

PHIL 117
Foundations of Ethics
UC Davis

Winter Quarter 2021

M/W/F, 2:10 pm – 3:00 pm (remote/synchronous)

Instructor: Dr. Tristan J. Rogers, Lecturer, Department of Philosophy

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Broadly speaking, moral philosophers in the 20th Century grappled with two types of questions. The first concerns the foundations of ethics. For instance, is ethics objectively knowable in the sense of not depending on social conventions and/or our feelings? Or is ethics just a way of subjectively expressing emotions of approval or disapproval? These are what philosophers call “meta-ethical” questions. A second line of questions investigate normative ethics, i.e. about what makes an action morally right. For instance, is morality fundamentally about producing good consequences or performing moral duties? Can we construct morality as a mutually advantageous agreement among rational agents? Finally, is morality fundamentally about moral character rather than right action? In this course, we will discuss these questions (and others), in important articles by G.E. Moore, A.J. Ayer, Bernard Williams, John Rawls, Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscombe, among others. Students are encouraged to engage with the texts and develop their philosophical acumen in discussion with their peers.

Catalogue Description: Advanced investigation of questions about the nature and foundations of morality. Among the topics that may be discussed are moral realism and anti-realism, cognitivism and non-cognitivism, types of relativism, moral skepticism, normative language and normative belief.

Required Texts:

All required readings will be provided in .pdf format on the Canvas Course Site. However, students who appreciate a physical book will find the majority of the readings in *Twentieth Century Ethical Theory*, eds. Cahn and Haber (Pearson, out-of-print, but affordable used copies available online).

Goals:

1. Develop competence in philosophical language and literature on the history and transformations of ethical theories.
2. Develop written and oral communication skills as those are associated with argumentative writing and public speaking.
3. Develop close-reading and critical thinking skills in the study of philosophical texts.

Assessment:

- 10% - Participation
- 15% - Review Questions
- 20% - Two Short Papers
- 25% - Midterm
- 30% - Final Exam

Late Work and Attendance Policy: As a rule, work will not be accepted late except in cases of documented emergency or illness. You may make a written petition in advance if you feel an exception is warranted, and given the circumstances of the pandemic, most reasonable petitions will be granted. Attendance will not be taken, but participation will be particularly noted on Fridays, which will be devoted to discussion of the week’s material. All lectures and discussions will be recorded and posted on Canvas.

Course Conduct: You are expected to be respectful toward your fellow students and myself during virtual Zoom lecture/discussion sessions. While per university policy, access to video is not required of students for Zoom sessions, it is my expectation that you will be fully present and participate appropriately, either voluntarily or when called on.

Plagiarism: Plagiarism is a violation of University policy and seriously undermines your integrity as a student. Penalties may be severe. It is your responsibility to understand the University’s plagiarism policy.

Reasonable Accommodation: If you need accommodation because of a disability, please let me know.

Week	Dates	Topics	Readings/Assignments
PART ONE: Meta-Ethics			
Week One – Intuitionism/Ethical Objectivism	Mon, Jan 4	Meta-Ethics and Normative Ethics	James Rachels, “Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century”
	Wed, Jan 6	What is “Good”?	G.E. Moore, “The Subject-Matter of Ethics”, Sec. 1-7
	Fri, Jan 8	Discussion Day 1	Review Questions Due
Week Two – Intuitionism/Ethical Objectivism	Mon, Jan 11	The Naturalistic Fallacy	G.E. Moore, “The Subject-Matter of Ethics”, Sec. 8-15
	Wed, Jan 13	Moral Obligations	H.A. Prichard, “Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?”
	Fri, Jan 15	Discussion Day 2	Review Questions Due

Week Three – Emotivism/Ethical Subjectivism	Mon, Jan 18	MLK Day	NO CLASS
	Wed, Jan 20	Logical Positivism	A.J. Ayer, “A Critique of Ethics”
	Fri, Jan 22	Discussion Day 3	Review Questions Due
	Sun, Jan 24	FIRST PAPER DUE	

Week Four – Emotivism/Ethical Subjectivism	Mon, Jan 25	Emotivism	C.L. Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”
	Wed, Jan 27	Ethical Disagreement	C.L. Stevenson, “The Nature of Ethical Disagreement”
	Fri, Jan 29	Discussion Day 4	Review Questions Due

Week Five – Reactions to Emotivism/Ethical Subjectivism	Mon, Feb 1	Critique of Emotivism	Brand Blanshard, “The New Subjectivism in Ethics”
	Wed, Feb 3	Ethics and Practical Reasoning	Stuart Hampshire, “Fallacies in Moral Philosophy”
	Fri, Feb 5	Discussion Day 5	Review Questions Due
	Sun, Feb 7	MIDTERM DUE	

**PART TWO:
Normative Ethics**

Week Six – Utilitarianism	Mon, Feb 8	Rule and Act Utilitarianism	J.C.C. Smart, “Extreme and Restricted Utilitarianism”
	Wed, Feb 10	Utilitarianism and Moral Integrity	Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism”
	Fri, Feb 12	Discussion Day 6	Review Questions Due

Week Seven – Utilitarianism	Mon, Feb 15	President’s Day	NO CLASS
	Wed, Feb 17	Rules and Practices	John Rawls, “Two Concepts of Rules”
	Fri, Feb 19	Discussion Day 7	Review Questions Due
Week Eight – Social Contract Theory	Mon, Feb 22	Justice	John Rawls, “Justice as Fairness”
	Wed, Feb 24	Morality as Rationality	David Gauthier, “Why Contractarianism?”
	Fri, Feb 26	Discussion Day 8	Review Questions Due
	Sun, Feb 28	SECOND PAPER DUE	
Week Nine – Virtue Theory	Mon, Mar 1	Critique of Modern Moral Philosophy	Elizabeth Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy”
	Wed, Mar 3	Return to Ethical Naturalism	Philippa Foot, “Moral Beliefs”
	Fri, Mar 5	Discussion Day 9	Review Questions Due
Week Ten – Virtue Theory	Mon, Mar 8	Traditions of Virtue	Alasdair MacIntyre, “The Nature of the Virtues”
	Wed, Mar 10	Eudaimonism	Julia Annas, “Virtue and Duty: Negotiating Between Different Ethical Traditions”
	Fri, Mar 12	Discussion Day 10	Review Questions Due
Exam Week –	Wed, Mar 17 8:00 am	FINAL EXAM	