

PHIL 161: Topics in the History of Ethics
Spring 2023; TTH 9:30-10:50am; RWAC #0426
Topic: Aristotle, Kant, and Mill
Professor David O. Brink

- **Office: RWAC #0480**
- **Office Hours: M 1-1:50pm, T 11am-noon, and by appointment**
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CONTENT

This iteration of Topics in the History of Ethics will focus on the ethical theories of Aristotle (384-322 BCE), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), and John Stuart Mill (1806-73). These three are arguably the three most important figures in the history of ethics. Moreover, they are often thought to be representative of three major approaches to ethics — virtue theory (Aristotle), deontology (Kant), and utilitarianism (Mill).

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* contains the fullest statement of his ethical theory, though we might supplement his claims there with claims he makes in other ethical works, including the *Politics*. Like other Greek ethicists (e.g. Socrates, Plato, the Epicureans, and Stoics), Aristotle takes the agent's *eudaimonia* or happiness to be the central ethical concept. Other ethical concepts, such as virtue, seem to be defined in relation to happiness. Aristotle treats virtue as the central and controlling element of happiness, but he also thinks that virtue is an incomplete good and needs the addition of goods of fortune (e.g. health and good luck) to secure a complete good. He recognizes both self-regarding virtues (e.g. temperance) and other-regarding virtues (e.g. courage and justice). He needs to explain how both self-regarding and other-regarding virtues are necessary for one's happiness, and his extended discussion of friendship may provide this explanation. For Aristotle, virtue involves control of the non-rational part of the soul by the rational part. In the *Politics* Aristotle commits himself to troublesome ideas about the distribution of capacities for virtue. He thinks that some people lack sufficient rational capacities in a way that makes them by nature fit for slavery. Though he has a higher estimate of women, he thinks that they too lack the capacity for complete virtue necessary for full citizenship.

Kant's ethical theory is developed in several writings, most importantly in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). We will focus on the *Groundwork* but supplement it with selections from the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In the *Groundwork* Kant insists that moral requirements are requirements of reason — categorical imperatives — that are not grounded in our emotions, interests, or desires in the way hypothetical imperatives are. He thinks that this requires us to act on rules that all rational agents can accept. This, he thinks, requires that we treat everyone as an end and never merely as a means. Kant is critical of various ethicists, including the Greeks, for basing morality on happiness. But he understands happiness hedonistically, as consisting in pleasure, as Aristotle does not and Mill may not. In his doctrine of the highest good Kant claims that virtue is a supreme but incomplete good. The highest good consists of happiness that is conditioned by and proportionate to virtue.

Mill was a founding contributor to both the utilitarian and liberal traditions in moral and political philosophy. We will use Mill's *Utilitarianism* (1861) and *On Liberty* (1859) to explore how he understands and combines these traditions. Utilitarianism assesses actions, institutions, and policies by the value of their consequences for human welfare or happiness. In assessing the consequences of alternatives, the utilitarian counts everyone's welfare and counts it equally. The utilitarian concludes that actions, institutions, and policies must promote — in one formulation, maximize — human welfare or happiness. Liberalism, as a tradition within political philosophy, recognizes that individuals have rights against each other and the state that constrain how they should be treated by each other and the state.

Though utilitarianism was a progressive doctrine historically, challenging traditional institutions of class and privilege in the nineteenth century, nowadays it strikes some as morally problematic. In requiring us to do what is best for all, utilitarianism may seem *overly demanding*, requiring agents to sacrifice their personal concerns for the greater good. Moreover, maximizing total welfare doesn't seem to allow the utilitarian to attach any intrinsic significance to the way in which welfare is *distributed* or to *individual rights* that many think trump the pursuit of collective goals. However, Mill thinks that utilitarianism can answer these challenges. In particular, he thinks that rights and justice have utilitarian foundations. This claim is defended at the end of *Utilitarianism* and at greater length in *On Liberty*, where he defends individual rights to liberty, apparently claiming that liberty may only be restricted to prevent harm to others, not for paternalistic or moralistic purposes or for preventing offense. We will also explore how Mill applies his utilitarian and liberal principles to issues of sexual equality in

The Subjection of Women (1869). It is sometimes claimed that the radical and progressive nature of Mill's doctrines only became apparent in his defense of sexual equality.

