

Ethical Naturalism

PHIL G4265

Spring 2010 • Tuesdays 2:10-4:00 • Philosophy 716

Professor D. Sidorsky

This course is intended primarily as a Seminar rather than as a course of lectures. The topics that are to be covered in the course are stated below on the assumption that each session (with probable overlapping and some adjustment) will be devoted to one of these topics. The class presentation of the first few topics will be made by the instructor. During those weeks, the students are requested to choose topics for their own presentation for the subsequent class sessions. The syllabus contains some minimal bibliographical guidance and a course reader has been prepared which includes some relevant required readings for each of the topics. The course reader is available for purchase at the Village Copier, which is located on the east side of Broadway between 111th and 112th street.

In addition, any other bibliographical materials that are most used for the student's presentation will be distributed to the class in advance of the presentation. An alternative procedure which involves a greater proportion of class lecture is also available as an option for covering these materials, subject to discussion by the class.

THE GRAND TRADITION OF ETHICAL NATURALISM AND ITS MINIMALIST RESURRECTION

The course opens with an introductory discussion of the nature of Ethical Naturalism and Ethical non-Naturalism. This discussion seeks to provide an interpretation of the scope of the thesis of ethical naturalism in the history of philosophy. It also seeks to develop an understanding of the significance of the twentieth-century debate over Ethical Naturalism.

PART I. Ethical Naturalism in the Ancient world

Topic 1. The birth of Ethical Naturalism in Pre-Socratic Greek Philosophy. The significance for ethics of the view that the universe is a "cosmos." A set of readings is available to the class as background for this topic, which includes an interpretation of Greek ethical naturalism from Waerner Jaeger's *Paideia* Volume I.

Topic 2. The debate over *Physis* versus *Nomos* in early Greek philosophy: (a) an account of the ethical claims of various Sophists ranging from ethical conventionalism or ethical relativism to a form of "Nietzschean" naturalism; (b) the relevance of two themes of Socrates for ethical naturalism, that is, the "real definition" of moral terms and the claim that evil is the result of error or ignorance; and (c) the Platonic development of morality in accordance with "Pythagorean" Naturalism, particularly in Books VI-VIII of *The Republic*.

Topic 3. The classic construction of Ethical Naturalism in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: the significance of the replacement of Pythagorean *Physis* by the physics and the biology of Aristotle.

Topic 4. Ethical naturalism in Hellenistic philosophy: the interpretation of the criterion of acting according to Nature in Cynicism, Cyrenaicism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism. The development of the concept of natural law in Stoicism.

PART II: Ethical Naturalism in medieval and modern philosophy

Topic 5. The rationalist interpretation of natural law in the Thomistic tradition. The persistence of doctrines of natural law through the modern age with special reference to the challenge of legal positivism in the debates between H.L.A. Hart, Lon Fuller and John Finnis.

Topic 6. Spinoza's *Ethics* is examined as the modern reformulation of Ethical Naturalism. Three themes that require explication in Spinoza's Ethical Naturalism are the formula of "*Deus sive natura*," the significance of the concept of *conatus*, and the reinterpretation of freedom in a deterministic universe. Among the Spinoza commentaries, Stuart Hampshire's *Spinoza*, in particular, provides a discussion of these three themes and reflects his own sympathy for forms of ethical naturalism.

Topic 7. The significance for Ethical Naturalism of the shift from Natural Law to Natural Rights. Some account is to be provided of the multiplicity of natural rights theories in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but the focus is on the epistemological difficulties of the thesis of natural rights. Some of these arguments are summarized in D. Sidorsky's "Contemporary Reinterpretations of the Concept of Human Rights." The justification of current programs which derive moral claims from claims of human rights rather than from claims of interests, utilities, welfare, institutional responsibility or ultimate ends is a related aspect of contemporary ethical naturalism.

Topic 8. Hume's skeptical critique of natural law and of natural rights as a prolegomenon to the conservation of Ethical Naturalism derived from the sentiments that constitute the "fabric of the human species." The textual source for this topic is Hume's *Treatise on Human Nature* and there is a defensive account of Hume's Naturalism in D. Sidorsky's "Incomplete Routes to Moral Objectivity: Four Variants of Naturalism."

Topic 9. Utilitarianism represents the most popular version of Ethical Naturalism throughout the modern period. The varieties of utilitarianism from Bentham, Mill, Sifgwick, and rule utilitarianism need to be differentiated. The major arguments for the support and the refutation of Utilitarianism will be the subject of class discussion.

Topic 10. The significance of Darwinism for Ethical Naturalism is a protean theme that has different lines of development in accordance with the interests of the students in the class.

Topic 11: An ancillary topic is Hegelian Marxist ethical historicism as a variant of ethical naturalism.

Topic 12: An ancillary topic is Nietzsche as an ethical naturalist.

PART III. Ethical Naturalism in twentieth-century philosophy

Topic 13. The Pragmatic ethical theory of John Dewey is a variant of Ethical Naturalism which sought to revise Ethical Naturalism through incorporating both what it conceived as the positive aspects of Darwinism and the failed features of Utilitarianism. The significance of Dewey's

ethical theory for his pragmatic philosophy can be studied through his account of “the construction of good” within the framework of his book The Quest for Certainty. Dewey’s *Theory of Valuation* also represented a Pragmatic response, formulated in a more linguistic idiom, to Logical Positivism.

The student interested in the ethical theory of pragmatism can also explore the neglected work of C.I. Lewis *The Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*.

Topic 14. Ethical Naturalism, Ordinary Language Analysis, and the primacy of Reasons. The linguistic criticism of the “fallacy” of Moore’s “naturalistic fallacy” brought about a resurrection of Ethical Naturalism on a linguistic basis. Two “classical” formulations of this thesis are Stuart Hampshire’s “Fallacies of Moral Philosophy” and Phillipa Foot’s “Moral Arguments.” The position is developed under the title of “Linguistic Naturalism” in the previously mentioned “Incomplete Routes to Moral Objectivity: Four Variants of Naturalism.”

Optional concluding topic in recent moral philosophy:

Topic 15. This topic aims at an exploration of the relationship between Ethical Naturalism and Ethical Realism. On the one hand, the rejection of Ethical Realism by J.L. Mackie, for example, provides a basis for criticism of Ethical Naturalism. In the other direction, John MacDowell has argued for Ethical Realism in a way which would support the more minimalist thesis of Ethical Naturalism. Simon Blackburn has developed a position which can be represented as a boundary thesis between ethical emotivism and ethical naturalism.