Ethical Theory (Philosophy 450/650) Prof. C. Williams
Spring 201x (MW 2:30-3:45; EJCH 108H) EJCH 108C 784-4287
Office hours: MW 4-5, F 1-2, & by appointment ctw@unr.edu

Required texts

John Martin Fischer (ed.), *Metaphysics of Death* (Stanford) [MD]
Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford) [RP]
John Perry (ed.), *Personal Identity* (California) [PI]

Course objectives

Persons, individually and collectively, “have a future” (in some sense of that expression). Much of our moral thinking is concerned with future-having aspects of persons, and this course will be broadly concerned with the questions “What is a person?” and “How is a person related to the future?” I plan to organize our thinking around three themes:

(i) Personal identity and self-concern. We typically care about our own future. If there is a future life in store for us, what makes it “ours”? Should we care about “our” future because some future person is physically continuous with us now, or because the future person about whom we make plans is psychologically related to us (though perhaps not identical to us)? We will consider some answers to these questions, and, in particular, we will examine Derek Parfit’s challenging view, according to which what should matter to us does not require the preservation of personal identity. Parfit has an account that not only makes the traditional wish for immortality irrelevant, but also (in the words of J. L. Mackie) “offers to our present selves the assurance of gradual but inevitable disappearance even while our bodies stay alive.”

(ii) Death. We usually think that it is a bad thing for a person to die. But there is an ancient philosophical doctrine, found in Epicurus and Lucretius, that seems to deny that death is bad. This doctrine is often thought to be unacceptable, but showing that death is bad is not so easy as it appears. What sort of harm is death if the person affected by it is in no position to appreciate the harm? How can death be bad if an endless existence is not evidently desirable? We shall look at some of the flourishing philosophical literature on death–much of it opposed to the Epicurean view—to see whether the non-Epicureans are right, and to think about the extent to which the Epicurean view *is* opposed to ordinary ways of thinking. (We naturally have to think about cases in which death is not thought to be bad at all as well.)

(iii) Future generations. Concerning our relationship to the people who will live after us, there are several questions we might ask, some of which are the following: Do we have responsibilities to future people? Unlike other people to whom we have responsibilities, the existence of future people depends on our decisions: might we owe these people an existence? benefit them by bringing about their existence? But how can there be obligations to merely possible people? And how could someone in the future be harmed by some actions of ours (e.g., the depletion of natural resources) if that person would not even have existed if we had performed some different set of actions instead?
This will not be a course in practical ethics, so called (nor will it focus on what are often called “meta-ethical” issues). Our attention will be directed to concepts regarding personhood that have a bearing on ethics, and you should expect to have a deeper understanding of these concepts. We will, however, glance at some practical issues along the way (e.g., abortion), and many of our topics are indirectly relevant to practical questions.

**Prerequisites**

Two philosophy courses. Some background in ethics is desirable, but not essential.

**Silver Core Curriculum**

This course satisfies Core Objective 12 [CO12] (“Ethics”).

Brief description of CO12: Students will demonstrate understanding of ethical principles in general or in application of specialized knowledge, results of research, creative expression, or design processes. Students will demonstrate an ability to recognize, articulate, and apply ethical principles in various academic, professional, social, or personal contexts.

**Student learning outcomes**

As a result of taking this course, students will be able to:

1. State a thesis about a problem in ethical theory, and provide evidence and philosophical argument (including replies to counter-arguments) in its defense.

2. Explain and interpret the ideas associated with theories of ethics in contemporary philosophical literature.

3. Distinguish better and worse reasoning, and recognize relevant logical relationships and patterns of inference (in contemporary theories of ethics).

4. Show what is at stake in abstract debates in philosophical ethics, and indicate how positions in these debates has implications for the practice of moral agents and, where relevant, other areas of philosophical inquiry.

**Class format and WebCampus**

This class combines lecture and discussion. We shall also be using WebCampus. Extra textual material, and links, will be found on our WebCampus page, and your papers will be submitted here (as well as in hard-copy form in class). Paper assignments and other handouts will be posted here. If the syllabus is revised during the semester, our WebCampus page will have the most current version.
Reading schedule

The following reading schedule is meant to give you an approximate idea of what we shall be doing. Lectures may sometimes lag behind this schedule by about a week. The schedule may be revised (additions or deletions), and I’ll regularly make announcements throughout the semester regarding what we are going to do next.