In reading and discussing the work of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill, we will try not only to understand and assess their ethical contributions but also to understand and assess their interrelations. Are Kant's criticisms of eudaimonism fair and reasonable? Aristotle and Mill both develop ethical theories based, in different ways, on happiness. Does Kant's idea that morality is a system of categorical imperatives require us to reject any morality of happiness? How is Kant's conception of a good will related Aristotle's conception of virtue? How close (or far apart) are Aristotle's conception of eudaimonia and Kant's conception of the highest good? What is Mill's higher pleasures doctrine, and might it admit of a broadly Aristotelian interpretation? Must the utilitarian be prepared to violate Kant's prohibition on treating oneself or others as mere means? Does Mill have a coherent conception of rights that would satisfy Kantian strictures? How might Mill's defense of sexual equality respond to Aristotle's defense of sexual inequality in the *Politics*? These are just a sample of the kind of comparative questions about happiness, virtue, and duty that we want to recognize and address.

FORMAT

Class meetings will involve lecture, seasoned with discussion. The lectures provide philosophical background and structure to the issues raised by the readings and will present and assess these issues in a systematic way. I hope and expect that students will be engaged by the material and ask questions and make comments. I'll use PowerPoint slides during class and will post those slides to the course website on Canvas after class.

Students are expected to come to lecture regularly and be prepared. Students who attend lectures and participate in discussion do better on class assignments, and attendance and participation play a role in one's overall grade.

REQUIREMENTS & GRADING

- **Quizzes.** The quizzes will be bi-weekly and administered online, through the Canvas website. They will take less than 10 minutes and consist of true/false and multiple-choice questions. The quizzes test basic comprehension of the readings, lectures, and class discussion. Quizzes can be taken within a 48-hour window after Friday 3pm and before Sunday 3pm. They are timed. Students are expected to prepare in advance. The quizzes are not open-book, and students may not collaborate in taking them. The quizzes will be Friday April 14, Friday April 28, Friday May 12, Friday May 26, and Friday June 9. Your quiz grade will be calculated based on your four best quiz scores (throwing out your lowest score). Collectively, the quizzes will be worth 45% of your overall grade.
- **Missed Quizzes.** There is more than adequate notice and opportunity for students to take the quizzes, and students can take the quizzes at their convenience during a 48-hour period. Since the lowest quiz score will be dropped, opportunities to make-up a missed quiz will be limited and exceptional. They are limited to unavoidable conflicts; they must be justified in writing with suitable documentation in advance or, where that is not possible, immediately after the administration of the quiz in question. Do not ask if you can make-up a quiz you forgot to take.
- **The Paper.** The paper should be 8-10 double-spaced pages. It will be due by 5pm, Wednesday, June 14th (during exam week) but can be submitted earlier. It will be worth 40% of your overall grade. Paper topics will be distributed well in advance of the due date.
- **Submission of Papers.** Students will be expected to submit papers electronically, via turnitin.com on the Canvas website.
- **Late Papers.** Since there is only one paper due during exam week, and students have ample time to submit the paper early, if needed, extensions will be granted only under exceptional circumstances and for limited periods of time. If students require an extension on the paper, they must request and justify an extension in advance via email. Late papers (for which an extension was not approved in advance) will lose one full grade for every day (24-hour period) late. For instance, a paper that would have received an A- if handed in on time will receive a C- if handed in two days late (more than 24 hours and not more than 48 hours). So, if you hand in an A- paper 25 hours late, that counts as two days late, and the paper will get a C-.
- **Plagiarism.** Students should note that plagiarism is a violation of the Principles of Academic Integrity (<https://senate.ucsd.edu/operating-procedures/senate-manual/appendices/2>). Anyone determined to have violated these principles will fail the assignment and the course and will be reported to the Office

of Academic Integrity. If you have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism or other academic misconduct, please consult with me *in advance*.

