

**PHIL 202: Core Course in Ethics; Winter 2024**  
**TTH 12-1:20pm; RWAC 0472 (North Seminar Room)**  
**Topic: Perfectionism: Ancient and Modern**  
**Professor David O. Brink**  
**Office: RWAC 0480**  
**Office Hours: T 1:30-2:30pm and by appointment**  
**Email: [dbrink@ucsd.edu](mailto:dbrink@ucsd.edu)**

Perfectionism is the doctrine that a person's good consists in the full realization of her essential nature and capacities. Perfectionist ethics understands duty and virtue in terms of realizing or promoting this kind of good, and perfectionist politics favor laws and institutions that promote human perfection individually and collectively. Perfectionism has a rich history. Perfectionist ideas can be found in Aristotle, the Stoics, Maimonides, Aquinas, Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz, Butler, von Humboldt, J.S. Mill, F.H. Bradley, T.H. Green, Nietzsche, and Marx, among others. Though perfectionist ideas can be found throughout the history of ethics, perfectionism has not been studied as a distinctive tradition, and it remains a neglected option in contemporary moral and political philosophy. This neglect may reflect assumptions that perfectionism relies on a teleological or essentialist metaphysics that have been discredited by modern science and that it cannot recognize the diversity of good lives and must endorse illiberal forms of censorship and paternalism. This seminar addresses this neglect by examining some influential figures in the perfectionist tradition and exploring the justification of perfectionist ideals, their content and requirements, and their implications for a variety of moral and political issues.

We will spend our first meeting exploring systematic issues about the structure of perfectionist normative theories in a provisional way. For the rest of the seminar, we will engage various important figures in the ancient and modern perfectionist tradition. Because the tradition is rich and varied, we will have to be selective in our coverage. Moreover, we will be selective in ways that reflect my expertise and its limits. Our readings and discussion will focus on Aristotle (384-322 BCE), Bishop Joseph Butler (1692-1752), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), as both critic and potential perfectionist, John Stuart Mill (1806-73), and T.H. Green (1836-82). Our focus will be on the tradition of perfectionist ethics, but we will also explore some implications for perfectionist politics. Moreover, although our focus will be historical, we want to test the adequacy and explore the systematic implications of the views under discussion.

#### DISTRIBUTION CREDIT

The seminar is listed in the catalog as an ethics core course and so can satisfy either ethics or core requirements (or both). Alternatively, it can satisfy history and core requirements. It cannot satisfy both ethics and history requirements.

#### FORMAT

The seminar meets twice a week (TTH 12-1:20pm). There will be 20 meetings total. Though we have a lot of material to cover, I will try to keep the weekly readings manageable. I will provide structure for the discussion of readings and topics, using PowerPoint slides, which I will also post on the Canvas website. But I hope that this structure will enable constructive discussion, and I will expect students enrolled in the seminar and auditors to be active participants and discussants.

#### REQUIREMENTS AND GRADES

There are two principal requirements for the seminar: short reader response essays and a long paper.

**Reader Responses.** Each enrolled student should submit short reader response essays of approximately 400-600 words (+/- ) for at least 10 seminar sessions. An essay should do some

philosophical work in connection with the week's readings. For instance, it could reconstruct a complex and non-obvious argument in one of the readings; it could raise a thoughtful objection to a position defended in one of the readings; it could sketch a new line of defense of an author's position; it could explore implications of an author's arguments or commitments; it could discuss a latent theme common to two or more readings. The essays should be submitted in emails (or as attachments) addressed to me by 8pm the night before the seminar. Your lowest essay score will be thrown out, and your remaining scores will be averaged.

**Paper.** Each enrolled student is expected to write a 4-6K word (+/-) paper for the seminar. A brief (1-2 page) analytical outline is due by 5pm Monday, March 11. The essay is due by 5pm Wednesday, March 20. Students are encouraged to discuss their papers with me in advance.

As percentages of the overall seminar grade, participation is worth 10%, the reader response essays are (collectively) worth 40%, and the term paper is worth 50%. The quality of participation is more important than quantity and can come in a wide variety of forms, including helpful clarification, alternative readings of texts and arguments, and philosophical commentary on the texts and ideas.

## READINGS

I've posted all of the required readings as PDFs on the course website on Canvas. Hard copies of all the required historical texts should also be available at the campus bookstore, for those who want to purchase hard copies. Of course, it's possible that you would find cheaper hard copies available online.

The required and a few recommended (optional) reading assignments are listed on the Syllabus. I've also posted a Schedule that provides a more detailed agenda of required readings tied to particular seminar meetings. We'll try to conform to the Schedule, but may need to make some adjustments.

## WEBSITE

All seminar materials and handouts will be posted on the course website, available through Canvas on Course Finder (<https://coursefinder.ucsd.edu>). Students enrolled in the course should have automatic access to the website. If you are auditing the seminar and have a UCSD email, let me know, and I can arrange for you to have access to the Canvas website. You should check periodically to make sure that you have current versions of all the handouts, which are revised or updated on a regular basis.

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**Syllabus**

Here are the topics and readings for the seminar with approximate allocations of seminar meetings among the readings. Readings are either required (A) or recommended (optional) (R). Publication details for the required and recommended readings can be found on the Select Bibliography.

