The Moralities of Everyday Life
Summer, 2023

Contact Information

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Short Summary

This course introduces the modern science of moral thought and moral action, explored through the disciplines of cognitive science, social and developmental psychology, neuroscience, behavioral economics, and analytic philosophy. Topics include empathy and compassion in babies and young children; emotional reactions to family, friends, and strangers; the origins of prejudice and bigotry; sexuality, disgust, and purity; punishment, revenge, and forgiveness; the relationship between morality and religion. Enrollment limited. For college students only. 1 Credit.

Course Goals

How is it that we are capable of transcendent kindness—and unspeakable cruelty? How do we explain people’s strongly held opinions about abortion, gay marriage, affirmative action, eating meat, and torture? How do evolution, culture, and religion conspire to shape our moral natures? These are among the most important—and exciting—questions around, and they are the focus of this course. We will explore the modern science of moral belief and moral action, drawing upon disciplines such as cognitive science, neuroscience, economics, and philosophy. We will look at research from the lab, from the community, and from the battlefield; we will discuss babies, monkeys, and psychopaths; we will debate claims about moral differences between men and women, liberals and conservatives, Christians and Muslims. We will explore issues such as prejudice and bigotry, sexuality and purity, and punishment, revenge, and forgiveness.

The lectures and readings will be accessible to a general audience; no special background is needed. But participants should be prepared to keep up with the readings, and be comfortable thinking about and debating ideas from a variety of fields.
About the Professor

PAUL BLOOM is a Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto and the Brooks and Suzanne Ragen Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Science at Yale University. His research explores how children and adults understand the physical and social world, with special focus on morality, religion, fiction, and art. He has won numerous awards for his research and teaching. He is past-president of the Society for Philosophy and Psychology, and co-editor of Behavioral and Brain Sciences, one of the major journals in the field. He has written for scientific journals such as Nature and Science, and for popular outlets such as The New York Times, The New Yorker, and The Atlantic Monthly. He is the author of seven books, including, most recently, Psych: The Story of the Human Mind.

Format and requirements

TLDR: Each week, you will watch lectures, do readings, and write a reading response. You’ll meet with us twice a week, once with me for an hour and once with a Teaching Fellow for two hours. You’re graded on participation, reading responses, and a take-home written exam.

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This course lasts five weeks. For each week, students will watch a series of short lectures that were taped as part of an online course—a MOOC—on morality, along with other supplementary on-line lectures and readings. Each week, there are two meetings for online discussion, during the periods of Tuesday and Thursday, 4:00 – 6:00 PM EDT.

Although this is an online summer course, the expected workload is equivalent to a typical semester-long university class. You will watch a semester’s worth of lectures, do the same amount of readings, do about as much writing, and have roughly the same amount of contact with the instructor and the teaching fellow (actually, this course will have more one-on-one contact with the instructor than a lecture would.). All of the necessary readings/video will be available online.

Requirements

Class Participation (30%). Class participation is an essential part of this course. You are required to attend all classes, on time, and actively engage in the discussion. If you miss more than two classes, you will automatically fail the course, regardless of how well you do otherwise.

Weekly reading responses (30%). Each week, you will submit a reading response. The responses will involve an integrative discussion of ideas and research, and will be about 800 words. If you fail to submit more to two reading responses on time, you will automatically fail the course, regardless of how well you do otherwise.

Take-home exam (40%). This will be assigned in the final week of class. It is an open-book exam and will involve a series of short essays.
READINGS (these are subject to change)

WEEK 1
Foundations

Harris (2010). Science Can Answer Moral Questions; TED Talk
Haidt (2008). The Moral Roots of Liberals and Conservatives; TED Talk
Le Guin (1973). The ones who walk away from Omelas

WEEK 2
Empathy, Concern, and Hate

Bloom (2014). Against Empathy [with commentaries and responses]
Smith (2020). On Inhumanity [excerpts]
Manne (2014). In Ferguson and beyond: Punishing humanity
Bloom (2017). Beastly

WEEK 3
Universals

Levitt and Dubner (2009). Superfreakonomics [excerpt]
Sheskin et al. (2014). Anti-equality: Social comparison in young children
Bloom (2013). Just Babies [Chapter 1 and 3]

WEEK 4
Sex, Religion, and Politics

Bloom (2013). Just Babies [Chapters 4 and 5]
Hester and Gray (2020). The moral psychology of raceless, genderless strangers
Haidt (2012). The righteous mind [excerpts]

WEEK 5:
Getting Better

Singer (2015). The logic of effective altruism. [read responses and commentaries]
Wright (2009). Progress is not a zero-sum game; TED talk