Why be good?

DAMIEN STOREY | FALL 2019 | VERSION 1.1

Important: check the version number to make sure you have the latest version of this document.

When & where: MO/WE 11:30 – 12:45, SNA158
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COURSE PARTICULARS

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Why should we act ethically? If it is in our interest and we can get away with it, is it not wiser to act unethically? The aim of this course is to try to answer these questions systematically, to see if a rigorous case can be made for acting ethically rather than unethically. Drawing on research on ethical behaviour from various disciplines—including philosophy, psychology, evolutionary biology, and neuroscience—we will examine the motivations behind ethical actions, the status of ethical 'truths', and the relationship (if any) between an ethical life and a happy life.

COURSE OVERVIEW

Part 1: Are we all, deep down, selfish? Here we examine arguments for and against the idea that being selfish is just a fact of human nature, taking an especially close look at how unselfish behaviour might have evolved.

Part 2: Are we responsible for our actions? [New] To be responsible for our actions it must be the case (it seems) that we could have freely done otherwise? But is this ever true?

Part 3: Can ethical claims be true? Ethics is sometimes dismissed as just a 'social construct'; or as people mistaking their feelings for facts; or as a 'folk' understanding of human behaviour that disappears when examined more scientifically. Here we consider whether there is any truth to these claims.

Part 4: What reasons do we have to do what's right? What motivates ethical actions? Does a virtuous person do what's right because they see it as *in their interest* to do so; or because they *desire to be good people*; or because they are compelled by *a sense of duty*?

Part 5: Who is happier—a moral or an immoral person? There is something troubling about the possibility that a successful, happy life—a life that any rational person could envy—might also be a deeply vicious life. Here we'll look at the connection between morality and happiness. In particular we'll assess the view that being a good person is a necessary condition for happiness.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the end of this course, students will:

- Have an introductory understanding of the main positions in normative ethics.
- Be able to engage critically and develop positions in a range of debates in metaethics.
- Have a better understanding of the relationship between scientific and 'folk' accounts of ethical behaviour.

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

I keep the weekly reading light and in exchange I expect students to do *all* the required reading, and do it *carefully* (which might mean reading the material multiple times). In addition, students are expected to complete all assessments, attend all lectures, and take an active role in class: listening carefully, asking questions, and engaging in discussion with each other and me.

ASSESSMENT METHODS

The course is assessed by:

1. (33%) *Lecture prep tasks*. These are very short writing tasks you'll be asked to do in about every second lecture. (*Grading.* Six of your tasks, chosen at random in advance, will be graded from F to A+ and your mark will be an average of the best five. Importantly: note that if you miss one of the tasks randomly chosen for you, it will not be replaced by another task.)
2. (33%) *Essay*. Between 1000–1500 words, on one of a choice of topics you'll receive later in the term. (*Grading.* Letter grade, F to A+.)
3. (33%) Two written exams. Both are in-class near the end of the lecture series and will involve questions of various types—from multiple choice to written responses—that could be about any aspect of the course. (*Grading.* Letter grade, F to A+.)

Your grades will always be given to you as one of the following letter grades.

A+	——	Exceptional
A	4.00	Superior
A–	3.70	Above Average
B+	3.30	Above Average
B	3.00	Average
B–	2.70	Average
C+	2.30	Below Average
C	2.00	Below Average
C–	1.70	Borderline
D+	1.30	Deficient
D	1.00	Deficient
F	0.00	Failing

Marking criteria: For many of you, philosophy is a new subject and you might be wondering about the marking criteria for written work. The very best way to understand this is to look carefully at my writing advice (in the final pages of this PDF) and at Jim Pryor's excellent advice about writing philosophy: Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Essay.

COURSE POLICIES

Course material. All required reading will be on Blackboard (BB) at least a week prior to the relevant lecture. Optional reading will not usually be on BB, but the library exists. Except in

exceptional circumstances, slides and handouts will not be on BB.

