

## TOPICS IN ETHICS: EVOLUTION AND ETHICS

G83.3005-002  
Spring 2010  
Wednesdays 4-6 p.m.

### INSTRUCTORS

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### COURSE DESCRIPTION

In this seminar we will examine recent philosophical work concerning the relevance of evolutionary biology to ethics. Questions to be addressed include: How should we understand the role of biological and cultural evolution in shaping our capacity for normative thought and motivation, and in shaping the content of human values? Are such traits properly understood as evolutionary *adaptations*? What implications, if any, might evolutionary explanations have for our understanding of the nature of normative truth (both practical and epistemic) and our ability to know what it is? Are the causal origins of normative judgments ever relevant to normative theorizing—whether “first-order” or “metaethical”—and if so, in what way? Do the details of the best causal explanation matter? Does normative theory have an “autonomy” of sorts, and if so, how should we understand this idea? We will begin with some background in the relevant biology and ethics, and then focus our attention on the work of the following authors, each of whom will be visiting the seminar: [Philip Kitcher](#), [Allan Gibbard](#), [Richard Joyce](#), and [Chandra Sripada](#). Background readings for each author's visit will be assigned as appropriate.

### READINGS

*Required:* Joyce, Richard. *The Evolution of Morality*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

*Recommended:*

Gibbard, Allan. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.  
Gibbard, Allan. *Thinking How to Live*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003.

We have not placed any book orders at the NYU bookstore, but each of these books is easily available for online ordering and delivery. We will be reading most or all of Joyce's book. Although we will be reading only selections from *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* and *Thinking How to Live*, the selections are substantial and you may wish to have your own copies. All additional readings will be made available either online through the course's Blackboard site or in a folder on the second floor of the department, where you may use the department's copy machine to make copies.

### REQUIREMENTS

*Questions for visiting speakers.* Students taking the course for credit are required to post questions for visiting speakers on the course's Blackboard site no later than 48 hours before each speaker's visit. Auditors are strongly encouraged to post questions as well. More specific instructions for posting questions will be given before the first speaker's visit.

*Seminar paper.* A seminar paper of roughly 20 pages in length is due on Tuesday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, by 5 p.m. We strongly encourage you to speak to us in advance about paper ideas. Please note: A grade of incomplete will not be issued unless a detailed paper proposal and outline, roughly 5 pages in length, is submitted by the May 4<sup>th</sup> deadline. *We will be enforcing this requirement very stringently. Barring special circumstances and prior permission from Laura and Sharon, you will receive an 'F' in the course if you do not comply with this requirement.* Moreover, those taking an incomplete are required to submit the final version of their paper no later than the first day of fall 2010 classes, Tuesday, September 7<sup>th</sup>. *This requirement will also be enforced very stringently. Barring special circumstances and prior permission from Laura and Sharon, a grade of 'F' will be assigned if the paper is not received by 5 p.m. on that date.*

## SCHEDULE OF READINGS

This schedule will be updated as the semester progresses. Note the special Friday meeting time for the visit by Philip Kitcher (February 12<sup>th</sup>).

### Wednesday, January 20<sup>th</sup>: Ethics Background

- Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value"
- Thomas Nagel, "Ethics Without Biology"
- Elliott Sober, "Prospects for an Evolutionary Ethics"

### Wednesday, January 27<sup>th</sup>: Evolutionary Pitfalls and Kitcher Preparation I

- Philip Kitcher and Leah Vickers, "Pop-Sociobiology Reborn"
- Philip Kitcher, chapters 1 and 4 of *The Ethical Project*
- Optional: Axelrod and Hamilton "The Evolution of Altruism"

### Wednesday, February 3<sup>rd</sup>: Kitcher Preparation II

- Philip Kitcher, chapters 5 – 7 of *The Ethical Project* (selections)

### Friday, February 12<sup>th</sup>: Kitcher Visits \*\*\*Note the special meeting time this week: Friday 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.\*\*\*

- Philip Kitcher, chapters 8, 9, and 11 of *The Ethical Project*
- Optional: Philip Kitcher, chapters 10 and 12 - 14 of *The Ethical Project*

### Wednesday, February 17<sup>th</sup>: Gibbard Preparation I

- Precis of Allan Gibbard's *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*
- Allan Gibbard, chapter 6 of *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*

### Wednesday, February 24<sup>th</sup>: Gibbard Preparation II

- Allan Gibbard, chapter 1, 9 and 13 of *Thinking How to Live*
- Optional: chapter 2 of *Thinking How to Live*

### Wednesday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>: Evolutionary Issues

- Chandra Sripada, "Nativism and Moral Psychology"
- Hauser & Associates, "Reviving Rawls's Linguistic Analogy"

### Wednesday, March 10<sup>th</sup>: Gibbard Visits

- Allan Gibbard, "How Much Realism? Evolved Thinkers and Normative Concepts"
- Sharon Street, "Mind-Independence Without the Mystery: Why Quasi-Realists Can't Have It Both Ways"

### Wednesday, March 17<sup>th</sup>: SPRING BREAK

### Wednesday, March 24<sup>th</sup>: Joyce Preparation I

- Richard Joyce, introduction and chapters 2 - 4 of *The Evolution of Morality*
- Optional: chapter 1 of *The Evolution of Morality*

### Wednesday, March 31<sup>st</sup>: Joyce Preparation II

- Richard Joyce, chapters 5, 6, and the conclusion of *The Evolution of Morality*

### Wednesday, April 7<sup>th</sup>: Joyce Visits

- Richard Joyce, "Moral Fictionalism"

### Wednesday, April 14<sup>th</sup>: Sripada Preparation

- Chandra Sripada, "Punishment and the Strategic Structure of Moral Systems"
- Sripada & Stich, "A Framework for the Psychology of Norms"

**Wednesday, April 21<sup>st</sup>: Sripada Visits**

- Chandra Sripada, "Carving the Social World At Its Joints"

**Wednesday, April 28<sup>th</sup>: Conclusion**

- Sharon Street, "Evolution and the Normativity of Epistemic Reasons"