

# MORAL PHILOSOPHY TUTORIAL READING AND ESSAYS

*Damien Storey*

2015



## CONTENTS

	Introduction	2
	Reading	2
	Essay	2
	Some basics of typography	4
	Referencing	4
	Plagiarism	5
Week 1	Utilitarianism and Welfare	6
Week 2	Rules and Acts	8
Week 3	Mill's 'Proof' and Moral Realism	10
Week 4	Impartiality and Alienation	12
Week 5	Justice and Rights [optional 1]	13
Week 6	The Right and the Good [optional 2]	14

## INTRODUCTION

### READING

Generally the reading is given in the order in which I'd suggest reading it. Usually I assign relatively little reading, but it's really important that you read it all: if you leave any out, you're likely to have a gap in your understanding of the topic that will make it very difficult to answer the essay question. (Note also that for the vast majority of papers, reading them once is not enough: there are very few papers that I could understand after one reading.) By all means let me know if there's any week in which you think I've assigned too much (or too little) reading.

### ESSAY

Your essays should be around 2000 words; that's about four single spaced pages. A little more or less is fine, but keep it under 2500 words. When you email your essay to me, *cc everyone else in your tutorial group*. And be sure to read and think about your tutorial peers' essays. Email your essay to me by 3 PM the day before the tutorial (unless I specify another time). If it's later than this, I might not get a chance to read it.

Please pay close attention to the following pieces of advice, especially 1 and 2. They try to cater for the most common and most easily solved problems I find in students' essays.

- 1 *Explain*. In short: explain *everything*. It should be possible for an intelligent peer who hasn't studied philosophy to understand your essay without needing to look up the words you use or read the authors you're writing about. So, for example: if you use a technical term or mention a concept that has particular significance for an author, make absolutely sure you clearly define/explain it; similarly, for any argument or position you discuss, you must clearly explain this argument or position to your reader. This is partly because good academic writing should be easily understood, but this is not the only or even the main reason. Rather, your ability to explain the ideas you're discussing—clearly, precisely, and succinctly—is one of the principal things you're being assessed on. You might well know, say, what a categorical imperative is, but you need to *show* that you know it and how precisely you know it. Explaining even small, simple ideas well is a lot harder than you might think; don't underestimate how important it is, and how much work it takes.
- 2 *Justify*. Assume that for every claim you make, the reader is asking 'why should I believe that?' In a philosophy essay, there should always be an excellent answer to this question. You should consider this to be, above all else, your aim when writing an essay. The worst thing you can do is to make bold assertions without defending them, and the second worst is to make bold assertions and defend them weakly. Note that this includes interpretive claims: if you write 'Plato believes that p', you need to show your reader, perhaps by giving a supporting

quote, that this is indeed something Plato believes.

*A bad essay:* ‘p!’

*A good essay:* ‘For reasons x, y, and z, it seems that p.’

*An excellent essay:* ‘Reasons x, y, and z give us good grounds for thinking that p, although someone might offer an objection along the following lines ... However, I think there is a promising response to this objection ...’

