Course aims and objectives

The topic of this course is normative ethics, a branch of philosophy that aims to answer the questions ‘how should I act?’ and ‘how should I live?’. We will survey and contrast some of the major normative traditions.

Our organising theme will be the debate between theory and anti-theory in normative ethics. Broadly speaking, there are some ‘pro theory’ philosophers (for example 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 other ‘anti-theory’ philosophers (for example Williams, Dancy, and on some interpretations Aristotle) who think that such theories are not possible.

More specifically, the course objectives are:

1. To teach you about the main normative ethical approaches.
2. To see how these approaches have been and could be applied to practical ethical questions.
3. To understand how and why these approaches support similar and different verdicts on various practical ethical questions.
4. To gain familiarity with and understanding of classic works in ethics.
5. To think critically about practical ethical questions.

Intended learning outcomes

By the end of the 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 in discussion and in a writing.
- Gain transferable skills in research, analysis and argumentation.

Assessment

85% of the grade for the course will be determined by the grade for a 2,500 word essay. 10% will be determined by the grade for a detailed plan for that essay. 5% will be given for participation in online discussion.
You may make up your own question for the essay, so long as you clear it with me in advance. However, I will also provide some questions that you can use if you wish.

There will also be an opportunity to write a formative 2,500 essay as practice for the official graded essay. This essay can be handed to me for feedback, but will not receive a mark, and will not contribute to your grade.

Formative essay due date: 7th March.
Graded essay due date: 23rd April.

**Syllabus**

Each week of the course will focus on a particular topic. That topic will be covered in the weekly online lecture. The topic will also be discussed in the online seminar for that week, with a particular focus on the required reading for that seminar. A list of the topics and required reading for each week is below (additional can be found on Learn).

We will alternate between asynchronous and synchronous seminars. Asynchronous seminars take the form of discussions on online forums, while synchronous seminars take the form of joint live discussions on Blackboard.

**Introduction**

Week 1: 16/01/2019 3pm Wednesday. Introduction to normative ethics: Socrates’ Question (synchronous seminar)

- Bernard Williams, ‘Socrates’ Question’ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Chapter one.

**Part one: theory**

Week 2: 25/01/2019 6pm Friday Consequentialism (synchronous seminar)

- J. S. Mill *Utilitarianism* (chapter 3 is optional)

Week 3: Kant’s ethics (asynchronous seminar)

- Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, chapters one and two

Week 4: 6/2/2019 3pm Wednesday. Contractualism (synchronous seminar)

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

Week 5: Virtue ethics (asynchronous seminar)


18th – 22nd February. Flexible learning week. No classes.
Part two: anti-theory

Week 6: 1/3/2019 6pm Friday Williams against utilitarianism (synchronous seminar)
   Bernard Williams ‘A Critique of Utilitarianism’ in Smart and Williams Utilitarianism For and Against

Week 7: Ethics and the limits of philosophy (asynchronous seminar)
   Bernard Williams, Chapters two and three of his Ethics and the Limits and Philosophy

Week 8: 13/03/2019 3pm Wednesday Ethics and the limits of philosophy (synchronous seminar)
   Bernard Williams, Chapters four and five of his Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy

Week 9: Moral particularism (asynchronous seminar)
   Jonathan Dancy ‘What are the Options’ Chapter one of his Ethics without Principles

Week 10: 29/03/2019 6pm Friday Moral particularism (synchronous seminar)
   Jonathan Dancy ‘Holism and its Consequences’ Chapter five of his Ethics without Principles

Week 11: Review (asynchronous seminar)
   No required reading