

Freshman Seminar 38i: Morality, That Peculiar Institution Harvard University, Fall 2015

Instructor: Prof. Selim Berker

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Office location: Emerson 208

Office hours: Mon., 1:30pm-3:30pm, and by appointment

Description:

The practice of making judgments about right and wrong, of ascribing praise and blame, of deliberating about what one should and should not do—in short, the entire network of commitments, duties, and customs that makes up that peculiar institution known as “morality”—is at once the most firmly grounded and the most problematic of human institutions. On the one hand, morality (or something like it) seems an inevitable and perhaps inescapable component of human life. On the other hand, all attempts to find an ultimate basis for morality—whether it be in the will of God, the dictates of science, the authority of self-evident truths, or the whimsies of subjective desires—have met with failure.

Where does this leave us? What should we do? Is there even such a thing as “what we should do”? Or must there be such a thing, even if we don’t yet know what its ultimate basis is? By drawing on the works of Plato, Hume, Moore, Mackie, Camus, Korsgaard, and others, this seminar will explore a variety of challenges for any attempt at explaining what morality is and what grounds it. Along the way, seminar members will learn how to carefully read a philosophical text, and how to convincingly argue (both in writing and in person) for a philosophical position.

Time and Place: Wed., 1pm-3pm, in Emerson 310

Course URL: <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/5024>

Prerequisites: None, other than an interest in the subject.

Required Texts:

The following books are available for purchase at the Coop:

Plato. *The Trial and Death of Socrates* (3rd edition). Translated by G. M. A. Grube, revised by John M. Cooper. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000.

David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford Philosophical Texts edition). Edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

G. E. Moore. *Principia Ethica*. New York: Dover Publications, 1903/2004.

A. J. Ayer. *Language, Truth, and Logic* (2nd edition). New York: Dover Publications, 1946.

Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus, and Other Essays*. Translated by Justin O’Brien. New York: Vintage, 1955.

A number of additional readings will be available for photocopying in Robbins Library (on the second floor of Emerson Hall) and for downloading on the course website.

Requirements:

Reading, discussing, and writing about the assigned readings will be the central activities of the course. There is a reading assignment for each meeting of the seminar. The readings are often fairly short, but tend to require close study. It is essential that you complete the assigned readings *before* each meeting of the seminar, as our discussions will presuppose familiarity with the material in those readings.

The writing assignments will be as follows:

- a 4-page paper due during the third week of the semester;
- a first 5-page paper due sometime in the middle of the semester;
- a second 5-page paper due at the end of the semester.

In addition, for each meeting of the seminar other than the first, students will be expected to write a paragraph responding in some way to some part of the week's reading assignment. These response paragraphs will provide a springboard for our class discussion, and they should be emailed to <sberker@fas.harvard.edu> by 11pm the day before the seminar meets each week (i.e. by 11pm each Tuesday). Some of the things you could do in your response paragraph:

- provide a reaction to one of the readings as a whole;
- raise an objection to one claim and/or one argument made by one of the authors;
- further expound on a point made by one of the authors that you particularly liked;
- discuss a possible point of interpretation of some crucial passage;
- ask some questions about a part of the text you didn't fully understand;
- connect some part of the reading to one of the previous readings during the course.

In particular, note that the first of these is only one option among many—it's really up to you what you want to talk about in your paragraph, and you shouldn't feel obligated to always pass judgment on each reading as a whole.

Academic Integrity Policy – Collaboration Permitted in Written Work:

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices in this discipline and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work. If you received any help with your writing (feedback on drafts, etc.), you must also acknowledge this assistance. Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this course.

Laptop Use:

You are allowed to use laptops for note taking during seminar meetings, *but only if your internet connection is turned off*. If the instructor discovers evidence that people are trolling the internet during class, all laptop use will be banned (except for those students who need to use them for medical reasons).

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:

Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present the instructor with a Faculty Letter from the Accessibility Education Office (AEO) by the end of the second complete week of term. Failure to do so may result in the instructor's inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential.

Departmental Writing Fellow: Michael Rabenberg

Email: rabenbergm@gmail.com

Website: <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/phil-dwf/home>

Office location: Emerson 003

The Department Writing Fellow (DWF) is available to all undergraduates enrolled in philosophy courses to discuss their writing. Whether you need help starting a paper, formulating an argument, editing a draft, or figuring out the conventions of philosophical writing, the DWF can help. To set up an appointment with the DWF, visit the above URL.

On Fri., Sept. 11, at 4:00pm-5:30pm, in Emerson 101, the DWF will be giving a lecture on the nuts and bolts of writing philosophy papers. All are welcome to attend.

Reading and Meeting Schedule:

Wed., Sept. 9: Introduction

Plato, *Euthyphro*

Wed., Sept. 16: The Euthyphro Dilemma

Philip L. Quinn, "God and Morality"

Louise Antony, "Good Minus God"

Steve Lovell, "C. S. Lewis and the Euthyphro Dilemma"

Wed., Sept. 23: NO CLASS (instructor out of town)

Wed., Sept. 30: The Motivational Argument

David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, §2.3.3 (pp. 265-268; annotations on pp. 524-526) &

§§3.1.1-2 (pp. 293-306; annotations on pp. 533-539)

[*optional:* the Editor's Introduction to §2.3.3 (pp. I 70-72) and to §§3.1.1-2 (pp. I 74-80)]

Wed., Oct. 7: The "Is"/"Ought" Gap

John Searle, "How to Derive 'Ought' from 'Is' "

Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Moral and Nonmoral"

Wed., Oct. 14: The Naturalistic Fallacy

G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, preface (pp. iii-viii) & ch. 1, §§1-15 (pp. 1-21)

Wed., Oct. 21: Emotivism

A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic*, preface to 1st edition (pp. 31-32) & ch. 6 (pp. 102-120)

Wed., Oct. 28: Relativism (Pt. 1)

Gilbert Harman, "Explaining Moral Diversity"

Gilbert Harman, "Moral Diversity as an Argument for Moral Relativism"

Wed., Nov. 4: Relativism (Pt. 2)

Bernard Williams, "Interlude: Relativism"

Geoffrey Harrison, "Relativism and Tolerance"

Wed., Nov. 11: Nihilism

J. L. Mackie, "The Subjectivity of Values"

Wed., Nov. 18: Is Life Absurd?

Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, pp. v-vi, 3-16, 28-31, 51-65, 119-123

Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd"

Wed., Nov. 25: NO CLASS (Thanksgiving break)

Wed., Dec. 2: Is Objective Morality Inevitable?

Ronald Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth: You'd Better Believe It," pp. 87-129

Wed., Dec. 9: Is Autonomy the Source of Morality? (MAKE-UP CLASS)

Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Tanner Lectures), lecture 1 (pp. 21-49) & lecture 3 (pp. 77-108)