- 3 *Use headings.* Before you start writing, sketch a structure for your essay. When writing, use headings that reflect this structure. A typical essay might have 2–4 headings.
- 4 *First understand, then assess.* Be careful not to rush into criticisms of what you read before you’ve fully understood it. Approach everything you read with charity. That is, assume (since it is likely) that the author has thought intelligently and carefully about what they’ve written, so is unlikely to have made simple, obvious mistakes. For example, if you notice a *prima facie* objection to something you’re reading, read it again carefully to see if there’s a way to understand it that avoids the objection or try to think of a plausible implicit assumption the author might have made that caters for the objection.
- 5 *Ensure your conclusions reflect your arguments.* You might have been taught that strong, persuasive prose requires confident assertions, rather than hesitant, qualified ones. This is not the case in philosophy: your assertions should reflect the actual degree of confidence that is warranted by the evidence you’ve provided. Decisive arguments are rare—even rarer are decisive arguments in just a few lines of a student’s essay. So be very careful not to mistake considerations that give us a good reason for believing that p for an argument that conclusively proves that p. A good essay is likely to have a large range of (appropriate) qualifying phrases: ‘this shows decisively that p’; ‘this is a very strong reason to believe that p’; ‘this suggests that p’; ‘this makes it less implausible that p’; and so forth.
- 6 *Use quotes.* Especially in historical subjects, including quotes from the relevant primary texts can be an excellent way to illustrate, justify, and give some focus to your discussion. One way (of many ways) to use a quote would be the following: make a claim; present a quote that you think backs up the claim; and then explain and interpret the text of the quote in order to show that and why it backs up your claim. (Two cautions: first, quotes from secondary sources are often less useful; second, avoid using a quote as a way of *saying* something; rather, a quote should play the role of evidence *about which* you have something to say.)
- 7 *Go from general to particular.* The topics we’ll look at are very broad. One could reasonably spend years writing hundreds of pages about them—you only have a few pages and one week. This presents a challenge: on the one hand, you want to cover the whole topic, showing that you’re familiar with all the major issues that arise; on the other hand, you want to do more than simply scratch the surface, never looking at any issue in detail. This can be a difficult balance to achieve, but in general it is much better to *err on the side of detail*. A good approach might be to devote about the first third or half of your essay to a more general discussion of the essay topic and then use the last half or two-thirds to examine one

or two smaller points in much greater detail—you might, for example, focus on one argument, premise, or objection that you think is especially important or interesting.

#### SOME BASICS OF TYPOGRAPHY

The following are a few typographic conventions worth learning:

- 1 *Indent paragraphs.* But do not indent the opening paragraph of the document or the first paragraph after a section heading. You may instead—not in addition—separate paragraphs with a blank line, although this is better suited to list-like texts, such as legal documents, than continuous prose.
- 2 *Use single line spacing.* It's easier to read. Double spacing is only necessary when a printed copy of your work will be annotated.
- 3 *A footnote mark is always placed after punctuation.*<sup>1</sup> It is almost always best to place a footnote at the end of the sentence, *after* the sentence-ending full stop, even if you are referring to something earlier in the sentence. Avoid consecutive footnotes; instead, place all information in one footnote if possible.
- 4 *Indicate quotes with either quotation marks or by using a block quote.* Extra flourishes, such as italicising, are unnecessary. And never place a block quote within quotation marks.
- 5 *Learn the difference between a hyphen (-), en-dash (–), and em-dash (—).* Use an en-dash like 'to' in ranges of dates or numbers (e.g. 87–142) and to express certain relationships between words: for example, an 'on–off switch' or 'Irish–American relations'. Either an en- or em-dash can be used to indicate a parenthetical phrase. If you use an en-dash, add a space either side – like so – but em-dashes are always unspaced—like so.
- 6 *Make ellipses with three full stops separated by spaces.* Like this . . . , with a space either side. You will most commonly use an ellipsis to indicate portions of text that you've omitted from quotes. Don't omit any sentence-ending full stops that precede an ellipsis (i.e. together they make four stops). For example:

[P]articulate care needs to be exercised when eliding text to ensure that the sense of the original is not lost . . . A deletion must not result in a statement alien to the original material. . . . Accuracy of sense and emphasis must accompany accuracy of transcription. (CMS, 16th, 13.49)

- 7 *Use a single space after full-stops.* A double space, once common, is now rightly recognised as unnecessary.

#### REFERENCING

In your essays you should reference both quotes and claims or arguments that originate from one of the authors you've been reading. You should also have a bibliography of all the works you've referred to in the text.

1. This includes full stops, commas, colons, semi-colons, and quotation marks.

You can use whatever bibliographical style you choose, so long as it's consistent. The following is an example of a typical author-year referencing style, starting with what the bibliography will look like:

**Book:** Author (Year) *Title*, Place: Publisher.

Fine, G. (1993) *On Ideas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Freeman, S. (ed.) (2003) *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Article:** Author (Year) 'Title', *Journal*, Volume, pp. Pages.

