



UNIVERSITY OF
CALGARY

FACULTY OF ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

Philosophy 649.10
Topics in Ethics
Moral Particularism
Fall Term, 2017

Course Outline

Monday and Wednesday, 3.30-4.45, SS 1253

Instructor: John A. Baker

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Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday, 2.15-3.15 and after class

Outside those times, for a variety of reasons, it is not a good idea just to "drop in", hoping to catch me in the office: it is much better to phone or email me for an appointment. I am happy to make such appointments, so do not hesitate to make them.

Course Description

At its core, moral particularism is to be thought of as being a three part thesis – **(1)** a *metaphysical thesis* to the effect that in a large variety of kinds of case (maybe in *all* cases) what makes an act morally right or morally wrong is the fact that *that particular act by that particular person in those particular circumstances* has, all things considered, a certain *particular moral right- or moral wrong-making nature* (the latter presumably *supervening on* the former); **(2)** an *epistemological thesis* to the effect that correspondingly moral reasoning and moral deliberation should be taken to be essentially "*case-based*", that is, to consist in the close examination (in some sense to be specified) of the particularities of the person and the act in the situation, this examination revealing the sense and the way in which the supervening morally right- or morally wrong-making properties are morally right- or morally wrong-making in this situation; and **(3)** a *normative thesis*, i.e., a thesis to the effect that the moral rightness/wrongness of the act so described *prima facie* grounds a practical reason for the relevant person to do the relevant act.

As described, moral particularism stands in contrast with more traditional *moral principlist theories* [aka *generalist theories*]. Specifically, *moral principlism* is **(1)** a *metaphysical thesis* to the effect that what *makes* a particular act by a particular person in a particular situation *morally right or morally wrong* is the fact that certain *morally valid* principles *apply in* this situation and in this situation this configuration of principles *all things considered* requires or forbids this particular act by this particular person; **(2)** an *epistemological thesis* to the effect that moral reasoning and moral deliberation is to be taken to have at least four parts – (a) reasoning to the claim that certain principles, if morally valid, would in some sense *apply* to this person in this situation, (b) reasoning to the claim that these principles *are* morally valid principles, (c) reasoning to the claim that these principles are to be assigned certain weights, and (d) reasoning to the claim that, given (a)-(c), this act by this person in this situation is the morally right or the morally wrong act to do; and again **(3)** a *normative thesis*, i.e., a thesis to the effect that the moral

rightness/wrongness of the act so described *prima facie* grounds a practical reason for the relevant person to do the relevant act.

Pre-twentieth century principlist accounts of how to check whether a certain principle is morally valid include, for example, those spelled out by Kant in his discussion of the working of the categorical imperative and by Bentham and Mill in their explications of rule utilitarianism, but it is emphatically not the goal of this course to assess such accounts or their twentieth and twenty-first century successors.

Instead, it is the aim of the course firstly to review briefly some of the most salient problems with principlism *in itself* and then to devote the bulk of the course to a detailed assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of moral particularism's metaphysical, epistemological, and normative theses as described above, focusing (i) on what particularism would need to say about the putative *moral right-making* or *moral wrong-making* powers of certain facts; (ii) on what particularism would need to say about the kind of reasoning that might yield the result that such and such *is* morally right- or wrong-making; and (iii) of what particularism might say about the sense in which the moral rightness and wrongness of acts can ground or serve as practical reasons for relevant people to act in relevant ways.

Prerequisites N/A

Course Learning Outcomes

Theories: By the end of the course students should have detailed familiarity with the main strengths and weaknesses of moral particularism and of moral principlism as described above.

Methods: Students by the end of the course should be familiar with, be able to use, and be aware of the limitations of the investigative tools currently being brought to bear in developing, defending, and assessing the theories listed above, including especially the limitations of the use of the resources of conceptual analysis.

Skills: Students by the end of the course should have refined their ability

- to develop an explicit and precise analysis of the reasoning in academic papers in the field, setting out the *direction* of the reasoning, the steps in the reasoning, and the unstated but critical background assumptions of the reasoning,
- clearly and concisely to frame and state arguments both for and against philosophical claims and to do this both in the classroom setting and in essays,
- to gain transferable skills in analysis, argumentation, and research.

Course Readings:

The readings for the course will be journal articles or book chapters downloadable through the University library.