- **Attendance and Participation.** Students are expected to attend class and participate on a regular basis, and I'll take note of frequent absences. Attendance and participation will count for 15% of your grade. If you have a medical reason or unavoidable conflict that prevents you from attending one or more classes, it would be prudent to explain your absence to me by email.
- **Grade Breakdown.** As percentages of your total grade: the quizzes collectively = 45%, the paper = 40%, and attendance and participation = 15%.

BOOKS

Required readings will be drawn from our primary texts; they will be posted as PDFs on the Canvas website and are available for student purchase at the campus bookstore or online (e.g. Amazon).

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trs. T. Irwin, 3d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2019).
- Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trs. M. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Other editions and translations of some of these works may be acceptable, but consult with me before using other editions and translations. In addition to these required texts, I'll post PDFs of relevant selections from Aristotle's *Politics* and several recommended (optional) secondary sources.

READINGS

The reading assignments are listed on the Syllabus. I will regularly indicate where we are on the Syllabus (remind me if I don't). It is important to read the assignments on time.

WEBSITE

All course materials and handouts will be posted on the course website, available through Canvas on Course Finder (<https://coursefinder.ucsd.edu>). Students enrolled in the course should have automatic access to the website. You should check periodically to make sure that you have current versions of all the handouts, which are revised or updated periodically.

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

In addition to doing the readings and completing the assignments, students need to know and comply with the course policies and requirements described here. Exceptions to these policies and requirements will be made only in cases where the student had an unavoidable conflict, beyond their control, which they document in a timely manner. Exceptions will not be granted to accommodate student negligence.

YOUR INFO

Within the first week of class, I would like each student to send me an email providing a little background information about themselves.

1. Your year (senior, junior, sophomore)
2. Your major (and minor, if applicable)
3. Relevant prior coursework (other philosophy courses or other courses that strike you as potentially relevant)
4. Optional fun fact: Dog or cat person? Favorite hobbies? Favorite food? Least favorite food? A surprising fact about you?

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Syllabus

Most of the required readings (A) can be found in the three required texts.

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trs. T. Irwin, 3d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2019).
- Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trs. M. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

There are pdfs of these texts on the course website, and hard copies are available for purchase at the campus bookstore (or could be found online). Other editions and translations of some of these works may be acceptable. Please consult with me before using other editions and translations.

I list a few recommended readings (B) here as well. For students who are interested in secondary literature on particular topics, I am happy to make recommendations upon request. Please do the readings in advance of class discussion.

1. ARISTOTLE'S ETHICS

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* contains the fullest statement of his ethical theory, though we might supplement his claims there with claims he makes in other ethical works, including the *Politics*. Like other Greek ethicists (e.g. Socrates, Plato, the Epicureans, and Stoics), Aristotle takes the agent's *eudaimonia* or happiness to be the central ethical concept. Other ethical concepts, such as virtue, seem to be defined in relation to happiness. Aristotle treats virtue as the central and controlling element of happiness, but he also thinks that virtue is an incomplete good and needs the addition of goods of fortune (e.g. health, good luck, the happiness of friends) to secure a complete good. He recognizes both self-regarding virtues (e.g. temperance) and other-regarding virtues (e.g. courage and justice). He needs to explain how both self-regarding and other-regarding virtues are necessary for one's happiness, and his extended discussion of friendship may provide this explanation. For Aristotle, virtue involves control of the non-rational part of the soul by the rational part. In the *Politics* Aristotle commits himself to troublesome ideas about the distribution of capacities for virtue. He thinks that some people lack sufficient rational capacities in a way that makes them by nature fit for slavery. Though he has a higher estimate of women, he thinks that they too lack the capacity for complete virtue necessary for full citizenship. (B) Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. I, chs. 6-9 and his notes to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