Late work. Late essays will lose marks at the rate of one full letter grade per week (e.g. a B– essay will get a C– if it is two days late and a D– if it is ten days late). In-class tasks cannot be done later than the class.

Extensions and exemptions. Extensions and exemptions are possible (though not guaranteed) if both of two conditions are met: (a) they are for official academic or medical reasons (with appropriate documentation) and (b) I am made aware of the request *before* the due date.

Assessments and grades. All students have the opportunity to attempt the same work load and their final grade reflects the academic merit of the work they produce. Students cannot achieve grades in any other way.

Referencing and plagiarism. Plagiarism is the presentation of someone else's work without acknowledgement—*whether deliberate or accidental*—such that someone might reasonably mistake it for your own work. The university's guidelines are here. Plagiarism is a *very* serious offence even if it is just a couple of lines and even if it is accidental: it is entirely *your* responsibility to learn what plagiarism is. If you are caught plagiarising, the minimum you can expect, in very mild cases, is failing the plagiarised component, but in most cases you will receive an F for the entire course and be reported for academic misconduct. If you're in any way unsure about plagiarism, please ask me.

ESSAY TITLES

For these essays, you need to find your own extra reading beyond what is already listed in the syllabus. However, just as examples, I've listed some extra reading under each question. This is not on Blackboard and you'll need to find the articles yourself.

1. To be morally responsible for my actions, must I be morally responsible for my character?

1. Harry G. Frankfurt 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person' in Watson (ed.) *Free Will*, 2nd edition (OUP: Oxford, 2003)
2. Gary Watson 'Free Agency' in Watson (ed.)
3. Susan Wolf 'Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility' in Watson (ed.)
4. J. M. Fischer 'The Cards That Are Dealt You' *The Journal of Ethics* 10 (2006) 107–129 [Response to Strawson]

2. Clearly and precisely explain (a) moral non-cognitivism and (b) the Frege–Geach problem. Is there any adequate solution to the Frege–Geach problem?

1. M. van Roojen 'Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism' in *The Stanford Enclopedia of Philosophy*
2. P.T. Geach 'Ascriptivism' *Philosophical Review* 69 (1960) 221–225

3. S. Blackburn *Spreading the Word* (OUP: Oxford, 1984), sections 5.6 (pp. 167–171) and section 6.2 (pp. 189–196)
4. M. Schroeder 'What is the Frege-Geach problem?' *Philosophy Compass* 3/4 (2008) 703–720

3. What does evolutionary theory have to tell us about morality?

1. Douglas Allchin 'The Evolution of Morality' *Evolution: Education and Outreach* 2 (2009) 590–601
2. Edward O. Wilson The Atlantic Monthly (1998) 53-70
3. B. Garvey 'The Evolution of Morality and Its Rollback' *History Philosophy Life Sciences* 40 (2008)

4. Is Aristotelian naturalism a promising form of moral realism?

1. James Lenman 'Moral Naturalism', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*
2. Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics*, books 1–6
3. Rosalind Hursthouse *On Virtue Ethics*, *op. cit.*, chapters 9–11
4. Julia Annas 'Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism?' in Stephen M. Gardiner (ed.) Virtue Ethics Old and New (Cornell University Press: Cornell, 2005) pp. 11–29

LECTURE OUTLINE

PART 1: ARE WE ALL, DEEP DOWN, SELFISH?

How would you act if you could get away with anyting?
Week 1: Lecture 1 & 2

- Plato, *Republic*, book II, 359c–360d ('Gyges' ring allegory') [about 2 pages]
- *This American Life* (podcast), segment: 'Flight *vs.* Invisibility'
- And optionally: Robert Shaver 'Egoism' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Did we evolve to be selfish?
Week 2: Lecture 3 & 4

- *Radiolab* (podcast), episode: 'The Good Show'
- William FitzPatrick 'Morality and Evolutionary Biology' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, up to end of section 2.
- *And optionally, for the virtuous:* P. Kitchner (2006) 'Between Fragile Altruism and Morality: Evolution and the Emergence of Normative Guidance 'in G. Boniolo and G. De Anna (eds) *Evolutionary Ethics and Contemporary Biology* (CUP: Cambridge) pp. 159–77

Amoralists and psychopaths.
Week 3: Lecture 5

- Bernard Williams (1993) 'The Amoralist' in *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (CUP: Cambridge, 1993), pp. 3–12 [9 pages]

PART 2: ARE WE RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR ACTIONS?

