

Contemporary Ethics
PHIL 505
Spring 2016

Prof. Lisa Tessman

Office: Library Tower 1215

Office hours: Mon 12:30-1:30 and Thur 1:00-2:00 or by appointment.

ltessman@binghamton.edu

*

Course Description:

This course serves as the first-year ethics seminar for SPEL Philosophy graduate students. The course surveys some questions that have been addressed in contemporary, mostly analytic, ethics and metaethics. We will read major works in deontology, consequentialism, virtue ethics, constructivism, moral pluralism, and relativism. In addition to studying the more standard topics in ethics, we will also consider what impact evolutionary studies and empirical studies of people's actual moral judgments should have on philosophical ethics.

Course Objectives:

- To survey contemporary work in philosophical ethics, and provide graduate students with a background for further study in a variety of areas within ethics.
- To have students develop their own original, critical thinking about the covered topics.
- To have students learn and practice philosophical skills as part of their training to become professional philosophers; these skills include understanding difficult texts; analyzing, constructing, and responding critically to arguments; engaging in conceptual thinking; developing, articulating, and defending their own positions both verbally and in writing; thinking in complex and original, but still disciplined, ways.
- To advance students in their ability to write papers that will be accepted for philosophical conferences and/or eventual publication. Students in this course will get practice in writing a conference-length paper.

Texts:

There are six books to buy or to access electronically. The books by Arpaly, Walker, and Wong are available as ebooks through the BU library.

Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

Liam Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

David Sloan Wilson, *Does Altruism Exist? Culture, Genes, and the Welfare of Others* (Yale University Press, 2015).

Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Moral Agency* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*, 2nd edition (Oxford University Press, 2007). Make sure to get the second, revised edition.

David Wong, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

All other readings are available electronically (under "contents" on Blackboard).

Course Requirements:

Class preparation and participation: Students are expected to prepare for, attend and participate thoughtfully in ALL seminar meetings. Please avoid scheduling travel (other than for academic conferences), appointments, etc., to conflict with class time. However, if you are ill please do not come to class. Do email me before class time if you are ill and will be missing class.

Come to class prepared to:

- 1) explain the day's reading; and
- 2) contribute your original interpretation of, and response to, the day's material. For each class meeting, please bring to class extensive written notes in which you work out your response. This could include critical points about the reading, what you take the implications of the reading to be, or interesting ways of extending or building on the author's position.

Each student may have one day on which you come unprepared. Tell me at the beginning of class if it is your unprepared day. You are not allowed to speak in class on your unprepared day, but you may benefit from listening to others. You are expected to participate fully in class discussions on all other days.

Presentations: Each student will do three presentations; you may not do more than one presentation on the same book. Plan on speaking for about 15-20 minutes for each presentation; the presentation should lead the class into ideas to be discussed. The presentation should not include any summary of the material that we have read; it should consist of the development of an original idea that engages with the material that we have read for that week (but may also tie back to earlier readings). Be creative with your presentations. You may use a powerpoint or other media if you wish, or ask the class to read something brief that you have written, or do some sort of an exercise that requires active participation from the class. You are encouraged to speak with me ahead of time about your presentations.

Seminar paper: Seminar papers are expected to draw centrally on the course readings. If you would like to also draw on material not assigned in the class, please check with me first; in any case, the primary focus must be on assigned material. The seminar paper has a strict 3,000 word limit—in other words, it is the typical length of a conference paper (i.e. a paper with a 20-minute reading time). The paper is due on the last day of class, and you will be expected to do a presentation based on your paper on that day. I encourage each of you to meet with me several weeks before the paper is due to start discussing your paper topic, and to continue to consult with me throughout the writing process, to whatever extent this is helpful to you. You are encouraged to base your seminar paper on one of your presentations. If you wish to coauthor your paper with another student in the class, please speak with me ahead of time about this.

Grading:

Two thirds of the grade is based on the quality of the seminar paper, and one third is based on your three class presentations. The final grade may be adjusted upward or downward based on class participation. Do give serious attention to the *quality*—not just the quantity—of your participation in discussions.

NO INCOMPLETES WILL BE GIVEN UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Schedule

Mon, Jan. 25

Introductions.

Mon, Feb. 1

Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Prologue and Lectures 1 and 2.

Mon, Feb. 8

Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Lectures 3 and 4.

Mon, Feb. 15

Liam Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*, Chapters 1-5.

Mon, Feb 22

Liam Murphy, *Moral Demands in Nonideal Theory*, Chapters 6-7.

Anja Karnein, "Putting Fairness in its Place: Why There is a Duty to Take Up the Slack."
Journal of Philosophy CXI (11) Nov 2014: pgs 593-607.

Mon, Feb 29

David Sloan Wilson, *Does Altruism Exist?* Chapters 1-5.

Mon, March 7

Frans de Waal (video):

http://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_do_animals_have_morals.html

Jonathan Haidt, 2001. "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment." *Psychological Review* 108 (4): 814-834.

Fiery Cushman, Liane Young, and Joshua Greene, 2010. "Multi-Systems Moral Psychology." In *The Moral Psychology Handbook*, ed. John Doris (Oxford University Press).

Mon, March 14

Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*, Chapters 1-2.

Mon, March 21

Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue*, Chapters 3-5.

Mon, April 4

Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings*, Chapters 1-3.

Mon, April 11

Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings*, Chapter 4, Chapter 10, and Epilogue.

Mon, April 18:

David Wong, *Natural Moralities*, Part I (chapters 1-3).

Mon, April 25

David Wong, *Natural Moralities*, Part II (chapters 4-6).

Mon, May 2

Full draft (3,000 words) of seminar paper due at the beginning of class.

Revising workshop.

Mon, May 9

Papers due via email before class time.

Presentations in class.