

Ethics and Evolution (HCOL 185) – Fall 2016

Course Syllabus

Course and Instructor Information:

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Office Hours: Tuesday & Thurs.: 11:30 – 1:00
(and by appointment)

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Course Description:

Evolutionary theory suggests that individuals are motivated by self-interest, a “survival instinct”, which promotes self-preservation sometimes at the cost of the interests of others. On the other hand, it is hard to deny that many people behave altruistically, with moral regard for others, and in fact make extreme sacrifices for moral reasons to benefit others. How then can morality be squared with the principles of evolution? In this class, we will explore this issue in detail. Several responses will be considered. Perhaps altruism, and morality generally, is an illusion? This is a response considered at the very origins of moral philosophy, in Plato’s Republic. Perhaps behavior that seems to be other oriented is actually motivated by self-interest? Egoism has a long tradition and has gained some support from evolutionary theory. Perhaps moral norms are just mechanisms for controlling selfishness? On the other hand, there may be evolutionary benefits conferred on groups that promote altruism and concern for non-members. We will spend some time exploring some of the difficulties and resources of a group selection model of the evolution of ethics. In doing so, we will explore a variety of cultural norms and beliefs that evolutionary anthropologist have used as evidence of a group selection model. We will also draw on resources in the growing field of moral anthropology that survey the variety of social and cultural norms in an effort to identify common features and principles that are trans-cultural. In considering the conflicts between various cultures moral norms, we will ask whether an objective or universal notion of morality can be sustained, and if not, what becomes of ethics in light of evolutionary theory. In doing so, we will be asking whether our ethical beliefs are attempts to describe objective features of the world we live in or whether they are merely the cultural artifacts of highly evolved and very diverse humans.

Required Texts:

An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics, Scott M. James (author), 2010, Wiley-Blackwell

ISBN: 978-1-4051-9396-2

Additional readings will be made available through our Blackboard site.

Assignments and grades:

150 points -- Homework. Each week students will be assigned some form of written homework. These will be mostly short, informal writing assignments designed to encourage reflection and careful thinking about the course readings and content. Some of the homework will be peer review assignments facilitated through the Eli Peer review website that we will be incorporating into our class. Some of the homework will be a homework journal that only I will see and the rest will be online discussion board postings. The homework will be submitted through our Blackboard site.

200 points -- Quizzes. There will be 4 random reading quizzes (50 pts each). These are quizzes designed to appraise your comprehension of the readings and the course material. These could be short multiple choice or short answer exams, or they could be short writing assignments in response to a prompt. All quizzes are open note quizzes, meaning that you can use any notes that you have written in a notebook. Therefore, you should take notes in something that you can use on a quiz, such as a spiral or bound notebook, and you should take lots of notes.

- 300 points** -- **Analyses papers.** You will write three (3) short papers at roughly the 1/3 points for the course. Each will be worth 100 points. These will be 500-700 words, and will aim to provide a succinct and focused critical analyses of a reading, issue or concept that we will discuss in class. These will emphasize critical reasoning and careful explication of the concept or theory under review. A detailed description and discussion of this assignment will be given when assigned. They will involve peer review through the Eli program.
- 200 points** -- **A Final Exam.** This will cover material from the mid-term to the end of the class. Like the Mid-term, a list of questions (usually around 7-8) will be handed out one week prior to the exam and I will pick 3 or 4 questions on the day of the exam for you to answer. No notes or other material is allowed for the final.
- 150 points** -- **Participation.** I expect everyone to participate in class discussion. This requires coming to class prepared and ready to actively involve yourself in the material, the discussion, and the ideas. A grade will be calculated for this and the percentage for this grade will be applied to the 150 points. Some days, I will base this grade simply on attendance, other days I will base it on questions, responses and in-class discussion – you will not necessarily know how I am calculating the participation on any given day. Attendance is required. This will count toward your participation grade. You may and should use the online area to supplement or continue in class discussions, ask questions, seek clarifications, etc.

Total Possible Class Points = 1000 points

Grading scale: (The same percentages apply to individual item grades)

A	= 1000 – 920 points	(100% - 92%)	C	= 720 – 780 points	(72% - 78%)
A-	= 920 – 900 points	(92% - 90%)	C-	= 700 – 720 points	(70% - 72%)
B+	= 880 – 900 points	(88% - 90%)	D+	= 680 -- 700 points	(68% - 70%)
B	= 820 – 880 points	(82% - 88%)	D	= 620 – 680 points	(62% - 68%)
B-	= 800 – 820 points	(80% - 82%)	D-	= 600 – 620 points	(60% - 62%)
C+	= 780 – 800 points	(78% - 80%)	F	= below 600 points	(Below 60 %)

Learning objectives:

1. Students will learn about the basic principles of evolutionary theory, particularly in relationship to the field of “sociobiology”, the attempt to explain human behavior in evolutionary terms.
2. Students will learn about the debate concerning group selection models of natural selection vs individual models.
3. Students will examine the ethnographic research used in moral anthropology to support the view that there are universal ethical norms and principles, and so indirectly supporting group selection accounts.
4. Students will learn about the emerging field of moral anthropology, how its research has been deployed in the debate about the evolutionary explanation of morality, and some of the criticisms of this field.
5. Students will learn about some of the commonalities in ethical belief systems and behavior that moral anthropologists have argued various seemingly quite distinct, and even adversarial, cultures have in common.
6. Students will learn about metaethics, ethical relativism, non-cognitivism, moral naturalism and non-naturalism
7. Students will learn to engage critically with ethical theories and learn to engage in moral dialogue and debate.

