

Ethics

Phil 418w
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park campus
Fall Semester, 25 Aug – 12 Dec 2014
MWF 2.30-3.20p, 101 Electrical Engineering West

Instructor: Christopher Moore

Department of Philosophy
Office: Sparks 243
Phone: 814-865-1607 (office)
Email: c.moore@psu.edu
Office Hours: W 1.15-2.15p, F 12.15-1.15p, and by appointment

Required Texts

Bookstore

Iris Murdoch, *Existentialism and Mystics* (Penguin, 978-0140264920)
Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, 978-0268035044)
Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard, 978-0674268586)
Harry Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love* (Princeton, 978-0691126241)
Alain de Botton, *On Love* (Grove, 978-0802142405)
Edward St. Aubyn, *The Patrick Melrose Novels* (Picador, 978-0312429966)
Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (Vintage, 978-0345807298)

Articles

Distributed during the semester; listed in course schedule.

Course

This course examines the connections between moral theory/ethical reflection and other philosophical questions, including those of virtue, love, authenticity, knowledge, free will, personhood, responsibility, and happiness.

College courses on ethics often organize themselves around the following question: “what should I do?” or less individualistically, “what should *we* do?” Such courses rarely try to answer the question directly, as though the teacher or students knew *how* to answer it. Instead they usually study how other serious thinkers have tried to answer it. More precisely, they usually study how these thinkers have argued about the *possibility* of answering it. After all, the chance to know what to do seems to depend on knowing that there really exists something best, or least bad, to do, and a way of figuring it out, and of demonstrating to skeptics and naysayers that you really have figured it out. Such a college course, then, may start with a historical and interpretative effort, determining whom to study, and what the chosen authors are saying; proceed to a systematic effort,

coordinating the subsidiary and underlying ethical and non-ethical questions; advance to an evaluative effort, judging the relative success of these various thinkers' theories; and conclude in a practical effort, applying lessons of the class to the students' potential future actions. This practical component looks to be the most personally relevant part of the class; the orienting question was, after all, about one's own (private or concerted) action. We all live by facing an open field of options we must decide between. We suspect that ethical considerations undergird the best decision-making, and so we want to know *what* those considerations are, *how* we discover them, and *when* we ought to follow them.

But asking "what should I do?" is not the only ethically salient question. That question assumes a particular perspective: practical, future-oriented, action-guiding. Yet our ethical life, indeed our life in general, is not limited to picking between multiple open choices. Much living proceeds as it were without remarkable, puzzling, or anxiety-inducing decision-making. We often act from habit, or by making unconscious decisions, or by following the easily-calculated best choice without a moment's hesitation, or hastily, or unwittingly. The fact that we do not feel ourselves in the midst of constant intellectual turmoil does not mean, however, that we do not find ourselves in the midst of constant ethical reflection. It means only that ethical reflection has more than a "shall I do this or that" decision-function.

Much ethical reflection actually looks backwards, either distantly or to the just-eclipsed present. We are struck by something we've done or are doing—often because someone has drawn our attention to it, and called us to account, or because conscience strikes—and we ask ourselves the following question: "what was/am I doing?" That is, we ask ourselves what exactly we've done, what reasons we may have had to do it, whether those reasons were/are any good, what the consequences of our actions are, whether we're responsible for those consequences, whether we want to be responsible for them, and so forth. In other words, we find ourselves caught up in the stream of life, acting in various ways prompted by our situation, mood, calculation, principles, and experience, and afterward, or in the middle of things, we wonder what we just did was all about.

Indeed, we ask not just "what am I doing?" but "what do I *mean* to be doing?" Our actions and intentions have meaning to us. Actions get things done, but they also express us, represent us, indeed *constitute* us. To an important extent, we are what we mean to be. In the less reflective moments in the course of life, we may care little what we mean to be doing, or even who we are. But when we worry that we have done something wrong, or untoward, or presumptuous, then we do wonder about the connection between what we have done and what we meant to do. Our effort to be the kind of person we want to be becomes an ethical matter.

This course on ethics will study the relationship between these questions—"what ought I do?" and "what did I mean to do?" At the core of this relationship is a concern for self-constitution, agency, and autonomy. More generally, this course studies, as a central topic of ethics, how we grow up to be the people we judge we should be.

We will read some of the best recent books and articles in English-language moral philosophy, including some work on “practical rationality,” the study of the grounds for our acting reasonably. Our authors have a range of influences, from Plato and Aristotle, to natural law and Kant and Wittgenstein. But ethical inquiry concerns living a human life well, and the best inquiries into the moral complexity of life come in literary fiction. We will thus study four recent English-language works: a short story, a novella, a narrative meditation, and a novel. These works depict the sorts of ethical reflection on maturity, self-esteem, and choice-making on which our philosophical texts dwell.

The semester’s reading falls naturally into five basic themes. We will discuss the meaning and relevance of these themes as we reach them.

