



**The Exeter College Summer Programme
at Exeter College in the University of Oxford**

Good Life or Moral Life?

Course Description

Ever since Socrates claimed that the unexamined life is not worth living, people have been interested in what makes a life good or worth living. How should we decide how to live individually (ethics) and collectively (political theory)? Is morality derived from God? Is it possible to have morality without God? Is the good life one in which everyone lives according to duties and obligations, or one that maximizes happiness? This course is about the way that philosophers try to understand fundamental issues in our personal, social, and political life.

The course will consist of two parts. The first part will introduce key issues in moral philosophy and the second part will focus on two recent Anglo-American philosophers.

Topics in the first half of the course are focused around the question “What is a good life?” and include basic issues in the history of ethics. To answer this main question, we need to ask several related questions:

- Are values determined by cultures?
- What is a virtuous person (Aristotle)?
- Is morality possible without God (Nietzsche)?
- What makes human actions right or wrong - the actor's intention (Kant) or the action's consequences (Bentham)?
- Is goodness a property that objects possess independently of us, or is it just an expression of how we feel about them (Hume)?
- How can we determine whether serious actions such as abortion or euthanasia are right or wrong?

In the second half of the course, we shall look at the work of two recent philosophers:

- Bernard Williams's *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*; and
- Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope*.

Bernard Williams was a student and professor at Oxford, and a major twentieth century philosopher. Williams considers historical attempts at explaining morality and the relationship between science and ethics. He offers some suggestions about what we can and cannot hope to find out about how to live from philosophy.

Courage in warfare was central to the Crow nation's conception of what it meant to live well. In the nineteenth century, the US Government prevented Indian tribes from engaging in warfare with one another. This brought to an end an entire way of life for the Crow people: it was no longer possible to live a good life as they had always understood that. Jonathan Lear asks how Plenty Coups, the last great Chief of the Crow, was able to cope with this cultural devastation, and how Plenty Coups was able to find a new sense of what it meant to be courageous – and hence to live a good life – in a radically different world; a world in which old values no longer made sense. In developing his account, Lear draws on insights from Bernard Williams, as well as Aristotle, Freud, and Kierkegaard, to provide an account of what he thinks it is to be human. Jonathan Lear is currently a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago and a former Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge.

Objectives of the Course

The course is designed to be *non-technical*. To this end, our course is intended to impart knowledge and learning skills which are both subject-specific and generic. *No prior knowledge of philosophy is required.*

Teaching Methods and Assessment

- 12 x 1.25hr Lectures (15hrs)
- 6 x 1.25hr Seminars (7.5hrs)
- 4 x 1.25hr Tutorials (5hrs)

The lectures aim to present the material, while the seminars aim to discuss the material presented in the lectures and the readings. Readings to be discussed in seminars will be found in the course reader distributed at the first lecture and in two set texts which students will be available in the library at Exeter College.

Final Assessment: An essay of between 2,500 – 3,000 words (40%), a final 3hr written examination (40%), oral presentation (10%) and participation in seminar and tutorial discussions (10%).

Lecture List

Sources of Morality

What is the source of morality? What makes something right or wrong, good or bad?

- Assuming that God exists, does God cause things to be right or wrong? (supernaturalism)
- Does denying the existence of God force the atheist to deny that anything really is right or wrong? (moral scepticism)
- If not God, does a particular society cause things to be right or wrong in that society? (cultural relativism)
- Is morality something independent of agents (about which agents can discover facts), or is morality a matter of individual agents imbuing the world with their own sentiments? (moral anti-realism)
- Are claims about morality facts about how the world actually is, or just a special way of using language to talk about the world? (emotivism)

1. Introduction and Overview of the Course
2. Origin of Morality and End of Morality

Three Approaches to Substantive Morality

Assuming that we can agree about the source of morality, are moral claims concerned with the status of agents or the actions that they take?

- Is morality concerned with describing the nature of moral agents who enjoy a good life? (virtue ethics)
- Is morality concerned with explaining the kind of reasons for action that make actions moral or immoral? (deontology)
- Is morality a matter of determining which actions have the best outcome? (consequentialism)

3. Good Agents or Good Actions?
4. Morality as Good Reasons for Action
5. Morality as Good Consequences of Actions
6. Practical Introduction to Essay-writing in Philosophy

Bernard Williams

Whereas the first half of the course offered a survey of different approaches to meta-ethics and substantive ethics in the history of philosophy, second half offers a close study of one philosopher's approach to ethics. This approach consists of a negative strand (Williams's rejection of historical approaches) and a positive strand (Williams's attempt to develop an approach that he thinks is more plausible). Bernard Williams

argues that none of the previous philosophical theories of ethics works. He believes that it is a mistake to expect philosophy to provide a substantive theory of ethics. Instead, he provides an account of the limited sense in which he believes philosophy can help us understand ethics.

7. [Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy: A critique of philosophical ethics](#)
8. [Williams's Positive Contribution to Ethics: Thick Ethical Concepts](#)
9. [Reflecting on Williams and his contemporaries](#)

Philosophical Ethics and the Practice of Life

In the final part of this course, we shall examine Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope*. This provides an example of how the abstract ideas we have discussed in the course can be applied to understanding particular problems in moral life. Lear is interested in explaining why cultural devastation threatens to destroy the possibility of living a good life, and how it is possible for us to overcome this threat and find a way to live a good life.

