Fall 9-1-2007

PHIL 502.01: Contemporary Writings on Ethical Objectivity

Bridget Clarke

University of Montana - Missoula, bridget.clarke@umontana.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/syllabi

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Clarke, Bridget, "PHIL 502.01: Contemporary Writings on Ethical Objectivity" (2007). Syllabi. 11065.
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/syllabi/11065

This Syllabus is brought to you for free and open access by the Course Syllabi at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Syllabi by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
I am not, myself, satisfied with what I have read or said on the philosophical basis of ethics. I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values, but I find myself incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don’t like it.

—Bertrand Russell, “Notes on Philosophy, January 1960"

The existence of a really good man living in a private dream world seems unacceptable.

—Iris Murdoch, The Sovereignty of Good

‘Objective,’ Oxford English Dictionary
3. Philos. a. Existing as an object of thought or consciousness as opposed to having a real existence; considered as presented to the mind rather than in terms of inherent qualities. b. That is or belongs to what is presented to consciousness, as opposed to the consciousness itself; that is the object of perception or thought, as distinct from the subject; (hence) (more widely) external to or independent of the mind. This sense is occasional in writers of the later 17th and early 18th centuries, these early examples being more or less transitional from sense 3a. The established use appears to be derived from Kant, occurring rarely in the late 18th cent., and more frequently from the early 19th cent. onwards (see quot. 1817). From the later 19th cent. onwards, this sense extends into more widespread general use, while retaining its specialist use in philosophical contexts.

1724 I. WATTS Logick II. ii. §8 Objective certainty, is when the proposition is certainly true in itself; and subjective, when we are certain of the truth of it. The one is in things, the other is in our minds. 1793 Monthly Rev. 11 498 Have the objects in fact a real objective existence, independent of our mode of perceiving them?

Our Topic. We will be working through some of the most influential writings in recent years on the question of whether and in what sense ethics is objective. All of the writings are challenging and will give us practice in the art of reading difficult texts as well as, I hope, a clear sense for some different positions that have been developed, and can be developed further, on this colossal question.

Readings. The books are available at the UC Bookstore and on-line.

Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (ELP)
Thomas Nagel, The Last Word (LW)
Philippa Foot, Natural Goodness (NG)

The other readings, which are chapters or articles, will be handed out or posted on e-reserve.

Schedule. This is subject to tweaking as we see fit.

September 14: ELP, chs. 1-2
September 21: ELP, chs. 3-4
September 28: ELP, ch. 8
October 5: ELP, ch. 9; Williams, “The Truth in Relativism”
October 26: LW, chs. 1-2
November 2: LW, ch. 6, Nagel’s review of ELP
November 9: NG, Intro and chs. 1-2 (focusing on ch. 2)
November 16: No class; I am out of town on University business
November 30: NG, chs. 3-4
December 7: NG, chs. 5-6 and Postscript
How We Will Proceed

We will run this as a reading group, with class members taking turns presenting on the assigned reading for the first half of the class and then opening it up to more general discussion (and instructor’s interventions) in the second half. Two to four members of class will present each week, and while you need not work as a unit, you do need to make sure that your discussions aren’t redundant.

Everyone who is not presenting will write a short critical response paper to the readings each week and email it to other class members by Friday 12p. The responses are not to be summaries of the readings, but selective accounts of your reaction to them. One way to do this is to cite (include a page reference) and paraphrase (or quote, whichever is most concise) claims that are getting you worked up, and then sketch out what seem to be the issues. The responses should be one single-spaced page in length.

In addition, each class member will also write a longer paper on a self-chosen topic at the end of the course; it is my hope that the presentations and shorter papers will give you ideas for the longer paper.

60% of your final grade will be based on your presentations and short papers, 40% on your final paper. You must show up regularly and complete the written work on schedule to receive credit for the course.

Presentations

No one expects you to have mastered the reading on which you present, but you are expected to engage it closely and carefully. What I am looking for are 2-3 clearly formulated and well-conceived questions and comments on the readings. These should be typed out and copied for distribution to the class.

A lot of love and skill go into writing good comments and questions. Here are some guidelines and suggestions.

Preparation

(a) identify as best you can the key claims.
(b) define as best you can the key terms.
(c) identify the support for the key claims.
(d) consider how these claims and terms relate to one another, to previous readings, and to your own sense of things.

At this point, you are in a position to home in on some critical questions or issues that you’d like to address. These—the fruit of your preparation—are what you will bring into class with you and distribute to us.

Formulation

• Bullet formats work nicely.
• Be sure to reference your remarks with specific page numbers so we know where they are coming from.
• Think about the most logical order in which to place your remarks.
• Be ready to talk about why the points you raise seem to matter.

E-reserve

To access materials on e-reserve, go to the Mansfield library homepage (http://www.lib.umt.edu/), click on “Course Reserve Materials” under “Research Tools.” Search under Course Number ‘502’ (or Instructor name ‘Clarke’) and the folder should appear. The password for the course is ‘502.’ To reach someone at the library, call 243-6866.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>September 7</td>
<td>Mackie, “The Subjectivity of Value”; Williams, “Ethics and the Fabric of the World”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 14</td>
<td>ELP, chs. 1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 21</td>
<td>ELP, chs. 3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 28</td>
<td>ELP, ch. 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 5</td>
<td>ELP, ch. 9; Williams, “The Truth in Relativism”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 26</td>
<td>LW, chs. 1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2</td>
<td>LW, ch. 6, Nagel’s review of ELP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 9</td>
<td>NG, Intro and chs. 1-2 (focusing on ch. 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 16</td>
<td>No class; I am out of town on University business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 30</td>
<td>NG, chs. 3-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 7</td>
<td>NG, chs. 5-6 and Postscript</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>