

PHIL 334
Winter 2014
MW 4 – 5:25 pm
lecture hall: Arts W-125

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Ethical Theory

Prerequisite: one of PHIL 230 (Introduction to Moral Philosophy), PHIL 237 (Contemporary Moral Issues), PHIL 242 (Introduction to Feminist Theory), PHIL 343 (Biomedical Ethics); or written permission of the instructor.

This is a *second* course in ethics, intended for students with prior university coursework in moral philosophy. One of the above-listed prerequisites is *mandatory*; if you lack the prerequisite you may not take the course without my written permission.

This course offers an introduction to contemporary moral theory through study of some prominent strands in the analytic moral philosophy literature. The readings—which average 50-60 pages a week—consist of articles from philosophical journals and selections from recent books, almost all dating from the last thirty years or so. We begin with contemporary *consequentialism*, which holds that the right action in any given situation is the one with the best consequences. Consequentialist theories are to be contrasted with *deontological* moral views, which maintain that actions are right or wrong not in virtue of their consequences but simply because of their *intrinsic features*—simply because of the *kinds* of acts they are. *Pluralist* moral theories propose a plurality of moral duties or morally relevant properties which must be weighed against each other in individual cases. They can thus be seen as pointing toward *virtue ethics*, a family of theories which, rather than proposing free-standing rules of conduct, seek instead to understand the central moral categories in terms of the idea of a virtuous agent. We will end with a brief look at *moral particularism*, the view that there are no general truths in ethics at all.

We will examine defenses of and objections to all the types of theory just mentioned in the course of the term. Our primary aim will be to investigate the merits and failings of different moral theories (in their contemporary guises), but we will also pay some attention to the *methodology* of moral theorizing.

Required Texts

The required readings for this course are contained in a) two books, which are available for purchase at Paragraph Books and on reserve at Redpath Library:

- *Consequentialism and Its Critics*, ed. Samuel Scheffler (Oxford, 1988)
 - *Moral Theory: An Introduction*, by Mark Timmons, 2nd edition (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013)
- b) a course pack containing further required articles and book chapters selected by the instructor (available for purchase at the McGill Bookstore); and
- c) a list (with hyperlinks) of required readings that are available online.

There is also one supplementary recommended text (which is available for purchase at Paragraph Books and on reserve at Redpath Library):

• *Writing Philosophy: A Guide for Canadian Students*, ed. Vaughn and McIntosh (OUP Canada, 2009)

Group Discussion

Group discussion will be an important component of the course, and attendance at these discussions is mandatory. The class will be divided up into small groups of five or six for the weekly in-class group discussions and will proceed to discuss two questions on the week's readings posted by the instructor. A class-wide exchange of views from the different groups will follow. Each week, each group will select a "secretary/spokesperson" to take notes on the group's discussion and to speak for the group in the class-wide exchange. That person will later turn in a two-page paper based on the discussion. An information sheet with further details of the group discussions and the papers based on them will be distributed before the first group discussion.

Course Requirements

- i) a midterm paper of approx. six pages, worth 30% of your final mark;
- ii) a final paper of approx. ten pages, worth 50% of your final mark;
- iii) two group discussion papers, each of two to two-and-a-half pages and each worth 10% of your final mark. Further specifications for these papers will be given on a separate handout.

Your attendance at and participation in the group discussions may be used as a further deciding factor if your mark is borderline.

Late papers will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a grade per calendar day (e.g., from a B to a B- after one calendar day of lateness). No extensions on the papers will be granted, save for the following case: requests for extensions will be *considered* (but not automatically granted) when requested at least one business day before the paper is due and substantiated at the time of request by a medical note documenting illness.

The use of electronic devices in class is forbidden (unless I have granted you an individual accommodation for a valid academic or medical reason). In particular, all of the following are forbidden:

- using or holding handheld devices such as cell phones
- wearing earbuds or headphones
- using a computer

Students who are seen to be violating this policy will be asked to exit the lecture or conference in question.

The University requires that the following notices appear on every syllabus:

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.