

**Moral Psychology**  
**Instructor: Nadia**  
**Teaching Assistant: Christine**  
**Fall 2012, Cornell Prison Education Program**

Broad Overview: This is a survey course into the study of moral psychology. Every week, I supplement empirical research from psychology with texts from philosophy for better grounding in theory. Students are encouraged to think critically about: 1) what morality is, and 2) what psychology can offer to the study of morality. A primary goal of this course is to introduce students to famous thinkers and classic research in moral psychology. A secondary goal is to encourage critical and analytic thinking by discussing the strengths and pitfalls of every writer's arguments.

The first third of the course is spent discussing what morality is. During the first week, we give a broad overview, and in the following weeks, we discuss the sorts of things that should and shouldn't factor into our moral thinking. The second third of the course is then spent discussing where morality may come from (and how it is learned). Finally, in the last portion of the course we turn to the "darker" side of human nature, or how morality may get suppressed (or become nonexistent). The last two weeks of the class are devoted to student topics.

Catalog Description: Introduces broad topics in moral psychology, and discusses experiments in social psychology more generally. Two and a half hours weekly.

Course Objectives: To introduce students to famous thinkers and classic research in moral psychology. A secondary goal is to encourage critical and analytic thinking. Each class section is set up to discuss important debates in moral psychology by reviewing texts in philosophy, empirical psychology, and popular news. Students are encouraged to discuss the pros and cons of each position, rather than to have the class converge on a "truth" regarding morality.

Course Requirements: Students are expected to attend and prepare for lectures by carefully doing all assigned reading prior to class. Students are also expected to fulfill all written and oral (presentation) assignments outlined in the syllabus. Finally, students are expected to actively participate in all class discussions. Please note: plagiarism and classroom disruption of any kind is strictly prohibited. Students are encouraged to suggest and discuss course-related material with the instructor. **However, correspondence with either the instructor or TA about anything outside the realm of the course (via written communication) is strictly prohibited.**

Course Texts:

*Elements of Moral Philosophy* by Stuart Rachels

Supplements from moral psychology, philosophy, and popular news

Evaluation of Student Performance/Grading:

20% - 1-page written discussion points handed in each week

10% - Active class participation

10% - Outline of paper

15% - Rough Draft

40% - Final paper

5% - Oral class presentation (end of course)

## What is Morality?

### **Week 1 -- August 27: Introduction to what is morality? Philosophical and Psychological approaches**

**Class goals:** Discuss a broad overview of what morality may be, and how philosophy and psychology approach this topic from different angles. An additional goal is to provide an introduction to how to read philosophical and psychological texts. Students read a very generalized overview of moral philosophy and psychology, and discuss what they believe would be a good definition of morality. This course is intended to set up for the next few weeks, in which we discuss what famous philosophers and psychologists have had to say on this topic.

Readings:

- 1) Chapter 1 in *Elements of Moral Philosophy*
- 2) Overview of Psychology Research Methods

**Assignments:**

- 1) One-page reflection piece on what you believe the definition of morality is.

### **Week 2 –September 6th (rescheduled from regular time): Emotions and Morality**

**Class Goals:** Discuss theoretical approaches to whether emotions *should* factor into moral judgments (in theory), and then discuss current empirical psychology work that questions whether emotions *do* factor into our moral judgments.

Readings:

- 1) Chapter 3 in *Elements of Moral Philosophy*
- 2) “An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals”, Sections I, II, and V by David Hume
- 3) Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 108, 814-834.
- 4) Valdesolo, P., & DeSteno, D. (2006). Manipulations of emotional context shape moral judgments. *Psychological Science*, 17, 476-477.
- 5) Pizarro, D.A., & Bloom, P. (2003). The intelligence of moral intuitions: Comment on Haidt (2001). *Psychological Review*, 110, 197-198.

**Assignments Due:** One-page reflection piece on whether emotions are required for morality.

### **Week 3 – September 10: Moral Circles: Who Belongs in Our Moral Circles?**

**Class Goals:** To discuss who and what belongs in our moral circle (for example: are animals worthy of our moral regard?). Then, we read psychological texts on people’s judgments on who belongs in our moral circles. We supplement this with hot-topic pop-culture debate of animal rights.

Readings:

- 1) Saletan, W. (2005). *KKK vs. KFC*. The Slate.
- 2) Singer, P. & Posner, R. (2001). Animal rights: debate between Peter Singer & Richard Posner. The Slate.
- 3) Reed, A., & Aquino, K. F. (2003). Moral identity and the expanding circle of moral regard toward outgroups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84, 1270-1286.
- 4) Miller, J. G., & Bersoff, D. B. (1998). The role of liking in perceptions of the moral responsibility to help: A cultural perspective. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 34, 443-469.

