

KS Ethics and Evolution

University of Graz | Department of Philosophy | Summer Term 2023

Time: Thursdays, 15:15 – 16:45 (unless otherwise stated)

Venue: SR 34.K1, Attemsgasse 25/K, 8010 Graz

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Description

Ever since Darwin it has been speculated that evolutionary theory has implications for ethics. For example, suppose that moral judgments are biological adaptations, i.e., humans only make these judgments (e.g., judge incest to be wrong) because doing so increased their ancestors' reproductive success. Don't we then have to conclude that these moral judgments are unfounded? That morality is merely some kind of "illusion foisted upon us by our genes," as the philosopher Michael Ruse put it? In this course we will address various such arguments from evolutionary hypotheses to claims in ethics. First, we will investigate whether, and if yes, in what sense morality is a product of evolution at all. Second, we will discuss what evolutionary hypotheses imply for normative ethics (for what is actually right, wrong, good, bad, etc.). And third, we will consider the implications of these hypotheses for metaethics (for more abstract philosophical questions about moral reality, knowledge and language).

Aims

Having completed the course, students should be able to:

- explain key concepts, methods and theories relating to biological evolution;
- assess the strengths and weaknesses of different hypotheses about the evolution of morality;
- evaluate arguments from such hypotheses to claims in normative ethics;
- evaluate arguments from such hypotheses to claims in metaethics;

- identify and explain connections between these arguments, and between the arguments and more general philosophical issues.

Schedule and Topics

03/09/2023, 15:15 – 16:45:	Preliminary Discussion [IN-PERSON]
03/16/2023:	Introduction to Evolutionary Biology [ONLINE / ASYNC] Buller: Adapting Minds, Chapter 1 (pp. 37 - 48 are optional) Joyce: The Evolution of Morality, Introduction
03/23/2023, 15:15 – 16:45:	The Natural Selection of Helping [IN-PERSON] Joyce: The Evolution of Morality, Chapter 1
03/30/2023, 15:15 – 16:45:	The Nature of Morality [IN-PERSON] Joyce: The Evolution of Morality, Chapter 2
04/20/2023:	Criticism of Evolutionary Psychology [ONLINE / ASYNC] Buller: Adapting Minds, Chapter 3
04/27/2023, 15:15 – 16:45:	Moral Language and Emotions [IN-PERSON] Joyce: The Evolution of Morality, Chapter 3
05/04/2023, 15:15 – 16:45:	The Moral Sense [IN-PERSON] Joyce: The Evolution of Morality, Chapter 4
05/11/2023, 15:15 – 17:30:	Presentations 1 [ONLINE / SYNC] Machery and Mallon: Evolution of Morality Plakias: Disagreement and Doubts About Darwinian Debunking
05/25/2023, 15:15 – 16:45:	The Evolutionary Vindication of Morality [IN-PERSON] Joyce: The Evolution of Morality, Chapter 5
06/01/2023:	Discussion Seminar Papers [ONLINE / ASYNC]
06/15/2023, 15:15 – 16:45:	The Evolutionary Debunking of Morality [IN-PERSON] Joyce: The Evolution of Morality, Chapter 6 (Sections 6.3 and 6.4 are optional)
06/22/2023, 15:15 – 17:30:	Presentations 2 [ONLINE / SYNC] Vavova: Debunking Evolutionary Debunking Wielenberg: On the Evolutionary Debunking of Morality
06/29/2023:	Final Discussion [ONLINE / ASYNC]

All texts can be downloaded from the course's Moodle page (moodle.uni-graz.at).

Assessment

Seminar Paper (50%)

Your seminar paper should address a specific and interesting research question in the area of ethics and evolution. For example, you may compare the arguments of two or more authors, criticize the arguments of a particular author, or defend a thesis of your own. You can choose your research question freely. Make sure that your paper involves 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 logical and aid understanding. 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. A first proposal of your seminar paper is to be submitted via Moodle by May 28, 2023.

Your seminar paper should be between 1.500 and 3.000 words (excluding title page, index, 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 texts which you researched yourself. Please submit your seminar paper via Moodle by September 15, 2023.

The grade will be primarily based 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 (citation, style, etc.), (4) the clarity, succinctness and intelligibility of your language, and (5) the adequacy of your paper's structure.

Class Participation (35%)

Please read all required texts carefully and participate actively in our discussions. For example, ask questions, raise objections or point out interconnections. By doing so you demonstrate that you are well-prepared.

Each student will function as an expert in one in-person session. Being an expert involves (1) reading the assigned chapter extra-carefully, (2) doing some additional research on the content of the chapter, (3) submitting between three and five short comments or questions on the chapter via Moodle (before 12:00 of the day of the session), and (4) contributing actively to discussions in class. You can select your expert session in a doodle survey in the second week of the semester.

In asynchronous online sessions you will be asked to complete certain tasks online. The tasks will be made available by Tuesday, 14:00 before the respective session. They can involve quizzes, essay questions, proposal uploads and forum comments. Please complete the tasks by Thursday, 23:59 of the respective week. Afterwards you will receive general feedback by e-mail as well as, in some cases, individual feedback in forums. The tasks and my feedback constitute the respective sessions. That is, at the time at which the session is scheduled in UGO, there will not be any additional video-conference meeting.

Presentation (15%)

Two sessions will be dedicated to student presentations. The topics for these presentations are listed in the section "Schedule and Topics". You will be able to choose your topic in the second week of the semester in a doodle survey. Special care should be taken to present the papers in clear and simple terms. To facilitate understanding you are also asked to either provide a PowerPoint presentation or a one-page handout.

The procedure of each presentation session will look as follows: (1) introduction of the topic by me (max. 5 minutes), (2) presentation of the student group (max. 20 minutes), (3) discussion of the topic/paper by all students (max. 35 minutes). The presentations will be assessed individually, not collectively, on the basis of the following criteria: (1) organization, (2) content, (3), delivery, (4) visual aids.

Students in the Machery/Mallon group should pre-read the Vavova paper and *vice versa*. Students in the Plakias group should pre-read the Enoch paper and *vice versa*. Reading the other presented texts is not obligatory.

General Policies

Attendance

To complete the course in a regular way you must not be absent from more than two of our thirteen sessions (one session = 1.5 hrs). In case you miss three or four sessions I ask for an explanation (e.g., doctor's confirmation) and some compensatory task (e.g., an additional short paper or summary). In case you miss five or more sessions you cannot successfully complete the course. If a session is held online, attendance is constituted by completing the required tasks.

Deadlines

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

Academic Honesty

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

Discussion Rules

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).