



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

Good Life or Moral Life?

Course Description

This course consists of four parts, each of which comprises (roughly) three lectures and two seminars:

- Part I: Sources of Morality
- Part II: Three Approaches to Substantive Morality
- Part III: Bernard Williams
- Part IV: Philosophical Ethics and the Practice of Life

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

Part I: 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

Part II: 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

Part III: Bernard Williams

Whereas Parts I and II offered a survey of different approaches to meta-ethics and substantive ethics in the history of philosophy, Part III 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](#)

Part IV: 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)

2. Supernaturalism

Compulsory readings for this seminar

- Plato, *Euthyphro* (Reading 3)

3. 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 Pt IV of the course, however, the introduction to Aristotle's ethics will be useful at this point]

4. 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)

5. 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)

6. Williams's positive project

Compulsory readings for this seminar

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

7. Lear's project

Compulsory readings for this seminar

- Lear, J., *Radical Hope*

8. Lear continued and Geuss'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.]