

PHILOSOPHY 540: SEMINAR IN ETHICS
University Of Southern California
Spring Semester 1999

Instructor: Dallas Willard

THEME: THE LOSS OF MORAL KNOWLEDGE

The seminar will study the disappearance of accepted moral knowledge from contemporary Western culture, and the essential role of developments of moral theory during the late 19th and 20th century in that disappearance. The dialectic of naturalism and intuitionism up to the positivist era will be examined, then the outworkings of ethical theory as "the logic of moral discourse" will be followed from Ayer and Stevenson to MacIntyre and Rawls. A centerpiece of the discussion will be Elizabeth Anscombe's 1958 paper, "[Modern Moral Philosophy](#)," and her claim that "it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that it should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology." The way in which moral distinctions have been made out as depending upon language, logic and 'rationality' will be closely scrutinized, and logic and rationality will be rejected as a basis of moral distinctions as a case of obscurum per obscurius at best. It will be suggested that the distinction between naturalism and intuitionism is not helpful (due to unclarities in the ideas of "nature" and "intuition" deriving from the contrasts through which they derive whatever meaning they have), and that in fact appeals to logic and rationality are simply other forms of 'intuitionism.' At the end—if there is time, and the seminar leader's audacity does not fail him—an outline of a theory of moral virtue and obligation will be offered, based upon common understandings of character and obligation undepleted by Empiricism and the Transcendentalisms to which it historically gives rise.

Texts:

W. D. Hudson, [Modern Moral Philosophy](#)
Mary Warnock, [Ethics Since 1900](#)
Cahn and Haber, [20th Century Ethical Theory](#)
A. MacIntyre, [After Virtue](#)
R. Audi, [Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character](#)
Alan Goldman, [Moral Knowledge](#)
John H. Dreher, *Moral Legitimacy and the Social Arts*

Formal Requirements:

Students will be required to make one seminar report (with a written text to be handed out at the time), to prepare one philosophical essay to be turned in at the end of the semester, and to participate regularly in seminar discussions. The essay must be discussed with the instructor well before its final version is turned in. (The "written text" will be explained in the first meeting.) On four or five occasions a one-page precis of a passage in the assigned readings may be required.

Schedule of Readings: <MAY BE ADJUSTED AS TOPICS DEVELOP.>

The "Introduction" to Cahn and Haber (pp. 1-9), the Anscombe paper (pp. 351-364), and the books by Hudson and Warnock should be read as early as possible in the course: the "Introduction" and Anscombe immediately, then Warnock and then Hudson. No particular seminar sessions will be devoted to the two books, though discussions of them may be introduced as relevant into any of our meetings.

Jan. 13:

a. Lecture overview of the historical development of ethical theory, concluding with Sidgwick's Methods of Ethics. The nature and purpose of ethical theory. The disappearance of Moral Knowledge as a contemporary phenomena.

b. A contemporary take on the problem of moral knowledge: Alan H. Goldman, Moral Knowledge. (Bring to class if possible.)

Jan. 20:

a. Continuation on Goldman: Can empirical knowledge constitute a suitable model for moral knowledge? Hobbes, Hume and Kant. The answer is (Goldman says) "No." (pp. 19-130)

b. Goldman's "Coherentist" analysis of moral knowledge. (Seminar Report anyone?) In reading, focus especially upon clarification and critique of what Goldman means by "coherence" and "relevance." Does the naturalist/intuitionist debate come into play here? If so, how?

Jan. 27: No meeting; to be made up on May 5.

Feb. 3:

a. G. E. Moore, "The Subject-Matter of Ethics," Cahn & Haber, pp. 12-32. (See also the Frankena selection, pp. 129-138) Seminar Report.

b. W. D. Ross, "What Makes Right Acts Right?" Cahn & Haber, pp. 87-105. Seminar Report.

