



The Exeter College Summer Programme
University of Oxford

Why Be Good? An Introduction to Ethics

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Course Description

What is there to live for? Is there anything worth pursuing apart from money, love, and your own desires? How can we live an ethical life? This course is an introduction to ethics. It will be structured around twelve topics, such as: Do you have a moral duty to donate most of your money to charity? Are we unfree and thus not responsible for anything? Is moral virtue a matter of luck? If someone you love dies and you're not upset, does that mean you never really cared about them? In addition to thinking about particular ethical issues, we will discuss some of the most powerful and persuasive theories in moral philosophy, including utilitarianism (the view that an action is right if it promotes happiness), deontology (the view that an action is right if it is done from duty), and virtue ethics (the view that an action is right if one has the right moral character or virtues).

Course Objectives

The course is designed to be non-technical. No prior knowledge of philosophy is required. You will learn to identify, explain, and take a critical perspective on some of the main topics in philosophical ethics, while also enhancing your ability to read, think, and write clearly and in a philosophical way. By the end of this course, I hope you will have improved some intellectual abilities that are important for life as a whole, beyond the knowledge and skills required for any particular profession.

Class Format

- 12 x Lectures (1.25hr)
- 6 x Seminars (1.25hr)
- 4 x Tutorials (1.25hr)

The lectures aim to present the material, while the seminars are an opportunity to discuss the material in more depth. We will cover one reading per lecture, whereas each seminar will focus on *two* readings unified by a common theme. For example, in Seminar 1 we will discuss readings 1 and 2 (on utilitarianism); in Seminar 2 we will discuss readings 3 and 4 (on Kantian ethics); and so forth. More details are below. You will also have four tutorials, which are meetings between a tutor and two students.

Topics

Lecture 1: Famine, Affluence, and Morality	}	Seminar 1
Lecture 2: Moral Saints		
Lecture 3: Absolute Moral Rules	}	Seminar 2
Lecture 4: The Grounds of Morality		
Lecture 5: Moral Luck	}	Seminar 3
Lecture 6: The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility		
Lecture 7: Happiness and Harm	}	Seminar 4
Lecture 8: Love and Death		
Lecture 9: Psychological Egoism	}	Seminar 5
Lecture 10: When to Psychologize		
Lecture 11: The Duty to Speak Your Mind	}	Seminar 6
Lecture 12: Moral Grandstanding		

Readings

All readings will be made available [online](#) before the first lecture. There is one reading per lecture.

1. Singer, Peter (1972). Famine, Affluence, and Morality. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*.
2. Wolf, Susan (1982). Moral Saints. *Journal of Philosophy*.
3. Rachels, James (1986). Are There Absolute Moral Rules? In *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*. McGraw-Hill.
4. Foot, Philippa (1972). Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives. *The Philosophical Review*.
5. Nagel, Thomas (1976). Moral Luck. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*.
6. Strawson, Galen (1994). The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility. *Philosophical Studies*.
7. Brickman, Philip (1978). Lottery Winners and Accident Victims: Is Happiness Relative? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.
8. Moller, Dan (2007). Love and Death. *Journal of Philosophy*.
9. Feinberg, Joel (2007). Psychological Egoism. In *Ethical Theory: An Anthology*. Blackwell.
10. Flowerree, Amy (2023). When to Psychologize. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.
11. Joshi, Hrishikesh (2021). *Why It's OK to Speak Your Mind* (chs. 1 and 2). Routledge.
12. Tosi, Justin & Brandon Warmke (2016). Moral Grandstanding. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*.

Assessment Methods

- An essay of between 2,500 - 3,000 words (45%)
- A final 3hr written examination (45%)
- Participation in seminar and tutorial discussions (10%)

The Essay (45%)

In the essay, you will formulate a thesis statement, argue for it, and defend it from possible objections. Your discussion should manifest a good understanding of the relevant literature. I will give you a list of topics in advance, although you may choose your own topic instead. If you would like to pursue a different topic than one I have suggested, please discuss it with me beforehand. You are encouraged to use secondary sources if they are relevant, but you are not required to do so. Please use any consistent style for citations (MLA, Chicago, Harvard, etc.). More information about your essay assignments will be provided in class.

The Exam (45%)

The final exam will consist of five essay questions, from which you must answer three. To be fully prepared for this exam, you must do the assigned readings every week, attend and participate in class regularly, and begin to study well beforehand. The exam will test your knowledge and understanding of the assigned readings and material covered in lectures and seminars.

Participation (10%)

Discussion is a crucial part of this course, so please come to each seminar and tutorial with questions and comments of your own. Also, remember that the quality of your contributions is more important than how often you contribute. Finally, regular attendance is expected and required.