

Yeshiva University/Straus Center Course Moral Philosophy
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Philosophy

This course will explore classic works of Western moral philosophy and some key texts of Jewish moral thought. The course is meant to enable students to understand some of the enduring, fundamental problems of moral philosophy and some of the most important approaches to formulating and addressing them. It is also—and equally—intended to highlight some of the significant resources in Jewish thought and the sorts of contributions they make to the main issues of moral philosophy. Rather than being mainly a survey, aiming at surface acquaintance with several thinkers, the course will be built around two centrally important questions. The first is, “what is the nature and locus of moral value?” and the second is “what is the nature of moral motivation; how and why would a person be motivated to act on the basis of moral considerations?” Those questions pervade the history of moral philosophy, and different thinkers’ approaches to them shape key elements of their thought. Those thematic concerns will supply a helpful architecture to our discussions.

Looking at the works of some Jewish thinkers will show how fully they engaged with fundamental philosophical concerns and we will see why Jewish thinkers should be “more people’s business,” why they should be included in the mainstream of moral philosophy. Their views of the virtues, the relation between reason, sensibility, and desire, their conceptions of human excellence and a well-led life, and their insights concerning moral epistemology and moral motivation exhibit depth and subtlety and have lasting relevance. While the course is meant to enlarge students’ understanding of the history of moral thought, the course is not primarily a history of philosophy course. It is focally concerned with fundamental issues in a manner that takes seriously the significance of the history of philosophy.

The readings (tentatively) include:

Plato: *Meno*, This is an accessible, perennially relevant exploration of the nature of virtue and whether virtue can be taught. The dialogue combines basic questions concerning the objectivity of value with basic questions concerning knowledge of value. Plato’s formulation of fundamental issues shaped an enormous amount of succeeding thought.

Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, This is certainly the most important articulation of virtue-centered ethics and a classic conception of perfectionist moral anthropology. Also, Aristotle’s account of the relation between virtuous activity and pleasure remains vitally important, as does his view of the relation between ethical and intellectual virtues and his conception of practical wisdom. [We will read Bks. I, II, III, VI, X.]

Saadia Gaon: *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, His account of the rationality of Judaism, the reasons for the commandments, and the way fulfilling them figures in human excellence is both an important basis of much Jewish thought that follows and an important conception of the relation between theism and reason. Saadia largely set the agenda for medieval Jewish philosophy and his understanding of the main issues—including the relation between reason and divine command—has had lasting influence. There are important points of contact with Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas, in particular, though Saadia was an original thinker, not beholden to one or another specific philosophical tradition or doctrine. [Introductory Treatise, Treatise III, Treatise IV]

Aquinas: “Questions on Law” (Questions 90-94 from *Summa Theologiae*) Aquinas’s conception of natural law and its relation to theistic considerations remain centrally important to debates over the natural law approach to ethics and the grounds of natural law. This is a crucial text concerning the metaphysics and knowledge of moral value. Aquinas connects natural law with a virtue-centered approach to ethics, raising important questions regarding relations between reason, revelation, virtue, and happiness. We will focus on the role of natural law in ethical thought overall and its significance for a conception of an excellent, flourishing life.

Maimonides: "Eight Chapters," "Laws Concerning Character Traits," excerpts from *Guide*, III. We will focus on his conceptions of virtue, the reasons for the commandments, human perfection, and the relation between reason, revelation, and tradition. Maimonides uses many Aristotelian concepts but elaborates them in unAristotelian ways, especially in his sophisticated view of the role of tradition in the mutual reinforcement of fulfilling commandments (practice) and attaining intellectual virtue. Maimonides’s moral epistemology differs in important ways from Aristotle’s conception of practical wisdom and Aquinas’s conception of natural law. The differences supply a basis for a distinctive, significant contribution to moral philosophy. Maimonides shows how the particularism of a tradition can nonetheless be the ground of objective, universally valid values. The works we will read focus on moral epistemology, moral psychology, and the relation between reason and revelation. Maimonides’s thought has Platonic and Aristotelian resonances along with unique, original elements.

