

Moral Pluralism and Relativism
PHIL 457M
Spring 2015
Meets M/W, 8:00-9:25 AM

Prof. Lisa Tessman
Office: Library Tower 1215
Office hours: Mon 9:30-10:30 and Tues 10:00-11:00 or by appointment
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Texts:

Books that are available at the bookstore and that are on (physical) reserve at the library:

Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (2012). ISBN: 978-0307455772.

Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (2007). ISBN: 978-0199571543.

David Wong, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (2006). ISBN: 978-0195383294.

Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (2011). ISBN: 978-0674072350.

All other readings are on electronic reserves and/or are available as an ebook through the library. You must always have a copy of the day's reading with you in class. For readings that are available electronically, either print or bring an electronic device so you can refer to the reading in class.

Course Description:

Can all apparently different types of moral values (such as the value of meeting one's obligations, the value of caring for a friend, the value of trying to impartially increase levels of well-being, the value of treating certain actions as strictly obligatory or forbidden) be reduced to a single type of value, or measured in terms of a common metric? Moral value pluralists insist that they cannot. This course will examine several pluralist theories and explore their implications. If, as some pluralists believe, different types of values cannot substitute for each other and all must be preserved, how does one make choices in the case of conflict? How should governments handle plural and conflicting values? If there is no single right or best way to order or prioritize the plurality of values, does this entail some kind of relativism, and if so, what kind?

Course Objectives:

- To familiarize students with some contemporary work in philosophical ethics focused on moral pluralism and relativism, as well as with some interdisciplinary work in moral psychology.
- To have students develop their own original, critical thinking about each of the covered topics.
- To have students learn and practice philosophical skills; 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 ways.

- To advance students in their ability to write excellent papers according to the norms of the discipline.

This course satisfies the Composition (“C”) General Education Requirement.

Learning Outcomes: Students in C courses will demonstrate

1. The ability to write effectively and coherently, in ways appropriate to the discipline and the level of the course.
2. The ability to revise and improve their writing in both form and content.

This course satisfies the Humanities (“H”) General Education Requirement.

Learning Outcomes: Students in H courses will demonstrate an understanding of human experience through the study of literature or philosophy.

Course Requirements:

This course is a 4-credit course, which means that in addition to attending and participating in class meetings, students are expected to do at least 9.5 hours of course-related work *outside of class* each week during the semester. This includes time spent completing assigned readings, taking notes on the readings, preparing questions and comments on the readings to bring to class, and working on the seminar paper.

Class preparation and participation:

Please avoid scheduling travel, appointments, etc., to conflict with class time. Email me before class time if you are ill and will be missing class. If you miss a class in which we do a writing exercise, you may make up the exercise only if you provide adequate documentation showing that the absence was due to illness or emergency; to make up the exercise, come to office hours (or if necessary, arrange an alternative) within one week of the missed class. More than three unexcused absences will result automatically in failure of the course.

Please do not use an electronic device in class for any purpose other than referring to the day’s reading, completing the writing exercises, or taking notes.

Do give serious attention to the *quality*—not just the quantity—of your participation in discussions. If you find it difficult to speak in class discussions, please come talk to me about this *during the first week or two of the semester*, and we will devise a plan for practicing this kind of speaking.

Writing exercises: Every two to three class meetings we will spend part of class on writing exercises, and these writing exercises will sometimes be shared out loud in class (either in small groups or as presentations to the whole class). Depending on the exercise, I may either grade the exercise without feedback, give feedback in writing, or meet individually with students to discuss the exercise. In general, it will not be possible to complete the exercise unless you have done the reading carefully. Students who need extra help on writing—as evidenced by their writing exercises—will be required to visit the Writing Center throughout the semester.

Seminar paper: A 3,000 word (plus or minus 25 words) seminar paper is required. The paper will be due in stages, with revision required, as indicated on the syllabus. Students will receive verbal feedback on a preliminary draft before completing the final version; some students will also be required to visit the Writing Center to improve the seminar paper. More information about the seminar paper will be distributed part way through the semester.

Grading:

50% writing exercises.

50% seminar paper.

