Topics in Ethics: Moral Justification and Ethical Naturalism
Professor D. Sidorsky

Spring 2012 - Tuesdays & Thursdays 1:10-2:25pm - 603 Hamilton

Syllabus

The text for the course, available in the Columbia Bookstore, is *Great Traditions in Ethics*, edited by Denise, Peterfreund and White. Unlike the text, which is organized chronologically, the first part of this course is organized topically and focuses upon four main "models" of moral justification. The text provides the core readings which will be analyzed and discussed during the term. There may be additional readings in Xeroxed selections for specific topics which will be distributed to the class.

The course is divided into two very different parts. The first part, usually until the midterm, has as its focus, as noted above, major models of moral justification throughout the history of philosophy. These include the *Model of Nature* that seeks to derive morality from Nature or Human Nature; the *Model of Reason* which argues that the presuppositions of human reason justify moral principles; the *Model of Sentiment* that locates the source of moral judgment in the universal sentiments of human beings and the *Model of History* that seeks to justify morality from the concept of evolution or progress that is manifest in historical activity.

The second part has as its focus the debate over "Ethical Naturalism" in twentieth-century ethical theory. Ethical Naturalism provides a route to moral objectivity but the course procedure does not investigate this route in direct terms but delineates ethical naturalism as a rejoinder to major twentieth-century ethical theories. The initiating point of departure is the criticism of ethical naturalism developed by G.E. Moore at the turn of the century in his *Principia Ethica*. It continues with such anti-naturalist developments as Ethical Emotivism in Logical Positivism, and Ethical Existentialism in Heidegger or Sartre. The critical examination of non-naturalist theories leads to the formulation of the ethical naturalist position in favor of moral objectivity. Although John Dewey's essay on Naturalism may be assigned if time permits, the Naturalistic theses are developed in class through the criticism of non naturalist positions, like those held by Moore, Ayer, Stevenson, and Sartre. Two essays in support of Ethical Naturalism by Stuart Hampshire and Phillippa Foot are made available for the class as optional readings.

The decision on the nature of the grading procedure is voted in class, but since the criterion requires at least two grades and some extrinsic motivation for student work, the vote has usually been projectible as supporting a midterm exam and a final exam.

INTRODUCTION
Preliminary class discussion of student views on the justification of everyday normative ethical claims. This involves preliminary examination of sources for moral justification from religious codes, customs and conventions, prejudices, psychological intuitions, and rationalizations. The issue of the grounds for student commitment to ethical relativism is also examined as a preamble to the arguments and texts of the course.

PART A: THE FOUR MODELS OF THE HISTORICAL TRADITION
The outline of topics approximates but does not coincide exactly with the outline of class lectures.

I. The model of Naturalism: moral justification through an appeal to the facts of Nature or of Human Nature
The assigned reading is the selection from the *Nicomachean Ethics* of Aristotle that is available in the course text; pagination of individual topics below will be provided in class.
1. Aristotle on human ends as a basis for morality
2. Aristotle's analysis of ends: pluralism, hierarchy, and the logic of a self-sufficient good
3. Happiness and the definition of virtue: the issue of <u>norms</u> as relative to biological human nature in the measure of human excellence
    (There is an assigned short theme on the issue of the relationship of norms to biological or to cultural human nature.)
4. The moral virtues and the doctrine of the "golden mean"
5. Aristotle on intellectual virtues: the issue of rationalism, elitism, and equality

II. The model of Rationalism: moral justification through rational presuppositions of moral discourse
The assigned reading is the selection from Kant's *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals* in the course text; pagination for the individual topics below will be provided in class.
1. Kant's criticism of classical naturalism and moral teleology: will, intention, and consequence in moral phenomenology
2. From moral phenomenology to a metaphysics of morals; analysis of the nature of a Kantian <u>metaphysical</u> argument
3. Kant on the role of imperatives in moral discourse; the Categorical Imperative and the criterion of universalizability
4. Class discussion of Kant's own illustrations of his moral principles
    (There is an assigned short theme on your analysis of any one of Kant's four illustrations)
5. The evaluation of two criticisms of Kantian ethics: the argument from equivocal description and the argument of tacit appeal to consequences
6. Kantian dualism and its significance for Enlightenment morality

III. The model of Sentiment: moral justification through an appeal to the nature of the human passions
The assigned reading is the selections from Hume in the course text; pagination for the individual topics below will be provided in class. It is possible that some additional texts from Hume's ethical writings will be distributed for this topic.
1. Hume's criticism of moral justifications that are derived from Reason, that is, relations of ideas and matters of fact
2. Hume on the derivation of morals from Sentiment
3. Humean philosophy as a mix of Skepticism and Conservationism: parallels on matter, mind, and causality
4. Moral objectivity in Hume via the thesis of universalizability or the "General Survey;" the illustration of the universalizability of secondary qualities like colors of objects

IV. The model of History: moral justification through an appeal to evolution or progress in history

The classic source for this paradigmatic position would be the philosophy of Hegel. For reasons of elucidation and time, there is no assigned reading in Hegel. Rather, the two class lectures and discussions are limited in their focus to the significance of two concepts of Hegelian thought for moral philosophy.

