

Introduction to ethics

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Semester 2
Tuesday, 13.00-15.00

Aims of this module

The purpose of this module is to get students thinking in a systematic and structured fashion about ethical matters. We will cover the three major areas of ethics: normative ethics, meta-ethics, and applied ethics. In normative ethics, we will examine virtue ethics, deontology and consequentialism through primary readings of the main proponents, Aristotle, Kant and J.S. Mill respectively. We will look at concrete case studies such as whether or not to give to beggars on the streets in Oxford, or whether we should do more for refugees, using the ethical principles outlined by these authors. For meta-ethics we will examine what it means for ethics that moral norms change over time and differ between cultures (cultural relativism), whether ethics need God as a foundation, and what evolutionary theory can tell us about the status of moral norms. In applied ethics, we will look at the ethics of disability (is disability worse than being non-disability, and is it permissible or obligatory to try to “cure” disability), the ethics of income inequality and governmental policies to change it, and the ethics of having children: is it right or wrong to bring people into existence?

Week-by-week overview

Week 1: Virtue Ethics and the pursuit of happiness (Aristotle)

Week 2: Is morality universal? The problem of moral relativism (Wong, Nichols)

Week 3: Doing the right thing by looking at the consequences: Consequentialism and utilitarianism (Mill)

Week 4: Effective altruism: having your cake and eat it? (Singer, Srinivasan)

Week 5: Deontological ethics (Kant, O’Neill)

Week 6: Can we ground ethics in God? (Zagzebski, Antony) – essays due

Week 7: Can we ground ethics in evolution? (Joyce, Street)

Week 8: The ethics of inequality (Rawls, Nozick)

Week 9: The ethics of disability (Barnes, Savulescu)

Week 10: Is it right or wrong to have children? Duties toward future generations and the right to parent (Benatar, Gheaus)

Week 11: Exam recap, essay feedback, general discussion

Week 12: ---

Reading List

All of the below are available in the Harcourt Hill library or online (indicated)

Course Texts:

Concepción, D. W. (2004). Reading philosophy with background knowledge and metacognition. *Teaching philosophy*, 27(4), 351-368. – read through carefully, *especially the appendix* to be able to read the texts

Shafer-Landau, R. (2013) *Ethical theory: an anthology*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell

READING BY TOPIC

Week 1: Virtue ethics

required: Chapter 66 of Shafer-Landau, The nature of virtue, Aristotle (excerpt from *Nicomachean Ethics*)

Week 2: Moral relativism

Required:

- Harman, G. (1975). Moral relativism defended. *The Philosophical Review*, 3-22.

Recommended:

- Wong, D. B. (1992). Coping with moral conflict and ambiguity. *Ethics*, 763-784.
- Nichols, S. (2002). On the genealogy of norms: A Case for the role of emotion in cultural evolution. *Philosophy of Science*, 69(2), 234-255.

Week 3: Consequentialism and utilitarianism

Required:

- J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism* (chapter 2)

Week 4: Effective altruism

Required:

- Singer, P. (1972). Famine, affluence, and morality. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 229-243.
- Srinivasan, Amia. (2015) Stop the robot apocalypse.
<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n18/amia-srinivasan/stop-the-robot-apocalypse>

Week 5: Deontology

required:

- chapter 55 of Shafer-Landau - groundwork of the metaphysics of morals - Immanuel Kant
- chapter 57 of Shafer-Landau - Kantian Approaches to Some Famine Problems - O'Neill Onora

Week 6: Meta-ethics: grounding ethics in religion

required:

- Antony, L. (2012) Good minus God.
http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/18/good-minus-god/?_r=0
- Zagzebski, L. (1987). Does ethics need God? *Faith and Philosophy*, 4, 294-303.

recommended:

- The embodiment of the sacraments - Jennifer Frey
<http://prosblogion.ektopos.com/2015/03/17/philosophers-and-their-religious-practices-part-4-the-embodiment-of-the-sacraments/>
- The ethics and justice of Mitzvot - Anya Topolski
<http://prosblogion.ektopos.com/2015/03/20/philosophers-and-their-religious-practices-part-5-the-ethics-and-justice-of-mitzvot/>

Week 7: Meta-ethics: Grounding ethics in evolution

required:

- Joyce, R. (2006). The evolution of morality, chapter 1

recommended:

- Street, S. (2006). A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value. *Philosophical Studies*, 127(1), 109-166.
- Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: a social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological review*, 108(4), 814.

Week 8: Ethics of inequality

required:

- Rawls, J. (1999). A theory of justice, first chapter

recommended:

- Nozick, R. (1973). Distributive justice. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 45-126.

Week 9: Ethics of disability

required:

- Barnes, E. (2014). Valuing Disability, Causing Disability. *Ethics*, 125, 88-113.

recommended:

- Barnes, E. Confessions of a bitter cripple
<http://politicalphilosopher.net/2015/05/15/featured-philosop-her-elizabeth-barnes/>
- Kahane, G., & Savulescu, J. (2012). The concept of harm and the significance of normality. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 29, 318-332.

Week 10: Ethics of procreation and parenting

required:

- Gheaus, A. (in press) The right to parent and duties concerning future generations. *Journal of Political Philosophy*
- Interview with David Benatar on the harm of never coming into existence
<http://www.ttbook.org/book/better-never-have-been-born>

recommended:

- Paul, L.A. (2015). What you can't expect when you're expecting. *Res Philosophica*, 92,1-23 (2015)
- Chappell, R. Do people have a moral duty to have children?
<https://aeon.co/essays/do-people-have-a-moral-duty-to-have-children-if-they-can>

Reading per assignment

Should the Cecil Rhodes statue in Oriel College fall?

- Rini, R. Should we rename institutions that honour dead racists?
<https://aeon.co/opinions/should-we-rename-institutions-that-honour-dead-racists>
- Robinson, Y. Oxford's Cecil Rhodes statue must fall It stands in the way of inclusivity - <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/19/rhodes-fall-oxford-university-inclusivity-black-students>

- Hutton, W. Cecil Rhodes was a racist, but you can't readily expunge him from history - <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/dec/20/atonement-for-the-past-not-censorship-of-history>
- Harman, G. (1975). Moral relativism defended. *The Philosophical Review*, 3-22.
- Wong, D. B. (1992). Coping with moral conflict and ambiguity. *Ethics*, 763-784.

Should Britain welcome more refugees?

- Singer, P. (1972). Famine, affluence, and morality. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 229-243.
- Herman, B. (2001). The scope of moral requirement. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 30(3), 227-256.
- Badhwar, N. Rescuing refugees http://www.huffingtonpost.com/neera-k-badhwar/rescuing-refugees_b_8991948.html
- Miller, C. Stop Making the Migrant Crisis About Us - http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/calum-miller/refugee-crisis_b_8085058.html

Should Deaf parents be allowed to refuse cochlear implants for their Deaf infants/young children?

- Barnes, E. (2014). Valuing Disability, Causing Disability. *Ethics*, 125, 88-113.
- Barnes, E. Confessions of a bitter cripple <http://politicalphilosopher.net/2015/05/15/featured-philosop-her-elizabeth-barnes/>
- Kahane, G., & Savulescu, J. (2012). The concept of harm and the significance of normality. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 29, 318-332.
- Sparrow, R. (2005). Defending deaf culture: The case of cochlear implants*. *Journal of Political Philosophy*, 13(2), 135-152.
- Timpe, K. Moral outrage. http://philosophycommons.typepad.com/disability_and_disadvanta/2015/01/moral-outrage.html