

Ethics and Evolution (HCOL 185) – Fall 2018

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, so the story goes, is driven by a “survival instinct”: self-preservation, sometimes at the cost of others. Yet, it is hard to deny that many people behave altruistically and with a moral regard for others. Some people even make extreme sacrifices to benefit others for moral reasons. How can morality be squared with the principles of evolution? This is the issue will explore. 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 altruistic oriented is actually motivated by self-interest? Egoism has a long tradition, but is a contentious topic from an evolutionary perspective. Afterall, what advantages could “selfishness” confer at the level of the organism? (And Dawkins “Selfish Gene” metaphor only complicates the issues). 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 the group selection model for the evolution of ethics. Evolutionary explanations for the emergence and development of moral attitudes and norms takes two routes: one attempts to fit our basic moral conceptions within an evolutionary account, the other attempts to “debunk” the authority of moral attitudes and norms (albeit while preserving some core “moral” notions of “what we have good reasons for doing”). We will track this debate. We will also look to recent work in Moral Anthropology that tries to account for the development of morality as a natural, social and anthropological phenomenon and try to evaluate whether this work supports any particular view of the evolution of ethics.

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, sometimes in the form of journal entries, often times in the form of questions posted to the discussion board on Blackboard. Regarding the latter, the class will be divided into 4 groups. At various points throughout the term, I will ask one of the groups to post a question to the discussion board and another group to respond by weeks end to those questions. The questions are simply ones that you think would make for good discussion in class, or that you need help understanding, or that you want to talk about, or that you are interested in etc. Classmates from the other assigned group will then pick a question to answer by the end of the week. All homework assignments are designed to be low-stress, low-stake ways to get you to reflect on the course topics in alternative ways.

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.

200 points -- Analyses papers. You will write two (2) 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.

100 points -- Discussion Leader. Each student will sign up to lead a class discussion of a paper, chapter or topic for discussion from the syllabus. The goal of this assignment is to summarize and analyze a paper or topic assigned on the syllabus, and then facilitate an interesting and useful discussion of that topic or paper by relating it to questions, themes or issues that we are discussing in the class. The presentation will be accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation. These should be no longer than 20 minutes, and will ideally launch or segue into our class discussion on that day.

200 points -- A Final Research Paper. A 10-page research paper that investigates a topic from the course in more detail. This can be research into the moral or philosophical theories and concepts that we discuss, the scientific and evolutionary theory, research in biology or anthropology, etc. Students will have to submit a mini-prospectus that includes a thesis statement, paper outline, and 5 – 7 sources. This will be due at the time of the final exam for the course. There is a Library Research Guide set up for this class and linked in the Blackboard page. We will also meet with a librarian specialist to discuss how to approach this assignment.

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, having annoying sidebar conversations, jokes, etc.... are inappropriate. 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 generally 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. 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 as backup.

- ⊗ If you are given the opportunity to make up missed assignments, this must be completed as soon as possible.
- ⊗ 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

1. *Natural Selection*, Darwin, [Natural Selection.pdf](#) ↴
 2. *Accumulating Small Change*, Dawkins [Dawkins Small change and chance.pdf](#) ↴
- Supplementary material:
1. [Beatty Chance and Natural Selection.pdf](#) ↴
 2. [Eugenia Scott Evolution.pdf](#) ↴

Module 2: Evolutionary Explanations of Human Behavior

- *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* [Wilson Sociobiology.pdf](#) ↴
- *Darwinism in Contemporary Moral Philosophy and Social Theory*, Rosenberg [Rosenberg Moral and Social theory.pdf](#) ↴
- [What is Sociobiology?](#) ↴ Philip Kitcher, in *Vaulting Ambitions* MIT, 1987

Module 3: What is morality? Moral realism, anti-realism, and other accounts...

- "Moral Realism: Prospects and Problems," Peter Railton, 1996. (From Sinnott-Armstrong and Timmons (eds.), *Moral Knowledge?*, Oxford University Press)

Module 4: *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 5: 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 6: An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics

- 4 Just Deserts 66-86 (IEE, James)
- 5 The Science of Virtue and Vice 87-116 (IEE, James)

Module 7: 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 8: An Introduction to Evolutionary Ethics

- 8 Moore’s Naturalistic Fallacy 143-149 (IEE, James)
- 9 Rethinking Moore and Hume 150-160 (IEE, James)

Module 9: 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 10: 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).