

Variety of Values

PHIL 605E

Fall 2021

Wed 1:40-4:40 PM in CW 106

Prof. Lisa Tessman

Pronouns: she/her or they/them.

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Office hours on Zoom: Mon 4:00-5:00 PM, Thur 9:00-10:00 AM, or by appointment.

Zoom link for office hours: <https://binghamton.zoom.us/j/99619382395>

Zoom link for class (in case we ever have to meet remotely):

<https://binghamton.zoom.us/j/94528560885>

Course description and semester plan:

This course starts with the assumption of value pluralism, namely it starts with the assumption that we can value many different kinds of things, and that within this plurality there are at least some irreducibly different values, which makes it hard to know which to prioritize. The course will also assume *moral* value pluralism, namely it will assume that even amongst those values that count as moral, there are at least some irreducibly different (moral) values. We will be exploring the implications of value pluralism and moral value pluralism, including their implications for the overridingness of morality, for relativism, and for how to think about conflicts of values. We will also spend some time focusing on values that get sidelined in one way or another when value pluralism, or moral value pluralism, is denied, and we think that there is just one kind of thing that is good. For instance, the value of meaningfulness, and the value of love, may get short shrift when the value of morality is taken to always override these values, and suspicion is cast on partiality when morality is seen as both overriding and impartial. Lastly, we will examine some of the interesting features of subjective values that tend to be ignored when we only ask about what is objectively valuable.

For ten class meetings (Sept 1-Nov 10) we will discuss readings as a whole class. Then, for two class meetings (Nov 17 & Dec 1), students will choose an additional reading (from the list provided) to discuss in pairs or small groups. On the last day of class (Dec 8) students who are writing a conference-length paper (see instructions for seminar papers below) will present a full draft of their papers.

Texts:

With one exception, all readings are available electronically, either as a PDF on Brightspace (under “Content”), or as an ebook through the BU library. The one exception, which you will have to either purchase or find some other way to acquire, is: Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, Princeton University Press, 2012.

Course objectives:

- To familiarize students with some contemporary work on values and value pluralism.
- To have students develop their own original, critical thinking about the topic.
- To have students learn and practice philosophical skills.
- To advance students in their ability to write papers that will be accepted for philosophical conferences and/or publication. Students in this course will get practice in writing either a conference-length or a publication-length paper.

Course requirements:

Class preparation and participation: I expect students to prepare for and participate thoughtfully in all seminar meetings, though I understand that covid safety requirements (see below) may interfere with in-person participation at times.

Weekly assignments are due on Tuesday evenings by 5:00 PM. For ten weeks, two kinds of weekly assignments must be completed:

- 1) **Summaries:** Please submit (as an Assignment on Brightspace) a 150-200 word paragraph summarizing the main idea/argument/position in that week's reading (if we read more than one author, either tie the readings together thematically or leave out whatever cannot be tied in). This should be a formal, polished piece of writing. Imagine that you were writing a paper for publication in which, as background, you had to very briefly convey to the reader the main points of the text. I will use anonymous grading for weekly summaries.
- 2) **Discussion Board:** Unless you are the presenter that week, please post under the week's "Topic" (click on "Discussions" on Brightspace) a 150-200 word paragraph explaining your response to the week's material. This could include critical points about the reading, what you take the implications of the reading to be, or interesting ways of extending or building on the author's position. This paragraph can be informal. Each student must post before reading or responding to others' posts. Sometime between 5:00 PM on Tuesday and the start of class on Wednesday, please read everyone else's paragraphs (you may respond if you wish or wait until class time to respond verbally).

Presentations: Each student will do one presentation on the readings (on the first day of class, students will sign up for a presentation date). You are encouraged to consult with me as you are preparing your presentation. Plan on speaking for 15-20 minutes, with or without accompanying slides. Please practice the presentation ahead of time in order to time it; you may also wish to video your practice presentation so that you can watch the video to determine what needs improvement before presenting in class. The presentation should consist of your own critique of or constructive engagement with the material that we have read for that week (but may also tie back to earlier readings); it should not include any summary of the material that we have read. Be creative with your presentation. After your presentation, please solicit responses (questions, comments, responses to a question that you have posed) to your presentation from the rest of the class.

Paper topics exercise: After completing each week's reading, ask yourself: if I were to write a paper that engaged with this reading (and could also draw on previous readings), what would I write about? Come up with a paper topic, think about the topic for a while, and then write out (in a sentence or short paragraph) a thesis statement. At the beginning of each class, everyone will be asked to share their thesis statement.

Seminar paper: Seminar paper topics are expected to arise directly out of the course material (you may use one of the paper topics that you shared as part of the weekly paper topics exercise, but you are not required to). Please choose to write *either* a short paper with a 3,000 word limit intended for conference presentation (i.e. with a 20-minute presentation time), or a 6,000-8,000 word paper aimed at publication. If you choose to write a conference-length paper, it must be presented on the last day of class and is due in final form (by email or as a google doc) on Friday Dec 10. Paper presentations should be polished, as if you were presenting at a

professional conference; practice the presentation, time and video your practice sessions, and work on improving the presentation before you present in class. If you write a longer paper, it is due in final form (by email or as a google doc) on Monday Dec 13, and there is no presentation. The word counts are strict; please include a word count. I encourage each of you to consult with me throughout the writing process to whatever extent this is helpful to you.