**Assignments Due:** One-page reflection piece on your thoughts on the articles read.

**Week 4 – September 17: The Morality of Thought and Character**

**Class Goals:** To discuss whether morality may extend to one's thoughts. To do this, we read about the philosophical topic of virtue ethics (how morality is judged by one's character), and psychological articles on how we judge moral thoughts.

- 1) Chapter 12 of the *Elements of Moral Philosophy*
- 2) Cohen, A. B. & Rozin, P. (2001). Religion and the morality of mentality. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 81, 697-710.
- 3) Tetlock, P. E. (2003). Thinking the unthinkable: sacred values and taboo cognitions. *Trends in Cognitive Science*, 7, 320-324.

**Assignments Due:** One-page reflection piece on whether people could or should be punished for bad "thoughts".

**Week 5 – September 24: Morality and Religion**

**Class Goals:** We discuss what religion does (or doesn't do) for morality. We read texts from both modern and ancient philosophical thinkers on this topic, and discuss empirical work in psychology on how religion shapes our moral judgments.

- 1) Chapter 4 of *Elements of Moral Philosophy*
- 2) "Why I am Not a Christian" by Bertrand Russell
- 3) *Euthyphro* by Plato
- 4) Shariff, A. F., & Nonrezayan, A. (2007). God is watching you: Priming God concepts increases prosocial behavior in an economic game. *Psychological Science*, 18, 803-809.

**Assignments Due:** One-page reflection piece on whether religion is or isn't necessarily for morality.

## **Week 6 – October 1: Altruism and Morality**

**Class Goals:** We debate whether *true* altruism is possible. We discuss definitions of altruism (and whether humans, by definition, are capable of it). We then read about some empirical work on the evolution of altruism, and a paper on the surprising lack of altruistic behavior.

Readings:

- 1) Chapter 4 of the *Elements of Moral Philosophy*
- 2) Fehr, E., & Fischbacher, U. (2003). The nature of human altruism. *Nature*, 425, 785-791.
- 3) Warneken, F., & Tomasello, M. (2006). Altruistic helping in human infants and young chimpanzees. *Science*, 3, 1301-1303.
- 4) Darley, J. & Latane, B. (1968). Bystander intervention in emergencies: diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 8, 377-383.

**Assignments:** One-page reflection piece on your idea of the definition of altruism, and whether “true” selfless action is ever possible.

## **CLASS NOT IN SESSION FOR FALL BREAK/COLUMBUS DAY (Oct 8<sup>th</sup>)**

## **Week 7 – October 15: Boundaries of Morality – How Moral Is “Too” Moral?**

**Class Goals:** Having now discussed all that may be encompassed in morality, we turn to whether there are limits to what is moral. In particular, we ask, whether there is such a thing as being “too moral” (and what that may imply for the construct of morality). We read empirical psychology articles on the “holier than thou” effect (how we judge those who strictly adhere to all moral principles).

Readings:

- 1) Chapter 5 of *Elements of Moral Philosophy*
- 2) Susan Wolf's, “Moral Saints”
- 3) Monin, B. (2007). Holier than me? Threatening social comparison in the moral domain. *International Review of Social Psychology*, 20, 53-68.
- 4) Merritt, A., Effron, D., & Monin, B. (2010). Moral self-licensing: When being good frees us to be bad. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 4/5, 344-357.

**Assignments:** One-page reflection piece on your thoughts on the articles read.

### Where Does Morality Come From?

## **Week 8 – October 25 (rescheduled from regular time): Evolution and Morality**

**Class Goals:** During the first portion of this course (weeks 1-8), we discussed the question of what morality *is*. Now, we turn to a discussion of where morality may come from. We read a discussion of whether morality may be grounded in evolution. We then look at empirical research on morality in monkeys.

Readings:

- 1) Lakshminarayanan, V. & Santos, L. R. (2008). Capuchin monkeys are sensitive to others' welfare. *Current Biology*, 18, R999-R1000
- 2) deWaal, F. B. M. (2008). Putting the altruism back in altruism: The evolution of empathy. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 59, 297-300.
- 3) deWall, F. B. M., Leimbruber, K., & Greenberg A. R. (2008). Giving is self-rewarding for monkeys. (2008). *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 105, 13585-13689.

**Assignments Due:** One-page reflection piece on your thoughts on the articles read.

**Week 9 – October 29: Culture and Morality**

**Class Goals:** We discuss how culture may impact our moral stance. We discuss the theoretical argument of “cultural relativism”, or whether it makes sense to adopt the stance that there are no moral universals. We then look at empirical demonstrations of how moral judgments differ and don't differ across cultures.

Readings:

- 1) Chapter 2 of *Elements of Moral Philosophy*
- 2) “A Defense of Cultural Relativism” by William Graham Sumner
- 3) “The Maze of Moral Relativism” from the *New York Times*
- 4) Miller, J. G., Bersoff, D. M., & Harwood, R. L. (1990). Perceptions of social responsibilities in India and the United States: Moral imperatives or personal decisions? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 33-47.

