



UNIVERSITY OF  
CALGARY

FACULTY OF ARTS  
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

## PHIL 649.08 Lec 1 Topics in Ethics: Rationality & Morality

Winter Term 2015

*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

Central to philosophical thinking about the nature of justificatory (aka normative) reasons for actions (and *a fortiori* about what counts as rational action) has been the Humean thesis that since the late 1970s has been called 'reason internalism'. In the literature various rather different formulations of this thesis have been argued for, but at the core is always the claim that whether a certain fact (or purported fact) to count as a reason for a certain person to act in a certain way ineliminably depends on whether that prospective agent has (or would under certain circumstances) have certain "relevant" desires or attitudes – this has been referred to as 'the subjectivist core' of this account of reasons for actions. *Reason* internalism is a thesis about the nature of justificatory reasons for actions generally, but many philosophers have concluded that, if reason internalism is combined with certain other plausible seeming theses, then we are forced to adopt some sort of 'subjectivist' ('anti-realist') views about the power of moral rights, duties, and values to ground justificatory reasons to respond to these moral rights, duties and values in relevant ways, the only question then being *which* 'subjectivist' views and how 'subjectivist' these views need to be.

Reason internalism has been implicitly assumed correct by many philosophers (notably by John Mackie in his 1977 *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*). It has also always had its critics (for example, Thomas Nagel in his 1970 *The Possibility of Altruism*) as well as its explicit defenders (notably, Bernard Williams in his 1979 "Internal and external reasons" and most recently Mark Schroeder in his 2010 *Slaves of the Passions*). But in recent years it has been argued (notably and most recently by Derek Parfit in his 2011 *One What Matters* and Thomas Scanlon in his 2014 *Being Realistic about Reasons*) that reason internalism and hence the purportedly consequential views about moral rights, duties and values are in certain fundamental ways in need of radical rethinking and indeed that it is necessary to look to the possibility of developing 'reason *externalist*'

('objectivist' – a seriously problematic term) accounts of justificatory reasons and indeed of rational choice, and consequently of the nature of moral choice.

The aim of the course is to examine in detail the most persuasive arguments for and against reason internalism in its more plausible formulations and to investigate the possibility of developing an 'objectivist'/'externalist' account of justificatory reasons, that examination paying particular attention to the fact that clearly any account of *rational* action which places acting for reasons at its core will need to be supplemented with a correlative account of *weights* of reasons.

### **Required Texts**

It is my intention to examine in some detail Mark Schroeder's much admired defence of reason internalism in his 2010 *Slaves of the Passions*, Thomas Scanlon's attempt to develop what he calls a 'cognitivist' account of reasons for action in his 2014 *Being Realistic about Reasons* (a refreshingly slim volume) and Derek Parfit's attack on reason internalism in section I and part of section VII of his 2011 *On What Matters*.

Both Scanlon's and Schroeder's books are available online from Oxford Scholarship Online through the UofC library. But since some students prefer to use hard copies I have asked the UofC bookstore to bring in copies.

I did not ask the UofC bookstore to bring in copies of Derek Parfit's monumental (and very expensive) two volume *On What Matters* because we will only be examining section I and part of section VII and the whole two volume work is available for \$19.74 in the Kindle edition – to read the Kindle edition it is not necessary to own a Kindle since you can read Kindle formatted books on both PCs and Macs (both laptops and iPads) using the free downloadable Kindle application.

Other readings are available online through the UofC library.

### **Assignments and due dates**

#### ***Assignments:***

1. Two brief "analysis-and-critique" assignments.

The format for analysis-and-critique assignments and what they involve will be posted on D2L at the beginning of term and explained in class. Samples of 'analyses-and-critiques' will also be posted on D2L and discussed in class.

2. Two short essays (about 1500 words maximum, excluding footnotes and bibliography).
3. A term paper (about 2000 words maximum, excluding footnotes and bibliography).
4. A presentation and defence of the core ideas argued for in the term paper.

The questions and readings for the essays and for the term paper will significantly overlap with the readings mentioned in 1. Details of the topics and readings will be announced in class and posted on D2L.

There will not be a Registrar-scheduled final exam in this course.

#### ***Due-dates:***

**Analysis-and-critique 1:** Details of the assignment will be posted on D2L on Wednesday, January 14<sup>th</sup>. The completed assignment will be due on Thursday, January 29<sup>th</sup>, at 9am.

**Essay 1:** The question for the first essay will be posted on D2L on Wednesday, January 14<sup>th</sup>. The deadline for submission of the essay will be Thursday, February 12<sup>th</sup>, at 9am.

**Analysis-and-critique 2:** Details will be posted on D2L on Thursday, February 12<sup>th</sup>. The completed assignment will be due on Thursday, February 26<sup>th</sup>, at 9am.

**Essay 2:** Details will be posted on D2L on Thursday, February 26<sup>th</sup>. The completed assignment will be due on Thursday, March 12<sup>th</sup>, at 9am.

**Term paper:** The question for the term paper will be posted on D2L on Thursday, March 12<sup>th</sup>. The completed paper will be due on Wednesday, April 8<sup>th</sup>, at 9am.

**Presentations:** Presentations will be made in the last two classes of term (April 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup>) and on a schedule to be assigned.

### **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 15%.
2. *Ceteris paribus*, the first essay will be worth 15% and the second essay will be worth 20%
3. *Ceteris paribus*, the term paper will be worth 35%.
4. *Ceteris paribus*, the presentation and defence will be worth 5%.
5. Later virtue will be allowed to redeem earlier sin.
6. 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.
7. 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 6 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. Note that point 6 will still apply.**