Grading:

Weekly summaries: 30%

Presentation on course readings: 20%

Seminar paper (in both presentation and written form if you are writing a conference-length paper; in written form only if you are writing a longer paper): 50%

The final grade may be adjusted upward or downward based on class participation (including the discussion board and paper topics exercise). Do give serious attention to the *quality*—not just the quantity—of your participation in discussions. Academic dishonesty will result in failure of the class and possible further action, including severance from the SPEL program.

No incompletes will be given under “normal” circumstances.

Schedule

Week 1: Wed, Aug 25

Introductions

Week 2: Wed, Sept 1

Thomas Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value,” in *Mortal Questions* (1979): pgs. 128-141. [Available as a PDF].

Harry Frankfurt. 1982. “The Importance of What We Care About.” *Synthese* 53 (2): 257-272. [Available as a PDF].

Bernard Williams, “Persons, Character and Morality” chapter 1 in *Moral Luck*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981: 1-19. [Available as a PDF].

Bernard Williams, “Morality, the Peculiar Institution” chapter 10 in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Harvard University Press, 1985: 174-196. [Available as a PDF].

Week 3: No class (Rosh Hashanah)

Week 4: Wed, Sept 15

Michael Stocker, *Plural and Conflicting Values*, Oxford University Press, 1990
[Available as an ebook through the BU library]:

Chapter 4: “Moral Conflicts: What they Are and What They Show”

Chapter 6: “Plurality and Choice”

Week 5: Wed, Sept 22

Susan Wolf, *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love*, Oxford University Press, 2015 [Available as an ebook through the BU library]:

Chapter 1: “Introduction”

Chapter 2: “Moral Saints”

Chapter 3: “Morality and Partiality”

Chapter 4: “Morality and the View from Here”

Week 6: Wed, Sept 29

George Harris, *Reason's Grief: An Essay on Tragedy and Value*, Cambridge University Press, 2006 [Available as an ebook through the BU library]:

“An Aesthetic Prelude”

Chapter 1: “The Problem of Tragedy”

Chapter 2: “The Dubious Ubiquity of Practical Reason”

Chapter 3: “Nihilism”

Chapter 4: “Pessimism”

Week 7: Wed, Oct 6

George Harris, *Reason's Grief*:

Chapter 6: “Moralism and the Inconstancy of Value”

Chapter 8: “Best Life Pluralism and Reason's Regret”

Chapter 9: “Tragic Pluralism and Reason's Grief”

Week 8: Wed, Oct 13

David Wong, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism*, Oxford University Press, 2006 [Available as an ebook through the BU library]:

“Introduction”

Chapter 1: “Pluralism and Ambivalence”

Chapter 2: “Pluralistic Relativism”

Chapter 7: “Moral Reasons—Internal and External”

Week 9: Wed Oct 20

Susan Wolf, *The Variety of Values: Essays on Morality, Meaning, and Love*:

Chapter 9: “‘One Thought Too Many’: Love, Morality and the Ordering of Commitment”

Chapter 11: “The Importance of Love”

Eva Kittay, *Learning from My Daughter: The Value and Care of Disabled Minds* [Available as an ebook through the BU library]:

Chapter 7: “An Ethics of Care”

Chapter 8: “The Completion of Care—The Normativity of Care”

Week 10: Wed, Oct 27

Susan Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, Princeton University Press, 2012.

“Meaning in Life”

“Why it Matters”

Comments and Response by:

Nomy Arpaly

Jonathan Haidt

Response by Susan Wolf (read just the part of Wolf's response in which she responds to Arpaly and Haidt, i.e. pgs. 115-132)

Week 11: Wed, Nov 3

Valerie Tiberius, *Well-Being as Value Fulfillment: How We Can Help Each Other to Live Well*, Oxford University Press, 2018. [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

Chapter 1: "Introduction"
Chapter 2: "The Value Fulfillment Theory of Well-Being"
Chapter 3: "What is Value Fulfillment?"

Week 12: Wed Nov 10

Valerie Tiberius, *Well-Being as Value Fulfillment*.

Chapter 4: "Assessing Well-Being: Value Fulfillment Theory"
Chapter 5: "Being a Good Friend"
Chapter 6: "Conclusion"

Week 13: Wed Nov 17

Reading groups: readings to be chosen from (all or part of) one of the following books:

Cheshire Calhoun, *Doing Valuable Time: The Present, the Future, and Meaningful Living*. Oxford University Press, 2018. [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

L.A. Paul, *Transformative Experience*. Oxford University Press, 2014. [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

David Sobel, *From Valuing to Value: A Defense of Subjectivism*. Oxford University Press, 2017. [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

Lisa Tessman, *Moral Failure: On the Impossible Demands of Morality*. Oxford University Press, 2015. [Available as an ebook through the BU library].

Week 14: no class (Thanksgiving)

Week 15: Wed, Dec 1

Reading groups continued.

Week 16: Wed, Dec 8

Paper presentations.