Contemporary Ethical Theory  
PHIL 4500  Section 1  
MWF 2-2:50  
Business 209

Instructor: Erica Holberg (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 27th – Introduction

The Problem for Ethical Theory?

Wednesday, August 29th – Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?”*

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

Monday, September 3rd – Labor Day. No class.

Wednesday, September 5th – Smith, The Moral Problem*

Friday, September 7th – Smith, The Moral Problem

Monday, September 10th – Williams, “Morality, The Peculiar Institution”*

Wednesday, September 12th – Williams, “Morality, The Peculiar Institution”

Friday, September 14th – Foot, “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”*

Monday, September 17th – Foot, “Utilitarianism and the Virtues”

The Structure of Action

Wednesday, September 19th – Anscombe, Intention, §16-19 *

Friday, September 21st – Anscombe, Intention, §20-23 *

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

Monday, September 24th – Anscombe, Intention, §24-27 *

Tuesday, September 25th – Group Writing Seminars

Wednesday, September 26th – Anscombe, Intention, §28-29 *

Friday, September 28th – Anscombe, Intention, §30-32 *

Monday, October 1st – Anscombe, Intention, §38-39 *

Tuesday, October 3rd – First papers due by 7 p.m.

Wednesday, October 3rd – Review of first two units
Friday, October 5th – No class. Instructor out of town.

**Reality, Reason, and Good Action**

Monday, October 8th – Blackburn, “How To Be an Ethical Antirealist” *

Wednesday, October 10th – Blackburn, “How To Be an Ethical Antirealist”

Friday, October 12th – Blackburn, “How To Be an Ethical Antirealist”

Monday, October 15th – Korsgaard, “The Authority of Reflection”, pp. 90-100 *

Wednesday, October 17th – Korsgaard, “The Authority of Reflection”, pp.100-114 *

Thursday, October 18th – Korsgaard, “The Authority of Reflection”, pp.115-130 *

Friday, October 19th – Fall Break. No class.

Monday, October 22nd – Quinn, “Putting Rationality in its Place” *

Wednesday, October 24th – Quinn, “Putting Rationality in its Place”

Friday, October 26th – Quinn, “Putting Rationality in its Place”

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

Monday, October 29th – McDowell, “Virtue and Reason” *

Tuesday, November 31st – Group Writing Seminars

Wednesday, November 31st – McDowell, “Virtue and Reason”

Friday, November 2nd – McDowell, “Virtue and Reason”

**Naturalism and Ethical Norms**

Monday, November 5th – McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism”, pp. 149-164 *

Tuesday, November 6th – Second papers due by 7 p.m.

Wednesday, November 7th – McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism”, pp. 164-179 *

Friday, November 9th – McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism”
Monday, November 12th – Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form”, pp. 1-11 *

Wednesday, November 14th – Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form”, pp. 11-18 *

Friday, November 16th – Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form”

Monday, November 19th – Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form”

Wednesday, November 21st – No class. Thanksgiving Break.

Friday, November 23rd – No class. Thanksgiving Break.

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

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

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

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

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

Tuesday, December 4th – Group Writing Seminars

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

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

Wednesday, December 12th – Final paper due by 7 p.m.