup>th</sup> – Korsgaard, “The Authority of Reflection”, pp. 90-100 \*

Wednesday, October 17<sup>th</sup> – Korsgaard, “The Authority of Reflection”, pp.100-114 \*

Thursday, October 18<sup>th</sup> – Korsgaard, “The Authority of Reflection”, pp.115-130 \*

Friday, October 19<sup>th</sup> – Fall Break. No class.

Monday, October 22<sup>nd</sup> – Quinn, “Putting Rationality in its Place” \*

Wednesday, October 24<sup>th</sup> – Quinn, “Putting Rationality in its Place”

Friday, October 26<sup>th</sup> – Quinn, “Putting Rationality in its Place”

Sunday, October 28<sup>th</sup> – Second paper drafts distributed to classmates by 7 p.m.

Monday, October 29<sup>th</sup> – McDowell, “Virtue and Reason” \*

Tuesday, November 31<sup>st</sup> – Group Writing Seminars

Wednesday, November 31<sup>st</sup> – McDowell, “Virtue and Reason”

Friday, November 2<sup>nd</sup> – McDowell, “Virtue and Reason”

### **Naturalism and Ethical Norms**

Monday, November 5<sup>th</sup> – McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism”, pp. 149-164 \*

Tuesday, November 6<sup>th</sup> – Second papers due by 7 p.m.

Wednesday, November 7<sup>th</sup> – McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism”, pp. 164-179 \*

Friday, November 9<sup>th</sup> – McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism”

Monday, November 12<sup>th</sup> – Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form”, pp. 1-11 \*

Wednesday, November 14<sup>th</sup> – Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form”, pp. 11-18 \*

Friday, November 16<sup>th</sup> – Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form”

Monday, November 19<sup>th</sup> – Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form”

Wednesday, November 21<sup>st</sup> – No class. Thanksgiving Break.

Friday, November 23<sup>rd</sup> – No class. Thanksgiving Break.

Monday, November 26<sup>th</sup> – Anscombe, “On Promising and Its Justice, and Whether It  
Need be Respected *in Foro Interno*” \*

Wednesday, November 28<sup>th</sup> – Anscombe, “On Promising and Its Justice, and  
Whether It Need be Respected *in Foro Interno*”

Friday, November 30<sup>th</sup> – Thompson, “What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about  
Justice”, pp. 333-345 \*

Sunday, December 2<sup>nd</sup> – Fourth paper drafts distributed to classmates by 7 p.m.

Monday, December 3<sup>rd</sup> – Thompson, “What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about  
Justice”, pp. 345-358 \*

Tuesday, December 4<sup>th</sup> – Group Writing Seminars

Wednesday, December 5<sup>th</sup> – Thompson, “What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle  
about Justice”, pp. 358-373 \*

Friday, December 7<sup>th</sup> – Thompson, “What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about  
Justice”, pp. 374-384 \*

Wednesday, December 12<sup>th</sup> – Final paper due by 7 p.m.