

Experimentation and Discovery in Ethical Theory

I. Course Information

Instructor: Max Hayward (mh3173@columbia.edu) *Office Hours:* TBD

Class Meeting Time and Place: TBD

Website: www.courseworks.columbia.edu

II. Course Description

In his *Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, David Hume wrote: “Men are now cured of their passion for hypotheses and systems in natural philosophy, and will hearken to no arguments but those which are derived from experience. It is full time that they should attempt a like reformation in all moral disquisitions and reject every system of ethics, however subtle or ingenious, which is not founded on fact and observation.” Hume’s claim could serve as the slogan for one of the most important traditions in modern ethical thinking. Following the rise of the natural sciences in the early modern period, naturalistically minded philosophers have attempted to provide an epistemological basis for moral inquiry inspired by the methodologies of the experimental sciences. This course locates the major roots of this tradition in the empiricist sentimentalism of Hume and Adam Smith. Next, we consider John Stuart Mill’s famous “proof” of Utilitarianism and his calls for “experiments in living” as attempts to build a normative system on an experimental basis. We turn next to calls for an introduction of scientific methodology into ethical thinking in the works of the American Pragmatists, William James and John Dewey, before moving to two of the most influential arguments against the possibility of an experimentalist project in ethics, made respectively by Immanuel Kant and G.E. Moore. The final two weeks are taken up with exploring attempts to make good on the promise of experimentalism in contemporary ethical thinking, wherein ethics is viewed variously as part of empirically discoverable psychology, or as a form of social technology to solve collective problems.

III. Requirements

Readings:

It is essential to do the readings prior to the class for which they are assigned. Doing so will be essential for successful completion of the assignments and participation in class. The readings cover several complex and highly influential works; thus, although the reading assignment is not heavy in terms of pages, careful study and re-reading of the text is indispensable.

Response Papers:

In order to provide training in the skills of careful analytical reading, students are required to write 6 one-page response papers to readings from the course syllabus. The papers should focus on the structure of the argument presented in the text (or a part of the text) identifying the conclusion, premisses, and major inferential moves made by the author. Students are encouraged to read critically, locating moments where premisses are suppressed or potentially faulty inferences presented, and to explain the argumentative merits of various interpretations where the argument is unclear. At least 4 response papers are due before the mid-term, and ideally students will continue to prepare brief critical outlines for all readings in order to prepare for class discussion. Responses must be submitted before the class for which the reading is assigned. The response papers count for 30% of the grade.

Midterm:

There will be a midterm in class at the end of the third week. This will be an opportunity to employ skills developed in writing their response papers: students will be presented with important extracts

from the text, and asked to explain the nature of the argument and its significance in the context of the wider debate. The midterm will count for 20% of the grade.

Final Paper:

Students will write one 10-12 page paper, to be submitted within one week of the end of class. This will focus on responding to one or more of the texts from the course syllabus, offering a critical analysis and either offering objections or proposals for strengthening or extending the line of argument. Although not required for a high grade, there is an opportunity for students to use their final paper to develop and present their own ideas and original arguments, and they will receive credit for doing so where these are not obviously wrong. The final paper will count for 40% of the grade.

Class Participation:

Each class will commence with an expository and introductory presentation from the instructor, with the second half of the session devoted to sustained class discussion. In-class participation will count for 10% of the grade. Students who find it difficult to participate in classroom discussion are urged to approach the instructor in person in order to discuss strategies to overcome obstacles to involvement: the style of philosophical debate can often be intense, and this should not be a barrier to any student who is interested in the material. Students will have the opportunity, although this is not compulsory, to offer a short presentation in class as a way of boosting their participation score.

Late and missing assignments:

Assignments should be turned in the day they are due, unless other arrangements have been made. Late assignments will be marked down 1/3 of a letter grade for every day that they are overdue.

Attendance & Lateness:

In general, attendance is mandatory, especially given the intensity of scheduling during the summer teaching session. However, you can miss one class without penalty. Further absences will only be permitted after discussion with the instructor: students are urged to make problems known as far as possible in advance. If you exceed, without permission, the one allowed absence, you will be penalized 1/3 of a letter on your final grade for each subsequent missed class. Three late arrivals count as one absence.

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense. Here is a short list from the Columbia University Handbook (140-1) of some of the forms plagiarism can take:

- Submitting essays or portions of essays written by other people as one's own
- Failing to acknowledge, through proper footnotes and bibliographies, the sources of ideas essentially not one's own
- Failing to indicate, through proper use of quotations and footnotes, paraphrases of ideas or verbatim expressions not one's own, including materials in the Web
- Submitting work written for one course to a second course without specific permission of the faculty member to do so
- Collaborating on an assignment or examination without specific permission of the faculty member to do so.

Required Reading:

Readings will be placed on reserve or made available online via *Courseworks*. Three books are ordered at BookCulture:

John Stuart Mill: *On Liberty and Other Essays*

David Hume: *An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*

Adam Smith: *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

Students may use other editions of these texts, noting that the reading from Mill includes both *On Liberty* and *Utilitarianism*.

IV: Course Schedule:

Weeks 1-2 Ethics as Sympathy in Society

Session 1: Overview; How to Read and Write Philosophy; David Hume

An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals, Sections 1-5

Session 2: David Hume

An Inquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals,

Session 3: Adam Smith

A Theory of Moral Sentiments, Parts I & II

Session 4: Adam Smith

A Theory of Moral Sentiments, Parts III & IV

Week 3: Experiments, Desire and Desirability

Session 5: John Stuart Mill

Utilitarianism, Chapters 1, 2, 3 & 4

Session 6: John Stuart Mill

On Liberty, Chapter 3

Week 4: Pragmatism and Scientific Method

Session 7: William James

The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life

Session 8: John Dewey

Reconstruction in Moral Conceptions

Midterm: Take-Home Exam

Week 5: Against Experimentalism

Session 9: Intuition and the a priori

Immanuel Kant - Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, Preface & selections

G.E. Moore, Principia Ethica, sections 5-13

Weeks 5 and 6: Modern Developments

Session 10: Discovering Ethics by doing Empirical Psychology

Jesse Prinz - "Can Moral Obligations be Empirically Discovered?"

Peter Singer - Ethics and Intuitions

Session 10: Discovering Ethics in Desire and Disposition

David Lewis - "Dispositional Accounts of Value"

Bernard Williams - "Internal and External Reasons"

Session 12: Ethics as an Experimental Project

Philip Kitcher - "The Hall of Mirrors" & Naturalistic Ethics without Fallacies