

## Introduction to Ethical Theory

Sample syllabus

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### Course description

Questions about the nature of ethical goodness are philosophically vexing because ethical concepts are extremely abstract and difficult to define in terms of ordinary natural facts. As a result, ethical controversies are difficult to resolve, and disagreement among otherwise reasonable compatriots will run deep. At the same time, we have an urgent need for ethical guidance: our lives are multifaceted and we need principles to cut through life's complexities and give us direction.

This course will examine the philosophical root of the apparent unresolvability of ethical controversies: the fundamental theories philosophers adopt about the nature of ethical knowledge and belief. Historically philosophers—and whole cultures—have cycled back and forth between variations of three different basic views. Impressed by the elevated abstraction of ethical concepts, one school argues that we must derive our ethical knowledge from a higher dimension or from God. Another school, skeptical that we could ever access such a higher realm, concludes that there is no ethical knowledge, only emotional expression or a socially-relative construction. A third school rejects an assumption common to both, and argues that ethical abstractions can be derived from observable natural facts about human beings.

Not every view we will examine will fit neatly into one of these categories, and not every historical period will feature a distinct advocate of each school. Themes will be sounded and then recapitulated in later eras with motifs distinctive to those eras. One point we will discover is that as philosopher's theories of human knowledge change, their views about the possibilities of ethical knowledge will change, as well. In several eras, for instance, the possibility of a naturalistic basis for ethical knowledge seems to disappear, entirely. (Though we will briefly uncover some of the deeper epistemological controversies beneath the deepest ethical controversies, this class will not presuppose specialized philosophical knowledge.)

### Texts

- Course pack, combined with one of several popular anthologies

### Lecture and reading schedule

#### *Ancient views on ethical knowledge*

- The good is revealed to us from a supernatural dimension:
  - The Old Testament, The Ten Commandments
  - Plato, from *The Republic*
  - The New Testament, The Sermon on the Mount
  - St. Paul, First Epistle to the Corinthians
- The good is created by custom
  - Herodotus
  - Protagoras
  - Zhuangzi
- The good is a knowable naturalistic fact
  - Aristotle
  - Epicurus

#### *Medieval and Renaissance views on ethical knowledge*

- The good is revealed to us by divine will
  - St. Augustine
  - St. Aquinas
- The good is created by custom
  - Machiavelli
  - Montaigne

***Modern views on ethical knowledge***

- The good is known by reason detached from experience
  - Spinoza
  - Kant
- The good is an expression of sentiment or name for pleasure sensations
  - Hobbes
  - Hume
  - Mill
- The good is a natural/psychological/cultural construction or adaptation
  - Nietzsche
  - Spencer

***Contemporary views on ethical knowledge***

- The good is known through rational intuition or reflective equilibrium
  - Ross
  - Moore
  - Rawls
- The good is an expression of emotion, non-cognitive, or erroneous belief
  - Ayer
  - Hare
  - Mackie
- The good is a culturally relativistic construction
  - Benedict
  - Rorty
- The good is a knowable naturalistic fact
  - Anscombe
  - Foot
  - Rand
  - Railton