Class time

This writing-intensive seminar will mix lecture, large-group conversation, concerted talk about essay-writing, and small-group directed interpretation assignments; the last of these may be the most philosophically-rigorous and useful activity of the class. You are required to attend each class, be prepared to discuss the reading, take notes, and participate in a way that advances your understanding and skills. Failures to meet any of these requirements may contribute to a grade lowered by up to two letters. Each excusable absence requires a one-page, 1.5 spaced, hard-copy paper analyzing the day’s reading turned in by the Monday class following your absence to avoid penalty.

Papers

There will be eight papers. Each is to be written in 12 point Times New Roman, with 1” margins all around, 1.5 spaced, and on only as many sides of paper as are assigned. In the “header” area of your document, include your name, Phil 103w, name of assignment, and date. At the top of your essay include an informative title of your choosing. Double-sided printing is appreciated but not required. Failure to format assignments correctly will result in your paper being returned to you with no grade. I will accept no more than one paper late in the semester, with prior permission, at a penalty of one grade letter per day late, and with a maximum lateness to be discussed between us. The score of each paper depends on the quality of writing, thinking, reading, and, if relevant, revision that it displays. I list a few examples of such quality:

- Writing: clear and appropriate organization; definite thesis; absence of spelling, grammatical, and usage errors; and responsiveness to the prompt.
- Thinking: coherent argumentative structure; exactitude of discussion and avoidance of ambiguity or vagueness; sensitivity to nuance, difference, and value; creative and imaginative interpretation; sympathetic presentation of opposing or parallel views.
- Reading: evidence of having read the entire work with care; attention both to detail and general thrust of the work; charitable reconstruction of the author’s claims.
- Revision: conscientious response to every comment provided; incorporation of any further discussion of topic in class; self-generated improvement of content/form.

Paper 1 [one page with revision, 15pts]

Relate the sermon that Frank reports to the rest of Wolff's story. Consider especially the way the overt moral dilemma in the train story brings out the more subtle moral texture at play in Frank and Frances' life now and in the past.

Paper 2 [one page with revision, 15pts]

Indicate the most important conclusions or insights of Thomson's article (whether or not she explicitly states them) and give a precise description of the argument by which she supports those conclusions or articulates those insights.

Paper 3 [three pages, 20pts]

Discuss Frankfurt and Velleman's respective accounts of the essence of love, especially by explaining why they count as merely adjunct or contingent many elements people often include in that essence (which elements you should list and speculate why they are often included). Then identify the most significant points of agreement and disagreement they might each have with de Botton's analysis of love (which you should spell out very efficiently), particularly in terms of your choice of ethical ramifications.

Paper 4 [two pages, 20pts]

Suppose Patrick Melrose is badly late to a dinner-date for reasons connected to his drug use. A sympathetic friend says, "Look, whatever happened, it's got to be *his addiction that made him* late." But having read Frankfurt, Schapiro, Korsgaard, and St. Aubyn, we might think that his friend puts the matter much too simplistically, and thus too readily releases Melrose from responsibility. Making precise and comprehensive use of our readings from this section, and the description of drug addiction in St. Aubyn's book, offer a better way to make sense of and evaluate Melrose's tardiness to the dinner.

Paper 5 [two pages with revision, 30pts]

Protagoras (as we read, *Prot.* 334a4-c4) says that what's good depends on what benefits a person or thing given his/her/its situation. G.E. Moore (per Murdoch, pp. 300-1), by contrast, says that the good is "a supersensible reality... a mysterious quality, unrepresentable and indefinable, [etc.]." Nearly all of the six essays by Iris Murdoch we've read try to explicate the nature of the good. With as much precision, definiteness, and breadth of reliance on her essays as you can muster, set out Murdoch's view of the good and, if helpful, the views against which she would contrast her own view.

Paper 6 [three pages, 25pts]

On MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, prompt to be distributed.

Paper 7 [three pages, 25pts]

On Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, prompt to be distributed.

Final Paper [five pages, 50pts]

In *The Circle*, the protagonist comes to articulate three ethical precepts: "Secrets are lies. Sharing is Caring. Privacy is theft." Give the best reasons for holding these precepts as valuable, and then evaluate them in light of the other readings for this class.

Logistics

Grades

A 187-200 – Extraordinary	C 147-153 – Acceptable
A- 180-186	C- 140-146
B+ 174-179	D+ 134-139
B 167-173 – Good	D 127-133 – Minimal pass
B- 160-166	D- 120-126
C+ 154-159	F 000-119 – Fail

Technology

Please check class-related emails each weekday, and respond promptly. I will do the same. I will email you additional handouts if I do not distribute paper copies. Please check with fellow students to ensure you have not missed any handouts.

Under no conditions may you look at or touch a mobile device during the class period, unless you request and I grant permission before that class; failure to follow this rule may result in a multi-letter lowering of your course grade.