Some Class Policies:

- ☹ **Attendance in this class is part of the grade. I expect everyone to attend class and to participate.** If you have to miss class, you need to let me know *prior to class* either by e-mail or phone that you cannot attend. **I will only allow students to make-up quizzes or other assignments if they have notified me before class or if they can demonstrate other reasonable circumstances.**
- ☹ **If you miss more than 15 minutes of class, I will count this as an absence.**
Incompletes are only granted by the Dean of Arts and Sciences
- ☹ Come to class with the assigned reading completed and questions or notes for discussion, and be prepared to discuss the material.
- ☹ Please try to be on time. If you are late, be courteous and minimize distractions. Chronic tardiness is unacceptable and will result in a loss of points.
- ☹ If I am not in class after 15 minutes, you can assume that something unforeseen came up and we will consider the class cancelled.
- ☹ I don't mind food or drinks in class, but please don't make a scene and if you spill it, you clean it up.
- ☹ Religious Holidays: Students have the right to practice the religion of their choice. Each semester students should submit in writing to their instructors by the end of the second full week of classes their documented religious holiday schedule for the semester. Faculty must permit students who miss work for the purpose of religious observance to make up this work.
- ☹ **Do not sleep in this class!!** This is incredibly rude and annoying and I take it personally. If you need to get up, use the restroom and walk around, please do this instead. Otherwise, I will ask you to leave.
- ☹ Exemplify behavior appropriate to a classroom setting. This seems simple, but slouching, having feet up, rolling your eyes, huffing, puffing, nodding off, goofing off, doodling... Be engaged and alert.
- ☹ Plagiarism of any sort in this class will result in an automatic "F" and full prosecution under UVM policies! I am absolutely intolerant of any sort of plagiarism. There are many opportunities to copy work off the internet or other places. There will be opportunities to use the work of other students. Do not do it! It is easy to catch and I am unforgiving of plagiarism.
- ☹ If a cell phone goes off during class I will confiscate it and repeatedly make hour long calls to my friends in Europe and Asia. Make sure your cell phones are off.
- ☹ Please don't talk when others are talking, including me.
- ☹ **I do not offer extra-credit work.** The only way to shore up a sagging grade is to work harder!
- ☹ **I do not accept late work or offer makeup work, unless** there is a legitimate reason for having failed to turn in the assignment. I don't consider failure to plan ahead a legitimate reason for not turning in an assignment; for example, if your printer runs out of ink right before class or your computer crashes the night before an assignment is due. If you feel that you have a legitimate reason for missing an assignment, we can always talk it over. You can always email me an assignment.
- ☹ **If you are given the opportunity to make up missed assignments, this must be completed as soon as possible.** I will not give "indefinite extensions" and it is the student's responsibility to follow through on makeup assignments.
- ☹ I do not allow computers or mobile devices to be used during class time. If you have some special circumstance that you would like to discuss, please do and we may be able to make other arrangements.

Course Schedule

Preliminaries and Advice: This is the outline of the reading and a (rough) description of the topics we will be covering. Here are some points to remember. Read the material before the class or week in which we will discuss it. Take notes and write down questions, and think about the topics. During the week in which we are discussing the assigned readings, you suggest a brief review and re-reading to integrate class discussions and lectures into your understanding of the topics. Remember, also, that any notes you write in your notebook you can use on any of the Quizzes. This is to encourage you to take good notes not only in class, but while you are studying the material. This Schedule is subject to change depending on any number of factors.

Module 1: The Theory of Evolution and its implications

Natural Selection, Darwin, (pdf online)

Accumulating Small Change, Dawkins (pdf online)

Module 2: Evolutionary Explanations of Human Behavior

Darwinism in Contemporary Moral Philosophy and Social Theory, Rosenberg (pdf online)

On Human Nature, Wilson (pdf online)

Sociobiology: The New Synthesis (pdf online)

Module 3: *An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics*

Introduction: A Philosopher and a Biologist Walk into a Bar . . . 1-6 (*IEE, James*)

Part I. From “Selfish Genes” to Moral Beings: Moral Psychology after Darwin 7-10 (*IEE, James*)

1 Natural Selection and Human Nature 11-28 (*IEE, James*)

Module 4: *An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics*

2 The (Earliest) Roots of Right 29-47 (*IEE, James*)

3 The Caveman’s Conscience: The Evolution of Human Morality 48-65 (*IEE, James*)

Module 5: *An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics*

4 Just Deserts 66-86 (*IEE, James*)

5 The Science of Virtue and Vice 87-116 (*IEE, James*)

Module 6: *An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics*

Part II. From “What Is” to “What Ought To Be”: Moral Philosophy after Darwin 117-120 (*IEE, James*)

6 Social Harmony: The Good, the Bad, and the Biologically Ugly 121-130 (*IEE, James*)

7 Hume’s Law 132-142 (*IEE, James*)

Module 7: *An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics*

8 Moore’s Naturalistic Fallacy 143-149 (*IEE, James*)

9 Rethinking Moore and Hume 150-160 (*IEE, James*)

Module 8: *An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics*

10 Evolutionary Anti-Realism: Early Efforts 161-177 (*IEE, James*)

11 Contemporary Evolutionary Anti-Realism 178-184 (*IEE, James*)

11.3 Conclusion 185 (*IEE, James*)

Module 9: Moral Anthropology: Moral Diversity

Anti-relativism, Clyde Kluckhohn (pdf online)

Anti-anti-relativism, Clifford Geertz (pdf online)

The moral person in context, Kenneth Read (pdf online)

Sentiments and Consciousness, Steven Parish (pdf online).