Do we have any control over how we act?
Week 3: Lecture 6

- *Radiolab* (podcast), episode: 'Is Free-Will Really Free?'

Are we responsible for our character?
Week 4: Lecture 7 & 8

- Robert Kane *Free Will: A Contemporary Introduction* (OUP: Oxford, 2005), chapter 11
- *And optionally, for the virtuous:* Galen Strawson 'The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility' in Gary Watson (ed.) *Free Will*, 2nd edition (OUP: Oxford, 2003)

PART 3: CAN ETHICAL CLAIMS BE TRUE?

It's all just feelings!
Week 5: Lecture 9 & 10

- A. J. Ayer *Language, Truth, and Logic*, chapter 6, pp. 104–118 [A classic statement of 'emotivism']

It's all relative!
Week 6: Lecture 11 & 12

- David Enoch (2014) 'Why I am an Objectivist about Ethics (And Why You Are, Too)' in Russ Shafer Landau (ed.), *The Ethical Life* 3rd ed. (Oxford: OUP)

Can there be universal ethical truths? If so, how?
Week 7: Lecture 13 & 14

- TBD
- *And optionally, for the virtuous:* Jonathan Dancy (1998) 'Moral Realism' *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [about 10 pages]

If ethics is explained by evolution, is our everyday understanding of it mistaken?
Week 8: Lecture 15 & 16

- Richard Joyce (2016) 'Evolution and Moral Naturalism' in K. J. Clark (ed), *The Blackwell Companion to Naturalism* (Blackwell: Oxford) 369–385.
- *And optionally, for the virtuous:* William FitzPatrick 'Morality and Evolutionary Biology' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

What about if it is explained by neuroscience?
Week 9: Lecture 17

- Radiolab (the podcast), episode: 'Morality'
- *And optionally, for the virtuous:* Sabine Roeser (2010) 'Intuitions, emotions and gut reactions in decisions about risks: towards a different interpretation of 'neuroethics'', *Journal of Risk Research*, 13:2, 175–190.

Recap/short in-class exam
Week 9: Lecture 18 — Wednesday 13th of November

PART 4: WHAT REASONS DO WE HAVE TO DO WHAT'S RIGHT?

'We are not conscripts in the army of duty, but volunteers!'
Week 10: Lecture 19 & 20

- Philippa Foot, 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives' *The Philosophical Review* 81 (1972) 305–316
- *And optionally, for the virtuous:* Elizabeth Anscombe 'Modern Moral Philosophy' *Philosophy* 33 (1958)

If I don't *want* to act ethically, do I have a *reason* to act ethically?
Week 11: Lecture 21

- Errol Lord and David Plunkett (2017) 'Reasons internalism' in McPherson and Plunkett (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics* (Taylor and Francis), pp, 324–339
- *And optionally, for the virtuous:* Finlay and Schroeder 'Reasons for Action: Internal vs. External' in *The Stanford Enclopedia of Philosophy*

Is a truly moral life a desirable or undesirable life?
Week 11: Lecture 22 & 23

– Susan Wolf 'Moral Saints' *The Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982) 419–439

Can an immoralist be happy?
Week 12: Lecture 24 & 25

– Steven M. Cahn 'The Happy Immoralist' *Journal of Social Philosophy* 35 (2004) 1–20

A naturalist account of happiness.
Week 13: Lecture 26

– Rosalind Hursthouse 'Neo-Aristotelian Ethical Naturalism' in Hugh LaFollette (ed) *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics* [9 pages]

In-class exam.
Week 14: Lecture 27 — Wednesday 18th of December

SOME ESSAY & WRITING ADVICE

WRITING PHILOSOPHY

Please pay close attention to the following advice, especially 1 and 2. They try to cater for the most common and most easily solved problems I find in students' writing. Please take them seriously.

