

Ethics: Living Philosophy in Contemporary Times

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE GOOD?

IS THERE COMMON GOOD?

10 November 2019 at Carindale Library Meeting Room

From the centre of the universe to worlds beyond, we have already had two basic responses; we have already sought to ask ourselves how we feel, or care about such things as goodness and other ways of valuing. The other basic response follows in the next session.

REFERENCES

(The works listed are not a complete coverage of the contemporary field but to provide the best known and most significant in contemporary discussions. Apologies if anything important has been missed)

The Key Texts

Raimond Gaita. *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (Routledge, 1991).

Raimond Gaita's work is one of the most important, original and provocative books on the nature of morality to have been published in recent years. It is essential reading for anyone interested in what it means to talk about good and evil. Gaita argues that questions about morality are inseparable from the preciousness of each human being, an issue we can only address if we place the idea of remorse at the centre of moral life. Drawing on an astonishing range of thinkers and writers, including Plato, Wittgenstein, George Orwell and Primo Levi, Gaita also reflects on the place of reason and truth in morality and ultimately how questions about good and evil are connected to the meaning of our lives.

Allan Gibbard. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgement* (Clarendon Press, 1990).

This treatise explores what is at issue in narrowly moral questions, and in questions of rational thought and conduct in general. It helps to explain why normative thought and talk so pervade human life, and why our highly social species might have evolved to be gripped by these questions. Allan Gibbard asks how, if his theory is right, we can interpret our normative puzzles, and thus proceed toward finding answers to them.

Alasdair MacIntyre. *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

After Virtue is a book on moral philosophy and MacIntyre provides a bleak view of the state of modern moral discourse, regarding it as failing to be rational, and failing to admit to being irrational. He claims that older forms of moral discourse were in better shape, particularly

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singling out Aristotle's moral philosophy as an exemplar. He claims that the new sciences, though superficially similar to the old, would in fact be devoid of real scientific content, because the key suppositions and attitudes would not be present. "The hypothesis which I wish to advance," he continues, "is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described." MacIntyre applies this hypothesis to advance the notion that the moral structures that emerged from the Enlightenment were philosophically doomed from the start because they were formed using the aforementioned incoherent language of morality. MacIntyre claims that this failure encompasses the work of many significant Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment moral philosophers, including Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Marx, Immanuel Kant, and David Hume. These philosophers "fail because of certain shared characteristics deriving from their highly specific historical background." That background is the Enlightenment's abandonment of Aristotelianism, and in particular the Aristotelian concept of teleology.

Alasdair MacIntyre. *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Alasdair MacIntyre explores some central philosophical, political and moral claims of modernity and argues that a proper understanding of human goods requires a rejection of these claims. In a wide-ranging discussion, he considers how normative and evaluative judgments are to be understood, how desire and practical reasoning are to be characterized, what it is to have adequate self-knowledge, and what part narrative plays in our understanding of human lives. He asks, further, what it would be to understand the modern condition from a neo-Aristotelian or Thomistic perspective, and argues that Thomistic Aristotelianism, informed by Marx's insights, provides us with resources for constructing a contemporary politics and ethics which both enable and require us to act against modernity from within modernity. This rich and important book builds on and advances MacIntyre's thinking in ethics and moral philosophy, and will be of great interest to readers in both fields.

Mary Midgley. *Beast and Man: The Root of Human Nature* (Cornell University Press, 1978).

Philosophers have traditionally concentrated on the qualities that make human beings different from other species. In *Beast and Man* Mary Midgley, one of our foremost intellectuals, stresses continuities. What makes people tick? Largely, she asserts, the same things as animals. She tells us humans are rather more like other animals than we previously allowed ourselves to believe, and reminds us just how primitive we are in comparison to the sophistication of many animals. A veritable classic for our age, *Beast and Man* has helped change the way we think about ourselves and the world in which we live.

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Derek Parfit. *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984).

Derek Parfit discusses ethics, rationality and personal identity. Part 1 argues that certain ethical theories are self-defeating. One such theory is ethical egoism, which Parfit claims is 'collectively self-defeating' due to the prisoner's dilemma, though he does not believe this is sufficient grounds to reject the theory. Ultimately, Parfit does reject "common sense morality" on similar grounds. Part 2 focuses on the relationship between rationality and time, dealing with questions such as: should we take into account our past desires?, should I do something I will regret later, even if it seems a good idea now?, and so on. Parfit's main purpose in Part 2 is to make an argument against self-interest theory.

Derek Parfit. *On What Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2011)

Derek Parfit provided a three-volume book. The first two volumes were published in 2011 and the third in 2017. It is a follow-up to Parfit's 1984 book 'Reasons and Persons'. Parfit defends an objective ethical theory and suggests that we have reasons to act that cannot be accounted for by subjective ethical theories. Furthermore, it attempts to present a moral theory that combines three traditional approaches in moral and political philosophy: Kantian deontology, consequentialism, and contractarianism (of the sort advocated by T. M. Scanlon, and from the tradition of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Rawls). According to Parfit, these theories converge rather than disagree, "climbing the same mountain on different sides", in Parfit's metaphor.

