

PHIL 202: Core Course in Ethics
 2011-13 History of Ethics Sequence, Part 2
 Winter 2012
 Th 2:00-4:50 pm; HSS 7077
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History of Ethics: From Aquinas to Locke

This seminar takes as its starting point the framework of ancient Greek eudaimonism discussed in David Brink's Fall 2011 seminar and will examine how that framework is challenged and transformed by philosophers in the medieval and early modern periods. Although Greek eudaimonism is the essential background for our study, there is no requirement that participants have taken the previous seminar. There will be some review at our first meeting and I will make clear any important assumptions about ancient ethics along the way.

Among the topics that will occupy us are:

- the Christian response to, and appropriation of, ancient eudaimonism;
- the development of natural law theory within the framework of eudaimonist ethics;
- the emergence of "modern" natural law theory and the problem of normativity;
- the (apparent) eclipse of virtue and happiness as central concerns for 17th c. moral philosophy;
- the transformation of eudaimonism by other 17th c. philosophers (in part under the influence of newly revived Stoic and Epicurean doctrines).

Each of these topics is extremely rich and would merit a seminar of its own. In understanding the direction moral philosophy takes in the post-Hellenistic period,¹ one must begin with the response of early Christian theologians (especially Paul and Augustine) to the central claims of Greek eudaimonism. Augustine makes three main criticisms of this outlook: 1) Greek eudaimonism misidentifies the "highest good" [*summum bonum*], which it interprets as the best natural life for a human being (equated with happiness: *eudaimonia*, *beatitudo*) rather than a life lived in the absolute perfection of God; 2) it assigns an unwarranted authority to human reason, whose practical and theoretical employment is the principal factor determining whether or not we live well or happily; 3) it ignores the central theological commitments of Christianity: the fact of original sin (ascribed to the Fall), entailing the inherent corruption of the human will; the promise of redemption through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; the identification of blessedness/salvation with a perfected love of God, which can only be a *gift* of God (the effect of grace), not a condition that is merited through our virtue or attainable through the exercise of our natural powers (both of which evidence the corruption of the Fall).

Almost all moral philosophy through the time of Kant (at least) is written with a keen sense of these elements of Christian theology. Equally, however, the conceptual scheme and technical vocabulary of Christian ethics remain heavily indebted to those of the ancients. This is clear enough in the case of Augustine, who engages closely with the ancient schools and effectively adapts eudaimonism to Christianity rather than rejecting it entirely. It is even clearer in the case of Aquinas, who takes over Augustine's formulation of Christian eudaimonism, while linking it more closely to Aristotle's ethics and integrating it with a theory of natural law. The sources of the latter theory are found both in ancient Stoicism (as channeled through Cicero) and in the "new" law that Paul opposes to the Hebrew decalogue.

¹ From Wikipedia: the Hellenistic period is usually taken to begin with the death of Alexander in 323 BC, and to end either with the final conquest of the Greek heartlands by Rome in 146 BC; or the final defeat of the last remaining successor-state to Alexander's empire, the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt in 31/30 BC, after the Battle of Actium.

Our second main challenge, then, after coming to grips with the idea of “Christian eudaimonism,” is understanding the integration in Aquinas’ thought of eudaimonism and natural law theory.

Beginning in the medieval period, natural law theory gives rise to a set of hotly contested debates about the ground of natural law and the manner in which it “binds” the human will, or imposes requirements of action on it. The first issue can be framed as a version of the so-called Euthyphro problem: Is natural law *law*, because obedience to it is commanded by God, or does God command obedience to it, because it is antecedently understood as law? The first position is held by those characterized as “voluntarists” (the ground of law is God’s will), the latter by “intellectualists” (law is uncreated and coeternal with God’s intellect).

For Christian eudaimonists, *our* relation to natural law is complex: not only is it *right* that we act in accordance with it, fulfilling whatever obligations God or the law imposes on us, but it is part of our *good* that we do so. Lawful action is, in general, virtuous action (willing in accordance with “right reason”), and virtue (whether natural virtue or theological virtue) is closely bound up with the attainment of happiness. Voluntarists and intellectualists may construe this connection differently, but up to the time of Suárez, the last great scholastic, writing at the beginning of the 17th century, it remains an integral part of Christian eudaimonism.

