The Moralities of Everyday Life

PSY 420H1 ● Winter 2025 ● Mondays 4-6PM ● BL 113

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 really need to read this syllabus?

Yes, you do. Besides the obvious details that you need to know—like where we're meeting and what you should be reading—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 BL 113. Following U of T policy, the classes will meet 10 minutes after the hour, so the class will actually be on Monday, from 4:10 – 6:00 PM.

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/661xyfqkxr7eedqajphp2/AH-2R_iwduh-794JqA9AXo0?rlkey=1bso9ewg5wbtuj15xlzxfu38q&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 and Jan 13 readings are set in stone.

Background:

Prior to the class of Jan 13 (and ideally before Jan 6) 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

Jan 6   Introduction to the class

Jan 13   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*

Jan 20   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 Communicatoins*

Jan 27   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

Feb 3   Fairness

- Bloom, P (2013). *Just Babies*, excerpt
- Starmans et al. (2017). Why people prefer unequal societies. *Nature Human Behaviour*

Feb 10   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*

Feb 17   No class, reading week

Feb 24   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]

March 3   A case-study for moral psychology: Driverless cars

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

March 10   Moral AI?

              Readings TBA

March 17   Student Choice
:

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

March 24   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

March 31   Student presentations

Evaluation

Reading responses = 30%, participation = 30**%**, final assignment = 30%, final presentation = 10%

Details about the evaluation

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, with the subject heading "Psych 420 Reading Response" (no attachments, please). It is due by **Saturday 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 midnight Sunday.

2. You need to do a short final written assignment. More details later.

3. On the last class, you need to do a presentation based on your final paper. Again, more details later.

4. 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. Note 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—paul.bloom@Utoronto.ca—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. Use of AI without attribution is *definitely* cheating (see more below). If you have any questions 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, Claude, Gemini, 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 pretty 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. (Again, 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.

I'm in trouble!

Shit happens—there may be circumstances when you experience disruptions to your learning and circumstances when you need extra support. Accordingly, the department has provided a helpful guide to clarify your and your instructor's responsibilities when navigating these situations. I will frequently consult with these recommendations when providing you with support, and I recommend that you also consult it to learn more about your rights and responsibilities before reaching out to me.

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