Irwin, T.H. (1977) 'Plato's Heracleiteanism', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 27, pp. 1–13.

**Article in book:** Author (Year) 'Article Title' in Editor(s) (ed(s)). *Book Title*, Place: Publisher.

Scanlon, T.M. (2003) 'Rawls on Justification' in S. Freeman (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

**In-text citation:** (Author, Year, Page(s))

It has been argued that the charge of conservatism laid against Rawls' idea of reflective equilibrium is unsound (Scanlon, 2003, pp. 150–151).

Scanlon argues that the charge of conservatism laid against Rawls' reflective equilibrium is unsound (2003, pp. 150–151).

## PLAGIARISM

The university guidelines are here: [www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/epsc/plagiarism). From the college regulations:

Plagiarism is the presentation of someone else's work without acknowledgement as if it were your own. Typically, this involves copying an essay from another student or from the Internet, or copying passages from a book without quotation marks and a clear page reference. It is a very serious offence to plagiarise someone else's work, and there are serious academic penalties which may include the offender being sent down from the College and the University. ... Please also be aware that poor academic work practices, such as copying sections directly from academic articles into your notes for information, might lead to unintentional plagiarism, but that this unintentional offence will still be dealt with severely by the University as 'reckless' plagiarism.

Two good reasons not to plagiarise. 1. I'll spot it. It's really easy. 2. If you think about it, there is really no advantage to plagiarising an essay, just serious disadvantage if you're caught. The most you'll gain, if you're lucky, is to make me believe that you wrote an essay when you didn't—but why would you care what I believe? If you genuinely can't write an essay for whatever reason, try to write part of an essay, some notes, or—in the worst case—nothing.

## WEEK 1: UTILITARIANISM AND WELFARE

This week we will look at what Mill calls ‘utility’—what we might call a person’s good or welfare. According to utilitarianism we should maximise utility, but this tells us little if we don’t have a clear idea of what utility is. Mill’s answer is—arguably—a form of hedonism, but one that makes a qualitative distinction between pleasures, some higher and some lower. This week we will consider this distinction and whether this or some other idea of welfare captures what it is that makes a life good.

### ESSAY:

Two parts – do both:

(A) How should we understand Mill’s distinction between higher and lower pleasures? Is this distinction defensible?

(B) Does Nozick’s ‘experience machine’ refute Mill’s hedonistic account of welfare? Are any alternative theories of welfare preferable to Mill’s and if so, why?

### TO THINK ABOUT:

‘The creed which accepts as the foundations of morals ‘utility’ of ‘the greatest happiness principle’ holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness. By happiness is intended pleasure and the absence of pain; by unhappiness, pain and the privation of pleasure.’ (*Utilitarianism*, ch. 2) What is distinctive about this ethical theory? How does it differ from other ethical theories?

### READING:

- 1 J.S. Mill *Utilitarianism*, chapters 1, 2, and 4
- 2 R. Crisp *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Mill on Utilitarianism* (London: Routledge, 1997), chapter 2 and 3
- 3 D.O. Brink ‘Mill’s Deliberative Utilitarianism’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 21 (1992) pp. 67–103
- 4 R. Nozick *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), pp. 42–45 (reprinted in various anthologies as ‘The Experience Machine’)
- 5 D. Parfit *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), Appendix I.

Optional reading:

- 6 J. Griffin *Well-Being: Its Meaning, Measurement and Moral Importance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), part 1 [Some excellent discussion of some of the theories of welfare discussed in, for example, Parfit]
- 7 D.O. Brink ‘[Mill’s Moral and Political Philosophy](#)’, *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, section 2 [A good general introduction, with sections relevant to this week]

8 K. Bykvist *Utilitarianism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, 2010),  
chapter 4

## WEEK 2: RULES AND ACTS

This week we'll be considering how we should interpret Mill's utilitarianism and what form of consequentialism is most defensible. In particular, we'll be looking at the difference between *act* consequentialism and *rule* consequentialism.

### ESSAY:

Two parts, do both:

(A) Is Mill an act or a rule consequentialist? What evidence, from the text of *Utilitarianism*, can you offer for and against each reading?

