Problems of Philosophy

Ethics

1. Tuesday, September 3 MORAL ARGUMENTS

Philosophy involves assessing arguments, attempts to show that a particular conclusion follows from a set of premises. We will spend some time on arguments in general before turning to a particular example. In this example, Peter Singer tries to establish a general moral principle with an argument. How does his argument work? Specifically, how does he move from his example of a drowning child to conclusions about what we are required to do in the case of famine?

Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," p. 231.

2. Thursday, September 5 SINGER'S PRINCIPLE

Singer's strategy depends on his principle being superior to the alternatives. We will begin by investigating that. Then we will turn to the different formulations of the principle that Singer gives. What are the argumentative advantages and disadvantages of each? Does his argument do a better job of establishing one rather than the other?

Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality."

3. Tuesday, September 10 HOW FAR DOES OUR RESPONSIBILITY GO?

Cohen agrees with Singer that we have a duty not to let people die and also that we can prevent deaths by giving aid to famine victims until we are very poor ourselves. Nonetheless, he does not believe that we are required to give that much aid. With some qualifications, he believes we are primarily responsible only for doing our share to alleviate suffering. What is his argument for this conclusion and how would Singer reply? We will begin by paying special attention to the first paragraph in section III, on pp. 72–73.

L. Jonathan Cohen, "Who is Starving Whom?"

4. Thursday, September 12 ABORTION AND THE RIGHT TO LIFE

Most of the debate about abortion is about this question: do fetuses have the right to life? Thomson proposes a different way of thinking about it. Suppose a fetus has a right to life, just like an adult. Would that prove that abortion is wrong?

Judith Jarvis Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion."

5. Tuesday, September 17 CRITICISMS OF THOMSON'S ARGUMENT

There are many differences between most cases of abortion and the violinist case. Do the differences matter for Thomson's argument? On the other hand, could abortion still be wrong even if the analogy is solid? Suppose a fetus doesn't have a right to use its mother's body. Does it follow that there is nothing wrong with abortion? Does it follow that there is a right to abortion? (Note that those are slightly different things.)

Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion."

Note First paper topics distributed.

6. Thursday, September 19 MORAL REALISM

Where do moral rules come from? Many cultures give a religious answer: they are given to us by a supernatural being. In *Euthyphro*, Plato denies that makes sense. He believes that moral rules cannot be created. Human conventions are another possible source of moral rules. In the *Republic*, Plato expresses a concern that moral behavior would not be sustained if this were so. According to Plato, then, the moral rules must exist independently, as something real apart from the choices and beliefs of either gods or human beings.

Plato, *Euthyphro*, 6e–11b and *Republic*, 357a–362d.

7. Tuesday, September 24 MORAL RELATIVISM

The American Anthropological Association's "Statement on Human Rights" argues that morality is relative to cultures. (They made the statement in opposition to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.) Harman offers some refinements of the view. We want to know two things. First, what

does moral relativism involve? Second, how do the Anthropologists and Harman argue for moral relativism?

(1) American Anthropological Association, "Statement on Human Rights." (2) Gilbert Harman, *Moral Relativism*, pp. 1–6, 20–27.

8. Thursday, September 26 RELATIVISM AND TOLERANCE I

The Anthropological Association's statement argued that acknowledging the truth of moral relativism should lead to greater tolerance. We will talk about their reasons for thinking that and the views of two dissenting anthropologists.

(1) Julian Steward, "Comments on the Statement on Human Rights." (2) H.G. Barnett, "On Science and Human Rights."

9. Tuesday, October 1 RELATIVISM AND TOLERANCE II

Harman explains the putative relationship between moral relativism and tolerance by reference to a moral principle. Does this run afoul of Williams's criticisms?

(1) Harman, *Moral Relativism*, pp. 57–63. (2) Bernard Williams, *Morality*, pp. 20–25.

Note First papers due today.

Epistemology

10. Thursday, October 3 WHAT DOES KNOWLEDGE INVOLVE?

This is Descartes's famous consideration of doubt about our knowledge of the external world. We will take up two questions. First, what does it mean to subject our beliefs to doubt? Is he really saying that we have reason to believe that the world doesn't exist? Second, Descartes seems to set the standard for knowledge very high: in order to know something, you have to know that *nothing* incompatible with what you think you know is true. But you would sound crazy if you applied that standard in your daily life. ("These *could be* a foreign substance indistinguishable from Corn Flakes" and so on.) Does that show that Descartes is on the wrong track?

René Descartes, *Meditations,* First and Second Meditations, pp. 12–23.

11. Tuesday, October 8 DESCARTES'S ANSWER TO SKEPTICISM

Descartes finds things he can know in the Second and Third Meditations: he knows that he exists and that God exists. He can use reason to show that God exists and, from that, he can show that his knowledge in general is secure. But how can he be certain of the reliability of the reasoning that leads to his supposed knowledge of God?

(1) Descartes, *Meditations*, Second and Third Meditations, pp. 16–36. (2) Handout on Descartes.

