

**Introductory Handout Philosophy 160 Ethical Theory**  
**Richard Arneson, instructor. Winter Quarter 2015**

This class meets Tuesdays and Thursdays 12:30 to 1:50 p.m. in HSS 1128A.

The final exam for this class will be held on March 17 from 11:30 to 2:30. If you enroll in this class, you must be free to take a regular final exam for this course at this scheduled date and time.

**Course texts:** Two books available in the Bookstore (and elsewhere) are required reading for this class. One is *Well-Being and Death* by Ben Bradley; the other is *What We Owe to Each Other* by Thomas Scanlon. All other assigned reading, along with this syllabus (what you are reading right now), class notes and recommended readings, will be posted at a course web page accessible via TED. Eventually the short paper assignment, the writing assignment, and advance information on the final exam will also be posted. Students should check this course TED page regularly for updates.

Arneson's office hours: Tuesdays 3-4 and Fridays 2-3 in 8057 HSS Bldg.

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This is a course in normative ethical theory. People make moral claims on each other, and argue about the legitimacy of such claims. They disagree about what we ought to do, and about what is really good or choice-worthy in human life. We have these disagreements in ordinary life, not just in academic journals or philosophy classrooms. Normative ethical theories try to answer the questions, what makes right acts right and good things good. We look at important rival views on these questions.

**1. Some say: morality is doing what best promotes your own interest.** First, we examine the connection between egoism and morality. Egoism is the view that what one ought to do, the rational thing to do, is whatever is in one's own interest. Morality says one ought to give due consideration for others, show appropriate concern and respect for others when one acts. So it seems egoism says, one should pay no attention to morality in deciding what to do, except insofar as doing what's moral happens to advance our own interests. David Gauthier disagrees. Gauthier think it can be rational to obey certain moral constraints on the pursuit of your own interests, even though this leads yo to do acts that are really, not merely apparently, disadvantageous to yourself. In his words: "Duty overrides advantage, but the acceptance of duty is truly advantageous." Does this make sense? Whether or not it makes sense, is rationality tied to doing what is in one's interests as Gauthier supposes?

**2. What's in one's interest? What is it for something to make one's life go better?** The next section of the course examines the idea of something's being in one's interest. Here we seek to identify what is good in the sense of being prudent. Some things are good as means to getting other things, but what's good in itself? What makes a person's life go better for that very person? We look at four rival answers: (1) hedonism (what's good is feeling good, having enjoyable experience), (2) desire satisfaction (what's good is getting what you want), objective list (some things are good for you regardless of your attitudes or beliefs regarding those things), and (4) hybrid views (combining some elements of 1 to 3).

In this connection we examine the idea of death. What makes death bad, when it's bad? There are puzzles here. We look at a short book by Ben Bradley, *Well-Being and Death*.

**3. Rivals to egoism. Some say: morality requires one to do whatever would bring about the impartially best outcome.** The next section of the course looks at two different views about the nature of morality. Both are rivals to egoism. Each says, it can be rational, and maybe rationally required, to act in ways that show due consideration for others, even when egoism condemns such acts. The two views differ about what it is to show due consideration for others.

Utilitarianism says that what is morally right is to maximize the total of good (good quality lives for people). To show due consideration for others is to give the interests of every person who might be affected by what you do equal weight in determining what you should do. (Utilitarianism is a member of a broader family of views known as consequentialism. Utilitarianism says (1) one always ought to do whatever would bring about the best possible outcome and (2) the best outcome is the one with largest aggregate good for people [and other animals]. Consequentialism asserts (1). Different versions of consequentialism propose different standards for assessing outcomes.)

**4. Rivals to egoism. Some say: morality requires one to respect and honor everyone's moral rights.** The next section of the course looks at an alternative to consequentialism. The alternative view is that morality requires one to respect the individual moral rights of those who might be affected by your actions.

On this view, your individual moral right, for example, your ownership right over your car, consists in duties that others have directed toward you, for example, to refrain from stealing your car. The rights view differs from utilitarianism and consequentialism, because sometimes you could do any of many actions that would violate no one's rights, but which would not lead to the best possible outcome. According to the rights view you are at liberty to do any of these acts. Also, sometimes in order to do what would bring about the best possible outcome you would have to violate some individual's moral rights. The rights view says it is not necessarily permissible to violate people's moral rights even to advance nice causes and even when doing so would be necessary to bring about the best outcome.

Different versions of rights theory propose different accounts of what rights we have. Different versions of rights theory also differ in their views about the nature of rights—about what they are and how a claim to have a right might be justified.

