

Philosophy 290–6: Permissibility, Meaning and Blame. Themes from the Recent Work of T.M. Scanlon

Mondays 2–4
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Description

What are we thinking about, when we think about the “morality” of actions? A theme of T.M. Scanlon’s recent work is that we may be thinking about more than one thing. On the one hand, we may be trying to decide what to do. Within this *deliberative* perspective, Scanlon suggests, we focus on questions of *permissibility*. On the other hand, we may be trying to come to terms with what someone’s action says about him, or about his relations to others. Within this *evaluative* perspective, we focus on questions of *meaning*.

Scanlon suggests that sustained and careful attention to the distinction between permissibility and meaning, or more broadly between the deliberative and evaluative perspectives, promises to illuminate several central questions in ethics. Does what we *intend* affect the *morality* of what we *do*? How should we understand the resonant idea that morality is a matter of treating people as “*ends, not means*”? What is *blame*? When is it appropriate? Only when it is for something *freely chosen*? Does what we ought to do depend on the *facts*, or only the *evidence* available to us? Does what we *intend* affect what we have *reason to do*?

Readings

To provide background, we will review the central chapters of Scanlon’s *What We Owe to Each Other*. Then we will focus on Scanlon’s unpublished book, *Dimensions of Moral Assessment: Meaning, Permissibility, and Blame*. Readings are available on the reserve shelf in the Howison Philosophy Library. The manuscript of *Dimensions of Moral Assessment* may also be downloaded from the “Resources” section of the course’s bspace page: <http://bspace.berkeley.edu/>. Enrolled students should already have access. Other students should send either their ID number or their official Berkeley email address to Niko.

Prerequisites

This is a graduate seminar. Enrollment is open only to (i) graduate students in Philosophy and Logic and Methodology of Science and (ii) senior philosophy majors with the consent of the instructors.

Requirements

- All enrolled students are required to write a term paper of 18 pages, due on May 12.
- Enrolled graduate students are required, and auditing graduate students are strongly encouraged, to present the reading at one of our sessions. While presentations should of course provide a brief summary of the reading, their main aim should be to stimulate discussion by identifying the crucial issues. Presenters should meet with the instructors on the Friday before their session to run through their approach.

Readings

1. January 28

Introductory meeting

2. February 4

Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Ch. 4

3. February 11

Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Ch. 5

4. February 25

Scanlon, *Dimensions of Moral Assessment*, Introduction and Ch. 1: "Permissibility and Intent I: The Illusory Appeal of Double Effect"

5. March 3

Scanlon, *Dimensions of Moral Assessment*, Ch. 2: "Permissibility and Intent II: The Significance of Intent"

6. March 10

Scanlon, *Dimensions of Moral Assessment*, Ch. 2: "Permissibility and Intent II: The Significance of Intent"

7. March 17

Kolodny and McFarlane, "Ought: Between Subjective and Objective"

8. March 31

Scanlon, *Dimensions of Moral Assessment*, Ch. 3: "Means and Ends"

9. April 7

Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Ch. 6

10. April 14

Scanlon, *Dimensions of Moral Assessment*, Ch. 4: "Blame"

11. April 21

Scanlon, *Dimensions of Moral Assessment*, Ch. 4: "Blame"
Wallace, "Dispassionate Opprobrium"

12. April 28

Scanlon, *Dimensions of Moral Assessment*, Ch. 4: "Blame"

13. May 5

Scanlon, "Reasons: A Puzzling Duality?"

14. May 12

Kolodny, "Aims as Reasons"