

# Tentative Course Syllabus

(Final version will be posted closer to the start of the course.)

## Brief overview

Human beings are moral beings and moral life has an experiential dimension. One experiences oneself as being morally obligated to perform or to refrain from performing a certain action. These experiences have a certain phenomenology: there is something it is like to think that killing is wrong, there is something it is like to judge what counts as a good life, etc. They fall under the scope of **moral phenomenology**, a new approach to moral philosophy with tremendous potential for interdisciplinary research, as recent developments in moral psychology and neuroscience testify. The novelty of the approach is that it tackles classical problems of moral philosophy in a way that privileges the perspective of the subject engaged in moral deliberations.

One aim of the course is to address foundational questions: the nature, scope, and significance of the phenomenology of moral experience, what is distinctive about moral experiences, whether phenomenological description is relevant to carrying out certain philosophical projects in ethics, etc. These are complex issues. Let's take, for instance, significance. Is phenomenology relevant outside philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences? Is there any reason to have a separate field for moral experiences, or could they just be studied along with all other types of experiences? The answer that this course is going to explore is that, if there are moral phenomenal features, *i.e.* phenomenal features moral experiences possess *in virtue of* their being moral experiences, studying these features is relevant to moral philosophy in a way that parallels the relevance of phenomenology to cognitive sciences.

The second aim of the course is to focus on certain topics inspired by phenomenology that are gaining traction in philosophy of mind and cognitive sciences - empathy and interpersonal understanding, collective intentionality, shame, the sharing of emotions, etc. - and see how they can inform moral phenomenology. For instance, it will explore two psychological phenomena - emotion and attention - and will ask how subjects might be actively involved with them as they occur in everyday life. Answering this question is helpful for understanding some important aspects of a subject's moral psychology.

The course instructors are highly regarded philosophers who specialize in the area of phenomenology, moral philosophy, and philosophy of mind.

## Tentative Syllabus and Associated Bibliography

### **Dorothea Debus: Emotion, Attention and Imagination: Ways of Shaping Our Mental (and Moral) Lives**

This is a short course on some issues in the philosophy of (moral) psychology. We will consider three psychological phenomena, namely emotion, attention, and imagination. We will ask how subjects might be actively involved with those psychological phenomena as they occur in

their own everyday mental lives, and which value this might in turn have in their lives as moral agents.

## 1. Emotions

We will begin by considering the phenomenon of the emotions. Emotions play an important role in our everyday lives quite generally, and in our moral lives more particularly. Emotions sometimes alert us to the moral properties of situations we find ourselves in - for example, your anger about a certain situation might alert you to the fact that the situation is very unjust -, and emotions sometimes also motivate us to act in ways that might be morally required - for example, your anger might motivate you to try to rectify the injustice that has made you angry in the first place. At the same time, however, it also seems plausible to accept that we can 'regulate' our emotions in some respects - for example, a successful course of anger management might make someone much less prone to anger than they used to be. But then, if emotions sometimes 'pick up' on relevant moral properties, and if they sometimes motivate us to act in morally required ways, what are we to make of the possibility of 'emotion regulation'? Is the ability to engage in 'emotion regulation' a risk or a benefit, as far as morality is concerned? Are those of us who are proficient in 'regulating' their emotions rendering themselves less morally perceptive, or might there be ways of engaging in 'emotion regulation' that actually make a subject more attuned to the moral properties of her environment? Do we have a moral obligation not to engage in 'emotion regulation' in an attempt to retain our 'naive' and 'pure' emotional reactions to the world we live in, or do we, quite on the contrary, have a moral obligation to engage in (the right kind of) emotion regulation in an attempt to grow more emotionally attuned to the moral properties of the situations we find ourselves in?

Readings:

Deonna, J.A. and Teroni, F. (2012): *The Emotions. A Philosophical Introduction*. London: Routledge; read as much of this as you like, but definitely do read ch.1 and ch. 4.

Gross, J.J. and Thompson, R.A. (2007): 'Emotion Regulation: Conceptual Foundations', in: J.J. Gross (ed.), *Handbook of Emotion Regulation*. New York and London: The Guildford Press. 3-24.