1. *Explain*. In short: explain *everything*. It should be possible for an intelligent peer who hasn't studied philosophy to *fully* understand your essay without needing to read the authors you're writing about. For example: if you use a technical term that has particular significance for an author, make sure you clearly define it. Similarly, for any argument or position you discuss, you must clearly and fully explain it to your reader. This is partly because good academic writing should be explicit and easily understood, but it is also because your ability to explain the ideas you're discussing—clearly, precisely, and succinctly—is what you're being assessed on. Your readers, inclusing your grader, know that you understand something only if, and to the extent that, you've succesfully explained it. Don't expect anyone to just assume you understand something that you've failed to explain. You might well know, for example, what a categorical imperative is, but you need to *show* that you know it and how precisely you know it. Explaining even small, simple ideas well is a lot harder than you might think; don't underestimate how important it is, and how much work it takes.

2. *Justify*. Assume that for every claim you make, the reader is asking 'why on earth should I believe that?' In a philosophy essay, there should always be an excellent answer to this question. You should consider this to be, above all else, your aim when writing an essay. The worst thing you can do is to make bold assertions without defending them, and the second worst is to make bold assertions and defend them weakly. Note that this includes interpretive claims: if you write 'Plato believes that p', you need to show your reader, perhaps by giving a supporting quote, that this is indeed something Plato believes.

   A bad essay: 'p!'
   A good essay: 'For reasons x, y, and z, it seems that p.'
   An excellent essay: 'Reasons x, y, and z give us good grounds for thinking that p, although someone might offer an objection along the following lines … However, I think there is a promising response to this objection …'

3. *Use headings*. Before you start writing, sketch a structure for your essay. When writing, use headings that reflect this structure. A typical essay might have 2–4 headings.

4. *First understand, then assess*. Be careful not to rush into criticisms of what you read before you've fully understood it. Approach everything you read with charity. That is, assume that the author has thought intelligently and carefully about what they've written, so is unlikely to have made obvious mistakes. For example, if you notice a *prima facie* objection to something you're reading, read it again carefully to see if there's a way

to understand it that avoids the objection or try to think of a plausible implicit assumption the author might have made that caters for the objection.

5. *Be sufficiently detailed*. The topics you'll consider are broad. Someone could spend years writing hundreds of pages about them, but you have at most a few pages and a few weeks. This presents a challenge: on the one hand, you want to show that you're familiar with the whole topic; on the other hand, you want to do more than simply scratch the surface, never looking at any one issue in detail. This can be a difficult balance to achieve, but in general it is much better to *err on the side of detail*. One approach might be to devote about the first third of your essay to a more general introduction of the topic and then use the last two-thirds to examine one or two smaller points in much greater detail—you might, for example, focus on *one* argument, premise, or objection that you think is especially important or interesting.

6. *Ensure your conclusions reflect your arguments*. You might have been taught that strong, persuasive prose requires confident assertions, rather than hesitant, qualified ones. But in philosophy your assertions should reflect the actual degree of confidence that is warranted by the evidence you've provided. Decisive arguments are rare—even rarer are decisive arguments in just a few lines of a student's essay. So be careful not to mistake considerations that give us a good reason for believing that p for an argument that shows conclusively that p. A good essay is likely to have a large range of (appropriate) qualifying phrases: 'this shows decisively that p'; 'this is a strong reason to believe that p'; 'this suggests that p'; 'this makes it less implausible that p'; and so forth. Be especially careful with strong success verbs like 'refutes', 'proves', or 'shows'.

7. *Show 'independence of thought' rather than 'originality'*. You might think that philosophy encourages you to express your own unique opinions, ones different from those of the authors you read. But originality—the simply fact that an idea is new—has little value by itself and it should not be your aim. After all, an idea can be both original and obviously false. What *has* value is independence of thought. For example, if you agree with the conclusions of a certain author because you fully understand them, have thought critically about their arguments, and carefully assessed alternative possibilities, then you believe nothing original, but you are showing admirable independence of thought.

