

PHIL 202: Core Ethics; Fall 2016

Professors David O. Brink and Donald Rutherford

Seminar Topic: Perfectionism: Ancient and Modern

Tuesdays, 1-3:50pm; H&SS 7077

Offices: H&SS 8016 (DB); H&SS 8046 (DR)

Office Hours: M1-2pm and by appt. (DB); M12-1 pm and by appt. (DR)

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Perfectionism is the doctrine that a person's good consists in the full realization her essential nature and capacities. Perfectionist ethics understands duty and virtue in terms of realizing or promoting this higher good, and perfectionist politics favor laws and institutions that promote human perfection individually and collectively. Perfectionism has a rich history. Perfectionist ideas can be found in Aristotle, the Stoics, Maimonides, Aquinas, Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz, von Humboldt, J.S. Mill, F.H. Bradley, T.H. Green, Nietzsche, and Marx, among others. Though perfectionist ideas can be found throughout the history of ethics, perfectionism has not been studied as a distinctive tradition, and it remains a neglected option in contemporary moral and political philosophy. This neglect reflects assumptions that perfectionism relies on a teleological or essentialist metaphysics that has been discredited by modern science and that it cannot recognize the diversity of good lives and must endorse illiberal forms of censorship and paternalism. This seminar aims to remedy this neglect by examining the ancient and modern perfectionist tradition and exploring the justification of perfectionist ideals, their content and requirements, and their implications for a variety of moral and political issues.

We will spend our first meeting exploring the structure of perfectionist normative theories in a provisional way. For the rest of the seminar, we will engage various important figures in the ancient and modern perfectionist tradition. Because the tradition is rich and varied, we will have to be selective in our coverage and be content to raise a few important issues about the figures we do cover. We will be focusing on Aristotle, Aquinas, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant (especially as critic), Mill, Green, and Nietzsche. Though our focus will be historical, we want to test the adequacy and explore the systematic implications of the views under discussion.

In addition to the seminar itself, we are organizing a conference to complement the seminar, which will be held Friday and Saturday, November 18 and 19. Here is the tentative schedule.

Friday:

- Susan Sauvé Meyer (University of Pennsylvania), "Plato on Perfection"
- Katja Vogt (Columbia University), "The Good and the Good Life in Aristotle"
- Terence Irwin (Oxford University), "Counsels of Perfection"
- Steven Nadler (University of Wisconsin, Madison), "Maimonides on Human Perfection and the Love of God"

Saturday:

- Donald Rutherford (University of California, San Diego), "Leibniz as Perfectionist"
- David O. Brink (University of California, San Diego), "Normative Perfectionism and the Kantian Tradition"
- Thomas Hurka (University of Toronto), "Sidgwick and Perfectionism"
- Gwen Bradford (Rice University), "The History of Perfectionist Bads"

We expect seminar participants to attend and participate in the conference.

DISTRIBUTION CREDIT

The seminar is listed in the catalog as an ethics core course and so can satisfy either ethics or core requirements (or both). Alternatively, it can satisfy history and core requirements. It cannot satisfy both ethics and history requirements.

FORMAT

Seminar meetings will be a mix of presentations by us (DB, DR, or both). We will structure discussion of the readings and raise issues for discussion. Though we don't expect everyone to be equally chatty, some significant seminar participation is an expectation of every seminar member.

REQUIREMENTS AND GRADES

Each enrolled student is expected to write two papers for the seminar -- a medium length paper, approximately 8-10 pages, and a longer paper, at least 15 pages long. Students are encouraged to discuss their papers with us in advance and are welcome to submit drafts of papers. The shorter paper will be due Friday, October 28 (the end of fifth week), and the longer paper will be due Monday, December 5 (the beginning of exam week). As percentages of the overall seminar grade, the participation (quality and quantity) will be worth 20%, the shorter paper is worth 30%, and the longer paper is worth 50%.

READINGS

The reading assignments are listed on the Syllabus. We're circulating a Note on Texts in advance so that students have time to purchase the primary texts or otherwise arrange to have access to them. Selected primary and secondary texts will be posted as PDFs on the website or put on hard reserve in the Philosophy library (see Note on Texts and Syllabus for details). If you have any questions about the primary texts, please contact one of us.

WEBSITE

Handouts, and other seminar materials will be available on the course website at TritonED (<https://ted.ucsd.edu>). Students enrolled in the seminar should have automatic access to the website. You will be expected to have access to print or electronic versions of these handouts during class. You should check periodically to make sure that you have current versions of all the handouts (which are revised or updated periodically). If you are not enrolled in the seminar but would like to have access to the website, let one of us know, giving us a UCSD email address, and we can arrange for you to have access.