

Modern Ethics

A course by Stephen R.C. **Hicks**, Ph.D., Professor of Philosophy

Eight lectures, with special emphasis on how moral conclusions follow from a philosopher's positions in metaphysics, epistemology, and human nature. The modern philosophers selected have been historically influential (and continue to be so), and they are mostly opposed to each other philosophically and so advocate widely diverse moralities.

Key philosophers include John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, Arthur Schopenhauer, Søren Kierkegaard, Auguste Comte, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ruth Benedict, A.J. Ayer, and Philippa Foot. For each, Professor Hicks establishes the philosopher's intellectual context, presents his or her most influential arguments, and quotes directly from the philosopher's important books or essays.

Key themes: Deontology, Utilitarianism, Egoism, Altruism, Subjectivism, Liberty, Equality, Hierarchy, Predation, Nihilism, Emotivism, Relativism, Naturalism.

Lecture One: What Is the Meaning of Life? John Locke versus Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Themes: Traditional Hierarchy? Liberty and/or Equality. Six Deep Questions about Ethics. What is 'Modern'?

Texts: Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*. Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*

Lecture Two: Absolute Duty. Immanuel Kant

Themes: Purifying Ethics. Divine Command Theory. Moses. Uzzah. Whose interests: Egoist, Predatory, Altruist? None: Deontology.

Texts: Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *Critique of Practical Reason*

Lecture Three: Is God Dead? Søren Kierkegaard

Themes: Abraham and absolute faith. Psychological functionalism? Pascal's Wager. Social functionalism? The Grand Inquisitor.

Texts: Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *Either-Or*. Dostoevsky, "The Grand Inquisitor," *The Brothers Karamazov*

Lecture Four: Altruism and Self-Sacrifice. Arthur Schopenhauer and Auguste Comte

Themes: Suffering. Nihilism. Self-interest and selflessness. Egoism, Predation, and Altruism. The Religion of Humanity.

Texts: Schopenhauer, *The Basis of Morality* and *The World as Will and Representation*. Comte, *System of Positive Philosophy*

Lecture Five: The Greatest Happiness for the Greatest Number. John Stuart Mill

Themes: Hedonism. Epicurus. Utility. Bentham. Individual or collective? The problem of Casanova, de Sade, Sacher-Masoch.

Text: Mill, *Utilitarianism*

Lecture Six: Predation and Power. Friedrich Nietzsche

Themes: Gyges. Original Sin? Master and slave moralities. Slavery as natural and necessary? A new aristocracy.

Texts: Nietzsche, “The Greek State,” *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *The Will to Power*

Lecture Seven: Subjective Relativism. Ruth Benedict and A.J. Ayer

Themes: Anthropology. Meaninglessness (semantic and prescriptive). So subjective leaps? So individual emotivism? So group conditioning?

Texts: Ayer, “A Critique of Ethics.” Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*.

Lecture Eight: Biological Naturalism. Philippa Foot

Themes: Trolley Problems. Is the “Naturalistic Fallacy” a fallacy? Hume. The question of objectivity. Aristotle and Rand. The moral philosopher as first a biologist. Concluding Chart.

Text: Foot, *Natural Goodness*.

About the Instructor

Stephen R. C. Hicks, Ph.D. is Professor of Philosophy and the author of *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault*, *Nietzsche and the Nazis*, *Entrepreneurial Living*, *Liberalism Pro and Con*, and *Eight Philosophies of Education*. He has published in *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *Review of Metaphysics*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. His writings have been translated into twenty languages. He has been Professor at Rockford University (Illinois), Visiting Professor of Business Ethics at Georgetown University (Washington, DC), Visiting Professor at the University of Kasimir the Great (Poland), Visiting Fellow at Harris Manchester College (Oxford University), and Visiting Professor at Jagiellonian University (Poland).