12. Thursday, October 10 THE PROBLEM OF INDUCTION

I think I know things using *inductive reasoning*, that is, by moving from observations of the past to conclusions about what the future will be like. For instance, I think the fact that the sun has always risen in the past enables me to know that it will rise tomorrow. Hume argues that those inferences are groundless and that we have as much reason for believing that the sun will rise tomorrow as we do for believing that it will not. We will pay special attention to Hume's argument that attempts to justify these inferences based on past experience involve reasoning in a circle (see paragraphs 6–8 in part 2). What does that mean? Where is the circle?

David Hume, *Enquiry,* Section IV.

13. Tuesday, October 15 DEFENSES OF INDUCTIVE REASONING

Hume assumes that inductive reasoning makes sense only if we have reason to believe a principle about the uniformity of nature. His critics deny that this is so. They hold that uniform observations of the past give us enough reason to draw conclusions about the unobserved future all by themselves, without the addition of a principle about the uniformity of nature.

Hume, *Enquiry*, Section IV.

14. Thursday, October 17 CAUSE AND CORRELATION

Hume supposes we do not have any reason to make inferences based on past experience. So why do we make them? Hume's answer is habit. When we see As consistently followed by Bs, we conclude that As cause Bs and, when we next see an A (or hear of an A's happening, etc.), we conclude that there will be (or must have been, etc.) a B. Is this enough to make sense of

our idea of a cause? In particular, how does it distinguish between causation and correlation? If A *causes* B, then A made B happen. If A is merely *correlated* with B, then this is not so; the two just happen to occur in that order.

Hume, *Enquiry*, Sections V and VII.

15. Tuesday, October 22 FALL BREAK

16. Thursday, October 24 MIRACLES, PART 1

We will address two questions about the first part of the section on miracles. First, what does the reference to Bishop Tillotson's argument at the beginning mean? Second, how does Hume argue that we can never have good reason to believe in miracles?

(1) Hume, *Enquiry*, Section X, part 1. (2) John Tillotson, "The Hazard of Being Saved in the Church of Rome," pp. 122–23.

17. Tuesday, October 29 MIRACLES, PART 2

Can Hume show that we should dismiss reported miracles out of hand, without investigation? What distinguishes the case of the sun from the one about the queen's resurrection?

(1) Hume, *Enquiry*, Section X, part 2. (2) Handout on Rutherford.

Note Second paper topics distributed

18. Thursday, October 31 A DEFENSE OF MIRACLES

Lewis points out a significant problem for Hume's naturalism. Why does Hume get to use assumptions about the uniformity of nature and natural laws? He denied that we have any reason to believe in them! Does a supernatural source for natural order help?

C.S. Lewis, *Miracles*, pp. 159–71.

19. Tuesday, November 5 NATURAL RELIGION

Instead of looking for disruptions in the natural order, some people regard the uniformity of nature as evidence of a supernatural designer.

Here, Hume argues that the natural order gives us no reason to believe in a provident God. What does it mean to call God provident? Why doesn't the natural order show that God has that quality? It sure beats a disordered nature, after all!

Hume, *Enquiry*, Section XI.

Metaphysics

20. Thursday, November 7 IDENTITY: PERSON AND MAN

Questions about identity usually concern how one thing could continue to persist despite changing in various ways. How did Locke use the distinctions between masses of matter, living things, and people to address this problem? In particular, what is the distinction between a person and a man?

John Locke, *Essay*, pp. 328–38.

21. Tuesday, November 12 LOCKE'S CASES

Locke's position is that the identity of a person over time is independent of the identity of substances, whether material or immaterial. He argued for this position by challenging the alternatives. He did *that* by considering cases, such as that of the prince and the cobbler. How did he use those cases to argue for his position about personal identity?

Locke, *Essay*, pp. 338–48.

Note Second paper due Tuesday, November 12.

22. Thursday, November 14 REVISIT THE CASES

Williams thinks Locke's cases went by too quickly. When you look at them more carefully, he thinks, it isn't obvious at all that people can switch bodies. In particular, if you consider what it would be like to think about being involved in one of those cases yourself, you wouldn't be so sure that Locke was right about them.

Bernard Williams, "The Self and the Future."

23. Tuesday, November 19 ARE PEOPLE SPECIAL?

For most things, there need not be a determinate answer to questions about whether some object has survived some changes. Sometimes, there is no saying one way or the other. People seem to be different: I will either be there or I won't.

Williams, "The Self and the Future".

24. Thursday, November 21 THE BRANCH-LINE CASE

Could I survive being duplicated? On the one hand, no: two can't be one and there's only one of me. On the other hand, yes: death means there is no me and two is more than zero. More to the point, the process of being duplicated seems to be the same as having an ordinary, ongoing life. Only doubled, of course.

Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 199–217.

25. Tuesday, November 26 THE COMBINED SPECTRUM

Given what I'm made of, how could it be the case that questions about my identity over time must have determinate answers? This isn't true for the identity of physical objects: they can change in ways that leave their identity indeterminate. Something similar is true of minds: change the qualities of my mind enough, but not too much, and you won't be able to say whether it's the same mind or not.

Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 229–43.

26. Thursday, November 28 THANKSGIVING

27. Tuesday, December 3 DEATH

Death is non-existence. But non-existence is no big deal: think of all the time before you were born. You didn't exist then. So why would it be so bad not to exist after death?

(1) Lucretius, *On The Nature of Things*, pp. 89–98 (Book III, lines 830–1093). (2) Thomas Nagel, "Death," pp. 1–10.

28. Thursday, December 5 IMMORTALITY

Death may be bad, but immortality isn't the answer, according to Williams. Williams criticizes Lucretius for failing to consider an

important distinction among desires. Some of our desires are categorical, meaning they are satisfied only if the desired aim is achieved; Lucretius treats our desires like appetites, which can be satisfied simply by going away. Williams argues that immortals could not sustain their categorical desires and so would run out of reasons to live.

Bernard Williams, "The Makropoulos Affair."

29. Tuesday, December 10 FINAL EXAM
Review for the exam.

Goals

Students taking this course will become familiar with problems of philosophy that meet the following criteria. First, studying them gives insight into questions about how to live and our place in the universe. Second, the written material is exceptionally good. Third, the materials and questions are representative of the discipline of philosophy. This last point means that this course serves as an introduction to the discipline of academic philosophy. The first two points mean that the course should be valuable even to those who will pursue other academic interests.

The course emphasizes arguments and writing. Students who successfully complete this course will learn how to construct arguments, how to interpret analytical writing, how to raise objections to arguments, and how to write extended analytical essays of their own.

Materials

I ordered the following edition through the Huntley Bookstore: David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Hackett). Everything else will be made available as pdf files on Sakai. The full citations for the readings are given at the end of this document.

Comments on lectures, announcements, and readings will be available through the Sakai website for this course: https://sakai.claremont.edu

Instructor

My name is Michael Green. My office is 207 Pearsons. My office hours are Wednesdays, 2–4. My office phone number is 607-0906.

Assignments

Grades will be based on three assignments: two papers and a final exam. The papers will be limited to 1800 words which is about five or six pages. They will be due on Tuesday, October 1 and Tuesday, November 12. The Final Exam is scheduled for Friday, December 20 at 9am.

Grading policies

I am committed to seeing that my students are able to do very high quality work and that high quality work will be recognized. I do not employ a curve and there is nothing competitive about grading in my courses.

Grades apply to papers, not to people. They have no bearing on whether I like or respect you. Nor do they measure improvement or hard work: one may put a lot of effort into trying to make a bad idea work or produce a very good paper with ease. Grades communicate where written work stands on as objective a scale as we can devise. That is all that they involve, so don't make too much of them.

What the grades mean

A Work that is accurate, elegantly written, and innovative. It adds something original, creative, or imaginative to the problem under discussion. The grade of A is given to work that is exceptional.

B Work that is accurate, well written, and has no significant problems. The grade of B is given to very good work. There is less of a difference between A and B work than you might think. Generally speaking, B papers are less innovative than A papers. This may be because the paper does not attempt to add much or because the attempt made is not fully successful.

C Work that has problems with accuracy, reasoning, or quality of writing. The grade of C means that the paper has significant problems but is otherwise acceptable.

D Work that has severe problems with accuracy, reasoning, relevance, or the quality of writing. Papers with these problems are not acceptable college-level work. A paper that is fine on its own may nonetheless be irrelevant. A paper is not relevant to my evaluation of work for this particular course if it does not address the question asked or if it does not display knowledge of our discussions. This sometimes trips up those taking a course pass/no credit.

F Work that has not been completed, cannot be understood, or is irrelevant.

Final grades will be calculated using the College's 12 point scale.[1] The numerical average must be greater than half the distance between two grades in order to earn the higher grade.

Letter	Number	Range
A	12	$11.5 < A \leq 12$
A-	11	$10.5 < A- \leq 11.5$
B+	10	$9.5 < B+ \leq 10.5$
B	9	$8.5 < B \leq 9.5$
B-	8	$7.5 < B- \leq 8.5$
C+	7	$6.5 < C+ \leq 7.5$
C	6	$5.5 < C \leq 6.5$
C-	5	$4.5 < C- \leq 5.5$
D+	4	$3.5 < D+ \leq 4.5$
D	3	$2.5 < D \leq 3.5$
D-	2	$1.0 < D- \leq 2.5$
F	0	$0.0 < F \leq 1.0$

Letter and number grades

[1] Search for "Letter Grades" here: http://catalog.pomona.edu/

Late papers and academic accommodations

Late papers will be accepted *without question*. They will be penalized at the rate of one-quarter of a point *per* day, including weekends and holidays. Exceptions will be made in extremely unusual circumstances. Please be mindful of the fact that maturity involves taking steps to ensure that the extremely unusual is genuinely extremely unusual.

To request academic accommodations of a disability, please speak with me and Dean Collin-Eaglin at 621-8017. This is never a problem, but it is best taken care of in advance.

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