Learn Site
The Learn site for this course is your main source of information and course content. Please make sure you familiarise yourself with the site and check it regularly.

People

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**Practical Information**

**Office Hours**

See Learn

**Seminar and Tutorial**

See Learn

You will have a **tutorial** each week. Please stick to the group that you are officially in.

**Overview**

In this course we focus on the branch of moral philosophy known as normative ethics. Normative ethics focuses on the questions `How ought I to live and act?`. Normative ethical theories attempt, for the most part, to provide answers to these questions which tell us both *which* acts are right, and/or *which* lives ethically good, and, more importantly, *what it is that makes it the case that* these acts are right, and/or these lives good. Why is it right to e.g. help refugees crossing the channel, *why* is best to live the virtuous life?

One way of thinking about normative ethical theories is that they involve the search for the fundamental moral principle or principles. For example, **Utilitarians** argue that right acts are those that maximize happiness for the greatest number; and **Virtue Ethicists** argue that the best life to live is the fully virtuous life.

In this course we’ll examine the dominant traditions in **normative ethical theory**, focusing on both the core historical texts (for example the works of Mill, Kant and Aristotle) as well as contemporary works. But we’ll also be taking a step back and reflecting on the extent to which we should expect philosophy to be able to provide universal and general theoretical answers to the questions of how we should act and live.

To that end we will examine to prominent critiques of normative ethical theories: Williams’s **anti-theory** and Dancy’s **moral particularism**. Both Williams and Dancy argue, though in significantly different ways, that the prospects for normative ethical theories are dim.

One of the things that Williams is concerned to show is that all attempts to provide a universal foundation for normative ethical theories fail. Dancy, on the other hand, makes the provocative claim that there are no true moral principles. If he’s correct, theories that aim to provide fundamental moral principles are thus doomed to fail. Both Williams and Dancy do have positive claims to make about the nature of ethics however, and we’ll be looking at their positive accounts as well as their critiques of normative theory.

**Course aims and objectives**

All in all, this course will encourage you to reflect on and work out the answers that you think are most plausible to two of the most important questions for human life: how you should live and act.

It provides a systematic comparison of some of the major normative traditions. The organizing theme will be the debate between theory and anti-theory in normative ethics. To that end we will spend some time on Williams’ seminal work in this area: *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.
Broadly speaking, there are some (e.g. Mill and Kant) who think that philosophy can give us theories that answer the questions of how we ought to live and act; and there are some (e.g. Williams, Dancy and, on some interpretations, Aristotle) who think that such theories are not possible.

More specifically, the course aims and objectives are:
1. To learn about the main normative ethical approaches
2. To see how they have been, and could be, applied to practical ethical questions.
3. To understand how and why they support similar and different verdicts.
4. To read classic works in ethics
5. To think about difficult practical questions and be able to defend one’s view.

**Intended learning outcomes**
By the end of this course, students should:
- Have a grasp of fundamental issues and views in normative theory and anti-theory
- Be able to critically analyse and engage with literature by key philosophers in this field.
- Be able to present arguments clearly and concisely both within a classroom context and in an essay.
- Gain transferable skills in research, analysis and argumentation

**Syllabus**

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<td>Williams against Utilitarianism</td>
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**Assessment**

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<tr>
<td>Mid-term essay 1500 words</td>
<td>30%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Final essay 2000</td>
<td>65%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
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**Essay topics and participation requirements will be posted on Learn.**

Information regarding Assessment, Feedback and Student Support can be found here: [https://www.ed.ac.uk/ppls/philosophy/current/undergraduate/handbooks](https://www.ed.ac.uk/ppls/philosophy/current/undergraduate/handbooks)
Reading List
Listed below are the topics and readings, organized by week.

The required readings are necessary background reading for the seminar and are the focus for the tutorial.

Further readings are to learn more about the topic and to start your research if thinking of writing an essay on a particular topic, or to discuss with your ALG. Some are included on this list. From time to time, more may be posted on the Learn site depending on the interests of the class. You are also encouraged to do your own research. Good resources/starting points are the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy and the online Philosophical Papers, both of which can be easily searched by topic.

You *must* do the required reading for the seminar and the tutorial. You are not required to read everything, or any particular thing, on the further readings list. Be guided by your interests here. You are also encouraged to do your own research beyond this list, especially for your essays.

Accessing Readings
Most readings are available online or online though the library website, or in the library. Only readings not accessible in these ways will be uploaded to the Learn page.

Background Reading
“Ethics” entry in the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Week 1 Introduction to Normative Ethics: Socrates’ Question

- Required:
  B. Williams ‘Socrates’ Question’ Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, Chapter one.

- Secondary:
  J. Driver Ethics: the Fundamentals, chapter one of her ‘The challenge to moral universalism’ (Blackwell, 2007)

Week 2: Consequentialism

- Required:
  J. S. Mill Utilitarianism (chapter 3 optional)

- Secondary:
  Brink, D ‘Mill’s Moral and Political Philosophy’ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
Week 3: Kant’s Ethics

- **Required:**
  Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, (Chapter one and chapter two)

- **Secondary:**
  Korsgaard, C. *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), ch. 2 & 3
  Rae Langton, ‘Maria von Herbert’s challenge to Kant’
  https://lms.manhattan.edu/pluginfile.php/41280/mod_resource/content/1/Langton%20von%20Herbert%20and%20Kant.pdf

Week 4: Contractualism

- **Required:**
  T. Scanlon ‘The Structure of Contractualism’ in *What We Owe To Each Other*.

- **Secondary:**

**Week 5: Virtue Ethics**

- **Required:**

- **Secondary:**

**Week 6: Williams against Utilitarianism**

- **Required:**
  B. Williams ‘A Critique of Utilitarianism’ in Smart and Williams *Utilitarianism For and Against*

- **Secondary:**
  Smart, J.J.C & Williams, B. *Utilitarianism For and Against*
Week 7: Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy I

- **Required:**
  B. Williams, Chapters two and three of *Ethics and the Limits and Philosophy*

- **Secondary:**
  Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 1
  Hurley, S ‘Commentary on “Martha Nussbaum: Non-relative Virtues, an Aristotelian Approach”’ in Nussbaum and Sen (eds) *The Quality of Life*.
  Williams, B. ‘Replies’ in *World, Mind, Ethics: Essays on the ethical philosophy of Bernard Williams*.

Week 8: Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy II

- **Required:**
  B. Williams, Chapters four and five of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*

- **Secondary:**
  *See also the readings and secondary readings for weeks 3&4*

Week 9: Particularism

- **Required:**
  J. Dancy ‘What are the Options’ Chapter one of *Ethics without Principles*

- **Secondary:**
  Vayrynen, P. ‘Moral Particularism” in the *Continuum Companion to Ethics*.
**Week 10: Particularism**

- **Required:**
  J. Dancy ‘Holism and its Consequences’ Chapter five of *Ethics without Principles*

- **Secondary:**

**Week 11: Review**