

Christel Fricke

Title: Ethics Without Principles – Pros and Cons

The very wide spread idea that moral theory is essentially about universal moral principles and their authority has recently come under attack. Examples for such principle oriented theories include the various versions of utilitarianism as well as John Rawls' *Theory of Justice*. According to the idea underlying these theories, universal moral principles have to be specific enough to allow for judgments about what is right and wrong in the realm of individual choices or political institutions. But whereas their general nature stands in the way of their context sensitivity, their specific content exposes them to the suspicion of cultural bias.

Among the most prominent opponents of this idea is Amartya Sen who, in his 2009 book on *The Idea of Justice*, argues against the common assumption that we can only judge about the justice or injustice of the choice an agent makes or of a political institution if we have universal principles to rely on, principles stating what ideal justice (of choices or institutions) consists in.

We shall read and discuss parts I and II of Amartya Sen's *The Idea of Justice* and will then explore contemporary suggestions of moral theories that avoid relying on universal principles. The main challenge for such theories is to avoid moral relativism. This is the view according to which the authority of moral judgments is limited to social groups the members of which share certain social conventions. Moral relativism denies the claim that there can be judgments about what is morally right and wrongs to do for an agent under given circumstances which can make justified claims to be binding for all human beings.

The course will be taught in English. Essays can be submitted either in English or in Norwegian.

Reading:

Amartya Sen (2009) *The Idea of Justice*. London: Penguin Books.

A more extensive reading list will be provided.