Week 1 (1/19):
Introductory remarks

Week 2 (1/24, 1/26):
John Locke, “Of Identity and Diversity” [PI, 33-52]
Thomas Reid, “Of Identity,” “Of Mr. Locke’s Account of our Personal Identity” [PI, 107-118]
*VSA 1-1/26*

Week 3 (1/31, 2/2):
Bernard Williams, “The Self and the Future” [PI, 179-198]
*VSA 2–2/2*

Week 4 (2/7, 2/9):
Derek Parfit, RP, chapter 10 [all §§]
*Paper 1 due–2/9*

Week 5 (2/14, 2/16):
Parfit, RP, chapter 11 [all §§]
Parfit, RP, chapter 12 [§§87-90, 94]
*VSA 3–2/16*

Week 6 (2/23):
Parfit, RP, chapter 13 [§§95-97]
Parfit, RP, chapter 15 [§§107-118]
*VSA 4–2/23*

Week 7 (2/28, 3/2):
Epicurus, “Letter to Menoeceus” [reserve]
Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book III (excerpt) [reserve]
*VSA 5–3/2*

Week 8 (3/7, 3/9):
Thomas Nagel, “Death” [MD]
Don Marquis, “Why Abortion is Immoral” [online: *Journal of Philosophy* 1990]
Exam 1–3/9

Week 9—Spring Break

Week 10 (3/21, 3/23):
  Bernard Williams, “The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality” [MD]
  VSA 6–3/23

Week 11 (3/28, 3/30):
  John Martin Fischer, “Why Immortality is Not So Bad” [reserve]
  Steven Luper-Foy, “Annihilation” [MD]
  Paper 2 due–3/30

Week 12 (4/4, 4/6):
  Fred Feldman, “Some Puzzles About Death” [MD]
  VSA 7–4/6

Week 13 (4/11, 4/13):
  David Benatar, “Why it is Better Never to Come into Existence” [reserve]
  Parfit, RP, Appendix G
  VSA 8–4/13

Week 14 (4/18, 4/20):
  Parfit, RP, chapters 16-17
  VSA 9–4/20

Week 15 (4/25, 4/27):
  Jonathan Bennett, “On Maximizing Happiness”
  Annette Baier, “The Rights of Past and Future Persons”
  Paper 3 due–4/27

Week 16 (5/2):
  Concluding remarks
  Longer paper (650) due–5/2

Final Exam: 9 May (2:15-4:15)

Summary of course requirements

450: Three papers (1500-2000 words)—the first two, 15% each; the third, 20% [= 50% total]
  Final exam–20%
  In-class midterm exam–10%
Short writing assignments–10%
Presentation–5%
Class participation–5%

650:  Three papers (1500-2000 words)–the first two, 10% each; the third, 15% [= 35% total]
      Final exam–20%
      In-class midterm exam–10%
      One longer paper (3000 words)–20%
      Presentation–5%
      Class participation–10%

Explanation of the requirements

1. The papers will be on topics that I’ll assign approximately 7-10 days in advance. The due
dates are indicated under Topics and Readings.

2. The longer paper for 650 will be on a topic that you and I will choose, and you must consult
with me about the topic no later than two weeks before the due date (5/2).

3. The exams will consist of short answers and essays. The final exam is scheduled for 9 May
(2:15-4:15). Although the final exam will be weighted toward the material in the second half of
the semester, it will have a comprehensive component. Each exam may include extra-credit
questions.

4. The short pieces of written work (marked ‘VSA’, above, for ‘very short assignment’) will
involve a response to a reading we are doing that week. Expect to write half a page for each one.
These will be due on Wednesday, and generally will be assigned on the immediately preceding
Monday. There will be ten of these, and each one is worth 1% of the grade (or 10% overall).
They will have one of these numbers for a grade: 1, .75, or .50. In instances where a VSA is
truly superior, a ‘1+’ will be recorded.

5. All students will give a brief presentation (15 minutes) to the class. You will select a problem
or issue that is connected to one of our recent readings, explain why you think the problem or
issue is important, and then offer a suggestion regarding what you think should be said about it.
Afterwards the class will discuss your claims.

