

Empirical Moral Psychology

Robbie Kubala

rkubala@gmail.com

Recent years have seen an explosion of interest in the field of empirical moral psychology. Many researchers claim that empirical studies can shed light on our understanding of morality, often by challenging our commonsense beliefs about our moral faculties and judgments. These challenges, and the general relevance of scientific discoveries to the study of morality, raise deep philosophical questions. Our goal in this seminar is to familiarize ourselves with some recent empirical developments and to address questions such as the following: What is the relation between the descriptive and the normative? How do we make moral judgments? When are those judgments reliable? How can moral judgments be justified?

This course will be run as a seminar, with frequent written assignments and no exams. Since discussion of the material is a crucial component of the class, you are expected to come to class having read the assigned essays and ready to discuss them. Please always bring a copy of the readings with you to class.

No prerequisites are required, but some familiarity with basic ethical theory (i.e., consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics) is essential. Please contact me if you would like me to recommend background readings.

Course Objectives

This is an upper-level seminar with several objectives:

- To help students develop their skills in reading, writing, and critically evaluating philosophical arguments.
- To teach students how to read and critically assess studies in psychology and neuroscience.
- To practice seminar techniques of respectful discussion and active listening.

Schedule of Topics and Readings

All readings will be available as PDFs and can be found on Courseworks. As the term progresses I may make some changes to this schedule. I will announce any changes in class or by email. We may occasionally have visiting presenters from other departments (e.g., Psychology, Statistics). I will announce any visitors in advance.

N.B. Optional readings are strictly optional, i.e., they are provided only for those who want to explore the course material more deeply, and in-class discussion will not presuppose familiarity with them. I am always happy to suggest additional readings.

Part 1: Philosophical Foundations

In the first part of the course, we will discuss the philosophical concepts necessary to address the central questions of the seminar.

1. Introduction

John Searle, “How to Derive ‘Ought’ from ‘Is’”

What is the relation between descriptive and normative claims? We will discuss the problem in general and then consider one attempt to show how some normative judgments follow from some descriptive judgments, given the existence of background institutions.

2. Naturalistic Ethics

David Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, 2.3.3 and 3.3.1

David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Section I and Appendix I

optional: Michael Gill, *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics*, Chapter 20

optional: Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, pp. 51-66

What view of ethics would make ethics amenable to scientific investigation? Ethical naturalists are those who believe that ethical facts are natural facts and can be studied by empirical inquiry, but there are many questions about how and why this could be so. We will discuss the views and arguments of one of the earliest naturalists.

3. Reflective Equilibrium

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, §4 and §9

Thomas Kelly and Sarah McGrath, “Is Reflective Equilibrium Enough?”

optional: Norman Daniels, “Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics”

optional: T. M. Scanlon, “Rawls on Justification”

***Argument Outline Due**

How can ethical naturalists justify moral judgments? Reflective equilibrium, the most popular answer, is, among other things, a method for achieving coherence between our general moral principles, our intuitions about particular moral cases, and our background theoretical beliefs. We will consider Rawls’ classic formulation and some challenges to it.

4. Intuitions

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Liane Young, and Fiery Cushman, “Moral Intuitions”

Gerd Gigerenzer, “Moral Intuition = Fast and Frugal Heuristics?”

optional: Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, “Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases”

optional: Judith Jarvis Thomson, “The Trolley Problem”

What are moral intuitions? We will investigate two recent views from the psychological literature about the nature of our intuitive judgments, the mechanisms by which they work, and the conditions under which they are reliable.

Part 2: Empirical Challenges

In the second part of the course, we will consider a series of challenges to the reliability of moral judgments. Apart from week 5, these are presented in two-week units, where we discuss the challenge in the first week and the response in the second week.

5. The Challenge to Character

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, II.7

John Doris, “Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics”

Julia Annas, “Comments on John Doris’ Lack of Character”

optional: Rachana Kamtekar, “Situationism and Virtue Ethics on the Content of Our Character”

optional: Gilbert Harman, “Moral Psychology Meets Social Psychology”

Do human beings really possess stable, global traits of character? What relation does this question bear to Aristotelian conceptions of virtue ethics? We will consider the situationist approach to social psychology, which is skeptical about robust notions of character.

6. The Challenge from Experimental Philosophy, Part I

Jonathan Weinberg, Shaun Nichols, and Stephen Stich, “Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions”

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “Moral Intuitionism Meets Empirical Psychology”

optional: Eric Schwitzgebel and Fiery Cushman, “Expertise in Moral Reasoning? Order Effects on Moral Judgment in Professional Philosophers and Non-Philosophers”

How can moral judgments be tested empirically? What kind of variations in moral judgment should undermine our confidence in the reliability of our intuitions? We will discuss the experimental philosophy movement and its challenge to traditional philosophical methodology.

7. The Challenge from Experimental Philosophy, Part II

Antti Kauppinen, “The Rise and Fall of Experimental Philosophy”

S. Matthew Liao, “A Defense of Intuitions”

optional: Amia Srinivasan, “The Archimedean Urge”

Can traditional philosophical methodology be defended against the attacks of experimental philosophers? Do anti-foundationalist moral epistemologies have a better chance of withstanding scrutiny?

8. The Challenge from Social Psychology, Part I

Jonathan Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail”

Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt, “How (and Where) Does Moral Judgment Work?”

optional: Lisa Tessman, *Moral Failure*, pp. 59-74

What role do the emotions play in moral judgment? Under what conditions are the emotions reliable? We will consider dual-process models of the mind and their relevance to moral philosophy.