The final grade may be raised or lowered by a plus or minus (e.g. from a B- to a B, from an A- to a B+, etc) depending on the quality of class participation.

Academic Honesty: I follow the Philosophy Department policy on academic honesty (below); furthermore, any student who plagiarizes or commits any other form of academic dishonesty will receive an F for the course. Students are responsible for being familiar with, and abiding by, the Student Academic Honesty Code.

Philosophy Department Guidelines on Academic Honesty

The Philosophy Department considers plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty to be serious breaches of the code of ethics governing academic life. They are also violations of Harpur College and Binghamton University policies.

In order to contribute to a culture of Academic Honesty within both the Department and the University, the Philosophy Department has agreed on the following guidelines:

- 1) Instructors will include a statement describing their policy regarding Academic Honesty on all course syllabi.
- 2) When a student commits an act of academic dishonesty, the instructor will formally bring the violation to the attention of the Harpur College Academic Honesty Committee by either:
 - a. submitting an Admission of Dishonesty Form that has been signed by the student,
 - or*
 - b. initiating a hearing before the Harpur College Academic Honesty Committee.
- 3) When a student commits an act of academic dishonesty, the instructor for the course will not give the student credit for the assignment, whether or not the student re-submits honest work.
- 4) Instructors will decide what further grade consequences are appropriate in response to the dishonesty at their own discretion; the typical consequence is a grade of 'F' for the course.

Schedule

Week 1:

Mon, Jan. 26

Introductions.

Wed, Jan. 28

W.D. Ross, "What Makes Right Acts Right?" from *The Right and the Good* (1930) chapter II, pg. 16 - top of pg. 34.

Week 2:

Mon, Feb. 2

Thomas Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value," in *Mortal Questions* (1979): pgs. 128-141.

Wed, Feb. 4

Michael Stocker, "Plurality and Choice," in *Plural and Conflicting Values* (1990): pgs. 165-207.

Week 3:

Mon, Feb. 9

Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," *Philosophical Review* 84 (1975): 3-22.

Wed, Feb. 11

Michele Moody-Adams, "Taking Disagreement Seriously," in *Fieldwork in Familiar Places* (1997), chapter 1, pgs. 13-60 (focus especially on pgs. 29-43).

Week 4:

Mon, Feb. 16

Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind* (2012), chapters 5-7: pgs. 95-154.

Wed, Feb. 18

Michael Gill and Shaun Nichols, "Sentimental Pluralism: Moral Psychology and Philosophical Ethics." *Philosophical Issues* 18 (2008): 143-163.

Week 5:

Mon, Feb. 23

Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals* (2007), Preamble & chapter 1.

Wed, Feb. 25

Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, chapter 2-3.

Week 6:

Mon, March 2

Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, chapter 4.

Wed, March 4

Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, chapter 5.

Week 7:

Mon, March 9

Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, chapter 7 (chapter 6 is optional).

Wed, March 11

Jesse Prinz, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, chapter 8.

Week 8:

Mon, March 16

David Wong, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (2006), Introduction & chapter 1.

Wed, March 18

David Wong, *Natural Moralities*, chapter 2.

Week 9:

Mon, March 23

David Wong, *Natural Moralities*, chapter 3.

Wed, March 25

I will be away giving a talk. There will be a writing workshop in class.

Week 10:

Mon, March 30

Martha Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," in *The Quality of Life* (1993), edited by Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen: pgs. 242-269.

Wed, April 1

Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (2011), chapters 1-2.

Week 11:

Mon, April 13

Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, chapters 3-4.

Wed, April 15

Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, chapters 5-6.

Week 12:

Mon, April 20

Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, chapters 7-8 & Conclusion.

Wed, April 22

1,000 word "practice" draft of seminar paper due by email *before* class time; also bring a copy to class.

Writing workshop in class.

Consultations on drafts begin.

Week 13:

Mon, April 27

Reading groups (readings to be determined).

Wed, April 29

Reading groups (readings to be determined).

Last day of consultations on drafts.

Week 14:

Mon, May 4

3,000 word seminar paper due via turnitin *before* class time.

Presentations.

Wed, May 6

Presentations.