

PHL 310 Moral Theory

MWF 2:10 Wilson 1132

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Office Hours: 1:10 – 2:00 MWF

Text: Cahn and Haber, *Twentieth Century Ethical Theory* plus D2L and internet materials

The Course: This is a course in moral theory. Our text has a large number of classic works in moral theory written over the last hundred years. I select a number that are important and, I hope, sometimes interesting. But they are not easy. We will read works in both metaethics and general normative ethics – don't worry if you do not yet know what that means. For the final section of the course, I like to have you read some recent work, whether a recent book or a series of recent articles. This section changes significantly almost every time I teach the course. This year, we will look at efforts by a group of philosophers and psychologists to assess the possible contribution empirical work in psychology can make to moral philosophy. Some think it can make a major contribution, and others think it cannot. This is an example of a recent trend in philosophy, a kind of collaboration between philosophy and the empirical sciences. If you go back to, say, the eighteenth century, the line between science and philosophy was not sharp. By the twentieth century, it became very sharp. That line may be breaking down so I guess we are back to the eighteenth century!

Save Your Work: Always keep a copy of work you turn in. Keep all your graded work till you see your official grade for the course. If any errors are made in recording or calculating final grades, they can be easily corrected if you keep all your work.

Academic Misconduct Policy: The university's academic misconduct policy can be found at http://www2.montana.edu/policy/student_conduct/. The most common forms of academic misconduct in philosophy classes are plagiarism, cheating, and unauthorized collaboration. Plagiarism involves using another person's work without citing the source. Even unintentional misuse or appropriation of another person's (such as relying on source material that is not expressly acknowledged) is plagiarism. If you have any questions about using and citing sources, you are expected to ask for clarification. Cheating involves a number of actions including copying from another student's paper during exams, using unauthorized notes during an exam, and using electronic aids during an exam. If you have any questions as to what constitutes cheating, ask.

Students may not collaborate on graded material, though obviously, it is good to talk about class material with other students and with people outside the class. If you have any questions about when this becomes collaboration, ask for clarification.

When I discover academic misconduct for an item of work, I usually give the student an "F" for that item and put a report in the student's permanent record. No student who has been found to commit academic misconduct may drop the class.

General Expectations: Students must be

- prompt and regular in attending classes
- well prepared for classes
- act in a respectful manner toward other students and the instructor and in a way that does not detract from the learning experience
- make and keep appointments when it is necessary to meet with the instructor.

Late Work: If you need to turn work in late, notify me in advance. In general, prior authorization is given for causes generally recognized by the university such as illness and participation in a university event. If something comes up fast and you cannot get prior authorization, I will need an official university excuse or a written medical excuse. If for some reason neither is possible, please come see me about the late work anyway. You should still turn in the work but I will lower your grade.

Contacting Me:

- I pick up phone messages from my office voice mail three times a week. I check my email every other day. If you contact me by voice mail or email, *please include your full name and the class you are in.*
- If you contact me by voice mail, be sure to speak slowly and clearly, especially when giving me your name and phone number.
- Do not treat either voice mail or email as instant messaging. However, if you send me an email or leave me voice mail, and I do not respond in a few days, send another. If an emergency happens, and you will miss a class deadline, contact me as soon as you can.
- I will not accept assignments by email.

D2L: You are required to check your D2L email accounts at least once a week. I sometimes send out information, such as changes in the syllabus, by D2L email. Failure to check is no excuse for not knowing. It is now possible to forward your D2L email to an outside account that you check more often.

I sometimes post handouts in the “content” section of D2L. You are responsible to periodically check.

I use the D2L grade module. I post all grades. Please check once in a while to make sure I did not make a mistake with your grades.