Feb. 10:

a. John Dewey, "The Construction of Good," Cahn & Haber, pp. 65-80. (See also the Santayna. pp. 48-55) Seminar Report.

b. L. Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics," Cahn & Haber, pp. 81-86; A. J. Ayer, "A Critique of Ethics," pp. 108-115, and C. L. Stevenson. "The Nature of Ethical Disagreement," pp. 139-144. (No Seminar Report)

- Feb. 17:
a. John Mackie, "A Refutation of Morals," Cahn and Haber, pp. 145-152. Seminar Report.
a. A. C. Ewing, "The Definition of Good," Cahn and Haber, pp. 153-161. Seminar Report.
- Feb. 24:
a. Rawls, "Two Concepts of Rules," Cahn and Haber, pp. 273-290. Seminar Report.
b. Rawls, "Justice as Fairness," Cahn and Haber, pp. 332-350. Seminar Report.
- Mar. 3:
a. Philippa Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives," Cahn and Haber, pp. 448-455.
b. Foot, "Virtues and Vices," Cahn and Haber, pp. 583-593. Seminar Report.
- Mar. 10:
a. MacIntyre, After Virtue
b. " "
- Mar. 17: Spring Break (15-19)
- Mar. 24:
a. MacIntyre, After Virtue. Seminar Report.
b. Bernard Williams, "Persons, Character and Morality," Cahn and Haber, pp. 634-646. Seminar Report.
- Mar. 31:
a. Why Utilitarianism hangs on. Read as much as you can of Cahn and Haber, pp. 647-725.
b. John Dreher, Moral Legitimacy and the Social Arts, chapters I-III.
- Apr. 7:
a. John Dreher, Moral Legitimacy and the Social Arts, chapter IV. Seminar Report.
b. John Dreher, Moral Legitimacy and the Social Arts, chapters V and VI. Seminar Report.
- Apr. 14: Robert Audi, Moral Knowledge and Ethical Character
- Apr. 21: Audi
- Apr. 28: Audi

May 5:

a. Audi. Perhaps some comments on Frank Jackson, From Metaphysics to Ethics.

b. Summary of 'findings'. Prospects for the rehabilitation of moral knowledge as a social reality. Or should we abandon ourselves to the political as a basis for life?

May 13: All papers in by 5 PM, Philosophy office.

Alan Goldman, Moral Knowledge:

THE BASIC ARGUMENTS OF THE BOOK
(See especially the last chapter)

There are two basic arguments, the first concerning the existence of knowledge, and the second concerning the nature of moral knowledge.

Stated most simply:

Non-cognitivism fails.

Therefore there is moral knowledge.

And:

Realism fails as an account of moral knowledge.

Non-cognitivism, Realism and Coherentism are the only alternative metaethical accounts of moral judgment.

Therefore moral knowledge is a matter of a certain coherence.

"When one's informed moral beliefs are fully coherent, then one believes as a fully rational evaluator. When one holds moral beliefs in part because they are so informed and coherent, then one has moral knowledge." (mid 183)

"One has moral knowledge when the truth of one's moral belief helps to explain its being held." (bottom 182)

"Only in the moral realm does it <coherence> determine truth." (bottom 183) And: "...truth in this <the moral> domain <is to be understood> in terms of coherence within a framework."

Thus moral knowledge is made to fit the general account of knowledge given by Goldman on p. 5. (Or does it?) Examine p. 5 carefully. And bottom p. 6-12.

Why the realist account will not work. E.g. 76-83, especially mid 81, 88-89.

Hobbes and Kant on Rationality. 22 & 100.

Summary of what goes wrong in Hobbes, Hume and Kant. 131-133. What remains to be done. Bottom 133-135.

LECTURE NOTES:

For the first of two lectures on MacIntyre's After Virtue

After Virtue is subtitled "A Study in Moral Theory." We take this to mean that it purports to be or provide a logically coherent and grounded set of propositions that comprehend the moral life or moral phenomena for the purposes of understanding or knowledge. When we have finished with it, if both it and we are successful, we should understand the moral life: be able to represent to ourselves the way the moral life actually is—what its parts or elements are or are not, and how (at least in general) they relate to each other and to other elements of reality beyond it.

