

PHIL 429: Advanced Topics in Social and Political Philosophy – Moral Psychology

Spring 2021

Instructor: Wesley Buckwalter

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Virtual class times: Monday 4:30-6:30 PM via zoom (4:30-5:30 PM on pre-recorded lecture days)

Virtual student hours: Group office hours directly after class on Mondays from 6:30-7:00 PM (5:30-6:00 PM on pre-recorded lecture days)
For private office hours email to set up an appointment

Where, When, and How the Course Meets

This course is taught online. It is mostly taught in the synchronous conference format. All class periods will be held through Zoom meetings distributed via the course Blackboard site. Although the course will be held online by video conference, many things about it will resemble what you might typically expect from an in-person course.

The class will typically meet on **Mondays from 4:30 to 6:30 PM and you will be expected to logon to Zoom at those same times**. However, some classes will also feature asynchronous pre-recorded lectures. On these days, you will be expected to watch video lectures ahead of time and then logon to Zoom for a shorter discussion period, from 4:30 to 5:30 PM. After each class period ends, optional group office hours will be available for anyone who wants to stick around and continue the discussion.

Course Description

Human beings are capable of both transcendent kindness and unspeakable cruelty. What is it that shapes the morals of creatures like us? Moral psychology is the study of moral thought and moral action. Researchers working in this area draw on methods and findings across the cognitive sciences, social and comparative psychology, neuroscience, and analytic philosophy to better understand morality and its role in our everyday lives. The goals of this course are:

- (1) To acquaint students with some of the discoveries made by moral psychologists about moral judgment, moral behavior, and the underlying processes that generate them.
- (2) To examine and critically assess some of the theories that have been proposed to explain why people make the moral judgments or engage in certain kinds of behaviors that they do.

(3) To explore some of the philosophical questions that are linked to discoveries in moral psychology and neighboring scientific disciplines. These questions include:

- Are human beings inherently self-interested? Are we ever motivated by a desire to benefit someone other than ourselves?
- Do psychopaths make genuine moral judgments?
- What psychological mechanisms support moral judgment and behavior? What is the role of reason and emotion in moral judgment?
- Is there such a thing as being a good person, and if so, what does it amount to?
- Is being morally good or bad a matter of luck?
- Can we be responsible for things we are unaware of doing or unable to control?
- Is it okay to be angry? When is anger a fitting response to injustice?
- Is disgust a reliable moral compass for deciding right and wrong? Is it responsible for horrifying acts of violence?
- Have we made moral progress? Are the ways human beings treat each other getting better or worse?
- Why is there so much moral disagreement the world over?

Attendance Policy

Students are expected to **attend regularly and participate in class discussion**. You are encouraged (but not required) to participate with your video turned on during class time. You are also encouraged to use group chat during class (keep it civil!). A partial recording of each class period may be made available for all (and only) students enrolled in the class after it is held. But please do not treat this resource as a substitute for attending class sessions.

Communication Policy

The best way to contact me is by email. I will respond to emails **within two working days**, and often much faster than that. Please do not hesitate to contact me with questions about the course that you cannot find the answers to on the syllabus or course Blackboard site, suggestions for improvement, or to request a one on one meeting with me over Zoom. Remember, **students must use their MasonLive email account** to receive important University information, including communications related to this class. I am unable to respond to messages sent from or send messages to a non-Mason email address.

Required Texts

All course materials will be made available through the course Blackboard site or by links on the course schedule.

Grading

Your grade for the course will be determined by your grade on the following components of the course:

1. Reading Journal (50% of your course grade)

You are required to keep a reading journal and to make an entry in it involving the assigned materials for each class period. Journal entries are to be made using the Reading Journal tool in the course Blackboard site. **You should aim for entries to be 1 page long double-spaced (approximately 300 words).** The entries should contain two parts: (i) briefly summarize the main point of the reading, and (ii) offer your take in the form of a critical reaction. For example, you might identify a point you agree with or disagree with and say why. Or you might relate the reading to a personal experience you had once, a meme or film it reminds you of, or to ask a question you wish to raise in class. Journals can engage with any of the assigned reading or audio/visual components scheduled for the relevant class period. However, be sure that your responses build on the readings in manner that goes beyond summarization.

Journal will begin for our February 1 class period and end on our April 19 class period (that's 12 entries in total). Entries are due by 11:59 PM the day before each class (**this means your first entry is due on Sunday night January 31 at 11:59 PM**). Entries will be graded as either "0" a "1" or a "2". All late entries will be "0". Your grade will be calculated from the top 10 entry scores (this means that you can effectively "skip" 2 entries without penalty).

