

Contemporary Ethical Theory

Preliminary Notice

Contemporary ethical theory is concerned with two areas of inquiry that are largely independent of one another: meta-ethics and normative ethics. Meta-ethics is concerned with the nature of morality and moral judgments, and involves questions such as whether moral judgments are true or false, whether they are ultimately objective or (on the contrary) subjective or relative, what role intuition plays in making moral judgments, and whether they can be established by the same sorts of considerations that are taken to establish empirical or scientific claims. Meta-ethics is also concerned with psychological questions such as what sort of motivation (if any) must be present when a person makes a moral judgment. Meta-ethical theories are largely neutral on the question of what is moral or immoral; instead, they are theories about what sort of activity (or practice, or enterprise) morality is, independent of one's specific views about right and wrong.

In contrast, normative ethics is concerned with right and wrong, along with other evaluative concepts such as good and bad, and virtuous and vicious. A wide variety of theories about these concepts have been proposed: theories based on the consequences of acts or the consequences of the general acceptance of certain kinds of moral rules; rule-based theories that eschew a consequentialist basis; theories derived from Kant's ethics; theories based on the social-contract tradition of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau; right-based theories, whether left-leaning or libertarian; theories building on Aristotle's virtue-based approach to ethics; and theories derived from feminist, Continental, and pragmatic perspectives. Normative-ethical theories are largely neutral on meta-ethical issues, being concerned instead with articulating their own distinct moral principles.

This course will survey both meta-ethics and normative ethics, devoting approximately equal time to each. We will read Hugh LaFollette's edited anthology *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory* from start to finish. Assignments will probably include two 2,000-word papers, revisions of them, two tests, and class participation.