

PHIL 10040 Introduction to Ethics

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Introduction

This module will introduce students to the philosophical subject of ethics. We're all familiar with ethics: we make ethically-loaded decisions and judgements every day; we ethically criticise other people; we feel the ethical emotions of pride and shame and remorse; we deliberate ethically about whether we should do the 'right thing'; we try to become ethically better people; we fight for ethically admirable political causes.

Ethics is a huge field, so any university Ethics course will have to focus on a narrower area in order to explore that area properly. For this module we have chosen to focus on the central phenomenon of guilt, as well as some related concepts like shame, remorse, apology. And our job as philosophers is to examine these concepts in order to find out what they mean *exactly*. The concepts are essentially familiar, we know what they mean, we know how to use them, but the philosopher goes further, deeper; she asks what assumptions we make when we deploy the concept; she compares different exemplary uses of the concept; if two people disagree over whether a third person is guilty, and how guilty, the philosopher asks what they are disagreeing *about*, exactly.

Three key assumptions. For the purposes of this module, we are assuming the following:

- (i) that ethics is at least *partly* objective. If ethics is entirely subjective, a matter of opinion, then there is nothing really to talk about in a module called 'Ethics'. There would be no basis on which one person could criticise another ethically – and yet we do that all the time.
- (ii) that all competent adults have *some* free will. It's tempting to say that our actions are fully determined by subatomic forces, by brain biochemistry, by unconscious psychological influences, by society, or even by God. And yet, when I criticise you ethically for doing X, I *presuppose* that you were sufficiently free to avoid doing X if you had chosen to.
- (iii) To keep things simple, the philosophical subject of 'ethics' is the same as 'moral philosophy', and the adjectives 'ethical' and 'moral' are synonymous. What's more, ethics and ethical concepts are thoroughly *familiar*. There is nothing esoteric about ethics. Each of us have an ethical *character*, each of us generally try to choose the ethically right action, and our guilt is an ethical response to some reality, and not merely a random bad feeling.

So we're not going to spend any time on these assumptions, we're going to assume them for the entire module. That also means: in your essay and exam, please do not try to argue that ethics is all subjective or that humans have no free will – they're both dead ends!

Week by week outline

1	22+24 Jan	<p>Introduction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summary of module: content, structure, assessment. • What is philosophy? What is a philosophical question? What is a philosophical answer? What is ethics? • What is guilt? What is the difference between <i>being</i> guilty and <i>feeling</i> guilty? What is responsibility? What is shame? • Starting assumptions about the module, regarding: (i) free will; (ii) the objectivity of ethics; (iii) the familiarity of ethics. • Also: for the purposes of this module, 'ethical' = 'moral'.
		Section A: Guilt and related concepts
2	29+31 Jan	<p>Guilt and remorse</p> <p>If I voluntarily did something morally wrong, without an excuse or justification, then I am guilty, and I deserve blame. I ought to feel guilty. We can use the metaphor of a 'moral stain' to describe the effect of the guilt on me, and on my self-conception.</p> <p><i>Pattern: the Monday lecture will be more general, and the Wednesday lecture will focus on the week's text. (But note that next Monday is a bank holiday.)</i></p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ingram A (2017) 'Guilt, practical identity, moral staining'. <i>Philosophy</i> vol. 92 no. 362 • Stanford: 'conscience', 'moral phenomenology' <p><i>Note: each week I have provided the full bibliographical reference for the text. If you choose to write an essay on Ingram, then simply copy and paste the full Ingram reference into your Bibliography at the end of your essay.</i></p>
3	Mon 5 Feb	<i>Bank Holiday. University closed</i>
	Tue 6 Feb Wed 7 Feb	<i>Tutorials begin. For discussion: last week's topic and/or this week's topic.</i>
	Wed 7 Feb	<p>Regret</p> <p>When I regret something, I wish I had not done it. This might be moral (remorse), but it might be non-moral: I simply bet on the wrong horse. Regret is an interesting phenomenon: in my imagination, I go back in time to the moment of choice, I choose the correct option, and then I go forward in time to the present, and I am better off than I in fact am. Is this process meaningful, or is no more than idle wishful thinking?</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • McQueen P (2017) 'When should we regret?' <i>International Journal of Philosophical Studies</i> vol. 25(5) • Stanford: 'moral dilemmas'

