

In this course we are going to immerse ourselves in reading and reflecting about moral philosophy, the branch of philosophy that concerns itself with human reasoning, doing, and being in relationship to matters of good and evil, right and wrong. We will begin by considering the debate over moral relativism: Can moral judgments be right or wrong independent of individual or cultural perspectives? We will go on to take a close examination of three approaches to normative ethical theory that have played a key role in the development of ethics within the Western philosophical tradition: virtue-based ethics (as represented by Aristotle), consequentialism (as represented by Bentham and Mill), and deontological ethics (as represented by Kant). As we explore these theories, our aperture for reflection will expand beyond the history of moral philosophy to include contemporary responses to and criticisms of these theories. In the last part of the class, we will expand this aperture even further to look at how well these three theoretical approaches can offer guidance in dealing with a select few, but nonetheless pressing, problems of contemporary life. For Spring 2010, these problems will include animal rights, the environment, and our obligations to help those who are much less well off than ourselves.