6. All work by graduate students will be held to a higher intellectual standard than that of
undergraduates.

7. I encourage class participation. Part of your grade—either 5% or 10%—depends on it, but those
who participate actively and well can receive further credit (though any further credit is a purely
discretionary element in the calculation of the final grade, and cannot be formalized). Please
note that, because of the required participation component, it is mathematically possible for you
to receive a final grade that is slightly lower than the average of the grades you receive on the individual written assignments.

8. All pieces of written work (except exams) are to be typed, double-spaced, and in grammatical English. If spelling and grammar are very weak indeed, your grade on a paper may be lower than it would otherwise be (though I will take into account the challenges of non-native English speakers). All papers must develop a clearly identifiable thesis.

9. Grade categories are by decile: As are grades whose point percentages are in the 90s; Bs, in the 80s; etc.

10. We will have plus (+) and minus (-) grades in this course, and they will be used for the upper and lower 2.5% in a grade category. For example, 80.0 to 82.4 is B-; 87.5 to 89.9, B+.

Policy on attendance

If you are registered for credit, class attendance is required. You are allowed to miss up to two class meetings without penalty. If you miss three classes, your final grade will be lowered by 3%; for each additional missed class your final grade will be lowered by 1.5%. The only exceptions to this policy are the same as those that govern the rescheduling of exams. If you miss more than five minutes of a class meeting, you will be counted as absent for that day.

Informal auditors are welcome, provided that they are diligent about doing the reading. If you are registered for the class, you should be registered for credit.

Please note that, because of the attendance policy, it is mathematically possible for a person to receive a final grade that is lower than any grade the person has received on the assignments.

Policy on late and rescheduled work

1. Papers: These will be penalized at the rate of one fractional grade for every 3 days (or portion thereof) that they are late. Papers will be collected at the beginning of class, and papers that are turned in on the due date but after the collection time may be treated as if they had been turned in the following business day (i.e., with a penalty of one fractional grade). Weekends and university holidays will not be counted in the calculation of penalties. (For possible exemptions from late penalties, see #2 next.)

2. Exams. These can be rescheduled only at my discretion, and any rescheduled work needs to be completed in a timely manner. If I agree to a rescheduling, there may or may not be a penalty, depending on whether you have an appropriate excuse. Only two sorts of excuse automatically count as appropriate: (i) a medical emergency, and (ii) the death of a near relative. Both sorts of excuse require written documentation, and I need to be notified as soon as possible about the problem. (Please do not wait until the next class meeting.) Other extenuating circumstances may
conceivably arise (e.g., certain University-related activities), but these have to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. I need to know about other potentially extenuating circumstances as far in advance as possible, and they too require written documentation.

If I agree to a rescheduling with a penalty, the exam will carry a penalty of 20% (i.e., the equivalent of two letter grades), and you will moreover not be eligible for any extra credit points that may be connected to it. The content and structure of any rescheduled exam, whether or not the exam carries a penalty, may differ from those of the original.

There will be no early scheduling of exams (including the final exam).

3. Very short assignments. A one-time penalty of 50% if turned in after the due date.

4. Presentations. No make-ups for unexcused absences if you miss on your presentation day. (It is your responsibility to remember, and to make plans for, your presentation day.)

**Statement on cheating and plagiarism**

Cheating, plagiarism or otherwise obtaining grades under false pretenses constitute academic dishonesty according to the code of this university. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and penalties can include canceling a student's enrollment without a grade, giving an F for the course or for the assignment. For more details, see the UNR General Catalog.

*Plagiarism* is a serious academic offense. It consists in the presentation of another person’s ideas or work as if they were your own, or in allowing your own ideas or work to be so used by someone else. Whenever you make use of another’s person’s ideas in your writing you need to cite the source, either in the body of the text or in a footnote. If you are in doubt, it is always best to cite. Cutting and pasting from Internet sources (whether professional articles or posted student papers) when you are writing a paper is most definitely plagiarism. Do not write a paper for another person, and do not allow another person to write a paper for you.

**Statement on disability services**

Any student with a disability needing academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to speak with the Disability Resource Center (Thompson Building, Suite 101) as soon as possible to arrange for appropriate accommodations.

**Statement on audio and video recording**

Surreptitious or covert video-taping of class or unauthorized audio recording of class is prohibited by law and by Board of Regents policy. This class may be videotaped or audio recorded only with the written permission of the instructor. In order to accommodate students with disabilities, some students may be given permission to record class lectures and discussions. Therefore, students should understand that their comments during class may be recorded.