- I. *Eudaimonia*. (A) *Nicomachean Ethics* I, X.7-8. (B) Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. I, chs. 6-7.
- II. *Virtue*. (A) *NE* II, III.5-12, IV, V.1-2, V.7, V.10, VI.1-7, VII. (B) Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. I, ch. 8.
- III. *Friendship*. (A) *NE* VIII-IX. (B) Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. I, ch. 9; David O. Brink, "Eudaimonism and Cosmopolitan Concern."
- IV. *The Scope of Citizenship: Slaves and Women*. (A) *Politics* II, 4-7, 12-13; Richard Kraut, *Aristotle: Political Philosophy*, ch. 8.

2. KANT'S ETHICS

Kant's ethical theory is developed in several writings, most importantly in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797). We will focus on the *Groundwork* but supplement it with selections from the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In the *Groundwork* Kant insists that moral requirements are requirements of reason — categorical imperatives — that are not grounded in our emotions, interests, or desires in the way hypothetical imperatives are. He thinks that this requires us to act on rules that all rational agents can accept. This, he thinks, requires that we treat everyone as an end and never merely as a means. Kant is critical of various ethicists, including the Greeks, for basing morality on happiness. But he understands happiness hedonistically, as consisting in pleasure, as Aristotle does not and Mill may not. In his doctrine of the highest good Kant claims that virtue is a supreme but incomplete good. The highest good consists of happiness that is conditioned by and proportionate to virtue. It will be instructive to compare Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* and Kant's conception of the highest good. (B) Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. III, chs. 66-72.

- I. *The Good Will and the Categorical Imperative.* (A) *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Preface, sections I-II. (B) Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. III, chs. 66-67.
- II. *Kant's Conception of Freedom.* (A) *Groundwork*, section III. (B) Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. III, chs. 69-70; David O. Brink, "Perfect Freedom: A Comparative Study."
- III. *Kant's Criticisms of Eudaimonism.* (A) *The Critique of Practical Reason* 5: 25-26, 110-113. (B) Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals* 6: 385-87; Terence Irwin, "Kant's Criticisms of Eudaemonism;" Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. III, ch. 71; David O. Brink, "Normative Perfectionism and the Kantian Tradition," esp. pp. 1-15.
- IV. *Kant on the Highest Good.* (A) *The Critique of Practical Reason* 5:110-141. (B) Stephen Engstrom, "Happiness and the Highest Good in Aristotle and Kant."

3. MILL'S UTILITARIANISM AND LIBERALISM

Mill was an important contributor to both the utilitarian and liberal traditions, as is reflected in *Utilitarianism* (1861) and *On Liberty* (1859). Utilitarianism assesses actions, institutions, and policies by the value of their consequences for human welfare or happiness. In assessing the consequences of alternatives, the utilitarian counts everyone's welfare and counts it equally. The utilitarian concludes that actions, institutions, and policies must promote — in one formulation, maximize — human welfare or happiness. Liberalism, as a tradition within political philosophy, recognizes that individuals have rights against each other and the state that constrain how they should be treated by each other and the state.

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- I. *Utilitarianism and the Higher Pleasures Doctrine.* (A) *Utilitarianism*, ch. II. (B) Brink, *Mill's Progressive Principles*, ch. 3.
- II. *The Proof of Utilitarianism.* (A) *Utilitarianism*, ch. IV. (B) Brink, *Mill's Progressive Principles*, ch. 5.
- III. *Utilitarianism, Justice, and Rights.* (A) *Utilitarianism*, ch. V. (B) John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* §§5-6; Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 28-33; Brink, *Mill's Progressive Principles*, ch. 4.
- IV. *Mill's Liberal Principles.* (A) *On Liberty*. (B) Brink, *Mill's Progressive Principles*, chs. 6-9.
- V. *Mill and Sexual Equality.* (A) *The Subjection of Women*. (B) Brink, *Mill's Progressive Principles*, ch. 11.