**5. Thomas Scanlon's view.** T. Scanlon advances what he calls a "contractualist" theory of morality. According to contractualism, an act is morally wrong just in case it would be forbidden by principles that no one has reason to reject. We might consider Scanlon to be a rights theorist, with a particular account of what rights are and what makes it the case that someone has a particular right. He certainly opposes egoism and consequentialism.

Scanlon's theory advances connected views on what it is to have a reason, the nature of moral reasons, the place of individual well-being in ethics, responsibility and the content of what we owe to one another. We examine Scanlon's view in some detail to illustrate how moral issues are interconnected and to illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of one version of nonconsequentialist morality, the type of moral view most people probably implicitly hold.

**6. Attributive responsibility. What must be true of us, to make us praiseworthy or blameworthy for our choices and actions, depending on their quality?** Given that what I have done is morally wrong, some might deny I am responsible for this, apt for blame and punishment, either because I am not the sort of being who can reasonably be held responsible (e.g., feeble-minded or insane or a child), or because I have a good excuse (e.g., ignorance or coercion or duress). Skeptics about responsibility hold that given that human choices are caused events, the conditions for holding people responsible never obtain. Revisionists about responsibility hold that the sensible basis of our responsibility practices is that holding people responsible for what they do by praising and blaming them sometimes causes the future behavior of those people and others to be better than it would be if we scrapped these practices.

**7. Substantive responsibility. Can actions be harmful and wrong, even if they don't make a difference to what comes about? Can actions be beneficial and right, even if they don't make a difference to what comes about?** We look at two opposed views on this knotty issue. One view is that whether an act is forbidden, permissible, or required depends on the difference it would make to the outcome, if one did the act or not. Another view is that when we act together with others, we can be responsible for harmful wrongdoing, and acting wrongly, even if our acts make no difference to the outcome. Notice that this is an issue for nonconsequentialists as well as for consequentialists. A nonconsequentialist might hold, for example, that it is not wrong to fail to vote in elections if one's vote would make no difference to the outcome.

**8. Relativism and skepticism.** Moral codes concerning what is right and good vary from society to society and change over time within any single society. Is what is right and wrong relative to a society or culture at a time? Or are there timeless truths? Also, are there objectively right answers to evaluative questions, or is there no correct and incorrect in this domain? At the end of the course we look at Scanlon on relativism and John Mackie on the issue, whether there are objective values.

**COURSE GOALS:** The goals of the class are to improve our skills at reading and criticizing challenging readings and to reflect on our own moral views in the light of the philosophical theories we survey. A secondary aim is to sharpen our analytical writing skills.

**COURSE REQUIREMENTS:** (1) regular participation in class discussion, (2) nine short weekly discussion papers, each about one page in length, commenting on some aspect of the reading for that class that strikes you as significant, (3) a longer writing assignment, six to eight double-spaced pages in length, topics to be assigned in class, and (4) a regular comprehensive final examination. You will have some choice of topic on the writing assignment. On your discussion papers, writing assignment, and final exam you will be graded according to the clarity of your prose, the cogency of your arguments, and the soundness of the understanding of course materials that you exhibit. The final examination will comprehend all course

materials including required readings, lectures, and handouts distributed in class. (This means that merely recommended readings will NOT be covered on exams.)

To encourage keeping up with the reading class by class and week by week, there will be a class participation component of your grade. At each class meeting, there will be class discussion for half or more of the class, always on questions posed in advance of class (and relating to the readings assigned for that class). This class discussion usually will take place at the start of class, before the instructor's lecture starts, but sometimes will occur at the mid-way point. During lectures, you are always encouraged to interject questions and comment. I will take notes after every class on the class discussion, and the quality and frequency of your contributions to discussion will be the basis of your class participation grade.

The weekly discussion paper examines one line of thought or argument or claim made in a course reading for that day (the day you are turning in the paper). In the paper you can highlight something in the reading you think would be a good focus for class discussion. You can present a claim or argument advanced by the course author. You can raise an objection to what the author is saying, or defend a controversial claim in the reading against some possible objection. You have a lot of choice as to what to do in the short paper. Trying to summarize the entire reading in a one-page paper is probably not a good idea, but you might summarize and clarify an argument in the reading that seems complicated or pivotal or both. The weekly discussion paper is due at the start of class on either Tuesday or Thursday and should discuss some part of the assigned reading for that day.

**GRADING:** The writing assignment counts for 30 percent, the final exam for 40 percent, and class participation (along with weekly discussion papers) for 30 percent of your overall course grade.