8. *Use quotes correctly*. Especially in historical subjects, including quotes from relevant primary texts can be an excellent way to illustrate, justify, and give some focus to your discussion. One way (of many) to use a quote is the following: make a claim; present a quote that supports the claim; and then explain and interpret the text of the quote in order to *show* that and why it supports your claim. But two cautions: first, quotes from secondary sources are rarely useful; second, never use a quote as a way of *saying* something—rather, a quote should be presented as evidence *about which* you have something to say.

For more guides to essay writing, see Jim Pryor, Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Essay, and James Lenman, How to Write A Crap Philosophy Essay.

SOME BASICS OF TYPOGRAPHY

The following are a few typographic conventions worth learning.

1. *Indent paragraphs.* But do not indent the opening paragraph of the document or the first paragraph after a section heading. You may instead—not in addition—separate paragraphs with a blank line, although this is better suited to list-like texts, such as legal documents, than continuous prose.
2. *Use single line spacing.* It's easier to read. Double spacing is only necessary when a printed copy of you work will be annotated.
3. *A footnote mark is always placed after punctuation.*[1] It is almost always best to place a footnote at the end of the sentence, *after* the sentence-ending full stop, even if you are referring to something earlier in the sentence. Avoid consecutive footnotes; instead, place all information in one footnote if possible.
4. *Indicate quotes with either quotation marks or by using a block quote.* Extra flourishes, such as italicising, are unnecessary. And never place a block quote within quotation marks.
5. *Learn the difference between a hyphen (-), en-dash (–), and em-dash (—).* Use an en-dash like 'to' in ranges of dates or numbers (e.g. 87–142) and to express certain relationships between words: for example, an 'on–off switch' or 'Irish–American relations'. Either an en- or em-dash can be used to indicate a parenthetical phrase. If you use an en-dash, add a space either side – like so – but em-dashes are always unspaced—like so.
6. *Make ellipses with three full stops separated by spaces.* Like this . . . , with a space either side. You will most commonly use an ellipsis to indicate portions of text that you've omitted from quotes. Don't omit any sentence-ending full stops that precede an ellipsis (i.e. together they make four stops). For example:

   > [P]articular care needs to be exercised when eliding text to ensure that the sense of the original is not lost . . . A deletion must not result in a statement alien to the original material. . . . Accuracy of sense and emphasis must accompany accuracy of transcription. (*CMS*, 16th, 13.49)

7. *Use a single space after full-stops.* A double space, once common, is now rightly recognised as unnecessary.

REFERENCING

In your essays you should reference both quotes and claims or arguments that originate from one of the authors you've been reading. You should also have a bibliography of all the works you've referred to in the text.

You can use whatever bibliographical style you choose, so long as it's consistent. The following is an example of a typical author–year referencing style, starting with what the bibliography will look like:

Book: Author (Year) *Title*, Place: Publisher.

1. This includes full stops, commas, colons, semi-colons, and quotations marks.

Fine, G. (1993) *On Ideas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Freeman, S. (ed.) (2003) *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Article: Author (Year) 'Title', *Journal*, Volume, pp. Pages.

Irwin, T.H. (1977) 'Plato's Heracleiteanism', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 27, pp. 1–13.

Article in book: Author (Year) 'Article Title' in Editor(s) (ed(s).) *Book Title*, Place: Publisher.

Scanlon, T.M. (2003) 'Rawls on Justification' in S. Freeman (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Rawls*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

In-text citation: (Author, Year, Page(s))

It has been argued that the charge of conservativism laid against Rawls' idea of reflective equilibrium is unsound (Scanlon, 2003, pp. 150–151).

Scanlon argues that the charge of conservativism laid against Rawls' reflective equilibrium is unsound (2003, pp. 150–151).