T. M. Scanlon. *What We Owe to Each Other* (Harvard University Press, 1998)

T.M. Scanlon bases his contractualism on a broader account of reasons, value, and individual well-being that challenges standard views about these crucial notions. He argues that desires do not provide us with reasons, that states of affairs are not the primary bearers of value, and that well-being is not as important for rational decision-making as it is commonly held to be. Scanlon is a pluralist about both moral and non-moral values. He argues that, taking this plurality of values into account, contractualism allows for most of the variability in moral requirements that relativists have claimed, while still accounting for the full force of our judgments of right and wrong.

Judith Jarvis Thomson. *Rights, Restitution, and Risk: Essay in Moral Theory* (Harvard University Press, 1986).

Moral theory should be simple: the moral theorist attends to ordinary human action to explain what makes some acts right and others wrong, and we need no microscope to observe a human act. Yet no moral theory that is simple captures all of the morally relevant facts. In a set of vivid examples, stories, and cases Judith Thomson shows just how wide an array of moral considerations bears on all but the simplest of problems. Judith Jarvis Thomson is a philosophical analyst of the highest caliber who can tease a multitude of implications out of the story of a mere bit of eavesdropping. She is also a master teller of

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tales which have a philosophical bite. Beyond these pleasures, however, she brings new depth of understanding to some of the most pressing moral issues of the moment, notably abortion. Thomson's essays determinedly confront the most difficult questions: What is it to have a moral right to life, or any other right? What is the relation between the infringement of such rights and restitution? How is rights theory to deal with the imposition of risk?

Bernard Williams. *Shame and Necessity* (University of California Press, 1993).

Bernard Williams's original and radical book questions a picture of Western history which assumes that the ancient Greeks had primitive ideas of the self, of responsibility, freedom, and shame, and that now humanity has advanced from these to a more refined moral consciousness. While we are in many ways different from the Greeks, Williams claims that the differences are not to be traced to a shift in these basic conceptions of ethical life. We are more like the ancients than we are prepared to acknowledge, and only when this is understood can we properly grasp our most important differences from them, such as our rejection of slavery. At the center of his study is the question of how we can understand Greek tragedy at all, when its world is so far from ours. Williams explains how it is that when the ancients speak, they do not merely tell us about themselves, but about ourselves.

And with important connections to other areas of philosophy:

Ethics, Meta-Ethics, and Metaphysics

Allan Gibbard. *Meaning and Normativity* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

What does talk of meaning mean? All thinking consists in natural happenings in the brain. Talk of meaning though, has resisted interpretation in terms of anything that is clearly natural, such as linguistic dispositions. This, Kripke's Wittgenstein suggests, is because the concept of meaning is normative, on the 'ought' side of Hume's divide between is and ought. Allan Gibbard's previous books *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* and *Thinking How to Live* treated normative discourse as a natural phenomenon, but not as describing the world naturalistically. His theory is a form of expressivism for normative concepts, holding, roughly, that normative statements express states of planning. This new book integrates his expressivism for normative language with a theory of how the meaning of meaning could be normative. The result applies to itself: metaethics expands to address key topics in the philosophy of language, topics which in turn include core parts of metaethics. An upshot is to lessen the contrast between expressivism and nonnaturalism: in their strongest forms, the two converge in all their theses. Still, they differ in the explanations they give. Nonnaturalists' explanations mystify, whereas expressivists render normative thinking intelligible as something to expect from beings like us, complexly social products of natural selection who talk with each other.

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Christine Korsgaard. *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Christine Korsgaard identifies and examines four accounts of the source of normativity that have been advocated by modern moral philosophers--voluntarism, realism, reflective endorsement, and the appeal to autonomy--and shows how Kant's autonomy-based account emerges as a synthesis of the other three. Her discussion is followed by commentary from G.A. Cohen, Raymond Geuss, Thomas Nagel, and Bernard Williams, and a reply by Korsgaard.

Christine Korsgaard. *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

Christine Korsgaard sets out to demonstrate how people determine their own actions. A dialogue with Immanuel Kant takes place throughout the book.

David Oderberg. *The Metaphysics of Good and Evil* (CRC Press, 2019)

The *Metaphysics of Good and Evil* is the first, full-length contemporary defence, from the perspective of analytic philosophy, of the Scholastic theory of good and evil – the theory of Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and most medieval and Thomistic philosophers. Goodness is analysed as obedience to nature. Evil is analysed as the privation of goodness. Goodness, surprisingly, is found in the non-living world, but in the living world it takes on a special character. The book analyses various kinds of goodness, showing how they fit into the Scholastic theory. The privation theory of evil is given its most comprehensive contemporary defence, including an account of truthmakers for truths of privation and an analysis of how causation by privation should be understood. In the end, all evil is deviance – a departure from the goodness prescribed by a thing's essential nature.