(B) 'Rule-consequentialism must either collapse into act-consequentialism, and hence is indistinct from this view, or it is an inconsistent view subject to the problem of 'rule worship', that is, it recommends an adherence to rules even on occasions when it is known that this would produce suboptimal results.' Discuss.

Be sure to find one or two passages in Mill that support the act-consequentialist reading and the rule-consequentialist reading. Think about: For each reading, what are Mill's 'secondary principles'? Is utilitarianism a decision procedure that should be applied each time we act? What role, if any, should rules play in a consequentialist theory: in particular, should they be used simply as a useful—or perhaps even necessary—guide to action or should they also be seen as what in fact explains why each particular action is right or wrong? If the latter, what kind of defence of this position can be given: can it be argued simply that this maximises welfare or must we look to some other considerations as well?

### TO THINK ABOUT:

To give you an idea of what a modern rule consequentialist theory looks like, this is the account that Brad Hooker defends (after much argument) in his *Ideal Code, Real World*. You'll get some idea of how he reaches this position with his article for the *Blackwell Guide*; to get an even better understanding, read the recommended chapters of *Ideal Code, Real World*.

**RULE-CONSEQUENTIALISM.** An act is wrong if and only if it is forbidden by the code of rules whose internalization by the overwhelming majority of everyone everywhere in each new generation has maximum expected value in terms of well-being (with some priority for the worst off). The calculation of a code's expected value includes all costs of getting the code internalized. If in terms of expected value two or more codes are better than the rest but equal to one another, the one closest to conventional morality determines what acts are wrong. (32; see also 144, n. 3)

### READING:

- 1 Mill, chapter 2



- 2 J. O. Urmson 'The Interpretation of the Philosophy of J.S. Mill', *Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1953) pp. 33–39; reprinted in P. Foot (ed.) *Theories of Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 1970) pp. 128–136
- 3 J. Mabbott 'Interpretations of Mill's Utilitarianism' *Philosophical Quarterly* 6 (1956) pp. 115–20; reprinted in P. Foot (ed.) *Theories of Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 1970) pp. 137–144
- 4 Crisp, chapter 5
- 5 B. Hooker 'Right, Wrong, and Rule-Consequentialism' in H. West (ed.) *Blackwell Guide to Mill's Utilitarianism* (Blackwell, 2006), pp. 233–248

Optional reading:

- 6 J. Rawls 'Two Concepts of Rules', *Philosophical Review* 64 (1955) pp 3–32
- 7 J.J.C. Smart & B. Williams *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge: CUP, 1973), esp. section 7 of Smart and 6 of Williams
- 8 B. Hooker *Ideal Code, Real World* (Oxford: OUP, 2003), chapters 1, 3, and 4
- 9 R. Card 'Inconsistency and the Theoretical Commitments of Hooker's Rule Consequentialism', *Utilitas* 19 (2007) pp. 243–258 [Helpful in particular for part (B) of the essay question]

## WEEK 3: MILL'S 'PROOF' AND MORAL REALISM

One way to argue for a moral theory is to appeal to our considered moral intuitions: does the theory recommend doing those actions, and only those actions, that seem to me, on reflection, to be right and does it help me to understand why they are right? But is this the only way in which we can defend an ethical theory? Can we not also appeal to certain natural facts, for example facts about human psychology? Relatedly, what are moral facts? Are they like, or reducible to, the facts investigated by the natural sciences?

This week we'll look at Mill's 'proof' of utilitarianism and Moore's criticism that Mill commits the 'naturalistic fallacy' of deriving an 'ought' from an 'is'. More generally, we'll think about the relation between moral facts—if we allow that there are moral facts—and natural facts.

### ESSAY:

Give a clear reconstruction of Mill's 'proof' of utilitarianism being careful to justify your reconstruction with evidence from *Utilitarianism* (i.e. don't just appeal to Crisp and West). Then discuss the following: Does Mill's argument commit the 'naturalistic fallacy'? If so, is this a problem? What other problems, if any, does his 'proof' have and how might Mill have avoided them? What other kind of arguments could be given in favour of consequentialism (even if you're not a consequentialist, you can have an opinion about how one ought to argue for it)?