MacIntyre's earlier studies led him to hold that "the nature of moral community and moral judgment in distinctively modern societies was such that it was no longer possible to appeal to moral criteria in a way that had been possible in other times and places"—and that this was a moral calamity! (p. ix) He wanted to reject Stalinism, but found no rational basis to do so either in liberalism or Marxism. The conclusion which he reaches in After Virtue is that "Marxism's moral defects and failures arise from the extent to which it, like liberal individualism, embodies the ethos of the distinctively modern and modernizing world, and that nothing less than a rejection of a large part of that ethos will provide us with a rationally and morally defensible standpoint from which to judge and to act—and in terms of which to evaluate various rival and heterogeneous moral schemes which compete for our allegiance." (p. x)

Thus what drives MacIntyre is essentially the same social fact that has motivated the "analytical" side of Anglo-American ethical thinking throughout the 20th Century: the (real or only perceived) inability to come to rational agreement, not just about what we ought to do, but about why we ought to do what we ought to do, or about why the actions we believe to be right (or wrong) are so. I think that the main and indispensable point of MacIntyre's book is not to offer a particular moral theory—though he comes close—but to explain why it is that we are in the condition of moral disarray which he says we are. He does, as we shall see, offer a particular theory of human life, one which at least implies a framework within which any accurate moral theory must fall.

We should not too quickly agree on his description of our condition, or the condition of moral theory, at the present time. His "Disquieting Suggestion" of Chapter 1 is introduced, a la Ludwig der zweite, by a little imaginative "story" about the natural sciences. <pp. 1-2, Read> This shows, he says, "a world in which the language of natural science, or parts of it at least, continues to be used but is in a grave state of disorder." (p. 2) And now the application: "The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language

of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I described. What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts of which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have—very largely, if not entirely—lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical of morality." (p. 2)

Now it is not immediately clear what might be done if this state of affairs actually obtains. He is going to take as the center of his focus strange beasts called concepts — for like all philosophers he wants to deal with necessary connections and identity. But the concept of concept is, alas!, one of the most obscure and contested parts of 20th Century philosophy. MacIntyre told us, nevertheless, in his first breath and with no apologies (p. ix), that "The notion that the moral philosopher can study the concepts of morality merely by reflecting, Oxford armchair style, on what he or she and those around him or her say and do is barren." --- No less, he adds, if the armchair be located in Princeton NJ or Cambridge MA, not to mention further west in nutty California. "Analytical" philosophy as well as Phenomenology or Existentialism ("Continental" philosophy)—other beasts from the philosophical zoo—apparently cannot even detect the moral disaster in the midst of which we live." (pp. 2-3) "Yet the powerlessness of this kind of philosophy does not leave us quite resourceless." (p. 3)

It is historical studies that have opened his own eyes, it seems. Apparently what cannot be done by peering directly ("merely by reflecting") upon concepts—perhaps because they cannot be peered directly upon at all!?!—can be done by "observing" or analyzing (!?*) historical processes.

Well, shall we hope? But why don't historians see our condition? MacIntyre explains the obliviousness of modern academic history to our collapsed moral state, not by the inherent historical invisibility of that state, but by the fact that modern academic history is a result of that very state—so that "from its value-neutral viewpoint moral disorder must remain largely invisible." (p. 4) Perhaps it is reasonable to think that a history that cannot see values as realities cannot see a real historical progression in values.

But we must leap ahead here to make a statement about the heart of MacIntyre's theory of the moral life. Otherwise the student will lose a tremendous amount of time trying to locate his view where he says it lies—when in fact it does not lie there at all. He talks as if his "discoveries" relevant to moral theory lay in history and sociology. He says, for example, at the opening of Chapter 3: "A moral philosophy... characteristically presupposes a sociology. For every moral philosophy offers explicitly or implicitly at least a partial conceptual

analysis of the relationship of an agent to his or her reasons, motives, intentions and actions, and in so doing generally presupposes some claim that these concepts are embodied or at least can be in the real social world."