Bernard Williams. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 1985).

Bernard Williams delivers a sustained indictment of systematic moral theory from Kant onward and offers a persuasive alternative. Williams's goal is nothing less than to reorient ethics toward the individual. He accuses modern moral philosophers of retreating to system and deserting individuals in their current social context. He believes that the ethical work of Plato and Aristotle is nearer to the truth of what ethical life is, but at the same time recognizes that the modern world makes unparalleled demands on ethical thought. In Williams' argument, Kant's ideas involved a view of the self we can no longer accept. Modern theories such as utilitarianism and contractualism usually offer criteria that lie outside the self altogether, and this, together with an emphasis on system, has weakened ethical thought. Why should a set of ideas have any special authority over our sentiments just because it has the structure of a theory? How could abstract theory help the individual answer the Socratic question "How should I live?"

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Ethics and Politics & Society

Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990).

Judith Butler argues that gender is a kind of improvised performance. The work is influential in feminism, women's studies, and lesbian and gay studies, and has also enjoyed widespread popularity outside of traditional academic circles. Butler's ideas about gender came to be seen as foundational to queer theory and the advancing of dissident sexual practices during the 1990s.

Raimond Gaita. *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love & Truth & Justice* (The Text Publishing Company, 1999).

Raimond Gaita discusses ideas about love and hatred, good and evil, guilt and forgiveness. It explores personal, political and philosophical ideas about the kind of society and the sort of public conversation we might have in the twenty-first century (written in 1999).

Martha Nussbaum. *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Martha Nussbaum deals with philosophical topics such as the meaning of life by seeking the dialogue with ancient philosophers, such as Aristotle, to whom Nussbaum pays much attention in many of her other works as well. The book examines the fundamental ethical problem that many of the valued constituents of a well-lived life are vulnerable to factors outside a person's control, and asks how this affects our appraisal of persons and their lives.

Martha Nussbaum. *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Harvard University Press, 1997)

Martha Nussbaum provides a classical defence of multiculturalism: drawing on the ideas of Socrates, the Stoics and Seneca (from whom she derives her title), she steers a narrow course between cranky traditionalists and anti-Western radicals who would reject her Socratic method out of hand.

Kenan Malik. *The Quest for a Moral Compass: A Global History of Ethics* (Atlantic Books, 2014).

Kenan Malik explores the history of moral thought as it has developed over three millennia, from Homer's Greece to Mao's China, from ancient India to modern America. It tells the stories of the great philosophers, and breathes life into their ideas, while also challenging many of our most cherished moral beliefs.

Ruwen Ogien. *Réseaux d'immigrés : ethnographie de nulle part*, (avec Jacques Katuszewski, 1981).

No English translation could be located, but for noting.

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Ruwen Ogien. *Mes Mille et Une Nuits. La maladie comme drame et comme comédie* (2017).

No English translation could be located, but for noting.

Peter Singer. *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

Peter Singer analyzes, in detail, why and how beings' interests should be weighed. In his view, a being's interests should always be weighed according to that being's concrete properties, and not according to its belonging to some abstract group. Singer studies a number of ethical issues including: race, sex, ability, species, abortion, euthanasia, infanticide, embryo experimentation, the moral status of animals, political violence, overseas aid, and whether we have an obligation to assist others.

Peter Singer. *Ethics in the Real World: 82 Brief Essays on Things That Matter* (Text Publishing, 2016)

In this book of brief essays, Peter Singer applies his controversial ways of thinking to issues like climate change, extreme poverty, animals, abortion, euthanasia, human genetic selection, sports doping, the sale of kidneys, the ethics of high-priced art, and ways of increasing happiness. Singer asks whether chimpanzees are people, smoking should be outlawed, or consensual sex between adult siblings should be decriminalised, and he reiterates his case against the idea that all human life is sacred, applying his arguments to some recent cases in the news. In addition, he explores, in an easily accessible form, some of the deepest philosophical questions, such as whether anything really matters and whether the pale blue dot that is our planet has any value.

Judith Jarvis Thomson. "A Defense of Abortion" (Philosophy & Public Affairs, Vol. 1, no. 1, Fall 1971).

"A Defense of Abortion" is a moral philosophy paper by Judith Jarvis Thomson first published in 1971. Granting for the sake of argument that the fetus has a right to life, Thomson uses thought experiments to argue that the fetus's right to life does not trump the pregnant woman's right to have jurisdiction over her body, and that induced abortion is therefore not morally impermissible. Her argument has many critics on both sides of the abortion debate, yet continues to receive defense. Thomson's imaginative examples and controversial conclusions have made "A Defense of Abortion" perhaps "the most widely reprinted essay in all of contemporary philosophy".

Peter Unger. *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

Peter Unger argues that for people in the developed world to live morally, they are morally obliged to make sacrifices to help mitigate human suffering and premature death in the

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third world, and further that it is acceptable (and morally right) to lie, cheat, and steal to mitigate suffering.