Finally, we shall return to the original problem about whether we should be concerned with pursuing an account of the good life or the moral life. Raymond Geuss charts three ways of thinking about the good life, and argues that what matters is not ethics (in the philosophical sense), but something that lies outside ethics. The final seminar will offer an opportunity to engage in attempts to think about the application of the issues raised in this course to how we live our lives; the philosophical problems that practical situations give rise to; and the sort of questions we should ask about the philosophical approaches to these practical issues.

10. [Jonathan Lear: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation](#)
11. [Jonathan Lear: Ethics in the face of cultural devastation continued](#)
12. [Conclusion and revision](#)

Seminar List

1. Cultural Relativism

Compulsory readings for this seminar

- Extracts from George, A. (ed.), *I Am, Therefore I Think* (Reading 1)
- Rachels, J., "The Challenge of Cultural Relativism" (Reading 2)
- Plato, *Euthyphro* (Reading 3)

2. Virtue Ethics and Wellbeing

Compulsory readings for this seminar

- Well-being readings (Reading 4)

- Williams, B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Chapter 3, pp. 30-53
- Lear, J., *Radical Hope* [this is a set text for later in the course, however, the introduction to Aristotle's ethics will be useful at this point]

3. Deontology and Consequentialism

Compulsory readings for this seminar

- Kant, I., *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Readings 5 & 6)
- Bentham, J., "The Principle of Utility" (Reading 7)

4. Williams's negative project

Compulsory readings for this seminar

- Williams, B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7 (pp 54-131)

5. Williams's positive project

Compulsory readings for this seminar

- Williams, B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* Chapters 8, 9, 10 (pp 132-202)

6. Lear's project

Compulsory readings for this seminar

- Lear, J., *Radical Hope*
- Geuss, R., "Outside Ethics" (Reading 8)

Compulsory Reading List

All seminar readings (other than the two set texts) are in your course handbooks. Most of the other suggested readings can be found in Exeter library. You must read the seminar readings prior to the seminars. It would be helpful to try and keep up with the readings related to the lectures, however the lectures will not assume knowledge of the readings.

Course Reading List

This is a complete course reading list, which includes the above and other readings. Students will receive reading instructions on selected texts from this list after their arrival in Oxford:

Useful Reference Works

There are several useful reference works on ethics in the library which you should consult regularly during the course. All are in short loan. They contain short-ish introductory overviews of all of the main issues we shall examine and extracts from classic texts:

Rachels, J., *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1986)
Singer, P. (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)
Singer, P., *Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1994)
Cahn, S. M. and P. Markie (eds), *Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1998)

Set texts

There are two set texts in addition to those in the reader:

Williams, B., *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2006)
Lear, J., *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006)

Bibliography

Further Reading on Supernaturalism, Moral Scepticism and Anti-Realism:

Gensler, H. J., "Supernaturalism" in *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Routledge, 1998), Chapt III, pp. 33-45 [Introduction to supernaturalism in ethics]
Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (various editions, e.g. Cambridge University Press)
Schacht, R. (ed), *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality* (University of California Press, 1994)
Ayer, A. J., "Critique of Ethics and Theology", in *Language, Truth and Logic*, (London: Gollancz; 2nd edn, 1946); 2nd edn repr. in G. Sayre-McCord (ed.) *Essays on Moral Realism*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), ch. 1. [Probably the most accessible introduction to noncognitivism in ethics.]
Blackburn, S., *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), ch. 6. [Shows how modern versions of emotivism attempt to avoid the problems faced by their ancestor.]

Further Reading on Virtue Ethics, Deontology, and Consequentialism:

- Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (various editions). [Essential reading: The 'function argument' occurs in I 7. Books II-V concern the virtues of character, while practical wisdom is the topic of VI]
- Anscombe, G. E. M., "Modern Moral Philosophy", *Philosophy* Vol. 33, 1958, pp 1-19. [Seminal article, critical of modern ethics and advocating return to the virtue ethics]
- Kant, *Foundations for the Metaphysics of Morals* (various editions). [Classic defence of the centrality of duty and the categorical imperative]
- Pettit, P., "Consequentialism", in P. Singer (ed.) *A Companion to Ethics* (Blackwell, 1993).
- Smart, J. J. and B. Williams, *Utilitarianism for and against* (Cambridge, 1973). [Classic assessment of utilitarianism/consequentialism]
- Rachels, J., "The Ethics of Virtue", in J. Rachels, *Elements of Moral Philosophy* (NY: McGraw Hill, 1978)
- Ross, W. D., "The Right and the Good", in Cahn and Markie (ed), *Ethics* (Oxford, 1998).

Further critical writing about Williams, see:

- Altham, J. E. J., and R. Harrison (eds), *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams* (Cambridge University Press, 1995). [Collection of essays about Williams's moral philosophy. In particular, note essays by McDowell, Nussbaum, Hookway, Jardine, Altham, and Taylor.]