### TO THINK ABOUT:

Moral anti-realism: there are no objective moral facts or properties.

Moral realism: there are objective moral facts and properties.

Moral naturalism (one kind of moral realism): there are objective moral facts and properties and these moral facts and properties are natural facts and properties.

Which of these three (very roughly stated) views seems to you to be on the right track? What reasons can you give for your choice?

### READING:

- 1 Mill, chapters 1 and 4
- 2 G. Moore *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: CUP, 1903), chapter 3
- 3 Crisp, chapter 4
- 4 H. West 'Mill's "Proof" of the Principle of Utility' in H. West (ed.) *Blackwell Guide to Mill's Utilitarianism* (Blackwell, 2006), pp. 174–184
- 5 G. Sayre-McCord '[Moral Realism](#)' *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*

Optional reading:

- 6 E. Seth 'The alleged fallacies in Mill's *Utilitarianism*', *Philosophical Review* 17 (1908) pp. 469–488
- 7 M. Smith 'Moral Realism' in H. LaFollette *The Blackwell Guide to Ethical Theory* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2000)

## WEEK 4: IMPARTIALITY AND ALIENATION

This week we look at a family of related objections to consequentialism: that it is too demanding; that it fails to distinguish between acts and omissions; and that it alienates us from the values, projects, and personal relationships that make us who we are. Focus on the alienation objection – this objection is difficult, so it will take a good bit of time and effort to explain it clearly.

### ESSAY:

Explain the ‘alienation/integrity objection’. How does Railton respond to this objection? Is he successful?

### READING:

- 1 Mill, chapters 2–4
- 2 Crisp, chapter 6
- 3 B. Williams ‘A Critique of Utilitarianism’, in J.J.C. Smart & B. Williams (eds) *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (CUP, 1973), sections 3–5
- 4 P. Railton ‘Alienation, consequentialism and the demands of morality’ *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984), pp. 134–171 [A consequentialist response to Williams]

### Optional reading:

- 5 S. Wolf ‘Moral Saints’ *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1988) pp. 419–439
- 6 Michael Stocker, ‘The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories’ *The Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976) 453–466 [Argues that in current consequentialist and deontological theories there is an unacceptable gap between one’s motives and one’s moral reasons]
- 7 Frank Jackson, ‘Decision-theoretic Consequentialism and the Nearest and Dearest Objection’ *Ethics* 101 (1991) 461–482 [Defends consequentialism against the can’t-accommodate-personal-relationships objection]
- 8 R. Crisp ‘Mill on virtue as a part of happiness’ *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 4 (1996), pp. 367–380

## WEEK 5: JUSTICE AND RIGHTS [OPTIONAL 1]

### READING:

- 1 Mill, chapter 5
- 2 L.W. Sumner 'Mill's Theory of Rights' in West (ed.) *Blackwell Guide to Mill's Utilitarianism* (Blackwell, 2006)
- 3 R. Nozick *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Blackwell, 1974), chapter 7, section I
- 4 J. Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (OUP, rev. edn. 1999), chapter 1
- 5 J. Raz 'Right-based Moralities' in J. Waldron (ed.) *Theories of Rights* (OUP, 1984)

### ESSAY:

Do we have rights? If so, what does it mean to have a right and does Mill manage to give a utilitarian account of them?

## WEEK 6: THE RIGHT AND THE GOOD [OPTIONAL 2]

### READING:

- 1 Mill, chapter 5
- 2 F. Kamm *Intricate Ethics* (OUP, 2007) chapter 1
- 3 T. Nagel 'Autonomy and Deontology' in Scheffler, S. (ed) *Consequentialism and Its Critics* (OUP, 1991) pp. 142–171

### Optional reading:

- 4 L. Alexander & M. Moore 'Deontological Ethics', *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*

### ESSAY:

Is it ever right to do an action that results, all things considered, in *less* overall good?