#### **Schedule of lecture/discussion topics and readings.**

**Readings marked with asterisk (\*) are from the two assigned books available at the Bookstore. All other readings are available at the course TED page.**

Week 1. January 5-11.

TUES: Introduction to moral theory. Introduction to David Gauthier, who affirms: **Rational morality tells us to conform to constraints on the pursuit of one's self-interest that advance one's self-interest.**

Reading: D. Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement*, chapter 1 and chapter 2.

THUR: Puzzles of rational choice; the idea of rational choice when one is interacting with others and the outcomes of choice are uncertain. Reading: Gauthier, chapter 3 and chapter 4. Recommended reading: Gauthier, chapter 5.

Week 2. January 12-18

TUES: Gauthier on the rationality of (a) disposing oneself to cooperate in single play Prisoners' Dilemma and (b) cooperating in single play Prisoners' Dilemma. Reading: Gauthier, chapter 6. Also Gregory Kavka, "The Toxin Puzzle."

THUR: Conclusion of morality as rational advancement of self-interest discussion. Criticisms of Gauthier. Reading: Gregory Kavka, "The Reconciliation Project."

Week 3. January 19-25

TUES: **What is self-interest? What is the good life for a person?** Three views: hedonism, desire satisfaction, and objective list. Reading: Derek Parfit, "What Makes Someone's Life Go Best?," appendix to Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*. Also Robert Nozick, "The Experience Machine." Also \*\*Ben Bradley, "Well-Being," chapter 1 of *Well-Being and Death*. Recommended reading: Roger Crisp, "Hedonism Reconsidered."

THUR: Desire satisfaction and human good. Reading: Wayne Sumner, "Welfare and Happiness"; also Peter Railton, "Facts and Values." Recommended reading: Chris Heathwood, "Desire-Fulfillment Theory."

Week 4. January 26-February 1

TUES: Objective list accounts of human good and perfectionism. Hybrid views. Reading: Thomas Hurka, "Objective List Theories" (section 1 only—pages 1-4). Recommended Reading: Robert Adams, "Well-Being and Excellence."

THUR: Death. Reading: Bradley, *Well-Being and Death*, chapters 2 and 3. Also T. Nagel, "Death."

Week 5. February 2-8.

TUES: More on death. Reading: \*\*Bradley, *Well-Being and Death*, chapters 4 and 5.

THUR: Another view of rationality and morality: **Rational morality tells us to advance the common good (everyone's self-interest). Utilitarianism & consequentialism.** Reading: Russ Shafer-Landau, "Consequentialism: Its Nature and Attractions" (chapter 9 of his *The Methods of Ethics*).

Week 6. February 9-15.

TUES: Utilitarianism and consequentialism: Objections and replies. Reading: Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality"; also R. M. Hare; "The Archangel and the Prole."

THUR: Another view of rationality and morality: **Moral rights. Rational morality tells us to respect each person's moral rights.** Reading: Robert Nozick, "Moral Constraints and Moral Goals"; also Judith Thomson, "Tradeoffs," from her *The Realm of Rights*. Recommended reading: Judith Thomson, "Duties," from her *The Realm of Rights*.

Week 7. February 16-22.

TUES: More on moral rights. The nature of persons; what makes a being a possessor of moral rights. Reading: Peter Singer, "Speciesism and Moral Status."

THUR: Amartya Sen. Rights as constraints and goals. Reading: Amartya Sen, "Rights and Agency," sections 1-4 only.

Week 8. February 23-March 1.

TUES: Contractualism. **Rational morality requires conformity to rules that no one has reason to reject.** Scanlon: Well-being is not so important. Reading: Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, chapter 3.

THUR: Contractualism. Scanlon's view. Reading:\*\* Scanlon, chapters 4 & 5. Recommended reading: Alastair Norcross: Comparing Harms: Headaches and Human Lives.

Week 9. March 2-8.

TUES: **Responsibility. What makes us blameworthy or praiseworthy?** Reading: J. Smart, "Free Will, Praise and Blame," P. F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment."

THUR: Responsibility, substantive and attributive. Scanlon's view. Reading: \*\*Scanlon, chapter 6.

Week 10. March 9-15..

TUES: **Responsibility as substantive obligation. What are my obligations when I don't make a difference to what comes about?** Reading: J. Glover, "It makes No Difference Whether or Not I do It"; also Christopher Kutz, chapters 4 and 5 of his *Complicity*.

THUR: Relativism and skepticism. **Is there a rational morality?** Reading: \*\*Scanlon, chapter 8; also John Mackie, "The Subjectivity of Values.