All of the required readings are posted as PDFs on the course website on Canvas. Most of the required readings can be found in the required texts:

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trs. T. Irwin, 3d ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2019).
- Aristotle, *Politics*, trs. CDC Reeve (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998).
- Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons & Other Writings on Ethics*, ed. D. McNaughton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2017).
- Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trs. M. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty, Utilitarianism, and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- T.H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, ed. D. Brink (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003)

Hard copies of these six texts should be available for purchase at the campus bookstore (or could be found online). Other editions and translations of some of these works are acceptable. Please consult with me before using other editions and translations.

There is a vast secondary literature on some of the figures we will study, especially Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. But not all of it bears directly on their attitudes toward perfectionism. Moreover, I have been extremely selective in identifying secondary sources as recommended reading, focusing on ones I know well that contribute to perfectionist themes on which we will focus. For those interested in more secondary literature suggestions, I am happy to make additional recommendations upon request.

Please do the required readings in the order in which they are listed and in advance of class discussion. A more fine-grained agenda can be found on the Schedule.

1. Introduction (1 meeting)

- (A) Thomas Hurka, "Perfectionism."
- (B) Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism*, chs. 2-5, esp. pp. 9-33, 37-44, 55-68; Philip Kitcher, "Essence and Perfection;" David Brink, "Normative Perfectionism and the Kantian Tradition," pp. 1-7; Dale Dorsey, "Three Arguments for Perfectionism;" Gwen Bradford, "Perfectionism;" Steven Wall, "Perfectionism in Moral and Political Philosophy."

2. Aristotle (5 meetings)

- (A) *Nicomachean Ethics* I, X.7-8, II, III.5-12, IV, V.1-2, VIII-IX; *Politics* I-IV, VII.
- (B) Richard Kraut, "Two Conceptions of Happiness;" Jennifer Whiting, "Aristotle's Function Argument: A Defense" and "Human Nature and Intellectualism in Aristotle;" Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. I, chs. 6-9; David Brink, "Eudaimonism and Cosmopolitan Concern;" Richard Kraut, *Aristotle: Political Philosophy*, esp. ch. 8.

3. Bishop Joseph Butler (2 meetings)

- (A) *Fifteen Sermons* Preface, Sermons I-III, XI-XII; *A Dissertation of the Nature of Virtue*.

- (B) Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vo. II, chs. 51-53; Aaron Garrett, "Joseph Butler's Moral Philosophy."

#### 4. Immanuel Kant (4 meetings)

- (A) *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals; Critique of Practical Reason*, esp 5: 25-26, 110-41; *The Metaphysics of Morals*, esp. 6: 385-87.
- (B) Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. III, chs. 66-72 and "Kant's Criticisms of Eudaemonism;" David Brink, "Normative Perfectionism and the Kantian Tradition" and "Perfect Freedom: T.H. Green's Kantian Conception;" Stephen Engstrom, "Happiness and the Highest Good in Aristotle and Kant;" Paul Guyer, "Kantian Perfectionism."

#### 5. John Stuart Mill (5 meetings)

- (A) *Utilitarianism*, esp. Ch. II; *On Liberty*; *The Subjection of Women*.
- (B) David Brink, *Mill's Progressive Principles*.

#### 6. T.H. Green (3 meetings)

- (A) *Prolegomena to Ethics*, Books II-III; "On the Different Senses of 'Freedom' as Applied to Will and to the Moral Progress of Man;" "Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract."
- (B) T.H. Green, *Lectures on Kant in Works II*; Terence Irwin, *The Development of Ethics*, vol. III, ch. 85; David Brink "Thomas Hill Green," *Perfectionism and the Common Good: Themes in the Philosophy of T.H. Green*, and "Perfect Freedom: T.H. Green's Kantian Conception."

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**Schedule**

This is a tentative schedule of required readings for specific class meetings. We'll try to adhere to it, but if we fall behind (or get ahead) we may need to revise the schedule a bit.

Week 1

- Tuesday, Jan 9: Hurka, "Perfectionism"
- Thursday, Jan 11: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I

Week 2

- Tuesday, Jan 16: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* I, X.7-8.
- Thursday, Jan 18: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* II, III.5-12, IV, V.1-2

Week 3

- Tuesday, Jan 23: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* VIII-IX
- Thursday, Jan 25: Aristotle, *Politics* I-IV, VII

Week 4

- Tuesday, Jan 30: Butler, *Sermons* Preface, Sermons I-III
- Thursday, Feb 1: Butler, *Sermons* XI-XII and *A Dissertation of the Nature of Virtue*

Week 5

- Tuesday, Feb 6: Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*
- Thursday, Feb 8: Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*

Week 6

- Tuesday, Feb 13: Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, esp 5: 25-26, 110-41, and *The Metaphysics of Morals*, esp. 6: 385-87
- Thursday, Feb 15: Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, esp 5: 25-26, 110-41, and *The Metaphysics of Morals*, esp. 6: 385-87

Week 7

- Tuesday, Feb 20: Mill, *Utilitarianism*, esp. Ch. II
- Thursday, Feb 22: Mill, *Utilitarianism*

Week 8

- Tuesday, Feb 27: Mill, *On Liberty* I-III
- Thursday, Feb 29: Mill, *On Liberty* IV-V

Week 9

- Tuesday, March 5: Mill, *The Subjection of Women*
- Thursday, March 7: Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, Books II-III

Week 10

- Monday, March 11: Paper outline due by 5pm.

- Tuesday, March 12: Green, "On the Different Senses of 'Freedom' as Applied to Will and to the Moral Progress of Man"
- Thursday, March 14: Green, "Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract"

Week 11

- Wednesday, March 20: Paper due by 5pm