

## Introduction to Ethics

### Spring 2006

#### Paper Assignment

The paper is due in your discussion section on Friday, May 5th. Late papers will not be accepted, so it's best to start your paper as soon as possible.

Choose one of the topics below. Your task is to write a clear argumentative and critical essay in which you discuss a controversial area in ethical theory, and *argue* for your own position on the issue. In particular, you should aim to do one or more of the following:

- ▶ state and defend a new argument in favor of a clearly formulated ethical theory or principle
- ▶ state and defend a new argument against one of the ethical theories discussed in the course
- ▶ state and defend a new response to a commonly given objection to a certain ethical theory
- ▶ state and defend a new rejoinder to a response typically given to a commonly given objection to a certain ethical theory

Your paper should be approximately 4-5 pages in length (double-spaced, 12pt. font).

You must give the appropriate citation for all outside sources that you consult. Bear in mind that passing off the work of others as your own in any way, shape or form, constitutes serious academic misconduct and will result in severe penalties, including but not limited to receiving a failing grade in the course.

#### Possible Topics:

**1. Would or could morality still exist if God did not exist?** What arguments can be given on either side of the debate? Are the arguments good ones? Discuss the Euthyphro problem and its relevance to answering this question. (If appropriate, discuss the attitudes of Mavrodes and Nielsen.)

**2. Are there any basic moral principles that apply to all people, all cultures at all times?** What arguments can be given for or against different versions of ethical relativism? Are the arguments good ones? (If appropriate, discuss the attitudes and arguments given by Pojman.)

**3. Does doing the morally right thing ever make a person's life worse off than doing the wrong thing?** Discuss how this relates to the ethical position of egoism. What arguments can be given in favor of egoism? What arguments can be given against it? Are the arguments good ones? (If appropriate, discuss the attitudes of Hobbes and Rachels.)

**4. Does doing the right thing ever lead to worse overall circumstances than doing the wrong thing?** Consider this question in light of the ethical positions of utilitarianism and consequentialism. Discuss the arguments that might be given in favor of consequentialism, and

discuss the positions of Mill and Bentham. What arguments might be given against consequentialism?

**5. Could a utilitarian respond to objections regarding justice, fairness and/or integrity?**

Clearly explain what utilitarianism is, and then discuss the general worries regarding justice, fairness and/or integrity, using specific examples. Then evaluate whether these arguments are convincing, and whether or not a utilitarian can possibly give a response. (If appropriate, discuss the readings by Nielsen and/or Williams.)

**6. Can utilitarianism or other moral theory respond to objections regarding the importance of promises?** Clearly explain what different moral theories—utilitarianism, various forms of deontology (Kant, Ross)—have to say about the ethics of keeping promises. Do you think any of the theories we’ve discussed does a better job than others in explaining the moral importance of keeping promises? Explain your answer and give examples.

**7. Does goodness consist only in obtaining pleasure and avoiding pain?** Consider the ethical theory of hedonism and its rivals, and consider arguments against hedonism. What alternative theories about the nature of goodness might be true instead? (If appropriate, discuss the readings by Bentham, Mill, Nozick and/or Parfit.)

**8. Is goodness the same as satisfying a desire that someone has?** Consider arguments for and against desire satisfactionism in axiology. Is it good when something satisfies one of our desires, even when it brings us no pleasure, or if we don’t even know about it? (If appropriate, discuss the readings by Mill, Nozick and/or Parfit.)

**9. For an act to be right, must it be possible to will that everyone act the same way in similar circumstances?** Consider Kant’s formulation of the categorical imperative, and arguments for and against it as a characterization of moral rightness. Discuss the readings by Kant and Feldman.

**10. Does an act have to be done *for the sake of morality*, in order to be morally right or have moral worth?** Discuss Kant’s position, and contrast with the attitudes held by most utilitarians. Consider several example cases, and argue for your own position on the issue.

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*Suggestions:* Organize your paper into three main sections. In the first section, clearly lay out the issue under discussion and what possible views or positions someone might hold with regard to the issue. In the second section, lay out the argument or arguments that will be your main focus. In the third section, consider possible responses to those argument(s), and possible responses to those responses. Play devil’s advocate throughout and try to consider how someone with a contrary position would respond to your position.

Re-read the appropriate readings from the textbook, and discuss the positions of those authors. Incorporate and discuss the viewpoints of your peers raised in your discussion section meetings if possible. Create your own examples, possibly examples from your own life, but do not get lost in discussing details of the situations that are not relevant to the theoretical issue you’re discussing. Check your arguments for logical validity. Avoid superfluous introductory and concluding remarks.