Now actually, if one knows what to look for, the last clause in this statement lets most of the cats out of the bag. For it indicates that "the real social world" contains concepts as constituents, and as constituents which "govern" what goes on in that world. "Concepts" here play the role of Platonic forms or Aristotelian (Husserlian) essences, in that they found identities and necessary relations in-social, therefore ethical-reality. And of course this is just the sort of thing that any historian or sociologist would discover to the complete astonishment of any philosopher who has tried to put "concepts"-or "reason" and "rationality," for that is what we are talking about with "concepts"-into real events or actions. These are metaphysical claims, not sociological claims: claims about the categorial constituents of beings of the type dealt with in moral theory-actions, characters, roles, persons and personal relations.

Thus at the end of Chapter 3 we read that the transformations of the self he charts up to the present "emotivist" version (p. 32) moves in necessary correlation with appropriate transformations of "the forms of moral discourse, the language of morality,...Indeed it is wrong to separate the history of the self and its roles from the history of the language which the self specifies and through which the roles are given expression. What we discover is a single history and not two parallel ones." (p. 35) Language and reality are bound in an ontological union. The necessities (the "logic") of discourse are bled into life to give it the constraining order required.

See the crucial pages 28-29 and 32-34 on the ontology of social role and character and individual. See the comments about a human life and a "story" on p. 130, 144, 174 and elsewhere. See the comments about the qualities (concepts?) linked to courage as making it what it is in heroic societies, on pp. 122-123. And see above all the claims about tradition, narrative and personal identity on pp. 216 and following.

Note such central claims as this: "In what does the unity of an individual life consist? The answer is that its unity is <?!*^+?!> the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life. To ask 'What is good for me?' is to ask how best I might live out that unity and bring it to completion....The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest." (218-219) The virtues then are what they are only within a narrative. They are "those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but which will also sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good, by enabling us to overcome the harms, dangers, temptations and distractions which we encounter, and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good."

Now MacIntyre never tries to justify his ontology of concepts and social reality, his ontology of action, character, life and story, or his "conceptual analyses" in terms of the "narrative" necessities and identities in the ages of Homer, Aristotle, or others. He never tries to defend his views on these ontological and logical issues. The shade of good St. Ludwig slants long across the contemporary philosophical landscape, and provides cover for many a philosophical programme—whether or not he would be happy about that. It is nevertheless quite disingenuous of MacIntyre to proceed as if to get the low-down on what goes on with moral theory and the moral life we had merely to examine a few historical vignettes. The kind of essential structure in life he refers us to is not more obvious than any essence or natural law—and indeed is but a linguisticized form of essence and natural law. His 1988 book Whose Justice? Which Rationality? does not, I regret to say, do any better with the basic issues about ontology and logic in the makeup of human life and society than did After Virtue. He of course has a wide audience and many cohorts who assume that nothing useful can be said about these issues, and so we should just get on with the business of whatever branch of philosophy or life we are concerned with. And so we shall. But it remains that MacIntyre's accounts of virtue, character and human life, as well as his interpretations of past moral theorists, simply beg some of the most important questions imaginable about human life.

Certainly these questions emerge into the text when he comes, at the outset of Chapter 15, to discuss the "two different kinds of obstacle, one social and one philosophical" (p. 204), to "any contemporary attempt to envisage each human life as a whole, as a unity." The social obstacles come from the way "modernity partitions each human life into a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behavior." (204) The philosophical obstacles derive from two distinct tendencies. One, "domesticated in analytical philosophy," is "the tendency to think atomistically about human action and to analyze complex actions and transactions in terms of simple components.... That particular actions derive their character as parts of larger wholes is a point of view alien to our dominant ways of thinking..." (204) The other "tendency" is "at home in both sociological theory and in existentialism. This makes "the unity of human life...invisible" by drawing "a sharp separation... either between the individual and the roles that he or she plays <Sartre>...or between the different role—and quasi-role—enactments of an individual life so that life comes to appear as nothing but a series of unconnected episodes..." <Goffman> These, of course, are opposed the "concept" of self MacIntyre sees as necessary to a society if virtues are to be possible in it: "a concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end." (p. 205) But these metaphysical claims are not justified by MacIntyre—certainly not by his

excursions into "history."