Accessibility

Penn State welcomes students with disabilities into the University's educational programs. If you have a disability-related need for reasonable academic adjustments in this course, contact the Office for Disability Services (ODS) located in Boucke Building Room 116 at 814-863-1807(V/TTY). For further information regarding ODS, please visit their web site at equity.psu.edu/ods/. I should be notified as early in the semester as possible regarding the need for reasonable academic adjustments.

Cheating

Academic dishonesty in any portion of the academic work for this course shall be grounds for failing the entire course and communication of dishonesty to the College. This includes, but is not restricted to, any plagiarism on any paper. Plagiarism includes, among other things, not citing text, paraphrases, or ideas taken from any assigned or unassigned reading, or other students' comments or papers. Please ask about any case you're concerned about. For details on the PSU policy, see psu.edu/oue/aappm/G-9.html.

Reading and Assignment Schedule

	<u>TYPES OF MORAL QUESTIONS</u>
AugM 25	Syllabus. Start of introductions. Listen to T. Wolff, "The Night in Question"
W 27	Types of moral questions, and ways to discuss them.
	Due: Paper 1.

- Fr 29 Reread: Wolff, "The Night in Question"
Moral intuitions about what to do. One view of ethics: cause the least harm.
Thought-experiments. The deployment of moral concepts: 'rights,' 'actions.'
Read: Thomson, "The Trolley Problem"
Due: Paper 2.
- Sep M 01 [Memorial Day: No Class]
W 03 The meaning of life, and its connection to morality.
Read: Frankfurt, "The Question, 'How Should We Live?'"
Receive comments on Papers 1 & 2.
- LOVE AND COMMITMENT
- F 05 The mysteries of love.
Read: de Botton, *On Love*, pp. 1-76
- M 08 Love as meaning-making.
Read: Frankfurt, "On Love, and Its Reasons"
Due: Revisions of Paper 1 and Paper 2
- W 10 Love and illusion.
Read: de Botton, *On Love*, pp. 77-154
- F 12 The ideal of love.
Read: Velleman, "Love as a Moral Emotion"
- M 15 The narrative of love.
Read: de Botton, *On Love*, to end
- W 17 Self-love.
Read: Frankfurt, "The Dear Self"
- F 19 Love and the good.
Read: Murdoch, "On 'God' and 'Good'"
- M 22 Love and the ethical life.
Due: Paper 3
- SELF-CONSTITUTION AND ITS OBSTACLES
- W 24 Addiction and the problem of autonomy.
Read: St. Aubyn, *Bad News*, first half
- F 26 Maturity and personhood.
Read: Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person"
- M 29 The struggle for personhood.
Read: St. Aubyn, *Bad News*, to end
- Oct W 01 Kantian ethics.
Read: Velleman, "A Brief Introduction to Kantian Ethics"
- F 03 Growing up.
Read: Schapiro, "What is a Child?"
- M 06 Agency.
Read: Korsgaard, "Self-constitution in the ethics of...", pp. 100-20
- W 08 Agency, II.
Read: Korsgaard, "Self-constitution in the ethics of...", to end
- F 10 The paradoxes of self-constitution.
Due: Paper 4

CRITIQUE AND REVISION

- M 13 Morality as action or the inner life.
Read: Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection"
- W 15 Seeing what's good like seeing what's beautiful.
Read: Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts"
- F 17 Religion and morality
Read: Murdoch, "Above the Gods"
- M 20 The language of morality
Read: Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality"
- W 22 Art, vision, and morality.
Read: Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good"
- F 24 Murdoch on the "good"
Due: Paper 5
- M 27 Moral disagreement.
Read: MacIntyre, 1-35
- W 29 History and the Enlightenment.
Read: MacIntyre, 36-61
Receive comments on Paper 5
- F 31 Modernity and morality.
Read: MacIntyre, 62-87
- NovM 03 Aristotle, Nietzsche, and the present age.
Read: MacIntyre, 88-120
Due: Revision of Paper 5
- W 05 A return to the ancients.
Read: MacIntyre, 121-145
- F 07 A diagnosis of our discontents. MacIntyre's view.
Read: MacIntyre, 226-243
Due: Paper 6
- M 10 Read: Williams, 1-29
- W 12 Read: Williams, 30-70
- F 14 Read: Williams, 71-119
- M 17 Read: Williams, 120-155
- W 19 Read: Williams, 156-196
- F 21 **Due: Paper 7**

[Thanksgiving Week: No Class]

ETHICS WITHOUT PRIVACY

- DecM 01 Read: Eggers, *The Circle*, pp. 1-200
- W 03 Read: Eggers, *The Circle*, pp. 201-250
- F 05 Read: Eggers, *The Circle*, pp. 250-300

M 08

Read: Eggers, *The Circle*, pp. 301-400

W 10

Read: Velleman, "The Genesis of Shame"

F 12

Read: Eggers, *The Circle*, 401 to end

End of finals period **Due: Final Paper**