

Major Seminar: Moral Philosophy

Theories of the Good

Course Description

We describe actions, agents, and states of affairs as good (or bad). But what kind of property is good? Is good a natural property (and what would that even mean)? How should we understand ethical judgments? Is there a fact of the matter that we can be right or wrong about?

These questions are central to metaethics. We discuss some classic 20th century positions (Moore, Stevenson, Hare, Foot, and others), some aspects of historical positions (Plato, Aristotle, Hume), and some recent contributions to the debate.

The seminar does not aim to cover all accounts of the property good. Rather, we discuss a number of influential views, in order to then turn to some closely related questions about values, agency, and reasons.

Requirements

- In-class Participation: Students should read the texts prior to the class for which they are assigned. You should come to class prepared to discuss the material. When you prepare for class, you should make yourself outlines of arguments, notes of what you take to be core premises, of questions you have, and so on.
- Weekly Outlines of Readings: For each class, there are two or three assigned readings. Pick *one* of the readings, and submit a written outline (1 page) of the core argument.
- Mini-Presentations: Each student is expected to give at least one, but preferably two 3-minute presentations. Students can choose to do this on their own, or in a team of two students. The task is to highlight key claims, give outlines of arguments, and pose questions about one of the assigned readings. Please note that this is *not* a scary task—these presentations are *very* short. They are a valuable exercise, and they facilitate in-class discussion.
- Term Paper Proposal: Students submit a short written proposal (max. 1/2 page) for a term paper by the end of the Spring Break or earlier.
- Draft: Drafts of term papers (15 pages) are submitted by the end of April.
- Final Version: The final version of the paper is submitted 1 day after the last meeting of the class.

Readings

Almost all readings are available online through Butler Library, either via Courseworks or via JSTOR (log in with your UNI). Bernard Williams's short book *Morality* will be ordered at Bookculture (formerly Labyrinth).

Outline of Readings and Topics

Week 1: Introduction

Bernard Williams, *Morality. An Introduction to Ethics* (Canto), pp. 14-54 (chapters subjectivism, relativism, and 'good').

Week 2: The Open Question Argument

G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, 33-126 (esp. §§ 5-13).

<http://fair-use.org/g-e-moore/principia-ethica>

Katja Vogt, Spring 2009, PHIL C3912 Major Seminar: Moral Philosophy, Wed 4:10-6:00 pm

Some examples: “The good is benefit,” “Pleasure is the good,” “The good is the desired,” “The good is what we desire to desire” (selections from Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Sextus Empiricus).

Week 3: The Naturalistic Fallacy and Other Objections to Moore

William Frankena, “The Naturalistic Fallacy,” *Mind* 48 (1930), 464-77.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2250706>

Selections from David Hume.

Nicholas Sturgeon, “Moore on Ethical Naturalism,” *Ethics* 113 (April 2003), 528-556.

<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/monstera.cc.columbia.edu:2048/toc/et/2003/113/3>

Week 4: Is Good a ‘Supernatural’ Property?

G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Selections.

<http://fair-use.org/g-e-moore/principia-ethica>

Plato, selections from *Phaedo* and *Republic*

Week 5: Is Good like a Perceptual Property?

John McDowell, *Plato’s Theaetetus*, selection from the text and commentary.

Jonathan Dancy and Christopher Hookway, “Two Conceptions of Moral Realism,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, Vol. 60, (1986), pp. 167-187+189-205

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4106901>

Peter Railton, “Red, Bitter, Good,” in *Fact, Values, and Norms* (2003), 131-147.

Week 6: Emotivism and Prescriptivism

C.L. Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms,” *Mind* 46 (1937): 14-31,

<http://www.jstor.org.monstera.cc.columbia.edu:2048/stable/pdfplus/2250027.pdf>

R.M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford, 1963), Chapter 6.

Mark van Roojen, “Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-cognitivism/>

Week 7: Thick Concepts

Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), 221-250.

Jonathan Dancy, “In Defense of Thick Concepts.” in P. French, T. Uehling and H. Wettstein (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy XX: Moral Concepts*. (also in: *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (1996))

Allan Gibbard and Simon Blackburn (1992), “Morality and Thick Concepts,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume* 66, 267-283+285-299

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4106979>

Week 8: Naturalism I

Philippa Foot, “Moral Beliefs”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 59 (1958-1959), reprinted in Foot, *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978).

Philippa Foot (1958), "Moral Arguments," *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 67, No. 268, 502-513.
<http://www.jstor.org.monstera.cc.columbia.edu:2048/stable/i313321>

Week 9: Naturalism II

Gilbert Harman, "Moral Explanations of Natural Facts – Can Moral Claims be Tested Against Reality?" *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, supp. 24 (1986).

Nicholas Sturgeon, "Harman on Moral Explanations of Natural Facts," *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, supp. 24 (1986): 69-78.

Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 163-207.

Week 10: Good and Rationally Desired

The Socratic Paradox: "Everyone desires the good"; selections from Plato.

Richard Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press of Oxford University Press, 1979). Selections.

David Velleman, "Brandt's Definition of Good," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 97, No. 3. (Jul., 1988), pp. 353-371.
<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8108%28198807%2997%3A3%3C353%3ABDO%22%3E2.0.CO%3B2-2>

Week 11: Agency and the Good

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* Book I (selections).

David Velleman, "The Guise of the Good," *Noûs*, Vol. 26, No. 1. (Mar., 1992), pp. 3-26.
<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0029-4624%28199203%2926%3A1%3C3%3ATGOTG%3E2.0.CO%3B2-G>

Week 12: Good and Valued

Harry Frankfurt (selection)

David Velleman, "A Theory of Value," *Ethics* 118 (April 2008), 410-436.
<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu.monstera.cc.columbia.edu:2048/toc/et/2008/118/3>

Week 13: Values and Reasons

Tim Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Chapter 2 "Values."

Stratton-Lake and Hooker (2006), "Scanlon versus Moore on Goodness," in Mark Timmons (ed.), *Metaethics After Moore*, 149-168.