

The Moralities of Everyday Life
Summer, 2005

TENTATIVE SYLLABUS

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, behavioural 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 Emeritus 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, more recently, *Psych: The Story of the Human Mind*.

About the Teaching Fellows

MARK SHESKIN is a Professor of Social Sciences at Minerva University. He received his PhD from Yale in 2013, where he was one of the teaching assistants for the original 2011 precursor of this course. His research includes studies on the origins of fairness. His current focus is on developing infrastructure for online developmental research, including as part of the multi-university collaboration ChildrenHelpingScience.com (also known as lookit.mit.edu). You can contact him at msheskin@gmail.com

MATTI WILKS is an Assistant Professor at the University of Edinburgh. She completed her PhD in 2018 at the University of Queensland, Australia, and was a postdoctoral fellow in Prof Bloom's lab at Yale from 2019-2021. She is interested in questions of moral circle expansion, including the characteristics of unusually altruistic individuals and how children and adults differ in their moral concern towards distant others. She also studies naturalness bias and how this shapes attitudes towards novel food technology (e.g., cultured meat). You can contact her at mwilks@ed.ac.uk.

Format and requirements

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 the necessary readings/videos 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%). Prior to each Thursday's class, 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 than two reading responses on time, you will automatically fail the course, regardless of how well you do otherwise.*

The reading response will be due Wednesday at 4PM EDT.

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.

Writing help

The Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning provides writing support. See here for further information: <https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/undergrad-writing-partners>

Academic honesty

The reading responses and final paper should be your own work. While students are encouraged to discuss psychological research and theories outside of class, the written assignments are supposed to be your own work. Also, *any* use of words or ideas from other sources— *including online sources such as Wikipedia*—has to be explicitly and clearly acknowledged. For a useful discussion, see here:

<https://poorvucenter.yale.edu/undergraduates/using-sources/understanding-and-avoiding-plagiarism>

Any case of suspected cheating will be referred to the Executive Committee of Yale College. The consequences can be severe, including suspension and expulsion. In our experience, many episodes of cheating are due to stress and panic. If you find yourself in a difficult situation, *there are always better options than cheating*. If you are having problems in the course, you should always feel comfortable talking to one of us.

Using AI

Use of AI—Bing, ChatGPT, Bard, etc.—to write your reading responses or final exam for you is cheating. You need to write these for yourself.

However, you are allowed (but definitely not required) to use these systems in limited ways to help you improve your writing and your thinking about these topics. The best way to do so is to ask it to review a preliminary draft and make comments on both the writing and the quality

of your arguments. And then you edit the draft in a way that responds to these comments, and then possibly repeat the process.

If you do this, you must describe exactly how you did so, which will mean including an appendix (outside of the assignment's word count) with all of your prompts, all of the AI generated content, and a description of how you used what it generated. Your description of how you used what it generated should make clear how it supported your learning rather than undermining your learning. (Use of AI support without this full disclosure will count as cheating.) If you do not use AI, please write “I did not use AI on this assignment” at the end.

If you have any questions about the proper use of AI, please reach out to your TF before you submit your reading response.

Something to think about

Seminar participants will likely express different positions about sensitive topics revolving around domains such as sex, violence, religion, politics, and race. You might be shocked at some of the views that your fellow students have! I expect seminar participants to exhibit a high degree of intellectual charity when it comes to views that they disagree with, and to engage in civil, productive, and good-humoured discussion. The discussion should be interesting, fun—and kind. If you have a low tolerance for disagreement over serious issues, this seminar may not be for you.

READINGS (these are subject to change)

WEEK 1

Foundations

Pinker (2008). The Moral Instinct

Harris (2010). Science Can Answer Moral Questions; TED Talk

Haidt (2008). The Moral Roots of Liberals and Conservatives; TED Talk

Rachels (2006). The elements of moral philosophy [excerpt]

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

Woo et al. (2022). Human morality is based on an early-emerging moral core.

Wilks et al. (2022). Children prioritize humans over animals less than adults do

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 & Gray (2020). The moral psychology of raceless, genderless strangers

Haidt (2012). The righteous mind [excerpts]

Feinberg & Willer (2019). Moral reframing: A technique for effective and persuasive communication across political divides

Atari et al. (2020). Sex differences in moral judgements across 67 countries

WEEK 5:

The Future

Pinker (2007). The surprising decline in violence. YouTube video

Awad et al. (2008). The moral machine experiment

Lewis-Kraus (2022). The reluctant prophet of effective altruism

MacFarquhar (2015). Strangers Drowning [excerpt]