The Moralities of Everyday Life

PSY 420H1   •   Fall 2022   •   Mondays 5-7PM   •   SS 2101

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?

Yes, 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 and when will we meet?

The class is currently scheduled to meet in person, in SS 2101. Following U of T policy, the classes will meet 10 minutes after the hour, so the class will actually be on Monday, from 5:10 – 7:00 PM.

Right here (I'll add the readings to the folder a couple of weeks ahead of time)

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/c969bfyitjrao7q/AACYnkuVqD2XaQ3onegVtlX6a?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 Sept 19 (and ideally before Sept 12) please read the following, as these readings will provide essential psychological and philosophical background:

- Rachels, J. (2006). *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, excerpt
- Pinker, S. (2008). The Moral Instinct. *New York Times*
- Bloom, P (2013). *Just Babies*, excerpt
- Le Guin (1973). The ones who walk away from Omelas

Sept 12   Introduction to the class

Sept 19   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
- Haidt (2008). The Moral Roots of Liberals and Conservatives; TED Talk
  https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_the_moral_roots_of_liberals_and_conservatives?language=en
- Haidt, J. (2007). The new synthesis in moral psychology. *Science*
- Pizarro, D. A., & Bloom, P. (2003). The intelligence of the moral intuitions: A comment on Haidt (2001). *Psychological Review*

Sept 26   The Empathy Debate

- Bloom, P. (2017). *Against Empathy*, excerpt
- Discussion of "Against Empathy" in *Boston Review*: read target article, commentaries, and reply *https://bostonreview.net/forum/paul-bloom-against-empathy/*
- Zaki, J. (2018). Empathy is a moral force. *Atlas of Moral Psychology*

Oct 3   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*
- Over, H. (2021). Seven challenges for the dehumanization hypothesis. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*
- Bloom, P. (2017). The root of all cruelty. *New Yorker*
  https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/11/27/the-root-of-all- cruelty

Oct 10   Thanksgiving Day (no class)

Oct 17   Fairness

- Bloom, P (2013). *Just Babies*, excerpt
- Starmans, C., Sheskin, M., & Bloom, P. (2017). Why people prefer unequal societies. *Nature Human Behaviour*

Oct 24   Signaling

- Jordan, J. J., & Kouchaki, M. (2021). Virtuous Victims, *Science Advances*.
- Anderson, R. A., Kamtekar, R., Nichols, S., & Pizarro, D. A. (2021). "False positive" emotions, responsibility, and moral character. *Cognition*
- Everett, J. A., Pizarro, D. A., & Crockett, M. J. (2016). Inference of trustworthiness from intuitive moral judgments. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*

Oct 31   Morality and religion

- Bloom, P. (2012). Religion, morality, evolution. *Annual Review of Psychology*
- Shariff, A., Mercier, B. (2020). The evolution of religion and morality

Nov 7   Fall reading week

Nov 14   Morality and politics

- Haidt (2012). The righteous mind [excerpts]
- Van Bavel, J. and Pereira, A. (2017). The Partisan Brain: An identity-based model of political belief
- Crockett, M. J. (2017). Moral outrage in the digital age. *Nature Human Behavior*

Nov 21   A case-study for moral psychology: Driverless cars

- Awad, E. et al. (2018). The Moral Machine Experiment. *Nature.*
- Other readings TBA

Nov 28   TBA:

The topic for this class will be decided by the class. Possibilities include:

Anger

Disgust

Apologies

Moral Psychology and Criminal Law

Dec 5   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/
- Pinker, S. (2014). The surprising decline in violence. TED talk. https://www.ted.com/talks/steven_pinker_the_surprising_decline_in_violence?language =en
- MacFarquhar, L. (2015). *Strangers Drowning,* excerpt.

Dec 8 (Thurs)   Final presentations

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.

What do I need to do?

1. You need to send in a reading response. 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 (no attachments, please). It is due by Sunday at noon. Your comments will demonstrate to me that you have done the readings, and, more importantly, will help structure the discussion we have during class.

2. You need to do a final written assignment (see details below). 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 participants' 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.

By the way, here's an Easter Egg. If you've made it this far into the syllabus, please email me a picture of your movie star.

Final Assignment

Reddit has a section in which people write in with something that they did and ask if they are morally in the wrong. You can find this here: https://www.reddit.com/r/AmItheAsshole/

Please choose one case that you believe is interesting/difficult (not one with an obvious answer), and that has the sort of richness that allows you to build a paper around it. Then show how the research and theories discussed in the course can help think about the issue, understand the different sides, and ultimately, to resolve it.

What I'm looking for here is a serious attempt to relate what we learned in the course to a real-world moral dilemma, and you should try to integrate as much of the relevant material as possible.

The perfect paper will go like this:

1. It will begin with the link to the case you find interesting. (I'll read it myself, no need to summarize it).
2. It will talk about each side of the issue, bringing in both theoretical analysis and empirical research. You should discuss both the normative issues (the actual arguments for each side) and the psychological issues (what explains the moral motivations and beliefs on each side0.
3. It should cite and discuss at least 5 papers from the course. You can cite other work from outside the course, but this isn't required.
4. It should have a coherent structure. Sub-sections are recommended, but not required.
5. It should end with a sentence expressing your verdict. Is the person a … well, to put it politely, is the person morally wrong?

PROCEDURAL STUFF:

By Monday, November 7, please send me a link to your proposed case. If someone else has chosen it, I'll ask you to choose another. (So it's in your interest to get me your proposals early!)

It is due by 10 PM on the final day of class.

It should be 3500-4000 words and you can submit it as either a MSWord doc or a PDF. No other formats, please.

Sorry to have to say this, but just to get this out here: I take academic honesty very seriously. Please be scrupulously careful to cite all your sources. Please be aware as well that if you take some quotation without attribution and change the wording, it still counts as plagiarism. Finally, this is expected to be entirely your own work, and should not be collaborative. If you have any questions at all about what counts as academic honesty, please contact me *before* you submit the paper.

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-humored discussion. The discussion should be interesting, fun—and kind. If you have a low tolerance for disagreement over serious issues, again, this seminar may not be for you.

That sounds pretty heavy! 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 also 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