

Detailed description
Moral Epistemology
CEU Summer University 2018

Both in philosophy and in everyday life, ethical questions often seem to be particularly difficult to answer: one's confidence in the truth of one's own position is often matched by the equal confidence of others with conflicting opinions. An examination of each view typically leads to justificatory chains: ethical conclusions are based on ethical assumptions, so uncovering the assumptions of the ethical positions held leads to questions about the justification of the assumptions it rests on, and so on. In many cases, we eventually seem to have to rely on the reliability of certain basic intuitions on which to base our ethical views. But what justifies these basic moral intuitions, and how can we resolve disagreement about them?

Some philosophers still defend basic moral intuitions of the kind just mentioned, but the most popular contemporary philosophical answers to this problem, stemming from 20th century philosophers Nelson Goodman and John Rawls, invoke an alternative theory known as reflective equilibrium. According to this theory, you should not simply take a certain set of basic moral intuitions as fixed points and adjust your other moral beliefs in the light of these. Rather, one should take into account the whole set of one's considered moral judgments, and then engage in a process of mutual adjustment; questioning and adjusting one's moral beliefs about particular cases in the light of the general ethical principles one accepts, and vice versa. The ideal end of such a process would be a state in which one's beliefs form a mutually supporting and perfectly coherent set. In reality, we never reach this ideal state, but plausibly reflective equilibrium is the procedure the folk have been using to refine their moral judgments all along.

However, the theory of reflective equilibrium on its own does not seem, to many, to be able to answer the central problem in moral epistemology that we set out with. Philosophers have objected that the result of the procedure will depend upon where one starts from: one's initial set of considered moral judgments. Without a theory to (at least provisionally) underwrite the credibility of these initial judgments, it looks like a case of "Garbage In, Garbage Out": how could the results of the procedure have any justification? Even a reflective equilibrium theorist, then, appears to need to advert to another theory of how we could come to hold credible considered moral judgments. If these judgments are about mind-independent truths of a kind that are not accessible by sense-perception, then some kind of appeal to moral intuitions still appears necessary.

Fleshing out the prospects and problems for moral intuitionism within this framework, then, is a central aspect of this course, though alternative answers to the problems raised here – including answers based on a different understanding of what kind of truths moral judgments are about – will also be considered. We will examine competing accounts of intuitions, including Audi's doxastic view, Huemer's conception of intuition as intellectual appearance, and the non-doxastic treatment of intuition as an 'intellectual seeming'.

A popular current development in moral epistemology is the increasing significance given to our moral emotions in how we acquire moral knowledge. For instance, a rationalist account of moral intuitions seems to ignore an important aspect of our moral experience, the emotions that accompany our judgments. Indeed, research from neuroscience seems to point out that moral judgments, moral intuitions and moral emotions are intertwined mental phenomena that are very difficult to separate. We will examine attempts to include emotions into accounts of moral intuitions as Kauppinen has attempted to do. We will then look for connections between moral

intuitions, emotions and moral motivations and examine what insight response-dependent accounts of morality, including moral sentimentalism, can provide into understanding better how we form our moral judgments. The above questions will be addressed in the first part of the course.

Another problem in moral epistemology that relates to the above issues is the problem of moral testimony and moral expertise; this will occupy us for the second part of the course. Starting from moral sentimentalism, we will examine whether virtue epistemology can provide some justification to defer our moral views. It has to be stated that moral testimony does not seem to work like testimony in many other fields: people who want answers to questions about other matters often turn to an expert or to the group of recognized experts representing the field, and we usually think that ordinary people are justified in accepting the testimony of such experts as true. But we do not typically defer, or expect others to defer, to moral experts in this way: moral experts seem hard to identify, and when people do consult others about moral matters, they usually expect to be presented with the reasons for reaching a certain conclusion, and they demand to understand the reasons for themselves if they are to accept the moral conclusion as true. If there is such a thing as moral knowledge and it is effortful to get, this seems puzzling: why don't we simply accept the word of experts at face value when it comes to moral matters? Part of the course will consider various answers to this question and examine different skeptical and non-skeptical accounts of moral expertise and testimony, relating these also to the more general theories of moral epistemology and metaphysics discussed elsewhere in the course.

In the final part of the course, we will look at the consequences of the above discussion to moral disagreement. The fact that there is widespread disagreement on most moral issues seems to undermine attempts to provide an epistemological foundation for moral knowledge. While there are many instance of disagreements between experts and novices, the debate on moral disagreement has focused on cases of peer disagreement, that is, cases when two people with the same evidence and cognitive ability to process that evidence have conflicting views on the same question. One way to respond to peer moral disagreement is to suspend your judgment; another is to continue to hold your view in spite of the fact that your peer disagrees with you. Is moral expertise possible under these circumstances? And can an account of moral expertise accommodate moral emotions?

By the end of the course, students will gain advanced knowledge on issues related to the nature and justification of intuitions, the concept of a reflective equilibrium, the ideas of moral testimony and moral expertise, and the metaphysical consequences of accounts of intuitions. In addition, they will learn more about some of the challenges posed by experimental philosophy to armchair methodology in ethics and ways to respond.

Each thematic area will be examined separately. For each area, a lecture will address the most important themes, followed by discussions in seminar format. Students will be required to prepare the corresponding collection of principal texts found in their reader. An important element in the course are the working groups: the class will be divided into three smaller groups and each group will focus in examining a key text in one of the thematic areas specified above. The last part of the course will include individual consultations with the instructors and presentations by the participants.