1. The Hegelian concept of Geist and its significance for moral relativism
2. The Hegelian concept of Dialectic and its significance for universalism, especially in the context of Nationalist and Marxist ideologies

The Midterm grade is usually based on the materials covered in Part A. This grade is determined by some form of examination or papers as voted by the majority of the class on the nominated options. If the class runs behind schedule, the midterm can take place, as decided, before Part A has been completed.

V. If we do not fall too far behind on the syllabus, there will be one class on the ways in which the four moral models studied find expression in key concepts of political morality, like rights, contracts and utility. These latter three concepts can be viewed as efforts to apply a morality of Nature, Reason, and Sentiment. The lecture explores this theme examining the hypothesis that rights are justified by an appeal to Nature and Reason, while contracts are justified by an appeal to Sentiment and Reason, and utility is justified by an appeal to Nature and Sentiment.

PART B: TWENTIETH-CENTURY ETHICAL THEORY
The rejection of the models of the tradition; the issue of Ethical Non-Naturalism or Ethical Naturalism; the analysis of moral language and the nature of moral justification

I. G.E. Moore and the critique of Ethical Naturalism
The assigned reading is the selection from Chapter One of *Principia Ethica* in the course text; pagination for the individual topics below will be provided in class.

1. Moore on the definition of Good
2. Moore on the "naturalistic fallacy;" class evaluation of Moore's thesis
3. The *alleged* significance of Moore's non-naturalism for moral intuitionism, for the ethics of Bloomsbury, and for ethical emotivism

II. Logical Positivism and the new basis for ethical emotivism and ethical non-cognitivism
The assigned reading combines two very well-known texts from A.J. Ayer and C.L. Stevenson; pagination for the individual topics below will be provided in class.

1. The nature and limits of all possible languages in Logical Positivism; the delineation of the domain of moral statements
2. Ayer's "critique of ethics;" the specific concept of a "pseudo-statement"
3. Stevenson on the nature of ethical disagreement
4. Class discussion that focuses on criticism of the positions of Ayer and Stevenson, with the possibility of an assigned theme on these criticisms

III. The ethics of Existentialism in the context of the denial of Naturalism
The assigned reading is the selections from Sartre in the course text; pagination for the individual topics below will be provided in class. There will be either a very short text from Heidegger or a photocopy of a longer text, depending on available class time as the term approaches its end.
1. Heidegger and the criticism of Aristotelian Naturalism
2. The significance of Sartre's definition of freedom for ethics
3. Attempts at reconciling Sartrean freedom with morality: authenticity, universalizability, responsibility, and commitment
4. Discussion of Naturalist criticisms of Existential ethics: the relationship between commitment and "reasons" in logic, science, ordinary imperatives, and ethics

IV. The analysis of the language of morality and the restoration of Naturalism
There is no assigned reading from the text for this topic. Lecture and discussion will be based mainly on arguments that are well-formulated in Philippa Foot's "Moral Arguments" and Stuart Hampshire's "Fallacies of Moral Philosophy." As noted above, these two papers are made available.
1. The analysis of ethical terms and their use; Linguistic Naturalism and the significance of the definition of Good in ordinary language, contra G.E. Moore
2. The subversion of Logical Positivism; the analysis of the meaning of *Good* in ordinary language; the analysis of moral vocabulary including "rights," "excuses," or "the Right" according to the method of John Austin.
3. The denial of moral relativism and moral emotivism; moral convergence or moral objectivity; the role of *reasons* in relationship to the "Good"

The main subject matter of this course concludes with Part B. On the assumption that each numbered topic requires a full class, the term will conclude upon the completion of Part B. In the unlikely event that the pace can be more rapid, there will be time for an examination of parts of the following topic. An announcement regarding the readings for Part C will be made in class.

PART C: "POSTMODERNIST" ETHICAL THEORY AND THE ISSUE OF PLURALISM WITHOUT RELATIVISM
Competing views of Perspectivism and pluralism: Foucault and I. Berlin.