2. Final paper (50% of your course grade)

You will write one final paper that should be approximately 2,500 words (or 8 to 10 double-spaced pages). Papers must be uploaded through the course Blackboard site to be accepted. The paper can be a theoretical treatment of material related to the core topics covered in the course, or it can be an empirical report of a new study related to those topics. Students are welcomed to confer with each other and the instructor about this. Grading criteria and writing tips will be shared through the course Blackboard site. **The paper will be due on May 5 at 11:59 PM.**

The date of your paper submission will be taken from the date you upload your paper to the course Blackboard site. Papers that are not received will be given a "0". **The final paper will be marked as "0" if it is not received by 11:59 PM on May 5**, unless you have requested a grade of IN.

3. Zoom discussion (discretionary participation points)

Each week class will meet via zoom sessions. Students are expected to prepare for and participate in the sessions. Discretionary participation points may be given to students who consistently engage in the sessions.

Incompletes Policy

University policy specifies that instructors are to assign an IN incomplete grade only if the student has completed a significant portion of the assessment and there is a non-academic reason that prevents them from completing the work within the semester. Incomplete grades will only be assigned in the case of exceptional, unforeseen circumstances that occur within the last three weeks of the semester.

Flexible Syllabus Policy

Except for changes that substantially affect implementation of the grading statement, this syllabus is a guide for the course and is subject to change with advance notice. For example, readings may be adapted to match our progress.

Basic Course Technology Requirements

Activities and assignments in this course will regularly use the Blackboard learning system, available at <https://mymason.gmu.edu>. Students are required to have regular, reliable access to a computer with an updated operating system (recommended: Windows 10 or Mac OSX 10.13 or higher) and a stable broadband Internet connection (cable modem, DSL, satellite broadband, etc., with a consistent 1.5 Mbps [megabits per second] download speed or higher. Activities and assignments in this course will regularly use web-conferencing software (Blackboard/Zoom). In addition to the requirements above, students are required to have a device with a functional camera and microphone. In an emergency, students can connect through a telephone call, but video capability is the expected norm.

Course Materials and Student Privacy

Portions of our synchronous meetings in this class will be recorded to provide necessary information for students in this class. Recordings will be stored on Blackboard and will only be accessible to students taking this course during this semester. **All course materials posted to Blackboard or other course sites are private to this class**; and by federal law, any materials that identify specific students (via their name, voice, or image) must not be shared with anyone not enrolled in this class.

Academic Integrity

The integrity of the University community is affected by the individual choices made by each of us. Mason has an Honor Code with clear guidelines regarding academic integrity. Three fundamental and rather simple principles to follow at all times are that: (1) all work submitted be your own; (2) when using the work or ideas of others, including fellow students, give full credit through accurate citations; and (3) if you are uncertain about the ground rules on a particular assignment, ask for clarification. No grade is important enough to justify academic misconduct. Plagiarism means using the exact words, opinions, or factual information from another person without giving the person credit. Writers give credit through accepted documentation styles, such as parenthetical citation, footnotes, or endnotes. Paraphrased material must also be cited, using the appropriate format for this class. A simple listing of books or articles is not sufficient. Plagiarism is the equivalent of intellectual robbery and cannot be tolerated in the academic setting. If you have any doubts about what constitutes plagiarism, please see me or review the Honor Code: <https://oai.gmu.edu/mason-honor-code/>.

Disability Accommodations

Disability Services at George Mason University is committed to upholding the letter and spirit of the laws that ensure equal treatment of people with disabilities. Under the administration of University Life, Disability Services implements and coordinates reasonable accommodations and disability-related services that afford equal access to university programs and activities. Students can begin the registration process with Disability Services at any time during their enrollment at George Mason University. If you are seeking accommodations, please visit <http://ds.gmu.edu/> for detailed information about the Disability Services registration process. Disability Services is in Student Union Building I (SUB I), Suite 2500; ods@gmu.edu; (703) 993-2474.

Sexual Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, and Interpersonal Violence

University Policy on Sexual Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, and Interpersonal Violence
George Mason University is committed to providing a learning, living and working environment that is free from discrimination, and we are committed to a campus that is free of sexual misconduct and other acts of interpersonal violence, in order to promote community wellbeing and student success. We encourage students who believe that they have been sexually harassed, assaulted or subjected to sexual misconduct to seek assistance and support. University Policy 1202: Sexual Harassment and Misconduct speaks to the specifics of Mason's process, our resources, and the options available to students (<https://universitypolicy.gmu.edu/policies/sexual-harassment-policy/>).