For now we turn to some of his interpretations of past moral epochs.

He holds (p. 185) that "We...have at least three very different conceptions of a virtue to confront: a virtue is a quality which enables an individual to discharge his or her social role (Homer); a virtue is a quality which enables an individual to move towards the achievement of the specifically human telos, whether natural or supernatural (Aristotle, the New Testament and Aquinas); a virtue is a quality which has utility in achieving earthly and heavenly success (Franklin)."

THE VIRTUES OF HEROIC SOCIETY (Chap. 10)---

Key features pp. 122-124

The two selves p. 126

"Lessons" about virtue pp. 126-127 <very important>

THE VIRTUES OF ATHENS (Chap. 11)

Plato points to "signs of incoherence" in Greek Society p. 131

The shift occurring in "roles" and "structure" pp.132-3

The 4 "Athenian" views of the virtues. p. 135

cases of virtues 136ff

agon—contest/conflict central 137-8

the new drama 144-5

the Sophoclean self 145

ARISTOTLE'S ACCOUNT OF VIRTUE (Chap. 12)

No sense of the historical p. 147

But speaks as a citizen of the polis 147-8

What the virtues are for him 148-9

Virtues and laws of the community 151-2

The mean and phronesis 154-5

The 4 essential elements of practical reasoning 161-2

Three questions that threaten the Aristotelian account of the virtues 162-4: tragedy/conflict 163-4

MEDIEVAL ASPECTS (Chap. 13)

Too many ideals working in this period 165-6

Emergence of the will and sin as ethically central to the Christian narrative—retreat into interiority

168. State, not disposition. Stoic element 170

The 3 dimensions of Medieval virtue 171

Roles and the individual in Ancient and Medieval 172

The non-Aristotelian aspect 174

Charity/ new narrative 174-5

What the virtues are in Medieval period mid-176

Conflict again 179-180

THE NATURE OF THE VIRTUES – As History Shows! (Chap. 14)
 There is a core concept of virtue uniting all these
 accounts 186
 The centrality of PRACTICE 187-190, 194
 What virtue is 191, 193-4
 Three ways MacIntyre's account is Aristotelian 197-9
 Evil practices. How can a disposition be a virtue if
 the practice it sustains is evil? Answer 200ff
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Outline of topics for final remarks on MacIntyre:

1. Review of "practice" (187), "internal" good (188-190) and "virtue". (191ff)
2. and institutions. (194)
3. Need to supplement this statement on virtues (200-203)
4. Met by a theory of the unity of human life ("narrative") (205) two mistaken theories (204) intentions and "settings" (206-209) "...in successfully identifying and understanding what someone else is doing we always move towards placing a particular episode in the context of a set of narrative histories, histories both of the individual concerned and of the settings in which they act and suffer. It is now becoming clear that we render the actions of others intelligible in this way because action itself has a basically historical character." (211-212; cf 215)
5. The centrality and ultimacy of "intelligibility" (214)
6. The essence of man, no less! (216) – "a story-telling animal"
7. Narrative, intelligibility, accountability, personal identity
8. (218-219)
9. Quest and virtue (219), clan and history (220-222)
10. Tradition and virtue (223) From virtues to virtue. (233) the fade-out of morality (243)
11. The vacuity of contemporary "justice" (Chap 17 <pp. 244ff>) the virtues tradition at odds with modern economic order (254-5)
12. What matters now, in our present "dark ages." (263)

*****POSTSCRIPT ADDITIONS

13. Arguments, rational superiority and social context (267-270)
14. "Best theory so far" (270-271, 277)
15. Virtues and the "three stages" (275)