The Moralities of Everyday Life

PSY 410S  Winter 2022  Monday, 5-7PM

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.

Do I need to read this syllabus?

Sorry, you do. Besides the obvious details that you really need to know—like where we’re meeting and how long the reading responses are—it contains some information about the course that might dissuade some of you from taking it. Better to find out now!

Who is the professor?

Me. Professor Paul Bloom. My email is Paul.Bloom@utoronto.ca. My webpage is paulbloom.net. Office hours by appointment.
Where will we meet?

The class is currently scheduled to meet in person, in SS 2101. However, for the first month of class, we will meet virtually on Zoom, because, well, there’s a pandemic. Following U of T policy, the classes (including the Zoom classes) will meet 10 minutes after the hour, so the class will actually be from 5:10 – 7:00 PM.

Here is the Zoom link:  [https://utoronto.zoom.us/j/85353682811](https://utoronto.zoom.us/j/85353682811)

Where can I find the readings?

In this dropbox folder right here (I’ll add the readings to the folder a couple of weeks ahead of time)

[https://www.dropbox.com/sh/c969bfyitjrao7q/AACYnkuVqD2XaQ3onegVtIX6a?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/c969bfyitjrao7q/AACYnkuVqD2XaQ3onegVtIX6a?dl=0)

The background readings will be in a sub-folder called “Background”; the Week 1 readings will be in a sub-folder called “Week 1”, and so on.

Tentative Schedule — subject to change

Background:

Prior to the class of Jan 17 (and ideally before Jan 10) please read the following, as these readings will provide essential psychological and philosophical background:

- Le Guin (1973). The ones who walk away from Omelas

Jan 10 Introduction to the class

No additional readings
Jan 17 | Moral Foundations

- Harris (2010). Science Can Answer Moral Questions; TED Talk
  https://www.ted.com/talks/sam_harris_science_can_answer_moral_questions?language=en

Jan 24 | The Empathy Debate

- [Discussion of “Against Empathy” in Boston Review, read target article, commentaries, and reply]
  https://bostonreview.net/forum/paul-bloom-against-empathy/

Jan 31 | The Dehumanization Debate

- Kteily, N. S., & Bruneau, E. (2017). Darker demons of our nature: The need to (re) focus attention on blatant forms of dehumanization. Current Directions in Psychological Science
- Bloom, P. (2017). The root of all cruelty. New Yorker

Feb 7 | Fairness

- Bloom, P (2013). Just Babies, excerpt

Feb 14 | Signaling


Feb 21 | Family Day, no class
Feb 28  Morality and religion

- Shariff, A., Mercier, B. (2020). The evolution of religion and morality

March 7  Morality and politics

- Haidt (2012). The righteous mind [excerpts]

March 14  A case-study for moral psychology: Driverless cars

- Other readings TBA

March 21  TBA:
- The topic for this class will be decided by the class. Possibilities include:
  - Anger
  - Disgust
  - Apologies
  - Moral Psychology and Criminal Law

March 28  Moral improvement

- Singer, P. (2015). The logic of effective altruism. [also read commentaries and author reply], Boston Review
  https://bostonreview.net/forum/peter-singer-logic-effective-altruism/
  https://www.ted.com/talks/steven_pinker_the_surprising_decline_in_violence?language=en

April 4  Final presentations

What do I need to do?

1. You need to send in reading responses. Before every class except for the first one and the last one, participants will submit a 200-250 word comment about the readings. This comment will be a
response to a question raised in the previous class and should be sent to me by email, to paul.bloom@utoronto.ca (no attachments, please). It is due by Sunday at noon. Your comments will demonstrate to me that you have done the readings, and, more important, will help structure the discussion we have during class.

2. You need a final *project/presentation*. I will provide more details about this later in the course, but the general idea is that it should be the sort of thing you could submit to a journal or to a granting agency, such as a theoretical critique or a series of proposed experiments. For certain sorts of final projects, particularly those that involve empirical work, collaboration is encouraged. The final class will be devoted to presentations of these in-progress projects.

3. You need to *talk*. Seminar participants are expected to... participate. You should participate in the discussion every time we meet. (Having said this, I understand that serious crises and unavoidable obligations do occur—please try to let me know in advance if you need to miss a seminar meeting.)

Participants should also be aware that I intend to ask them for their opinions and arguments. I may ask a specific individual to expand on a point made in the comment that he or she sent in, for instance. I’ll note also that I expect participant’s contributions in class to reflect a careful reading of the assigned materials. If you haven’t done the readings, don’t show up. (As Wittgenstein was reputed to have said: No tourists!)

All of this might be a factor when deciding whether to take this course.

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**Evaluation**

Reading responses = 30%, participation = 30%, final = 40%.

Late reading responses will have a deduction of 20%. No reading responses will be accepted after Monday at noon.

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**Something to think about**

Seminar participants will likely express different positions about sensitive topics, including those that revolve 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-humored discussion. The discussion should be interesting, fun—and kind. If you have a low tolerance for disagreement about serious issues, again, this seminar may not be for you.
I hope there’s a party

Such a good idea! I’m going to try to arrange it, perhaps at a restaurant, or a park, or at my house (living in Roncy, not far from campus). The obvious concern is Covid; we need to see what the situation is regarding large gatherings.

When we meet in person, can I have my laptop or phone open, so I can check my email, go on social media, and shop for shoes?

Sorry, no. I appreciate the temptation—I’m often peeking at my phone during talks—but it’s rude, both to me and to the people around you.

Other Stuff

Accessibility Needs
Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have an acute or ongoing disability issue or accommodation need, you should register with Accessibility Services (AS) (accessibility.utoronto.ca) at the beginning of the academic year. Without registration, you will not be able to verify your situation with your instructors, and instructors will not be advised about your accommodation needs. AS will assess your medical situation, develop an accommodation plan with you, and support you in requesting accommodation for your course work. Remember that the process of accommodation is private: AS will not share details of your condition with any instructor, and your instructors will not reveal that you are registered with AS.

Writing
As a student here at the University of Toronto, you are expected to write well. The university provides its students with a number of resources to help them achieve this. For more information on campus writing centres and writing courses, please visit http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/.

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism
All students, faculty and staff are expected to follow the University’s guidelines and policies on academic integrity. For students, this means following the standards of academic honesty when writing assignments, collaborating with fellow students, and writing tests and exams. Ensure that the work you submit for grading represents your own honest efforts. Plagiarism—representing someone else’s work as your own or submitting work that you have previously submitted for marks in another class or program—is a serious offence that can result in sanctions. Speak to me for advice on anything that you find unclear. To learn more about how to cite and use source material appropriately and for other writing support, see the U of T writing support website at www.writing.utoronto.ca/. Consult the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters for a complete outline of the University’s policy and expectations. For more information, please see http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai and http://academicintegrity.utoronto.ca/
Other Resources

Student Life Programs and Services (http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/)
Academic Success Services (http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/asc)
Counselling and Psychological Services (http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/hwc)

This is a wonderful syllabus, but I still have questions

No worries – email me: Paul.bloom@utoronto.ca
harassment against any persons or communities.