

Contemporary Ethical Theory

PHIL 4500 Section 1

MW 2:30-3:45

Family Life 301

Spring 2018

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

Instructor's Office Hours: Fridays 2:30-3:30 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: 5.2%

Canvas Q & A: 4.5%

Class Participation: 20.3%

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 **9 p.m.** I would also appreciate it if you bring one paper copy to class the next Monday. 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 **9 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 (HW#_). The homework questions can be found on Canvas. There are 13 homework assignments, worth 4 points each for a possible total of 52 points.

There will be 15 Canvas Question and Answer, worth 3 points each, for a possible total of 45 points. Every week, you must 1) post a question about the readings for that week, or about something that came up in class by **5 p.m. Tuesday**. You must also 2) post an answer to a question raised by your classmates by **11 a.m.**

Wednesday.

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, January 8th – Introduction

The Problem for Ethical Theory?

Wednesday, January 10th – Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?” (Q & A #1)

Monday, January 15th – Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. No class.

Wednesday, January 17th – Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Q & A #2)

Monday, January 22nd – Williams, “Morality, The Peculiar Institution” (HW#1)

Wednesday, January 24th – Foot, “Utilitarianism and the Virtues” (Q & A #3)

Monday, January 29th – Foot, “Utilitarianism and the Virtues” (HW #2)

The Structure of Action

Wednesday, January 31st – Anscombe, *Intention*, §16-19 (Q & A #4)

Monday, February 5th – Anscombe, *Intention*, §20-27 (HW#3)

Tuesday, February 6th – First paper drafts distributed to classmates by 9 p.m.

Wednesday, February 7th – Anscombe, *Intention*, §28-29 (Q & A #5)

Thursday, Friday, February 8th and 9th – Writing Seminars

Monday, February 12th – Anscombe, *Intention*, §30-32 (HW#4)

Wednesday, February 14th – Anscombe, *Intention*, §38-39 (Q & A #6)

Thursday, February 15th – First papers due by 9 p.m.

Reality, Reason, and Good Action

Monday, February 19th – No Class, President's Day

Tuesday, February 20th – Blackburn, “How To Be an Ethical Antirealist” (HW#5)

Wednesday, February 21st – Blackburn, “How To Be an Ethical Antirealist” (Q & A #7)

Monday, February 26th – Korsgaard, “The Authority of Reflection”, pp. 90-114 (HW#6)

Wednesday, February 28th – Korsgaard, “The Authority of Reflection”, pp. 115-130
(Q & A #8)

March 5th - 9th, Spring Break

Monday, March 12th – Quinn, “Putting Rationality in its Place” (HW#7)

Tuesday, March 13th – Second paper drafts distributed to classmates by 9 p.m.

Wednesday, March 14th – Quinn, “Putting Rationality in its Place” (Q & A #9)

Thursday, Friday, March 15th and 16th – Writing Seminars

Monday, March 19th – McDowell, “Virtue and Reason” (HW#8)

Wednesday, March 21st – McDowell, “Virtue and Reason” (Q & A #10)

Friday, March 23rd – Second papers due by 9 p.m.

Naturalism and Ethical Norms

Monday, March 26th – McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism”, pp. 149-164 (HW#9)

Wednesday, March 28th – McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism”, pp. 164-179 (Q & A #11)

Monday, April 2nd – Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form”, pp. 1-11 (HW#10)

Wednesday, April 4th – Thompson, “Apprehending Human Form”, pp. 11-18 (Q & A #12)

Monday, April 9th – Anscombe, “On Promising and Its Justice, and Whether It Need be Respected *in Foro Interno*” (HW #11)

Wednesday, April 11th – Anscombe, “On Promising and Its Justice, and Whether It Need be Respected *in Foro Interno*” (Q & A #13)

Monday, April 16th – Thompson, “What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about Justice”, pp. 333-345 (HW#12)

Tuesday, April 17th - Paper Drafts due to Classmates by 9 p.m.

Wednesday, April 18th – Thompson, “What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about Justice”, pp. 345-358 (Q & A #14)

Thursday, Friday, April 19th and 20th – Writing Seminars

Monday, April 23rd – Thompson, “What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about Justice”, pp. 358-373 (HW#13)

Wednesday, April 25th – Thompson, “What is it to Wrong Someone? A Puzzle about Justice”, pp. 374-384 (Q & A #15)

Wednesday, May 2nd – Final paper due by 9 p.m.