

24.231, Ethics, Spring 2008

### Instructions for your First Paper

First: read Jim Pryor's Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper. There is a link to it from the course website. In several places Pryor says things about how your paper will be read by the people grading it (in this case, me and Adam). Make sure you read and understand those parts, too.

We have discussed several theories of individual welfare: Default Hedonism, Attitudinal Hedonism, Ideal Preferentism, and Actualist Preferentism. Your assignment is to evaluate one of these theories.

You should proceed as follows. Choose one of those four theories. And choose an argument against that theory---either one that appears in the reading or one we discussed in class. In your paper you will present the theory and the argument against it, and then provide your evaluation of the argument.

You will want to choose a theory and an argument that you feel you have something to say about. If one of the arguments against, say, Default Hedonism, seemed wrong-headed to you, then maybe you should choose that argument, and make it your goal in the paper to explain why the argument goes wrong. Or perhaps you thought that some argument against, say, Actualist Preferentism is successful, and that the author's response to that argument was no good. Then maybe you should choose that argument, and make it your goal to explain why the author's response is no good. In general, you should choose a topic you yourself feel invested in. This will make it easier for you to give your view on the argument (backed up with reasons), and not just repeat what has been said about it in the text and in class.

I emphasize a comment that Pryor makes: when presenting and explaining theories and arguments, do not assume your reader understands the technical terms and distinctions that you use. Even though we do understand them, you should write as if your paper will be read by another undergraduate philosophy student who has never taken this class. If such a student could not understand your paper, it will count against you. (You can apply what is said about explaining arguments in the guidelines on oral presentations to your paper.)

It is important that your writing be clear and precise. Remember the complaint Feldman makes about Mill's formulation of utilitarianism. Even though it is likely that Mill understood utilitarianism correctly, the formulation Mill actually wrote down was defective. When we grade your paper, we will go by what you actually wrote down, not by what we guess you might have had in mind.

It is unwise to do philosophy with a shotgun. Do not tell us everything you know about the topic of your paper, hoping that some of what you say will “hit the mark.” You should have one point you are making, and everything you say in your paper should be part of making that point.

Finally, remember that your paper is only 5 pages long. That is not a lot of space. The most important part of your paper is the part where you present your own evaluation of the argument. Budget your space accordingly. Explain the theory and the argument fully, but also briefly, so you still have plenty of room left to discuss the argument. A strong paper will not devote four and a half pages to summarizing the theory and the argument, and only half a page to stating and defending your own view on the matter.