The following articles in the *Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy* provides useful background reading:

- Michael Ridge and Sean McKeever, 2016, "Moral Particularism and Moral Generalism", *Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-particularism-generalism/>
- Jonathan Dancy, 2013, "Moral Particularism", *Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-particularism/>

The following article, though focusing on issues in bioethics (which is *not* the focus of this course), also provides a useful and relatively down-to-earth survey of many of the ideas and issues to be discussed in the course:

- John Arras, 2010, “Theory and Bioethics”, *Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/theory-bioethics/>

Assignments and due dates

- **Two “analysis-and-critique” assignments:** Hard copy be handed in at the beginning of class on Wednesday, October 4th, and Wednesday, November 15th, respectively. Electronic copies should also be posted in the D2L drop box. What is involved in analysis-and-critique assignments will be posted on D2L at the beginning of term. Examples will be posted on D2L and used as the basis for some class discussions.
- **One short essay** (about 1500 words maximum, including footnotes and excluding bibliography): Hard copy to be submitted at the beginning of class on Wednesday, October 25th. Electronic copies should also be posted in the D2L drop box. Topic and readings will be posted on D2L.
- **A term paper** (about 2200 words maximum, including footnotes and excluding bibliography): Topic and readings will be posted on D2L. The completed paper will be due on Monday, December 18th, at 9am. Slide a hard copy under my office door and post a digital copy in the D2L digital drop box.
- **A very short presentation and defense of the core ideas to be argued for in the term paper:** A description of what is wanted will be posted on D2L. Draft texts of presentations will be due Thursday, April 7th, at 4pm: these should be uploaded to the D2L digital drop box. Presentations will be made in the last two classes of term (December 4th and 6th) on a schedule to be assigned.
- **The quality of contributions to class discussion will be factored in to the assignment of the final grade.**

Grading

Percentages will be computed using the numbers set by the University as equivalent to the letter grades.

1. *Ceteris paribus*, the first analysis-and-critique will be worth 10% of the final grade and second worth 20%.
2. *Ceteris paribus*, the essay will be worth 20%.
3. *Ceteris paribus*, the term paper will be worth 35%.
4. *Ceteris paribus*, the presentation and defense will be worth 10%.
5. *Ceteris paribus*, class participation will be worth 5%.
6. Later virtue will be allowed to redeem earlier ‘sin’.
7. Except in very exceptional circumstances, and at the discretion of the instructor, a passing grade in the course will be received only if each of the assignments listed above is submitted and receives a passing grade.
8. Fairness to those who submit their assignments on time demands that lateness in submission of assignments be penalized. Accordingly, assignments handed in after the stated deadline will receive at most B if submitted by 3.00 pm of the day after the due day and C if submitted by 3.00 pm of the day after that, and so on, unless, of course, some sort of university recognized ground for delay — e.g. some sort of evidence of illness — is submitted.

NOTE: If a student fails to submit her or his analysis of an article before I hand out my analysis of that article, then clearly the requirement set out in point 8 above can only reasonably be satisfied in relation to analyses if the student submits an analysis of some different article from that originally assigned. If this situation arises then the student will need to approach me for a replacement assignment.

IMPORTANT DEPARTMENTAL, FACULTY AND UNIVERSITY INFORMATION

Academic Honesty

Cheating or plagiarism on any assignment or examination is regarded as an extremely serious academic offence, the penalty for which may be an F on the assignment, an F in the course, academic probation, or requirement to withdraw from the University. See the relevant sections on 'Academic Misconduct' in the current University Calendar. Intellectual honesty requires that your work include adequate referencing to sources. Plagiarism occurs when you do not acknowledge or correctly reference your sources. If you have questions about correct referencing, consult your instructor.

Academic Accommodation

The student accommodation policy can be found at: ucalgary.ca/access/accommodations/policy.

Students needing an Accommodation because of a disability or medical condition should communicate this need to Student Accessibility Services in accordance with the Procedure for Accommodations for Students with Disabilities ucalgary.ca/policies/files/policies/student-accommodation-policy.

Students needing an Accommodation based on a Protected Ground other than Disability, should communicate this need, preferably in writing, to their instructor.

D2L Help

Desire2Learn is UCalgary's online learning management system. Important information and communications about this course may be posted on D2L. Go to <https://ucalgary.service-now.com/it> for help.

Protection of Privacy

The University of Calgary is under the jurisdiction of the provincial Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) Act. The Department of Philosophy ensures the student's right to privacy by requiring all graded assignments be returned to the student directly from the instructor or teaching assistant.

Internet and Electronic Communication Devices

The instructor reserves the right to establish course policies regarding the use of devices such as laptops, tablets, and smartbooks. If allowed, these devices must be used exclusively for instructional purposes and must not cause disruption to the instructor or to fellow students. Cell phones and paging devices should be set to silent mode during lectures. Audio or video recording of lectures is not permitted without the written permission of the instructor. Students violating this policy are subject to discipline under the University of Calgary's Non-Academic Misconduct policy

Emergency Evacuation:

In case of an emergency evacuation during class, students must gather at the designated assembly point nearest to the classroom. The list of assembly points is found at <http://www.ucalgary.ca/emergencyplan/assemblypoints> . Please check this website and note the nearest assembly point for this course.

Other Helpful Contacts

Safewalk and Campus Security: 403-220-5333.