**Assignments Due:**

- 1) One-page reflection piece on your thoughts on the articles read.
- 2) Outline of your final paper

**Week 10 – November 5<sup>th</sup>: Moral Development**

**Class Goal:** We pose the question of how early morality starts, and how society may help or hinder moral thought/judgment. First, we discuss definitions of what it means for something to be “innate”. We then look at research on young children's moral cognition, and whether research in developmental psychology can truly provide evidence for early-developing concepts of morality. We return to the question of whether these offer evidence of innateness.

## Readings:

- 1) Hamlin, J. K., Wynn, K., & Bloom, P. (2008). Social evaluation by preverbal infants. *Nature*, 450, 557-559.
- 2) Dondi, M., Simion, F., & Caltran G. (1999). Can newborns discriminate between their own cry and the cry of another newborn infant? *Developmental Psychology*, 35, 418-426.
- 3) “The Moral Life of Babies” by Paul Bloom, *New York Times*

**Assignments Due:** One-page reflection piece on your thoughts on the articles read.

## **Week 11 -- November 15 (rescheduled from regular time): Free Will and Morality**

**Class Goals:** We discuss whether free will is necessary for moral judgment and behavior. First, we discuss whether free will is necessary for morality by reading theoretical pieces. Then, we discuss empirical evidence for how concepts of free will affect our moral judgments. Lastly, we end with a debate as to how we would go about forming a society (with its laws) in which free will does or doesn't exist.

- 1) “Kant and Hume on Morality” by Lara Denis
- 2) Vohs, K. D., & Schooler, J. W. (2008). The value of believing in free will: Encouraging a belief in determinism increases cheating. *Psychological Science*, 19, 49-54.
- 3) Pizarro, D.A. & Helzer, E. (2010). Freedom of the will and stubborn moralism. In Baumeister, R.F., A.R. Mele, and K. D. Vohs (Eds.) *Free will and consciousness: How might they work?* (pp. 101-120).
- 4) Greene, J., & Cohen, J. (2004). For the law, neuroscience changes nothing and everything. *The Royal Society*, 359, 1775-1785.

## **Assignments Due:**

- 1) One-page reflection piece on your thoughts on the articles read.
- 2) Rough draft of final paper

## When Morality Goes Wrong

## **Week 12 -- November 19: Psychopathy and Morality**

**Class Goals:** Having discussed how free will may be critical (or uncritical) to moral responsibility, we apply this concept in studying how moral judgments may apply to troubled (i.e., psychopathic) individuals. In psychology we discuss the diagnosis and consequences of psychopathic behavior and in philosophy, and then we discuss whether standard moral blame applies to such individuals.

- 1) “Moral Responsibility and Psychopathy” by Walter Glannon

- 2) Viding, E. (2004). Annotation: Understanding the development of psychopathy. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 45, 1329-1337.
- 3) Cima, M., Tonnaer, F., & Hauser, M. (2010). Psychopaths know right from wrong but don't care. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 5, 59-67.

**Assignments Due:** One-page reflection piece on whether psychopaths should be held morally accountable for their actions.

### **Week 13 -- November 26: Morality of Death**

**Class Goals:** Discuss the implications of why we, as humans, feel the need to punish (sometimes in cruel and unusual ways). Having discussed psychopathic behavior last week, we turn to discussing how moral disengagement occurs in normal, non-psychopathic populations. We also discuss whether cruel punishment is justifiable.

- 1) Peter Singer's "Famine, Affluence, and Morality"
- 2) Zimbardo, P. G. (2004). A situationist perspective on the psychology of evil: Understanding how good people are transformed into perpetrators. In A. Miller (Ed.) *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil: Understanding Our Capacity for Kindness and Cruelty*.
- 3) Bandura, A. (1999). Moral disengagement in the perpetration of inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3, 193-209.
- 4) de Vries, B., & Walker, L. J. (1986). Moral reasoning and attitudes toward capital punishment. *Developmental Psychology*, 22, 509-513.

**Assignments Due:** One-page reflection piece on your thoughts on the articles read.

### **Week 14 -- December 4<sup>th</sup>: Class Presentations**

During the last week, I allow students to present on topics of their own choosing (not covered in this course). Suggested topics should be discussed with the instructor prior, and will be shaped and developed into fuller ideas throughout the course.

#### **Assignments Due:**

- 1) Final Draft
- 2) Brief oral presentation (5 minutes, informal) on the topic

#### **Student Learning Outcomes:**

1. Knowledge of basic concepts in moral psychology
2. Ability to identify and discuss the viewpoints of influential thinkers in moral psychology.
3. Refined ability to closely define important terms (e.g., "free will", "innateness", "morality")
4. Ability to design a unique psychological experiment
5. Critical thinking and analytical skills
6. Understanding of empirical research and experimental designs in social psychology