

Related readings

The readings are posted in Blackboard (Content > Unit 4):

- + Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*
- + Jeremy Bentham, *Principles of Morals and Legislation*
- + Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysics of Morals*

Guidelines

Be sure to read the **RWA Guidelines** document in the **Resources** folder in Blackboard; check the RWA rubric in the **Grading System and Rubrics** document so you understand how your paper will be graded. Check the **Semester Schedule** for due dates of the Prep Sheet, Rough Draft, and final RWA.

Context

In previous readings, we have seen various modern thinkers touch on matters related to ethics and moral judgment. In this unit, we explore three of the formal ethical theories that emerged from the modern era: contractarianism, utilitarianism and deontology. Each of these theories is still used in applied ethics today, and each bears the influence of modern scientific thinking.

We may often—especially when we are discussing controversial moral topics—be tempted to think that moral judgments are either matters of personal opinion or relative to particular cultures or traditions, and therefore not the kinds of things that can be judged objectively true or false. Modern ethical theories try to resist that temptation by working to identify objective rational principles to support moral judgments. As you work on your reading and reflection, consider whether you think these authors succeed in identifying such an objective foundation for ethics.

Questions for each Group

Check the **Group Assignments** chart posted in Blackboard to see which group you are in.

+ Group 1: Hobbes

Reading: *Leviathan*, focusing on **pages 1.7 – 15.30**

Summary: Citing specific points throughout the reading, explain how Hobbes describes the natural equality of humans, and how this leads to the condition of war “of every man against every man.” Be sure to discuss the “laws of nature” that point the way out of the state of war.

Reflection: Consistent with contractarian theory, Hobbes asserts that “where no covenant has preceded..., every man has right to everything and consequently, no action can be unjust,” and that prior to forming contracts humans are in a natural state of perpetual war. What do you think of this description of human existence? Are humans as essentially self-interested as Hobbes asserts? Are values like empathy and collaboration essential to human nature, or do we only appreciate them because they serve our own interests? Defend your position with a clear argument supported by your own ideas.

+ **Group 2: Bentham**

Reading: *Principles of Morals and Legislation*, focusing on **pages 1.6 – 15.23**

Summary: Citing specific points throughout the reading, explain what Bentham means by the principle of utility and the definitions of ‘ought’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ that the principle leads to. Also, discuss how he responds to religious objections to utilitarian ethics.

Reflection: Because Bentham thinks the principle of utility should inform both ethical and governmental matters, he argues that “That which is politically good cannot be morally bad.” What do you think of that conclusion? Do you agree with his argument that social justice is consistent with maximizing utility (happiness)? (In other words, could something make lots of folks happy but still be unjust?) Defend your position with a clear argument supported by your own ideas.

+ **Group 3: Kant**

Reading: *Fundamental Principles...*, focusing on **pages 1.11 – 15.17**

Summary: Citing specific points throughout the reading, explain Kant’s distinction between acting from “inclination” (desire) and duty respect for law.” Discuss why he thinks that, as rational beings, achieving happiness cannot be our highest moral aim.

Reflection: Kant rejects consequentialist theories, and so he asserts that “the moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect expected from it.” Discuss whether you agree with his position. Do you think that living a moral life can consist solely in observing the duties Kant identifies, even if doing so doesn’t increase our happiness and well-being? Defend your position with a clear argument supported by your own ideas.