## 2. Attention

In the second session, we will consider our ability to pay attention to various features of our environment; this ability is usually recognized as morally relevant because we frequently rely on it when we try to assess the moral value or disvalue of relevant particular situations. For example, in an attempt to assess whether a certain state of affairs should or should not be thought of as unjust, you will need to attend to some features of the situation (e.g. the way in which resources are distributed) and not to others (e.g. the fact that the person in charge of distributing relevant resources is wearing black socks). Our ability to pay attention to some features of our environment rather than others therefore does have instrumental value, because it seems crucial in our attempts at leading good, moral lives. However, as I have argued elsewhere, attention might also be of moral relevance in a more direct way. For when a subject is engaged in an activity with respect to a certain object (or person), in order for the relevant activity to have value it is sufficient that the subject give her full attention to the relevant object. If this claim can be successfully defended, we can then also conclude that our ability to give something our full attention has great potential in making our lives morally valuable: All it takes for an activity to have value is our giving the object towards which the relevant activity is directed our full attention. If this can be shown to be true, the pressing questions then are: How can we account for the mental activity of giving something our full attention? What exactly is it that we do when we give something our full attention?

And how might we be able to give our full attention more frequently to the objects and people we encounter in our ordinary daily lives?

Readings:

Wu, W. (2014): *Attention*. London: Routledge; read as much of this as you like, but definitely do read the Introduction, and ch. 4.

Bommarito, N., 'Modesty as a virtue of attention', in *Philosophical Review* 122, 2013

### 3. Imagination

In our last session, we will consider some ways in which imagination might be morally relevant, and how we might put our ability to imagine things to good use. Empirical scientists have recently shown some renewed interest in our ability to imagine the future, and our ability to imagine future events is, as the relevant empirical literature shows, interesting in its own right. However, our ability to imagine the future is also of interest because it might be of moral relevance: A subject's present imagining of a future event can have an effect on how things develop with respect to the imagined future event, because the imagining of a future event can, and often does, make the imagining subject engage in certain actions with respect to the imagined future event which she would not otherwise have engaged in, and these actions will in turn have an effect on whether or not the relevant event will occur, and on the precise way in which the event will occur if it does. For example, your presently imagining going on a bike ride next Sunday might prompt you to make plans to actually do so. Everyday (self-)observation also suggests that mature healthy subjects usually have at least a primitive understanding of the ways in which certain imaginings of future events might make them act (or not act) with respect to the relevant future events, and thus which effects relevant imaginings of future events might have on the actual occurrence (or non-occurrence) of relevant imagined future events. What is more, on the basis of their understanding of the ways in which imaginings of future events might make them act (or not act) with respect to the relevant imagined future events, subjects can, and sometimes do, make themselves imagine future events in an attempt thereby to make themselves engage in future actions which are in turn likely to have desirable effects on the actual occurrence (or non-occurrence) of the relevant imagined future events. Thus, subjects sometimes set out to (and sometimes successfully do) shape the future by means of making themselves imagine future events. This suggests that a subject's ability to make herself imagine future events in certain ways can be of great moral importance not just with respect to the subject's own future, but also with respect to the future of various groups the subject might belong to at a local, national and global level, as well as with respect to the fate of future generations.

Thus, we should ask: How can we account for a subject's mental activity of making herself imagine a certain future event? What exactly is it that we do in these cases?

Which role do habits play in this context? How might we make ourselves imagine future events in ways which are valuable rather than harmful? And should we hold each other morally responsible for our imaginings of future events; that is, should we hold each other morally responsible for which future events we set out to imagine, and in which ways we set out to imagine those future events?

Readings:

Gendler, T. (2013): 'Imagination', in N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia* <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/imagination/>>.

Suddendorf, T. and Corballis, M.C. (2007): 'The evolution of foresight: What is mental time travel, and is it unique to humans?', in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 30. 299-351 (with Open Peer Commentary).

## Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons

We will present themes from a book we are writing together, which has the tentative title: ILLUMINATING REASONS: AN ESSAY IN MORAL PHENOMENOLOGY. One key theme is that most moral judgment-formation and moral comportment, including the kind that is spontaneous rather than deliberative, is highly reasons-responsive (contrary to what's suggested by one natural interpretation of the work of moral psychologists like Jonathan Haidt and Josh Greene). Another is that typically, much of the body of pertinent reasons is consciously appreciated in a manner different from being \*explicitly represented\* consciously; we call this the "chromatic illumination" of conscious experience by implicit background information. We also argue phenomenologically for a distinction between favoring reasons and requiring reasons, and on that basis we argue for the importance of (and intelligibility of) supererogation. And we consider a number of recent phenomenological arguments that have been deployed in support of moral realism; we push back against such arguments, by arguing instead that the pertinent moral phenomenology comports equally well with our own brand of meta-ethical expressivism, "cognitivist expressivism." Here are the topics and readings for the four sessions featuring our work.