9. The Challenge from Social Psychology, Part II

Frances Kamm, *Intricate Ethics*, Chapter 14

Peter Railton, “The Affective Dog and Its Rational Tale: Intuition and Attunement”

optional: Ernest Sosa, *A Virtue Epistemology*, Chapter 3

Under what views of ethical methodology would the dual-process model be a challenge to the reliability of moral judgments? Are there alternative views that could accommodate the psychological data?

10. The Challenge from Neuroscience, Part I

Joshua Greene, “The Secret Joke of Kant’s Soul”

Joshua Greene, “From Neural ‘Is’ to Moral ‘Ought’”

optional: John Mikhail, “Moral Cognition and Computational Theory”

optional: Mark Timmons, “Toward a Sentimentalist Deontology”

***Short Paper Due**

Could neuroscientific results be used to undermine the reliability of deontological moral judgments? Under what assumptions? We will consider the pathbreaking work of one philosopher-cum-neuroscientist.

11. The Challenge from Neuroscience, Part II

Selim Berker, “The Normative Insignificance of Neuroscience”

Joshua Greene, “Notes on Berker”

optional: Kahane, et. al., “The Neural Basis of Intuitive and Counterintuitive Moral Judgment”

What role do neuroscientific results play in the debunking of individual moral judgments? We will discuss an influential recent debate, paying particular attention to statistical methodology and the philosophical assumptions that can drive data analyses.

12. The Challenge from Evolution, Part I

Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value"

optional: Peter Singer, "Ethics and Intuitions"

optional: Richard Joyce, *The Evolution of Morality*, Chapter 6

Does Darwinian evolutionary theory pose a challenge to moral realism, because moral realists cannot explain how human beings could have evolved capacities to detect the moral truth? Which views of ethics are compatible with Darwinism?

13. The Challenge from Evolution, Part II

Katia Vavova, "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking"

Guy Kahane, "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments"

optional: Edouard Machery and Ron Mallon, "The Evolution of Morality"

Does the evolutionary challenge globalize, meaning that it debunks all normative judgments and not just moral judgments? If so, would that make it self-undermining? Could there be local instances of evolutionary debunking?

14. Conclusion

No assigned reading.

***Term Paper Due During Finals Period**

We will discuss any remaining issues from the semester and have time for additional student presentations.

Course Policies and Requirements

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. If you arrive to class late or leave early you will be considered absent, unless you contact me in advance with a worthy reason. Multiple unexcused absences may result in a reduction in your final grade.

Contacting Me

If you have any questions about the course that can be answered in one or two sentences, please feel free to email your question. I will always respond within 24 hours. However, substantive questions about the content of the course or your progress must be discussed in person. I will be happy to discuss these issues in person during my office hours or by appointment.

Electronic Devices

In order to facilitate discussion, you may use electronic devices (e.g., laptops, tablets, phones, recording devices) only for purposes of note-taking and only with Internet access disabled. If you use electronic devices to distract yourself or others, your class participation grade will be lowered.

Course Requirements

Class Participation	10%
Argument Outline	10%
Weekly Responses	20%
Short Paper	20%
Term Paper	40%

Class Preparation and Participation

You are expected to complete the assigned readings before the class for which they have been assigned and come to class prepared to discuss the text. You should always bring a copy of the text with you to class. Class email will be sent through Courseworks, and you are responsible for any announcements or assignments sent. Please ensure that Courseworks has your correct email address and that you have not exceeded your quota.

Your participation grade will be determined by the quality (not the quantity) of your in-class contributions. Disruptive behavior, disrespectful contributions, or otherwise poor participation will lower your final grade.

Argument Outline

In week 3, you will be asked to write a 1-page argument outline of one of the assigned readings. This will help you practice the skills needed to effectively analyze arguments. You can email this to me.

Weekly Responses

Each week, you will write a short response to the readings and post it to a public page on Courseworks. This can be a question, an explanation, a sketch of an argument, or something else. Your response will be due by 8am on the day that class meets, and you must complete 10 of these over the course of the semester (i.e., you will have several weeks off).

Short Paper

In week 10, you will submit a 3-5 page paper in response to a prompt that I will distribute by week 8. You can email your paper to me.

Term Paper

You will be responsible for a term paper of at least 10 pages, double-spaced. Paper topics are entirely at your discretion, although I must approve your paper topic by week 13. You can email your paper to me.

Late Policy

If you do not turn in your written assignments on time, you will incur a penalty of one reduction in letter grade for each day late (e.g., from A- to B+). This penalty will begin to accrue immediately after the deadline and includes weekends.

Optional Presentations

Beginning in week 11, you will have the option of making a 10-15 minute in-class presentation

on the topic of your term paper. Thoughtful presentations will earn one increase in letter grade on your term paper (i.e., from B+ to A-).

Grading Scale

I will employ a standard letter scale (no numerical grades) as follows:

- A—Excellent
- B—Good
- C—Fair
- D—Poor
- F—Unacceptable

Academic Integrity

The Columbia College honor code states: “I affirm that I will not plagiarize, use unauthorized materials, or give or receive illegitimate help on assignments, papers, and examinations. I will also uphold equity and honesty in the evaluation of my work and the work of others. I do so to sustain a community built around this Code of Honor.” Plagiarism or other forms of cheating—including using phrases copied from online sources without citation—will lead to failure of the course.

Statement on Disability Accommodation

I will make every effort to create the most inclusive and accessible learning environment possible. If you are a student with a disability and have an DS-certified Accommodation Letter, please come to my office hours to confirm your accommodation needs. If you believe that you might have a disability that requires accommodation, you should contact Disability Services at 212.854.2388 and disability@columbia.edu.

Academic Support

The Writing Center provides writing support to undergraduate and graduate students. In one-on-one consultations and workshops, consultants offer feedback and strategies to help you improve at every stage of your writing, from brainstorming to final drafts. To learn more about what happens in a Writing Center consultation, visit <https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/uwp/writing-center>