Morality in the Face of Moral Ignorance

Graduate Seminar
Spring 2009
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NEW REGULAR MEETING TIME: Wednesdays, 12noon-2:50pm, Marx 301

One guiding question for the course:
■ What should we think about cases in which someone lacks moral knowledge, or lacks certainty about moral questions?
  o Sometimes people have false moral beliefs.
    ▪ Can someone be praiseworthy if she does the right thing while reasonably thinking she’s doing the wrong thing?
    ▪ Can someone be blameworthy if she does the wrong thing while reasonably thinking she’s doing the right thing?
  o Sometimes people are unsure what the moral truth is.
    ▪ How is praiseworthiness and blameworthiness affected by moral uncertainty?
    ▪ How should someone act in light of her recognition that she is uncertain about the moral facts?
      • If someone is overwhelmingly confident of a certain moral claim, should she take it to be true in deciding how to act?
      • If someone gives some credence to the possibility that a particular action is wrong, and she is certain that refraining from performing the action is permissible, should she refrain?

Another guiding question for the course:
■ What kinds of factors make blame inappropriate?
  (This is a huge topic. We will just take up a few lines of thought within this topic.)
  o Does inability to act otherwise exculpate?
    (Also a huge topic, of which we will cover a small area.)
    ▪ Are addicts unable to act otherwise? Are addicts morally responsible?
  o Does ignorance exculpate?
    ▪ Does factual ignorance exculpate? If so, when?
      • Does blameless factual ignorance exculpate?
      • Does culpable factual ignorance exculpate?
    ▪ Does purely moral ignorance exculpate?
    ▪ Does ignorance about the overridingness of morality exculpate?
**Guest Professors:**

We will have four guest professors during the semester. Each guest professor is an author we are reading:

- Gideon Rosen, Princeton University: February 25
- Holly Smith, Rutgers University: March 11
- Bennett Foddy, Princeton University Center for Human Values: March 25
- Peter Graham, University of Massachusetts, Amherst: April 8

**Course Schedule:**

**Week One:** Wednesday, February 4

**Week Two:** Wednesday, February 11
- Michelle Moody-Adams, “Culture, responsibility, and affected ignorance” *Ethics* 1994

**Week Three:** Wednesday, February 18
- Nomy Arpaly, *Unprincipled Virtue: An Inquiry into Human Agency* 2003 continued

**Week Four:** Wednesday, February 25
- Gideon Rosen (Princeton) will be a guest professor for this session.
- Gideon Rosen “Skepticism About Moral Responsibility” *Philosophical Perspectives* 2004
- Gideon Rosen, “Kleinbart the Oblivious and Other Tales of Ignorance and Responsibility” *Journal of Philosophy* 2008

**Week Five:** Wednesday, March 4
- Elizabeth Harman, “Does blameless moral ignorance exculpate?” *unpublished*

**Week Six:** Wednesday, March 11
- Holly Smith (Rutgers) will be a guest professor for this session.
- Holly Smith, “Subjective Rightness“ *unpublished*
- Niko Kolodny and John MacFarlane, “Ifs and Oughts” *unpublished*
- Niko Kolodny and John MacFarlane, “Ought: Between Objective and Subjective” *unpublished*

*March 14-22: Spring Break*
Week Seven: Wednesday, March 25

Bennett Foddy (Princeton Center for Human Values) will be a guest professor for this session

- Harry Frankfurt, “Freedom of the will and the concept of a person” *Journal of Philosophy* 1971
- Bennett Foddy, “A Liberal Account of Addiction” *forthcoming*

Week Eight: Wednesday, April 1


Week Nine: Wednesday, April 8

Peter Graham (UMass—Amherst) will be a guest professor for this session

- Peter Graham, “Ignorance and Blameworthiness” *unpublished*

Week Ten: Wednesday, April 15

- Jacob Ross, *Acceptance and Practical Reason* (dissertation)
- Jacob Ross, “Rejecting Ethical Deflationism” *Ethics* 2006

Week Eleven: Wednesday, April 22

- Andrew Sepielli, “What to do when you don’t know what to do” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 2009
- “Knowledge and Action” John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley *Journal of Philosophy* 2008

Week Twelve: Wednesday, April 29

- Dan Moller, “Abortion and Moral Risk” *unpublished*

Getting Credit for the Course:

Graduate students in the philosophy department can take the course for credit to earn a unit in either of the following ways:

1. Do one class presentation, write one 5-6 page paper due in week six, and write one 15-20 page paper due during reading period (the week after classes end).
2. Do one class presentation and take a written exam on the course material during reading period.

Graduate students in the politics department can take the course for credit and get a grade by taking option 1 above.

Any student auditing the course can give a class presentation.