Link [here](#) to a secure Dropbox folder containing (in order) the readings for our sessions, except for reading 8, which is being drafted and will be posted later.

### 1. Moral Phenomenology in Focus (Timmons)

In this session we introduce some of the main themes in our book in progress, provide an overview of the important work of Maurice Mandelbaum that has influenced our work, and introduce the notion of chromatic illumination.

#### *Readings:*

1. "Overview" (draft book chapter 1)
2. "Chromatic Illumination" (Draft book chapter 6)
3. "Modes of Moral Experience" (draft book chapter 7)

Recommended (in order):

4. "Morals from Mandelbaum" (draft book chapter 4)
5. "Moral Phenomenology: Content and Method" (draft book chapter 2). This chapter overlaps (to some extent) Uriah Kriegel's 2013 "Moral Phenomenology."

### 2. Agentive Phenomenology and the Space of Reasons (Horgan)

We consider some important aspects of agentive phenomenology, with particular attention to aspects relevant to the free-will debate and aspects involving reasons-having experience. Concerning free-agency experience, we defend a "neutrality thesis" asserting that direct introspection cannot reliably ascertain whether or not such experience has metaphysical-libertarian satisfaction conditions. Concerning reasons-having experience, we urge a phenomenological distinction between favoring reasons and requiring reasons; we also argue that reasons are sometimes experienced as decisively morally favoring a given action—i.e., as rendering that action morally best—without thereby rendering it morally obligatory.

#### *Readings:*

6. Horgan, T., "Injecting the Phenomenology of Agency into the Free Will Debate"
7. Horgan, T., and Timmons, M., "Untying a Knot from the Inside Out: Reflections on the 'Paradox' of Supererogation"

8. “The Phenomenology of Agency and Freedom” (handout, if the chapter hasn’t been drafted in time)

Recommended (in order):

9. Horgan, T. and Tienson, J., “The Phenomenology of Embodied Agency”

10. “Fittingness” (draft book chapter 8)

### **3. Chromatic Rationalism (Horgan)**

We introduce the idea of morphological content: information that is embodied implicitly in the standing structure of an agent’s cognitive architecture, and that gets automatically accommodated during judgment-formation without first becoming mentally occurrent (either consciously or unconsciously). We explain why the “frame problem” in cognitive science, in a broad sense of this expression, strongly suggests that human cognition relies essentially and extensively on morphological content. We explain why morphological content as a cognitive-architectural feature of moral-judgment formation fits naturally with—as a cognitive-architectural implementation of—the reasons-responsive feature of moral phenomenology that we call chromatic illumination. Concerning the debate in moral philosophy about generalism vs. particularism, we argue that the frame problem provides grounds for accepting what we call “core particularism”; we also argue, however, that general moral principles are apt to figure importantly in moral cognition (albeit often morphologically rather than explicitly), even though such principles should not be expected to be exceptionless or to fully systematize moral normativity.

*Readings:*

11. Horgan, T. and Timmons, M., “Morphological Rationalism and the Psychology of Moral Judgment”

12. Horgan, T. and Timmons, M., “What Does the Frame Problem Tell Us about Moral Objectivity?”

Recommended (in order):

13. Horgan, T. and Potrč, M., “The Epistemic Relevance of Morphological Content”

14. Sauer, H., “Educated Intuitions. Automaticity and Rationality in Moral Judgment”

### **4. Moral Experience and Objectivist Purport (Timmons)**

Some philosophers offer phenomenological arguments that appeal to introspection as a basis for claiming that concrete moral experience (or one or another type) commits one to a strong form of moral objectivism (including realism). Such arguments from introspection, as we refer to them, are based on the claim that one can reliably determine by methods of introspection that one or another species of moral experience carries strong objectivist purport. We defend what we call the “neutrality thesis” (similar in spirit to the neutrality thesis introduced in session 2) which denies that one can reliably determine on the basis of introspection whether such experiences carry strong objectivist purport. Our basic strategy is to dwell on the phenomenology of various species of concrete moral experience and then argue that our cognitivism expressivism can accommodate the introspectively available data of such experience.