Schneewind and others have argued that all of this changes with Grotius, who discards the eudaimonist perspective of his predecessors, founded on the conception of an objective human good, and opposes to it a stark contrast between, on the one hand, individual interest (what is “useful” or “advantageous”), and on the other, the demands of natural law or morality. No longer can conformity to the latter uncontroversially be seen as promoting one’s own well-being. Instead, a skeptic can object: Why should I act morally, or obey natural law, if I do not take the latter to be in my best interest? Those impressed by what Schneewind has called the “Grotian problematic” see moral philosophy as taking a decisive turn at this point. Prudence and morality now potentially stand in conflict with each other, and the source and justification of the practical demands of morality becomes critical. From this arises what we now call the problem of “normativity” (pursued by Schneewind in the modern natural law theorists through to Kant).

An opposing line of interpretation challenges whether the transformation of moral philosophy in the 17th c. is as clearcut as Schneewind suggests. Irwin argues forcefully for the enduring significance of what he calls “Aristotelian naturalism” in the early modern period and beyond. My own understanding of the period leans toward Irwin’s position. I am interested in how prominent early modern philosophers continue to think about moral philosophy in ways determined by ancient eudaimonism, while at the same time weakening or discarding premises that may have been critical to the ancients. If Augustine and the medievals effect a first transformation of eudaimonism, adapting it to Christian theology, 17th c. philosophers bring about a second transformation, returning ethics to a focus on natural happiness as the end for human beings—an end achievable in this life, through the theoretical and practical application of reason. In the second half of the seminar, we will examine how plausible this reading is in the case of Descartes, Hobbes, Leibniz and Locke.

One point that will emerge from our study is that, in contrast to the relative unity and coherence of ancient eudaimonism, early modern moral philosophy takes a variety of strikingly different forms. Since this period has also received less scholarly attention, our approach will of necessity be more tentative and exploratory than studies of ancient Greek ethics. The complexity of the subject matter and the wealth of texts relevant to it also means that our treatment of them must be highly selective. We will do our best to get the most important issues on the table, but in keeping with the description of this as a “core” course, we will at most engage in a first pass through them.

Graduate Credit

Graduate students taking the seminar for credit may count it toward either the ethics requirement or the history requirement (but not both). The seminar also counts toward satisfying the core course requirement.

Format

The format of the seminar will follow that of Part 1 of the History of Ethics sequence. I will introduce each week's material, raise issues for discussion, and generally keep things moving. Seminar members are expected to stay current with the required reading, to think carefully about it, and to initiate discussion through questions and objections. Seminars are not supposed to be "passive learning experiences." They turn upon discussion occurring in which we share our understanding, or lack thereof, of the texts and issues. Since participation will factor into the determination of your final grade, you should feel yourself "bound" to contribute. If you are hesitant about doing so, make an effort to talk to me outside of class. I am always happy to pursue the discussion of any topic on other occasions.

Requirements and Grades

Students registered for a letter grade will be required to write two papers for the seminar: a medium-length paper of approximately 7-8 pages, followed by a longer paper of at least 15 pages. The first paper will be due, as a Word document in an email attachment to me, by 9 am on Monday, Feb. 13. Prior to this I will distribute a list of suggested topics, which will be drawn from the reading through week four (Feb. 2). I will be out of town the following Thursday, so you will have that week to write your paper. The second paper will be due on Thursday, March 22; although a draft of this paper is not required, I expect to consult with you on it well before the due date and will be happy to comment on drafts. The first paper is worth 25%, the second paper 50%, and participation 25%, of your final seminar grade.

Texts

Because our reading is drawn from many sources, of which we usually are covering only a small part, I have not ordered any books for the course. All primary texts, and as many of the secondary texts as possible, will be made available through the seminar Ted site. There you will also find material generated by me, including handouts and a bibliography documenting the texts I am relying on and some secondary works (this will expand as the quarter progresses). David has kindly left copies of the first two volumes of Irwin's *Development of Ethics* on reserve in the department library, from which you can make copies if you choose (these should remain in the library unless you are copying them).

Website

All registered students have automatic access to the Ted site (<https://ted.ucsd.edu>). If you are participating in the seminar as an auditor and would like access, let me know and I will arrange it.