Confidential student resources are available on campus at the Student Support and Advocacy Center (<http://ssac.gmu.edu/>; 703-993-3686, Crisis Line 703-380-1434), Counseling and Psychological Services (<http://caps.gmu.edu/>; 703-993-2380), and Student Health Services (<http://shs.gmu.edu/> ; 703-993-2831). All other members of the

University community (including faculty, except those noted above) are not considered confidential resources and are required to report incidents of sexual misconduct to the University Title IX Coordinator. For a full list of resources, support opportunities, and reporting options, contact Dr. Jennifer Hammat, Title IX Coordinator, at <http://diversity.gmu.edu/title-ix>, at 703-993-8730, or in the Compliance, Diversity, and Ethics office in the Aquia Building, Suite 373.

Course Schedule:

Date	Topic	Read Before Class	Audio/Visual Activity
January 25	Course Introduction: Can science answer moral questions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read Syllabus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch Haidt - The Moral Roots of Liberals and Conservatives https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_haidt_the_moral_roots_of_liberals_and_conservatives
February 1	Are humans inherently self-interested?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feinberg - Moral Motivation and Human Nature (pp. 494-501) • Batson & Shar - Evidence for altruism: Toward a pluralism of prosocial motives 	
February 8	Are moral judgments motivational?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Moral Motivation" section from Doris & Stich - Moral as a matter of fact: Empirical perspectives on ethics (pp. 9-13) • Roskies - Are ethical judgments intrinsically motivational? 	
February 15	Do some moral judgments rely on different brain systems?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greene - Beyond point and shoot morality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch Can you solve this dilemma? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9xHKxrcOPHg
February 22	Does virtue come from good moral character?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Character" section from Doris & Stich - Moral as a matter of fact: Empirical perspectives on ethics (pp. 3-9) 	

	<p>*Asynchronous Lecture, Dr. John Doris:</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxLNKpLcU1k</p> <p>Class will meet from 4:30-5:30 PM*</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (Recommended) Doris - Persons, situations, and virtue ethics 	
March 1	Does morality depend on luck?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nagel - Moral luck • (Recommended) Martin & Cushman - The adaptive logic of moral luck 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to Fiery Cushman on moral luck https://philosophybites.com/2012/06/fiery-cushman-on-moral-luck.html
March 8	Does responsibility require ability?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chituc and Henne - The Data Against Kant https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/21/opinion/sunday/the-data-against-kant.html • Buckwalter - Theoretical motivation of Ought Implies Can • (Recommended) Buckwalter - Ability, responsibility, and global justice 	
March 15	<p>Are we morally responsible for implicit bias?</p> <p>*Asynchronous Lecture, Dr. Anthony Greenwald:</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PluF2WluyYE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brownstein - Implicit Bias (read section 1 and section 4) https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/implicit-bias 	

	Class will meet from 4:30-5:30 PM*		
March 22	<p>Should we have empathy?</p> <p>*Asynchronous Lecture, Dr. Paul Bloom:</p> <p>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWWNUa6kmqE</p> <p>Class will meet from 4:30-5:30 PM*</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bloom - Against empathy (and responses): http://bostonreview.net/forum/paul-bloom-against-empathy 	
March 29	<p>Is disgust a good moral compass?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kelly & Morar - Against the Yuck Factor • Kumar - Foul Behavior 	
April 5	<p>Is it right to be angry?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nussbaum - Transitional anger • Srinivasan - The aptness of anger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch Cherry - Anger is not a bad word https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uysTk2Elotw
April 12	<p>Why does moral disagreement persist?</p> <p>*Asynchronous Lecture, Dr. Stephen Stich:</p> <p>https://www.canal-tv/video/fmsh/the_persistence_of_moral_disagreement.29519</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Moral Disagreement” section from Moral Psychology: Empirical Approaches https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-psych-emp/#MoraDisa 	

	Class will meet from 4:30-5:30 PM*		
April 19	<p>Are we getting better?</p> <p>*Asynchronous Lecture, Dr. Stephen Pinker: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5X2-i_poNU</p> <p>Class will meet from 4:30-5:30 PM*</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Watch Robert Wright - Progress is not a zero sum game https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_wright_progress_is_not_a_zero_sum_game?language=en
April 26	Final session and review	TBA	