

Partiality and Impartiality
Family, Friends, Compatriots and the Moral Point of View

LMU Munich, Department of Philosophy
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Description

In this “essay course” we will explore the current debate about partiality and impartiality in ethics, and we will practice writing crisp philosophical essays.

Philosophers with very different outlooks – deontologists, utilitarians and contractarians – agree that impartiality is a central feature in moral thinking. Against this view, others hold that at least some form of partiality is morally legitimate, even desirable. This conflict is of utmost theoretical and practical relevance since it affects both our ideas about what morality may legitimately demand from moral agents and how we assess the moral quality of our everyday actions like favouring our relatives, friends or compatriots.

Topics to be discussed will include the tension between the impartial demands of morality and important goods like friendship or parental/filial relations that seem to require partiality; the question whether nationality can justify legitimate forms of partiality and special obligations towards compatriots; the moral challenge of world poverty for citizens in affluent countries.

This course is aimed at students who have already some familiarity with moral theories. It will be taught in English.

Goals

To become familiar with the current debate in moral philosophy about partiality and impartiality; to improve one’s academic writing skills.

Readings

- Texts will be made available as PDF files and as a printed reader.
- A helpful introduction into writing academic essays is: Nigel Warburton: The Basics of Essay Writing. London/New York: Routledge 2006.

Requirements and assessment

- Participation and familiarity with the readings.
- A short presentation of less than five minutes about one of the readings.
- Four essays of up to 2000 words length (4–5 pages) written in English and to be handed in during the term.
- The final grade will only depend on the essays.

Schedule, class on Mondays 16–18, room M210

Week 1 (October 21)

Introduction to partiality and impartiality in ethics

(Text: Brian Feltham: *Introduction: Partiality and impartiality in ethics*)

Week 2 (October 28)

Text: Peter Singer: *Famine, Affluence, and Morality*

Week 3 (November 4)

Text: Bernard Williams: *Persons, Character and Morality*

Week 4 (November 11)

Text: Maximilian de Gaynesford: *The Bishop, the Valet, the Wife, and the Ass: What Difference Does it Make that Something is Mine?*

Week 5 (November 18)

Text: John Cottingham: *Impartiality and Ethical Formation*

Week 6 (November 25)

Text: Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift: *Legitimate Parental Partiality*

Week 7 (December 2)

Text: Sara Goering: *Choosing Our Friends: Moral Partiality and the Value of Diversity*

Week 8 (December 9)

Text: David Miller: *Reasonable Partiality Towards Compatriots*

Week 9 (December 16)

Text: Seyla Benhabib: *The Generalized and the Concrete Other: The Kohlberg-Gilligan-Controversy and Feminist Theory*

happy holidays!

Week 10 (January 13)

Text: Thomas Nagel: *Equality and Partiality*

Week 11 (January 20)

Text: Samuel Scheffler: *Families, Nations, and Strangers*

Week 12 (January 27)

Text: Iris M. Young: *Responsibility and Global Justice. A Social Connection Model*

Week 13 (February 3)

Conclusion

Advice on Essay Writing (based on advice by Jo Wolff)

Before starting work on any question you should read through the paper carefully and pay particular attention to whether any of your topics have been raised in an unusual way. It is easy to miss this in an attempt to get started.

Before writing your answer you should make a plan – one point in the plan for every paragraph in the essay.

Planning your essay

1. Introduction

Are there any key terms to explain?

Why bother asking the question?

Are there key assumptions made in the question?

What are the possible answers to the question?

What will be your answer and why?

2. Development

Do you need to introduce any technical concepts or vocabulary?

What is your main argument or arguments?

How does your argument answer the question?

What lines of objection could be made against you?

What replies are there?

Are there further implications of your argument? (Be brief!)

3. Conclusion

What have you shown? (Do not introduce new material into the conclusion.)

Hints

- If you are told to write an essay on a particular item of reading, without being given a title, assume that the title is: 'What does x attempt to show in ...? Does he/she succeed?'
- Once you have found a way of expressing a key thought or concept use the same wording. If you change the wording the reader may think you are trying to express a different idea.
- If a point is standardly made in the literature by means of a standard example, use that same example. Don't worry about boring the reader – that is better than confusing him/her.
- If you do not quite understand what you say, do not think 'never mind, I'm sure the examiner will get it.' We are testing your knowledge and understanding, not the examiner's.
- It is often helpful to structure the main part of your essay as if you are arguing against someone who is skeptical of your position: giving your position – possible objections – your replies to the objection etc.
- Decide what you are arguing for, and then stick to it.
- Ask someone else – a friend, colleague etc. – to read and comment on your essay before submitting it.

Assessment criteria for essays

Standardly, written assignments will be graded according to the following criteria.

1. Structure and organisation
 - a. Is the assignment well organised?
 - b. Does it have a clear introductory paragraph, thesis statement, and concluding paragraph?
 - c. Are there clear transitions between paragraphs and sections of the assignment?
2. Exposition and interpretation
 - a. Do you give a clear and charitable interpretation of the view(s) under consideration?
 - b. Do you make clear the underlying assumptions of the view(s) as well as their implications?
 - c. Do you support your interpretations with relevant citations from the text?
3. Argument and critical evaluation
 - a. Do you provide good arguments for the claims you make? Is it obvious what they are?
 - b. When critiquing a view, do you consider possible responses to that critique?
 - c. Do you show that you have thought independently about the problem in question?
4. Writing style
 - a. Is your prose style clear and easy to understand?
 - b. Are there any recurring grammatical or spelling errors?
 - c. Do you avoid awkward and confusing sentence structures?

A link to a “perfect” essay:

<http://goo.gl/sYDh5x>

How to proceed to write your essays

1. From the syllabus, select a text/topic about which you want to write an essay. N.B.: You will have to write and submit your essay *before* the text/topic is discussed in class. (The point is that you bring the ideas from your essay to the discussion in class.)
2. Schedule a meeting with the teacher (e-mail to: heilinger@lmu.de) for Monday morning (10-12) of the week *before* the text will be discussed in class.
3. Prepare a *one page plan* for an essay (see advice above!) and bring it to the meeting, where you will briefly present it and get feedback and advice for writing the essay.
4. Submit the essay until Saturday noon, that is *two days before* the text/topic will be discussed in class.
5. You will receive the grade for your essay within a few days after submitting it.
6. Do this four times during the term. If you want to, you may submit a fifth essay, in which case the four best grades will constitute your final grade.
7. Enjoy engaging with the topic and writing the essays! Even though it is hard work, it should also be kind of fun...