



Metaethics: Interdisciplinary Moral Psychology

University of Graz | Department of Philosophy | Fall Term 2016

- Date:** Tuesday, 16:30 – 19:30 (November and December)
- Venue:** SR 34.K1, Attemsgasse 25/K, 8010 Graz
- Lecturer:** Mag. Dr. Thomas Pölzler, MA
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- Office hours:** By appointment (e-mail)

Description

Suppose a person is exposed to the smell of “fart spray”, or seated in a room with a dirty chair, a sticky desk, an overflowing trash can, etc. Will the disgust induced by these stimuli lead the person to make harsher moral judgements than s/he otherwise would have made? And can any such result provide evidence for or against the philosophical claim that moral judgements are constituted by emotions (i.e., that to judge something morally right, wrong, good, bad, etc. *means* to feel disgust, approval, anger, etc.)?

Questions such as these belong to the domain of moral psychology. On the understanding assumed here, moral psychologists mainly address the empirical assumptions of normative ethical and metaethical theories. In particular, they aim at identifying these assumptions (see the second of the above questions), and at testing them (as exemplified by question one). Obviously, philosophical methods are much more helpful in realizing the former than the latter of these aims. Moral psychology is thus most appropriately pursued in an interdisciplinary way. And indeed, the field has recently seen increasing collaboration and cross-pollination between philosophy and a broad variety of scientific disciplines.

In this course students are introduced to interdisciplinary moral psychology. First we will get clear about the general aims and methods of moral psychology. Then we will exemplarily consider five prominent topics in the field: moral virtues, moral intuitions, moral emotions, moral evolution, and moral experience. Our main focus will be on the validity and ethical implications of particular scientific studies on these topics. However, we will also address how philosophical claims might be relevant to the scientific study of morality, and how the above topics are interconnected and relate to more general philosophical issues.

Aims

Having completed the course, students should be able to:

- name and explain the general aims and methods of moral psychology;
- critically reflect on the assumptions, methods and results of scientific studies of morality;
- discuss and assess the normative ethical and metaethical implications of scientific hypotheses;
- explain how philosophical issues bear on the scientific study of morality;
- identify and explain connections between different topics in moral psychology, and between these topics and more general philosophical issues.

Schedule and Topics

10/04/2016, 16:30 – 18:00: **Preliminary Discussion**

10/11/2016, 16:45 – 19:45: **Aims and Methods of Moral Psychology**

- James Fieser: Ethics
- John Doris and Stephen Stich: Moral Psychology: Empirical Approaches
- Edouard Machery and John Doris: An Open Letter to Our Students: Doing Interdisciplinary Moral Psychology

10/18/2016, 16:30 – 19:30: **Moral Virtues**

- Stanley Milgram: Behavioral Study of Obedience (E)
- John Darley and Daniel Batson: From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior (E)
- John Doris: Persons, Situations, and Virtue Ethics (P)

10/25/2016, 16:30 – 19:30: **Moral Intuitions**

- Joshua Greene, Brian Sommerville, Leigh Nystrom, John Darley, Jonathan Cohen: An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment (E)
- Joshua Greene: The Secret Joke of Kant's Soul (P)

11/08/2016, 16:30 – 19:30: **Moral Emotions**

- Simone Schnall, Jonathan Haidt, Gerald Clore, Alexander Jordan: Disgust as Embodied Moral Judgment (E)
- Thalia Wheatley and Jonathan Haidt: Hypnotic Disgust Makes Moral Judgments More Severe (E)
- Jesse Prinz: The Emotional Basis of Moral Judgments (P)

11/15/2016, 16:30 – 19:30: **Moral Evolution**

- Richard Joyce: The Evolution of Morality, Part 1 (E)
- Richard Joyce: The Evolution of Morality, Part 2 (P)

11/22/2016, 16:30 – 19:30: **Moral Experience**

- Geoffrey Goodwin and John Darley: The Psychology of Meta-Ethics: Exploring Objectivism (E)
- Don Loeb: The Argument from Moral Experience (P)

The double sessions *Moral Virtues*, *Moral Intuitions*, *Moral Emotions*, *Moral Evolution* and *Moral Experience* will be divided into an empirical session (addressing scientific hypotheses about these matters = E) and a philosophical session (addressing these hypotheses' implications for normative ethics or metaethics = P).

All texts can be downloaded via Moodle (moodle.uni-graz.at).

Assessment

Seminar Paper

Your seminar paper should attempt to answer a specific and interesting research question in the field of interdisciplinary moral psychology. For example, you may compare the arguments of two or more authors, criticize the arguments of a particular author, do your own empirical research or investigate the normative ethical or metaethical implications of research done by others. You can choose your research question freely. Make sure that your paper mainly consists of sound arguments that support your answer to this question.

The language of your seminar paper should be clear, succinct and intelligible. Its structure should be rationally comprehensible. In particular, you should motivate and explicitly state your research question in an introductory section and summarize your thesis and most important arguments in a concluding section.

Your seminar paper should include an abstract. It should be between 3.000 and 4.000 words (excluding title page, contents, abstract, footnotes, bibliography, etc.) and refer to at least three relevant sources. These sources can be texts that we discussed in class, additional texts provided on the course's Moodle page or researched by you yourself.

Your seminar paper must be submitted via Moodle by September 30, 2017 the latest. However, I strongly recommend that you finish it as soon as possible.

Your grade primarily depends on the following criteria: (1) the adequacy and interestingness of your research question, (2) the soundness and relevance of your arguments, (3) your compliance with the rules of academic writing (abstract, citation, etc.), (4) the clarity, succinctness and intelligibility of your language, and (5) the adequacy of your paper's structure.

Further recommendations for writing a philosophical seminar paper can be found at: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>.

Expert Double Session

Each student should function as an „expert“ in one of the double sessions on moral virtues, moral intuitions, moral emotions, moral evolution and moral experience. This involves (1) providing a 5 minute summary of the empirical readings at the beginning of the empirical session and a 5 minute summary of the philosophical readings at the beginning of the philosophical session; and (2) increased class participation, in the sense of contributing to analyzing and assessing the required readings.

Questions

In our course we will discuss 15 texts. For each of these texts you should formulate one question which we may then consider in class. Your questions should be questions of understanding or critical questions. For example, you may ask how an author uses a certain key concept, or whether a particular argument is based on a problematic tacit assumption. One question may involve up to five sentences. Your questions for each session must be submitted via Moodle by Monday, 23:55.

Class Participation

Please do all readings and actively participate in our discussions; for example, ask questions, raise objections or point out interconnections.

Rules and Requests

Attendance

In order to complete the course in a regular way you must not be absent from more than three of our thirteen sessions (one session = 1.5 hrs). In case you miss four or five sessions I ask for an explanation (e.g., doctor's confirmation) and some compensatory task (e.g., a longer seminar paper). In case you miss six or more sessions you cannot successfully complete the course.

Deadlines

Late submissions of seminar papers and questions will not be considered.

Academic Honesty

Violations of academic honesty (e.g., using others' ideas without citing them) will automatically lead to a negative assessment of the seminar paper or question in which they occur.

Discussion Rules

In order for our course to succeed it is essential that we treat each other politely and with respect (even when our opinions on some matter diverge).

Laptops, Smartphones, etc.

Please limit the use of electronic devices as much as possible (except for note-taking).