

Phil 74A/Humbio 174A/Ethicsoc 174:

Ethics in a Human Life

Section 1 Handout

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Section outline:

1. In pairs, discuss:
 - a. Why might you think doing a course like this is important or valuable?
2. Administrative issues:
 - a. Welcome!
 - b. Office hours have moved to Thursday 6pm
 - c. Anonymous feedback form:
 - i. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSepjCLR_VH_IL6gMxdeZDQop11Nf2CFYIDp0KrcV-9KThCtFw/viewform
3. Purposes of these sections:
 - a. **NOT** to convince you of specific ethical views, but rather...
 - b. To help you do well on the assignments
 - c. To develop—**through practice**—philosophical virtues:
 - i. Conceptual clarity:
 1. The ability to define what you mean
 2. Requires having a precise understanding of our *ideas themselves*
 3. Indications we are cultivating this virtue:
 - a. Asking “What do you mean?” usually at the beginning of the debate
 - b. Recognizing when people are using the same term to refer to different concepts
 - c. Identifying similarities and dissimilarities between closely related concepts
 - d. Drawing distinctions in a concept
 - ii. Argumentative rigor:
 1. The ability to reason well
 2. Requires accurate construction and identification of the *relationships between* ideas
 3. Indications we are cultivating this virtue:
 - a. Asking whether one idea follows from another: “Could the premise be true and the conclusion false?”
 - b. Asking whether one idea is compatible with another: “Can both of these things be true at once?”
 - d. To achieve these other outcomes as a result:
 - i. Reflectiveness
 - ii. De-dogmatization:
 1. We ordinarily jump to conclusions and assume we know more than we actually do (ask me about the psychology research on this, if you like)
 2. Philosophy is often an antidote to this
 3. We are more conscious of what we do not know

- iii. Open-mindedness
 - 1. This means we are more open to things we might not know
- iv. Tolerance
- e. Note these are non-trivial outcomes:
 - i. They improve our own clarity of thought
 - ii. They make us better thinkers and decision-makers
 - iii. They help us better communicate our ideas and reasoning to others
 - iv. They make us more open to other views and considerations when we might have otherwise been wrong
- 4. Growth can sometimes be uncomfortable
 - a. For example, we might be sore or uncomfortable after a physical workout
 - b. We might also feel uncomfortable symptoms of intellectual growth:
 - i. Confusion—or perhaps more accurately, the realization of confusion
 - ii. Anxiety
 - iii. Realizing we are wrong
 - c. This is natural and not necessarily bad, although I'm here to talk if you'd like it
- 5. Discussion questions:
 - a. Break up into groups and discuss the following question:
 - i. Is life really as miserable as Schopenhauer makes it out to be?
 - ii. If not, why not?
 - iii. But if so, what implications does this have about how we should live?
 - b. Reconvene in the major group to summarize what you discussed
- 6. Assignment:
 - a. Criteria:
 - i. You correctly explain Schopenhauer's claim
 - ii. You state whether you agree
 - iii. You give reasons to accept or to criticize the claim (bonus points for attention to objections to your view)
 - iv. Engage with Schopenhauer's essay and/or our discussion of it from the lecture
 - b. An example is on the next page

Example Homework Assignment

Note: Don't include anything like the bolded text below in your assignment. Also, I don't endorse the following views, nor am I concerned (for the purposes of this example at least) in depicting Rawls in the most precise and charitable way, even though you should care about precision and charity in your assignments.

i. Explanation of the claim (either elaborate and/or give an example, depending on what is necessary for someone else to understand what the claim means):

In *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls claims that society should be ordered in a way such that it is as best as possible for the worst off. For example, suppose that the worst-off people in a society are the poorest and least educated people. And suppose these people would be affected by a policy—say, whether the state should have free public healthcare. According to Rawls' claim, society should have free public healthcare if it would mean that these people would be in the best possible situation as a result.

ii. Stating whether you agree or disagree:

I disagree with the claim.

iii. Giving reasons to criticize the claim (since these are criticisms of the claim in Rawls' reading, it counts as engagement with the reading)

We can see that Rawls' claim is false if we consider the following hypothetical scenario. Suppose we can score the welfare of every group in society with a numerical value—say, between 1 and 10. For example, if you are in a group that has a decent income and adequate healthcare, then you get a score of 4, let's say. But if you have a huge income, perfect healthcare and a really amazingly wonderful life, then you get a score of 10. Now suppose the worst off comprise 1% of the population and that we have two ways of ordering society: one way where the worst off have a score of 3 and while the other 99% have a score of 4, and another way where the worst off have a score of 2.98 and while the other 99% have a score of 10. In the latter case, society as a whole is *vastly* better off: so many people's lives are greatly enriched for only a *negligible* cost to a small minority. Clearly, it is better to have a society where the vast majority of people flourish even if it results in a negligible cost to the worst off.

(If I'm marking you, then you would pass if you did this much, but the below are extras that'd get you bonus points! Here, you'd consider some sensible objection(s) to your own position)

One might object that this example is unrealistic, and hence the criticism of Rawls is not valid. While the specific details of the example are indeed unrealistic, the point which it illustrates is not: society should consider not just how the worst-off fare, but rather how *everyone* fares and whether the costs to one group may indeed be offset by much greater gains to another group. This point should be taken into account in realistic decision-making contexts. Consider, for example, determining how greatly we should tax the rich to improve the circumstances of the poor. It might be the case that in situations like this or others, a minor cost to some is a worthwhile benefit to others.