Spinoza: excerpts from *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza’s critique of Hebrew Bible as a source of ethics and his account of the relation between reason and revelation, especially its significance for the political context, mark a significant step in the development of distinctively modern thought. While highlighting Spinoza’s project of distancing himself from (Jewish) tradition we will take note of Maimonidean influences on his thought and also consider the relevance of his understanding of religiously-grounded morality to the contemporary world.

Hume: *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume’s critique of moral rationalism and conceptions of objective moral value has shaped many aspects of

the modern debates in moral philosophy. Hume maintains that the falsity of moral rationalism and the non-existence of objective values do not undermine the genuineness or authority of moral considerations. Thus, this is a version of subjectivism without ‘cost’ to morality. Hume’s arguments, and the arguments about Hume’s views remain highly significant and relevant.

Kant: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, The most influential conception of deontological ethics—ethics shaped by a conception of what are our moral duties. Also, Kant’s explication of moral duty on the basis of an *a priori* principle remains centrally important to the debate over the role of reason with regard to the account of moral value and the account of moral motivation.

J. S. Mill: *Utilitarianism*, This remains one of the most influential conceptions of the basic character and structure of moral theory. It is an attempt to put morality on an empirical, objective basis, a basis in general facts about human psychology—the desire for pleasure and the natural tendency to have concern for the welfare of other persons. Mill’s project of explaining all moral considerations in terms of the maximizing of utility (happiness, interpreted as pleasure) is one of the most important rivals to Kantian deontology, Aristotelian virtue-centered ethics, and Thomistic natural law.

The readings are in historical order, with one exception. I have placed Maimonides after Aquinas so that we will have Aquinas’s natural law theory as well as Aristotle’s theory of practical wisdom as a basis for exploring contrasts with Maimonides’s views. The slight revision of historical order is more than compensated-for by the opportunity to engage in illuminating comparative analysis.

If time permits we will include some readings from *Contemporary Jewish Ethics and Morality: A Reader*, in particular, E. Dorff on Covenant and Louis Newman on Law and Religion. These address central themes of the course in the contemporary context.

There are no philosophical prerequisites for the course. If this is a student’s first course in philosophy, it will be challenging but manageable. The total amount of reading is not great but these are texts one needs to read and reread, again and again. While some of the vocabulary and issues may seem unfamiliar at the start, within a few weeks all students should be able to recognize that there is a small number of fundamental concerns these thinkers share, and the issues motivating those concerns should emerge with real clarity. Moreover, all of them are perennially significant concerns; they are not of only historical interest.

The course will introduce students to substantive issues, such as different conceptions of the locus and nature of moral value, and different views of what gives an action moral worth, as well as introducing them to different ways in which moral thought has been structured, e.g., differences between consequentialist, deontological, and virtue-centered approaches to moral thought.

Requirements: Students are expected to attend class on a completely regular basis. This is not material one can master on one's own and the discussions in class will be an important element of the course. These are eminently discussable issues and you will see that they are strongly relevant to any reflective person.

You will write 3 short papers (2-3 pages each) and one longer paper (6-7 pages). There will be a final essay-exam.

Required Texts

Plato: *Five Dialogues* (includes *Meno*) ed. G. M. A. Grube, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2002.

Aristotle: *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1999.

Saadia Gaon: *The Book of Beliefs & Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

Aquinas: *Treatise on Law*, Intro. by Ralph McInerny, Gateway Editions, 1996.

Maimonides: *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, ed. Raymond Weiss, Charles Butterworth, New York: Dover,

Spinoza: *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Hume: *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Peter Millican, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Kant: *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. James Ellington, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1993.

Mill: *Utilitarianism*, ed. George Sher, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co. Inc., 2002.