PHIL10099: Nature of Moral Understanding
2018/19 Course Guide

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1. Course Aims and Objectives

There is a distinctive experience that humans have when they think about situations that seem to involve moral considerations. While these experiences may be amenable to theoretical formalisation, there is important philosophical reflection to be done without theory. What do people understand when they understand a situation as demanding moral consideration, reflection or decision? This course aims to make progress with this and related questions and in the process complement our other courses in ethics and ethical theory.

The central question with which this course is concerned is: what is the nature of the understanding someone has when they engage with their moral concerns? These moral concerns are considered to arise in relatively ordinary situations of the kinds presented in life, literature and film. These situations include decisions about what to do in a situation; wondering about one’s life; questions of whether one is under a moral obligation; contemplation of shame or guilt.

In this sense, this course is a philosophical examination of various phenomena—moral phenomena—about which philosophical theories are constructed. The main goals will be to focus on the nature of the understanding we have of these phenomena with a view to clarifying which are their essential features and which do not distinguish them. Central to this examination, we will consider how other philosophers have tried to delimit the phenomena or characterise our moral understanding.

2. Intended Learning Outcomes

- To develop further the philosophical skills acquired in previous philosophy courses;
- Extend as well as deepen the knowledge acquired in previous moral philosophy courses;
- Learn how to use the techniques of philosophical analysis and division, as well as the approaches of past philosophers;
- Apply these techniques to familiar experiences of the moral as found in ordinary lives and literature.

3. Seminar Times and Locations

Semester 1 – Tuesdays 11.10am – 1pm, Lister L & T Centre Room 4.2

4. Seminar Content
Requirements
The format of this course is a seminar. It requires your participation. There is no required text for this course. Each week there are one or two required readings indicated above the questions given for that week.

You must read that article or chapter in preparation for discussion each week.

The discussion in class is no substitute for reading this material as well. You should read some of the additional reading given. This is essential if you propose to discuss that topic in an essay, exam or short dissertation. I have tried to ensure that the vast majority of the reading is online through the library’s subscriptions.

1. Introduction
No required reading.

We will discuss the content of the course and seek to identify the relation an investigation of moral understanding has to moral philosophy and ethics.

What are moral theories theories of?
To what extent, if any, is moral reflection amenable to theoretical codification?
Is Plato an ethical theorist?
How independent, if at all, are the levels of ethical theorising, viz. meta-normative, meta-ethical, normative ethical, applied ethical?
How many varieties of ethical theory are there?
Is there an experience that moral philosophy explains?

2. Facts and Choice

Are the facts given to us in moral matters?
Do moral challenges present themselves principally as requiring choice or clarity?
Is the Socratic thesis (“no one knowingly does wrong”) in any way defensible?
In what sense, if any, should we distinguish the role of facts in moral matters and scientific matters?
Which facts, if any, are moral facts?

3. Perceptiveness

Are some people better at recognising the facts that bear on a moral matter?
To what extent, if any, are we responsible for our beliefs?
To what extent, if any, is perception “morally loaded”?
To what extent, if any, is one’s moral character revealed by what is perceived?
Can literature function as moral philosophy?

4. Remorse

Is remorse distinct from guilt or bad conscience?
Can one be remorseful for something done on an involuntary basis?
To what extent, if any, is remorse personal?
To what extent, if any, is the moral understanding revealed in remorse distinct from that revealed prior to acting?
Is remorse distinct from regret?
Is remorse solely a hallmark of a moral thought or experience?

5. Forgiveness

Is forgiveness possible?
Must the person who forgives also condone what is forgiven?
What, if any, are the preconditions for forgiveness?
Does forgiveness require a shared understanding between the forgiver and the forgiven?
Are we ever obliged to forgive?

6. Individuality

What scope, if any, is there for individuality in one’s understanding of moral matters?
What is the universalizability requirement on moral judgments? Does it hold?
When, if at all, does moral disagreement imply that one party is wrong?
Does the genuine possibility of faultless moral disagreement imply that there are no moral facts?

7. Moral Argument
[The library has a copy and it is available from OUP online]
To what extent, if any, are the forms of moral argument distinct from other arguments in philosophy?
To what extent, if any, are moral arguments not amenable to the logico-deductive model of proof familiar in logic and mathematics?
What role does example play in moral argument?
To what extent, if any, is there a difference between argument and persuasion?

8. The Banal and Absurd

What if anything is the mark of the absurd?
Is a formal definition of what is absurd possible, other than contradiction?
Are there things we morally should fear to think?
Is absurdity a matter of conceptual incoherence?
Is banality a form of moral misunderstanding?