4	12+14 Feb	<p>Shame</p> <p>Broadly speaking, guilt is about what I have <i>done</i>, while shame is about who I <i>am</i> (or think I am). I am defective in some way, I have not achieved some kind of standard, I have been exposed before my peers, and this is painful. But what is the difference between healthy and unhealthy shame? Why exactly is it a bad thing to be ‘shameless’?</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Laing J (2021) ‘Making sense of shame’. <i>Philosophy</i> vol. 97 • Stanford: ‘respect’, ‘feminist perspectives on the body’
5	19+21 Feb	<p>Guilt, recklessness and negligence</p> <p>The paradigm of guilt is for something that I did intentionally. But sometimes, in pursuing my own projects, I take a risk; and if I am unlucky I might end up harming someone unintentionally. So my guilt would refer to the <i>reckless</i> risk-taking.</p> <p>Sometimes, in pursuing my own projects, I don’t even notice the risk, and I end up causing harm unintentionally. Such harm-causing will be <i>negligent</i> when there is a sense that I <i>should have known</i> about the risk (should have avoided it); but because I did not know about the risk, then I could not choose to avoid it. Because of this lack of choice, it might seem that it is not fair to blame me. But that can’t be right!</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Husak D (2011). ‘Negligence, belief, blame and criminal liability: The special case of forgetting’. <i>Criminal Law and Philosophy</i>, 5. • Stanford: ‘moral luck’
6	26+28 Feb	<p>Guilt and Apology</p> <p>If I am guilty, then I should apologise to the victim. What does an apology amount to, exactly? We could say that it is a public acknowledgement of the wrong, and it implies a commitment to repair the damage. But what if I could not help committing the wrong, given my character flaws?</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pettigrove G & Collins J (2011). ‘Apologizing for who I am’. <i>Journal of Applied Philosophy</i>, 28(2).
	Fri 1 March 2-3 pm	Essay workshop. Newman Theatre ‘O’.
7	4+6 Mar	<p>Guilt and Atonement</p> <p>If I am guilty and I apologise, I can offer to make amends (to atone). But how do I work out exactly what I need to do? How can I tell when I have done enough? What if the victim expects me to do more?</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Radzik L (2004). ‘Making amends’. <i>American Philosophical Quarterly</i>, 41(2). • Stanford: ‘atonement’

	Mon 11 March	*** March break. No lectures, no tutorials.
		SECTION B: Problematic contexts for guilt
8	25+27 Mar	<p>Vicarious Guilt</p> <p>A close friend of mine does something wrong to a third party. I personally have not done anything wrong, nor have I assisted or encouraged my friend, but because of our friendship I <i>feel</i> guilty. Is this ever appropriate? Surely I can only be guilty for what I have done, and only my friend can be guilty for what she has done?</p> <p>Reading: Sepinwall A (2022) 'Shared Guilt among Intimates'. <i>International Journal of Philosophical Studies</i>, 30(3).</p>
9	Mon 1 Apr	<i>Easter Monday. University closed</i>
	Tue 2 Apr Wed 3 Apr	<i>Final tutorials. For discussion: last week's topic and/or this week's topic.</i>
	Wed 3 Apr	<p>Carer Guilt</p> <p>Imagine I am caring for my ageing parents. How can I tell whether I am doing "enough"? Is it possible to feel guilty without being blameworthy in this context? Here we will pick up on the discussion from the previous week.</p> <p>Reading: Bennett M (2018). 'Blameless guilt: The case of carer guilt and chronic and terminal illness'. <i>International Journal of Philosophical Studies</i>, 26(1).</p>
10	8+9 Apr	<p>Complicity in guilt</p> <p>To be complicit means that I assist or encourage someone else to commit a crime. But there are lots of ways to do this: some instances of complicity are illegal, some are immoral. What does it depend on? For clarity we will use the legal terminology of the <i>accessory</i> assisting the <i>principal</i>. Question: how much does the accessory need to know about the principal's plans in order for her assistance to make her complicit?</p> <p>Reading: Knowles C (2021). 'Responsibility in cases of structural and personal complicity: A phenomenological analysis'. <i>The Monist</i>, 104(2).</p>
11	15+16 Apr	<p>Guilt and Punishment</p> <p>This week will be the first of two weeks looking at the role of guilt in the criminal law. If a person is found guilty of a particular offence in a criminal court, then she deserves to be punished. But what does it mean to deserve something? And what sort (and amount) of punishment does she deserve? If the punishment does not succeed in deterring her from recidivism, should we punish her more?</p> <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moore M (2010) 'Ch. 2 Closet retributivism'. <i>Placing Blame; a theory of the criminal law</i>. Oxford University Press. • Stanford: 'retributive justice', 'blame', 'desert', 'legal punishment'
12	22+23 Apr	Remorse and Parole

		<p>If an offender is found guilty by a court, they may be sentenced to time in prison. Before the end of their sentence, they might be eligible for parole (early release). One justification is that they are sufficiently remorseful, and therefore do not need further incarceration.</p> <p>Reading: Bell K (2021) 'Toward a normative theory of parole grounded in agency'. <i>Philosophical Issues</i>, 31(1).</p>
14		<p>Final exam. During the May exam period. Precise day and time to be confirmed around mid-March.</p>