

Contemporary Ethics
PHIL 505
Spring 2018

Prof. Lisa Tessman
Office: Library Tower 1215
Office hours: Tues 9:00-10:00 and Wed 12:00-1:00 or by appointment.
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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 works in consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics, constructivism, moral pluralism, and relativism. In addition to studying the more standard topics in ethics, we will also consider what impact empirical studies of people's actual moral behavior 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:

The books that we will be reading are all available as ebooks through the BU library; you may choose whether to buy hard copies or download the ebooks. All articles are available electronically under "contents" on Blackboard.

- Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford University Press, 1989/2002). ISBN 978-0198239161.
Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (Oxford University Press, 1992). ISBN 978-0195085648.
Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge University Press, 1996). ISBN 978-0521559607.
Cheshire Calhoun, *Moral Aims: Essays on the Importance of Getting It Right and Practicing Morality with Others* (Oxford University Press, 2016). ISBN 978-0199328796.
David Wong, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (Oxford University Press, 2009). ISBN 978-0195383294.
C. Daniel Batson, *What's Wrong With Morality?* (Oxford University Press, 2016). ISBN 978-0199355570

Articles by Peter Singer, Margaret Urban Walker, and Sharon Street.

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. Please email me before class time if you are ill and will be missing class.

Weekly assignments: On Tuesday evening by 9:00 PM:

- 1) Please send me (by email or by sharing a google doc) a 150-200 word paragraph summarizing the main idea/argument/position in that week's reading. This should be a formal, polished piece of writing. Imagine that you were writing a paper for publication in which, as background, you had to very briefly convey to the reader the main points of the text.
- 2) Unless you are the presenter that week, please post to the whole class (we'll decide on how you would all like to do this—email, google doc, blackboard discussion, etc.) a 150-200 word paragraph explaining your response to the week's material. 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. This paragraph can be informal. Sometime before class, please read everyone else's paragraphs.

Presentations: Each student will do two presentations. Plan on speaking for about 15-20 minutes for each presentation. Please practice the presentation ahead of time in order to time it; you may also wish to video yourself doing your practice presentation so that you can watch the video to determine what needs improvement before presenting in class. The presentation should not include any summary of the material that we have read; it should consist of your own critique of or constructive engagement 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 slides or handouts if you wish. 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). 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. A full draft of 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. I will meet with each of you after you turn in your first draft, to discuss revisions. The final draft is due on Monday, May 7th.

Grading:

One third of the grade is based on the weekly assignments, one third on the two presentations, and one third on the seminar paper. 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

Wed, Jan. 17

Introductions.

Wed, Jan. 24

Peter Singer, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring, 1972), pp. 229-243.

Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, Chapter 1, "Against Ordinary Morality."

Wed, Jan. 31

Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality*.

Wed, Feb. 7

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

Wed, Feb 14

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

Wed, Feb 21

Margaret Urban Walker, "Seeing Power in Morality: A Proposal for Feminist Naturalism in Ethics," chapter 7 (pgs. 103-116) in *Moral Contexts* (2003).

Cheshire Calhoun, *Moral Aims*, Introduction and Part I (chapters 1-2).

Wed, Feb 28

Cheshire Calhoun, *Moral Aims*, Parts II and III (chapters 3-7).

Wed, March 7: No class

Wed, March 14

Sharon Street, 2006. "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value." *Philosophical Studies* 127: 109-166.

Street, Sharon. 2008. "Constructivism About Reasons." *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 3: 207-245.

Street, Sharon. 2012. "Coming to Terms with Contingency: Humean Constructivism About Practical Reasons." In *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, edited by James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 40-59.

Wed, March 21

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

Wed, March 28

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

Wed, April 4: No class

Wed, April 11

I will be away giving a talk. It's movie day for the rest of you! Please view and discuss:

Frans de Waal, "Moral Behavior in Animals" (video)

https://www.ted.com/talks/frans_de_waal_do_animals_have_morals

Daniel Batson, "Origins and Implications of Empathy" (video)

<https://vimeo.com/125259039>

Daniel Ariely, "Our Buggy Moral Code" (video)

https://www.ted.com/talks/dan_ariely_on_our_buggy_moral_code

Wed, April 18:

Daniel Batson, *What's Wrong With Morality?* Part I (chapters 1-3).

Wed, April 25

Daniel Batson, *What's Wrong With Morality?* Parts II and III (chapters 4-8).

Wed, May 2

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

Presentations in class.

May 3-4: Individual appointments with me for discussion of seminar paper drafts.

May 7: Final version of seminar paper due via email by midnight.