## Readings:

15. “Sentimentalist Moral-Perceptual Experience and its Objectivist Pretensions: A Phenomenological Investigation” (forthcoming in R. Debes and K. Stueber, eds., *Moral Sentimentalism* (OUP), and the basis of a chapter to follow chapter 11)

Recommended (The following two chapters are set-up chapters for chapter 11 and a few others not yet drafted)

16. “Introspective Inquiry, Objectivist Purport, and the Neutrality Thesis” (draft book chapter 10)

17. “Direct Moral Experience and the Argument from Introspection” (draft book chapter 11)

## Uriah Kriegel

### 1. Moral Phenomenology: Foundational Issues

Moral phenomenology is the first-person study of the experiential aspect of our moral life. This presupposes, first, that moral life has an experiential aspect, and second, that there is something to be learned from its study. In this session, we will consider the plausibility of these two presuppositions.

Reading: Kriegel, U. (2013): ‘Moral Phenomenology’, in H. LaFollette (ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Ethics*. <http://www.uriahkriegel.com/downloads/IEE.pdf>

### 2. The Experiential Origins of Value

Might moral experience be the metaphysical ground of all value? This would be the most ambitious claim one could make on behalf of moral phenomenology. In this session, we will consider some versions of this idea, and assess their plausibility.

Reading: Brentano, F. (1902): *The Origin of the Knowledge of Right and Wrong*. English translation by Cecil Hague. Westminster: Archibald Constable & Co., Ltd.. 1902. Read Sections 1-36

## Dan Zahavi

### 1. Empathy and interpersonal understanding - a phenomenological perspective

Although there in recent years has been something of an upsurge of interest in and work on empathy, there is still no clear consensus about what precisely it is. Is empathy a question of sharing another’s feelings, or caring about another, or being emotionally affected by another’s experiences though not necessarily experiencing the same experiences? Is it a question of imagining oneself in another’s situation, or of imagining being another in that other’s situation, or simply of making inferences about another’s mental states? People are disagreeing about the role of sharing, and caring, and imagination in empathy, just as they disagree about the relation between empathy and social cognition in general, and about whether empathy is at all a natural kind or rather a multidimensional construct. In my talk, I will focus on the early exploration of empathy that we find in the phenomenological tradition. There are several reasons for this choice, the most important one being that the

phenomenological discussion in my view contains important insights that remain of relevance for the contemporary debate. As we shall see, the phenomenologists offer a distinct and multi-layered analysis of the intentional structure of empathy, one that differs rather markedly from recent attempts to explain empathy in terms of mirroring, mimicry, imitation, emotional contagion, imaginative projection or inferential attribution.

Reading: Zahavi, D. (2014): 'Empathy and Other-Directed Intentionality', in *Topoi. An International Review of Philosophy*, 33:129-142

## **2. Collective intentionality and the sharing of emotions**

When surveying recent philosophical work on collective intentionality much effort is spent on discussing the question of whether collective intentions are reducible or irreducible to individual ones. Much less effort is devoted to questions concerning the cognitive and affective presuppositions for we-intentionality. Conjointly with this lacuna, the focus has been on an analysis of joint action (how do we go for a walk together, paint a house together). Much less attention has been paid to shared affects and emotions, although they on some accounts are developmentally prior and logically more basic. In my talk, I will discuss and try to clarify the notion of emotional sharing. Does it involve a jointly owned token emotion or is it rather a question of constitutively interdependent and reciprocally co-regulated emotions? Does emotional sharing already constitute a 'we', and if not, what more has to be added?

Reading: Zahavi, D. (2015): 'You, Me, and We. The Sharing of Emotional Experiences', in *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 22. (forthcoming)

## **3. Shame and self-other-consciousness**

On many standard readings, shame is an emotion that targets and involves the self in its totality. In shame, the self is affected by a global devaluation: it feels defective, objectionable, condemned. The basic question I wish to raise and discuss is the following: What does the fact that we feel shame tell us about the nature of self? Does shame testify to the presence of a self-concept, a (failed) self-ideal, and a capacity for critical self-assessment, or does it rather, as some have suggested, point to the fact that the self is in part socially constructed? Should shame primarily be classified as a self-conscious emotion, or is it rather a distinct social emotion?

Reading: Zahavi, D. (2010): 'Shame and the Exposed Self', in J. Webber (ed.) *Reading Sartre: On Phenomenology and Existentialism*. London: Routledge. 211-226