9. Moral Limits

Does the moral always trump the prudential? (i.e. is morality higher than prudence?)
Can we decide in advance that some matters are never moral matters?
Is the rejection of morality of itself immoral?
Does the implication in an ethical theory that moral considerations are ubiquitous count against its prima facie plausibility?
What limits, if any, are there on morality?

10. Moral Problems and Moral Expertise

What is a moral problem?
What is the solution to a moral problem?
Can someone be morally successful?
Can moral problems be caused or solved by luck?
Are there moral experts? What do they know?
Are moral problems always inter-personal?

11. Moral Philosophy and Moral Understanding
To what extent, if any, is moral understanding distinct from moral knowledge? How, if at all, does moral understanding increase? What are the sources of moral understanding? What relation, if any, is there between moral theory and moral understanding? What is moral understanding understanding of?

5. Readings

Part I

1. Introduction


I have found the following general work on ethics to have a format and style congenial to the approach of this class. Therefore, you may find many of its entries helpful in grounding yourself in moral philosophy more broadly conceived.


In addition, for a fair-minded description of the “state of the art” in ethics and moral philosophy as it is understood now, the following book is good.


Some of the topics we will discuss are covered in more general and sometimes introductory ways in:

2. Facts and Choice


3. Perceptiveness


Brian P. McLaughlin, Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (editors), Perspectives on Self-Deception, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, part V.

There is a modest but interesting literature on ethics and literature, some titles relevant to our discussion are listed below.


Part II

4. Remorse


5. Forgiveness
Hannah Arendt, “Irreversibility and the power to forgive”, The Human Condition, chapter 33, 1958, several publishers and subsequent editions.


Bishop Butler, *Sermons VIII and IX*, upon Resentment and Forgiveness of injuries
http://anglicanhistory.org/butler/rolls/index.html, several print versions.


6. Individuality

[There is a considerable literature on this topic, the below section exposes an uncommon approach.]


Part III

7. Moral Argument


Peter Winch. “Persuasion” Midwest Studies In Philosophy. Volume 17 Issue 1, Pages 123 - 137.


An early question concerning the form and force of even the most basic argument was posed by Lewis Carroll. Over a century a secondary literature developed in response to his short paper.


Rees, W.J., "What Achilles said to the Tortoise." *Mind*, 60 (1951), 241-246.


8. The Banal and Absurd


9. Moral Limits


R. Rhees. On Knowing the Difference Between Right and Wrong. *Without*


**10. Moral Problems and Moral Expertise**

Plato, *Laches*.


**11. Moral Philosophy and Moral Understanding**


Concluding Note

The following books touch on many of the themes we will discuss in this course without giving the sort of treatment we will be obliged to give. You may find them stimulating.


6. Assessment

Exam
This course will be assessed solely on the basis of an exam given in the December diet of examinations. Students who qualify (usually fourth year single honours philosophy students) may be obliged to submit a coursework dissertation instead of sitting the exam. The title of your coursework dissertation must be approved in advance by submitting it to me in person or by email. After your title is approved you will complete a form confirming this title and submit it to the departmental office. Generally, any question listed for discussion in a seminar is a suitable short dissertation title.

Formative Exam
In addition, everyone should submit two exam answers for last year’s exam--available from the Library online. These can be e-mailed to me at any point during the term. This “formative exam” will not count toward determining your
mark for this class or the class of degree you are ultimately awarded. However the formative exam is an excellent opportunity to improve your philosophical writing and try arguments you may ultimately use in the exam or short dissertation. I strongly urge you to submit at least two formative exam essays. If you submit your essays by the end of teaching week 9, I will return them to you in class in teaching week 11. If you submit the essay by the end of teaching week 11, I will return the essay to you as soon as convenient for me.

MSc Assessment
MSc students are assessed by a single essay of 2500 words that must be submitted to the postgraduate teaching office in December at the same time as other MSc Essays. Please check with the postgraduate teaching office for precise details. Generally, any question listed for discussion in a seminar is a suitable essay question.

Feedback will be provided within 3 weeks, unless otherwise notified by email.

7. Useful Information

Contacts
You may contact me by email at david.levy@ed.ac.uk. My office is in room 5.10 of the Dugald Stewart Building. I am available Tuesday of each week from 4.10 until 5.10 to discuss more or less any philosophical topic, related to this course or not. To ensure that I can see you, I ask that you send me an email confirming that you intend to visit and advising me of the topic for discussion. Unfortunately, I am not often available at other times, though you can seek a special arrangement to meet if it proves necessary.

Feedback
You will receive feedback on your work in this class in the following ways. First, you can see me during my office hour to talk about class material, your own contributions to class discussions or essays in progress. Second, I will mark your formative exam and provide comments on how you can improve your essay—in technique and content—in advance of the exam. Third, you will get some feedback on your exam essays. Fourth, you can email me with specific questions about your work in progress or our discussions during the seminars.