

**PHIL4532**  
**Seminar on Western Philosophy 西方哲學研討**

**Four Major Contemporary Moral Philosophers:**  
**Thomas Nagel, Bernard Williams, T. M. Scanlon, and Derek Parfit**

**Course Outline**

**Time : W 1:30pm-4:15pm**

**Location : LHC G03**

**Course overview (as shown on CUSIS)**

This is a seminar course devoted to examining selected issues in Western philosophy. The specific content of the course varies from semester to semester. Offerings with different subtitles can be taken up for credit, up to a maximum of two times.

Advisory to Majors (old curriculum): to be taken in year 2 or above.

Advisory to Majors (new curriculum): to be taken in year 3 or above.

**Learning outcomes (as shown on CUSIS)**

1. Gain competence in explaining and evaluating the key concepts and theories addressed in the course.
2. Demonstrate familiarity with the primary and secondary source texts in the syllabus.
3. Engage in in-depth discussion on the selected topics of the course.
4. Demonstrate ability to articulate and defend one's own philosophical theses with clarity.
5. Demonstrate consolidated skills in expository and argument writing.

**Topics**

We will discuss the works by four major contemporary moral philosophers, namely Thomas Nagel, Bernard Williams, T. M. Scanlon, and Derek Parfit. Nagel is a great defender of moral objectivity, the existence of various types of moral reasons, and the view that there are unsolvable moral issues. Williams is well known for his skepticism of (external) moral reasons and of there being moral experts, as well as his criticism of moral theory, via his work on moral luck and his critique of theory. The emergence of contractualism as a moral theory (of the Kantian kind) has taken centre stage for the past 20 years, at least. This was due to the work by Scanlon. Scanlon's book, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, is a major contribution to metaethics. Scanlon is also a strong critic of Williams' works. Parfit has written much in moral philosophy, but we will focus on his critique of Scanlon's contractualism. We will also consider whether Scanlon has resources to reply to them.

**Learning activities**

Reading of the works by the four philosophers is essential. We will also discuss their works in tutorial, or in-class discussion. This will in part consist of presentation by students. Further, papers will be part of the requirements.

**Assessment scheme**

<i>Task nature</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Weight</i>
Papers	Written papers on the	90%
In-class participation	Presentation and discussion	10%


### Remarks on Assessment Scheme (if any)

I will probably ask for very short written works (one or two pages) on all four of the philosophers. In addition, I will ask for longer papers.

### Recommended learning resources

John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, chap. 1

Gilbert Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, chap. 1.

T. Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism*.

\_\_\_\_\_, *Mortal Questions*, chaps. 3, 8-10.

\_\_\_\_\_, *The View from Nowhere*, chaps. 8-10.

\_\_\_\_\_, *The Last Word*, chap. 6.

Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons."

\_\_\_\_\_, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

T. M. Scanlon, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism."

\_\_\_\_\_, *What We Owe to Each Other*.

\_\_\_\_\_, "How I Am Not A Kantian."

\_\_\_\_\_, "Thickness and Theory."

\_\_\_\_\_, *Being Realistic about Reasons*.

Derek Parfit, "Justifiability to Each Person."

\_\_\_\_\_, *On What Matters*, vol. 1, chap. 15.

\_\_\_\_\_, *On What Matters*, vol. 2, chaps. 21-23.

Johann Frick, "Contractualism and Social Risk."

### Course schedule

<i>Week</i>	<i>Topics</i>	<i>Required reading</i>	<i>Tutorials</i>	<i>Remarks</i>
1	The beginning of contemporary metaethics: Moral anti-realism	Mackie, <i>Ethics</i> , ch. 1, excerpts. Harman, <i>The Nature of Morality</i> , chap. 1.		
2	Moral realism	Nagel, <i>The Possibility of Altruism</i> , excerpt. Nagel, <i>The View from Nowhere</i> , chap. 8		
3	Moral skepticism	Williams, <i>Ethics &amp; the Limits</i> , chap. 1. Williams, <i>Moral luck</i> , chap. 1		
4	Are there any external reason?	Williams, "Internal and External Reasons" Scanlon, <i>What We Owe</i> , App.		

5	Moral objectivity	Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value” in <i>Mortal Questions</i> . Scanlon, <i>Being Realistic</i> , ch. 2.		
6	Types of moral reasons	Nagel, <i>The View from Nowhere</i> , chap. 9. Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value.” Nagel, “Ethics without Biology,” in <i>Mortal Questions</i> .		
7	Are there any moral experts?	Williams, <i>Ethics &amp; the Limits</i> , excerpt. Scanlon, “Thickness & Theory”		
8	Why should I be moral?	Nagel, <i>The Possibility of Altruism</i> , excerpt. Nagel, <i>The Last Word</i> , chap. 6. Scanlon, “Contractualism and Utilitarianism.” Scanlon, <i>What We Owe</i> , chap. 4.		
9	Contractualism: Structure	Scanlon, <i>What We Owe</i> , chap. 4		
10	Contractualism: Aggregation	Scanlon, <i>What We Owe</i> , ch. 5 Nagel, “Equality,” <i>Mortal Qu.</i>		
11	Contractualism: Parfit	Parfit, “Justifiability to Each Person.” Parfit, <i>On what does matter</i> , vol. 1, excerpt.		
12	Aggregation and Numbers	Parfit, <i>On what does matter</i> , vol. 2, excerpts.		
13	Social risks	Frick, “Contractualism and social risk.”		
14	<b>Workshop on final paper</b>	We will read each other’s paper		

#### Details of course website

I will send information and announcement about the course via emails to students taking this course.

**Contact details for teacher(s) or TA(s)**

<b>Teacher</b>	
Name:	Li Hon-lam
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<b>TA</b>	
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Office location:	
Telephone:	
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**Academic honesty and plagiarism**

Attention is drawn to University policy and regulations on honesty in academic work, and to the disciplinary guidelines and procedures applicable to breaches of such policy and regulations. Details may be found at <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/policy/academichonesty/>

With each assignment, students will be required to submit a signed declaration that they are aware of these policies, regulations, guidelines and procedures. For group projects, all students of the same group should be asked to sign the declaration.

For assignments in the form of a computer-generated document that is principally text-based and submitted via VeriGuide, the statement, in the form of a receipt, will be issued by the system upon students' uploading of the soft copy of the assignment. Assignments without the receipt will not be graded by teachers. Only the final version of the assignment should be submitted via VeriGuide.