

The Moralities of Everyday Life

PSY 420H1 • Fall 2023 • Mondays 3-5PM • Sid Smith 560

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 560. Following U of T policy, the classes will meet 10 minutes after the hour, so the class will actually be on Monday, from 3:10 – 5PM.

Where can I find the readings?

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

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/v8c1b1pgaxqxm8j0eb20/h?rlkey=ljq9124471xyi5v4vyybcd679&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

Please don't read too far ahead – I might change these! But the Background, Sept 11, and Sept 18 are set in stone.

Background:

Prior to the class of Sept 18 (and ideally before Sept 11) 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 11 Introduction to the class

Sept 18 Some 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 (2007). The new synthesis in moral psychology. *Science*
- Pizarro, & Bloom (2003). The intelligence of the moral intuitions: A comment on Haidt (2001). *Psychological Review*

Sept 25 Kindness

- Bloom, (2017). *Against Empathy*, excerpt
- Dwyer et al. (2023). Are People Generous When the Financial Stakes Are High? *Psychological Science*
- Rhoads et al. (2023). Unselfish traits and social decision-making patterns characterize six populations of real-world extraordinary altruists. *Nature Communications*

- Oct 2 Cruelty
- Kteily, & Bruneau, E. (2017). Darker demons of our nature: The need to (re) focus attention on blatant forms of dehumanization. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*
 - Smith (2020). On Inhumanity [excerpts]
 - Bloom (2017). The root of all cruelty. *New Yorker*
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/11/27/the-root-of-all-cruelty>
- Oct 9 Thanksgiving Day (no class)
- Oct 16 Fairness
- Bloom, P (2013). *Just Babies*, excerpt
 - Starmans et al. (2017). Why people prefer unequal societies. *Nature Human Behaviour*
- Oct 23 Signaling
- Jordan, & Kouchaki, (2021). Virtuous Victims, *Science Advances*.
 - Anderson et al. (2021). “False positive” emotions, responsibility, and moral character. *Cognition*
 - Everett et al. (2016). Inference of trustworthiness from intuitive moral judgments. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*
- Oct 30 Morality, religion, and politics
- Bloom, (2012). Religion, morality, evolution. *Annual Review of Psychology*
 - Shariff (2020). The evolution of religion and morality
 - Haidt (2012). The righteous mind [excerpts]
- Nov 6 Fall reading week
- Nov 13 A case-study for moral psychology: Driverless cars
- Awad, et al. (2018). The Moral Machine Experiment. *Nature*.
 - Other readings TBA
- Nov 20 Moral AI?
- Readings TBA

Nov 27 Student Choice

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

Anger
Disgust
Apologies
Moral Psychology and Criminal Law

Dec 4 Moral improvement

- Singer (2015). The logic of effective altruism. [also read commentaries and author reply], *Boston Review*
<https://bostonreview.net/forum/peter-singer-logic-effective-altruism/>
- Pinker (2014). The surprising decline in violence. TED talk.
https://www.ted.com/talks/steven_pinker_the_surprising_decline_in_violence?language=en
- MacFarquhar (2015). *Strangers Drowning*, excerpt.
- Lewis-Kraus (2022). The reluctant prophet of effective altruism, *New Yorker*

Evaluation

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

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.

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

2. You need to do a final written assignment. In consultation with me, you'll write a brief empirical or theoretical paper on a topic related to the course. More details later.

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 favorite movie star.

Academic Honesty

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 reading response or paper.

What about AI?

This might be a surprise, but I do not object to students using AI—Bing, ChatGPT, Bard, etc.—when writing their reading responses and final assignments. You are allowed (but not required) to use these systems in limited ways to help you improve your writing and your thinking about these topics. Some possible usages are:

- Finishing a draft and then asking the AI to give comments on the writing (catching typos and poor word choices and so on) and then revising the draft accordingly. You can repeat until you're really satisfied with it.
- Asking an AI to challenge the ideas of an initial draft. Ask it: What are the weaknesses of my argument? Are there any counter-examples? And so on. And then revising accordingly.

But two important caveats:

First, **you must write the first draft yourself**. If you just type the assignment into AI and then send me what it outputs, this is **cheating**—even if you fiddle around with it later and change some words and move around sentences. I'll add that while it's technically difficult to prove that a response was AI-generated, it's incredibly obvious to the instructor (me) when someone has done this.

Second, if you use AI, 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 have any questions about the proper use of AI, please reach out to me 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-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.

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.

Specific Medical Circumstances

If you become ill and it affects your ability to do your academic work, consult me right away. Normally, I will ask you for documentation in support of your specific medical circumstances. This documentation can be an Absence Declaration (via ACORN) or the University's Verification of Student Illness or Injury (VOI) form. The VOI indicates the impact and severity of the illness, while protecting your privacy about the details of the nature of the illness. You can submit a different form (like a letter from a doctor), as long as it is an

original document, and it contains the same information as the VOI. For more information on the VOI, please see <http://www.illnessverification.utoronto.ca>. For information on Absence Declaration Tool for A&S students, please see <https://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/absence>. If you get a concussion, break your hand, or suffer some other acute injury, you should register with Accessibility Services as soon as possible.

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