

Philosophy 241: Ethics and the Emotions
Monday Through Friday, 9:30-10:20 am
University of Washington
Spring 2010

Instructor: Jeremy Fischer

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Course Description

Emotions and ethics go way back. In this course we will discuss the place of emotions in a good life as well as the theoretical role that emotions might play in a philosophy of ethics. We will consider: (1) the Stoical view the emotions are always best suppressed by reason, if possible; (2) Aristotle's view that it is a good thing to experience certain emotions in certain circumstances (dictated by reason) and a bad thing not to experience such emotions; (3) the Sentimentalist view that sympathy with others, and not abstract reasoning, is the driving force behind moral behavior and moral thinking; (4) whether (and if so then how) emotions help us to understand what is good, which actions are right and wrong, and which actions deserve praise and blame; (5) how to make sense of specific emotions, including love, grief, shame, gratitude, anger, and contempt; and (6) what it means to say that an emotion is "appropriate" or "justified."

Fair warning: this course requires a considerable amount of reading, and class will be discussion-heavy. In other words, this is a course for those who wish to think carefully about emotions and ethics by reading and discussing a lot of great philosophy. Finally, although there are no official prerequisites, students who have taken other philosophy classes will possess a strong advantage over those who have not taken a philosophy class before.

Grades

There are 250 points to earn, distributed as follows:

- (1) In-class reading quizzes (50 points): at least one per week—these will typically take a multiple choice form.
- (2) In-class response essays (50 points): at least one per week—these will typically involve writing a short paragraph at the end of class in response to a question that I pose. All reasonable answers will receive full credit.
- (3) Short assignments (40 points): about five short assignments designed to help students learn methods of close textual reading.
- (4) Short essays (60 points): three essays worth 20 points each—these will be 1-2 page essays devoted to topics that I will provide you two weeks in advance of their due dates. The first paper will be due in week 4, the second will be due in week 7, and the third will be due in week 10.)
- (5) Final Exam (50 points): the exam will take place on June 9th from 8:30-10:30am in Savery 137, and will consist of a mixture of short and long essay questions.

Course Requirements

- (1) Passing the course requires passing at least four of the five graded sections of the course: passing the quiz and short assignments sections requires earning at least 20 out of 50 points; passing the final exam and in-class response essays sections requires earning at least 25 out of 50 points for each; and passing the short essay section requires earning at least 30 out of 60 points.
- (2) Assignments that are submitted late will be penalized by 10% each day, unless (1) I have granted an extension in advance of the deadline or (2) there is some emergency. Quizzes and in-class response essays cannot be submitted late.

Texts

Plato, *Symposium*. Nehamas and Woodruff (trans.), Hackett, 1989

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Hanley (ed.), A. Sen (intro.), Penguin Classics, 2010

All other texts will be posted on e-reserve

SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

Week 1: Anger

Themes: We begin by considering anger: what it is, whether it's good for anything, and whether it's ever warranted.

Readings:

- (1) Seneca, "On Anger" (selections)
- (2) Marilyn Frye, "A Note on Anger," in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (1983), 84-94.

Week 2: Love, Part 1

Themes: This week we discuss what is possibly the most important philosophical work on the emotions: Plato's *Symposium*. How do Plato's characters conceptualize love? Why do they find it to be so important for the general quest for knowledge and virtue?

Readings:

- (1) Plato, *Symposium*, pp. 1-47

Week 3: Love, Part 2

Themes: After finishing the *Symposium*, we consider an opposing (Epicurean) view of love.

Readings:

- (1) Plato, *Symposium*, 48-78
- (2) Lucretius, *Of the Nature of Things* (lines 1011-1287)

Week 4: Love, Part 3

Themes: This week we consider two contemporary treatments of love and its importance.

Readings:

- (1) Harry Frankfurt, "On Love, and its Reasons," from *The Reasons of Love* (2004)
- (2) Alison Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, Jaggar and Bordo (eds.), Rutgers University (1989)

Week 5: Can Emotions be 'Justified' or 'Appropriate'?

Themes: This week we consider what it means to say that it is appropriate to experience an emotion, or that one is justified in experiencing an emotion, on a given occasion. Does this talk make sense, or are emotions more like stomach grumblings in being incapable of being 'justified.' We also discuss some ambiguities in calling an emotion appropriate.

Readings:

- (1) John Rawls, "Features of the Moral Sentiments," in *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971: 479-485
- (2) Michelle Mason, "Contempt as a Moral Attitude," *Ethics* 113 (January 2003), pp. 246-253 (excerpt)
- (3) Gabriele Taylor, "Justifying the Emotions," *Mind* 84 (1975), pp. 390-402

Week 6: Aristotle

Themes: How should we evaluate people, in general and in regards to their emotional life? This week we consider Aristotle's views on the role of emotions in a good life.

Readings:

- (1) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2 (on virtue)
- (2) Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 4.5 (on anger) and 4.9 (on shame)

Week 7: Stoicism, Part 1

Themes: Plato and the Stoics argue that emotions are far more dangerous than we commonly believe. This week we consider the role that (according to Plato and the Stoics) reason ought to play in restraining grief. What is wrong with grief? Does grief ever get anything right?

Readings:

- (1) Plato, *Republic* (603e-608b)
- (2) Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, Book 3, "On Grief"

Week 8: Stoicism, Part 2

Themes: We begin this week with a contemporary (psychiatric) version of the Stoic view of grief, before considering a radical criticism of the practice of extirpating the passions.

Readings:

- (1) Stephen Wilkinson, "Is 'Normal Grief' a Mental Disorder?" *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 200 (July 2000), pp. 289-304
- (2) Friedrich Nietzsche, "Morality as Anti-Nature," from *Twilight of the Idols*

Week 9: Sentimentalism, Part 1

Themes: We move into the Enlightenment this week in order to consider a view about ethics that demotes reason from its position of authority. The emotions, and especially what Hume and Smith call 'sympathy,' take the leading part in determining, in general, which actions are right and wrong.

Readings:

- (1) David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2.3.3., 'Of the influencing motives of the will,' pp. 413-418
- (2) Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part 1, Sections 1 and 2 ('Of the Sense of Propriety' and 'Of the Degrees of the different Passions which are consistent with Propriety'), pp. 11-54

Week 10: Sentimentalism, Part 2

Themes: This week we extend the Sentimentalist view to the topic of evaluating action as praiseworthy and blameworthy. Smith argues that the basis of such evaluation lies in gratitude and resentment. We end with some of Smith's stoical reflections.

Reading:

- (1) Adam Smith, *TMS*, Part 2, Section 1, 'Of the Sense of Merit and Demerit,' pp. 79-92
- (2) Adam Smith, *TMS*, Part 6, Section 3, 'Of Self-Command,' pp. 280-308

*****The Final Exam takes place from 8:30 to 10:20am, on June 8th, in Savery 137*****