Course Objectives

1. You will be introduced to some major questions in philosophy having to do with moral philosophy in general and biomedical ethics in particular.
2. You will develop skills associated with reading and understanding philosophical texts and writing short philosophical essays.
3. You will come to understand how philosophers work and you will improve your abilities to engage in distinctive forms of philosophical argument and theory construction.
4. Hopefully, some of these skills will generalize to your daily lives, making you more likely to critically evaluate ideas presented to you and to develop and critically evaluate ideas of your own.

Grading Scale: Each item of work will be grade an a letter scale with pluses and minuses. However, for ease of grade computation, I convert each letter into a number according to the following pattern.

B+ = 8.7 B = 8.5 B- = 8.3

Note, I do not use some numbers, such as 8.2. Also “10” will be rare since it corresponds to an A+++! Work that is worth more than 10 points will be graded by the same general standard. For example, if an item is worth 20 points total, a B becomes $8.5 \times 2 = 17$ points.

Requirements: Your grade will be determined by the following.

- Attendance and class participation are required. I will regularly ask people to summarize ideas from assigned readings as well as other things. Since there are no exams, your participation is the way I gauge whether you have read, understood and thought about the material. (10 points)
- A short paper on an assigned topic (10 points)
- A midterm Exam (20 points)
- A term paper proposal (pass/fail: you must pass this to do a term paper.)
- A term paper (30 points)
- A take home final exam (30 points)

Philosopherstoolkit.com: I have a website www.philosopherstoolkit.com. You should download and read the essays on the main page about such things as reading and writing philosophy. This will give you an idea about what I expect from philosophy students. There are also some lectures I have prepared on topics relevant to this course. You might find them helpful.

Note Taking: There are a lot of individual readings for this class. It is important that you not only *read* these materials. You must also *understand* them and *keep track* of them. The best way to do this is by note taking. Notes can be very detailed (mine often are) or just capture the basic ideas. I give some advice on note taking on my website, www.philosopherstoolkit.com. At a minimum your notes should include

1. Clear explanations of main concepts such as *utilitarianism*, and how they differ from other concepts such as *contractualism*.
2. Clear statements of the positions of various authors. If you have read three authors and, a day later, have no idea which author said what, you have largely wasted your time.
3. Clear statements of the main arguments for various positions, for example, why does Stevenson like emotivism?
4. Clear statements of possible responses to those positions and arguments, that is, what philosophers call 'objections'.
5. Some thoughts of your own, e.g., is Stevenson right or wrong, and why.

Key Dates

- Jan 21 MLK Holiday
- Feb 6 **Short Paper Due**
- Feb 18 Presidents Day Holiday
- Feb 27 **Midterm Exam**
- March 11-15 Spring Break
- March 29 University Day
- April 1 **Latest Date for Term Paper Proposal**
- April 15 **Term Paper Due**
- April 29 **Take Home Final Exam Due**

Partial Syllabus: Note the following dates are approximate and subject to change.

I. General Introduction. No readings Jan 9, 11

II. Objectivist Intuitionism and the Attack on Naturalism in Ethics. Jan 14, 16, 18, 23, 25

- G. E. Moore, "The Subject Matter of Ethics," p. 12-26 (*This is only part of the selection in our book*)
- Ross, "What Makes Right Acts Right, p. 87-105

III. Emotivism: An early Irrealist Option. Jan 28, 30, Feb 1, 4

- A. J. Ayre, "A Critique of Ethics" Text, p. 108-115
- Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms," Text, p. 116-128
- Stevenson, "The Nature of Ethical Disagreement," Text, p. 139-143

Short Paper Due!!! Feb 6. Information on D2

IV. Mackie, Error Theory, and The Attack on Objectivist Intuitionism. Feb 6, 8, 11, 13, 15

- Mackie, "A Refutation of Morals" (on D2L)
- David Brink, "Moral Realism and the Skeptical Arguments From Disagreement and Queerness," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 62, No. 2; June 1984.

V Moral Relativism. Feb 20, 22, 25

- Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended, p. 519-530.

Midterm Exam. Feb 27