

Course	PHIL60412
Title	Issues in Ethics: Promises & Obligations
Tutor	Dr Thomas Smith

Course Content:

Ethics is not just concerned with what is right, wrong, and so on. It is concerned with the nature, significance and explanation of rightness and wrongness. One form of wrongness consists, not just in *doing* wrong, but in *wronging* another person; that is, in violating an obligation that one has to them. A central, familiar, but in many ways puzzling example of this is that of promise-breaking.

Promises are interesting in part because they appear to create obligations that did not previously exist. That is, they change the moral facts. If I promise to mow your lawn, I make it possible for me to wrong you by not mowing your lawn, when this was not previously possible. How, then, do promises work? Must a promisor say 'I promise', or will other words suffice? What *thought* (if any) is expressed by a promise? What expectations (if any) does a promise induce? Under what conditions does a promise obligate? When it so obligates, why is this? And what does such an obligation bind one to do? Must a practice of promising exist, for a promise to be made? Or could a promise be made in a 'state of nature? Can a promise be made to oneself? Must a promise always regard some potential future action of the promisor? Must a promise be *accepted*? How do promises differ from predictions and expressions of intention? How do they differ from contracts, agreements and vows?

We will be critically discussing classic and contemporary views on such questions.

Teaching and Learning Methods:

After an initial meeting, there will be seven two-hour seminars, at which students will give presentations, and the tutor will lead a discussion of issues raised by texts that we have read. Students will also have the opportunity to discuss their private reading and writing assignments one-to-one with the tutor.

Assessment

Assessed Essay 5000 words 100%

Preliminary reading

- Heuer, U. (2012) 'Promising – Part 1' *Philosophy Compass* Vol. 7, Issue 12, pp. 832-841.
- Owens, D. (2012) 'Promises' *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics* Preprint available via David Owens's personal website: <http://www.davidowensphilosophy.wordpress.com/>
- Searle, J. R. (1969) *Speech Acts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapters 3 and 8.
- Vitek, W. (1993) *Promising* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Aims:

The course unit aims:

- To introduce students to the philosophical issues regarding promises and obligations.
- To introduce students to seminal and recent literature on this topic.
- To equip students with the advanced research skills needed for dissertation writing and doctoral research.

Intended Learning Outcomes:

On completion of this unit successful students will be able:

- To complete a substantial piece of research in an area of analytical philosophy.
- To present a substantial piece of research to a critical audience.

- To demonstrate a broad knowledge of the literature on an advanced topic in analytical philosophy.
- To conduct independent research, under supervision by an expert supervisor.
- To understand, critically assess, and respond to advanced philosophical writing.