Morality in Childhood

Course Number: CA-MS-UA 145

Instructor: Clare Kelly, PhD

Prerequisites: No prerequisites.

Course Description: How do children come to know right from wrong? Do we come into the world blank moral slates that must learn right and wrong, or are we born with an innate moral sense? What influences play a role in shaping our moral development? This course focuses on the science of morality, a burgeoning field that has emerged at the intersection of developmental, social, and evolutionary psychology, philosophy, and neuroscience, and now forms a core component of the scientific study of human nature.

In Part 1 of the course, we first define morality and learn about how it is studied scientifically. We will talk about babies, beasts, and brains, and what research with each of these can tell us about morality, where it comes from, and how it develops during childhood. In doing so, we will draw on empirical research and theoretical perspectives from developmental, cognitive, social, and evolutionary psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy. In Part 2, we consider in more detail the role of parents, peers, school, and society in shaping moral development from infancy to adulthood, and we will apply the knowledge gained in Part I to understand how today’s youth negotiate the challenges of the modern world, including bullying in school and on the Internet, the influence of the media and popular culture, and hate and prejudice.

Office Hours and Contact Information: One Park Avenue, 8th Floor: Room 8-412

Hours: Office hours are by appointment only.

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Twitter: @camsmorality

We will use twitter to discover and broadcast new and interesting studies or media links so please sign up for an account if you don’t already have one, and follow @camsmorality
Course Aims

Following completion of this course, students will be able to:

1. Explain, compare, and evaluate theoretical perspectives on morality and its origins.
2. Describe, compare, and evaluate theories on the development of morality in childhood.
3. Describe the brain structures and neuronal circuits that support moral cognition and emotion.
4. Evaluate the role of social and cultural influences on children’s moral development, including family, school, religion, peers, literature, and the media.
5. Analyze issues of bullying, aggression and prejudice from the perspective of the science of morality and moral development.

Course Syllabus:

An overview of each of the sessions is below, including readings and media (videos, blogs, websites, etc.) that are relevant to each session and are required for a complete understanding of each topic. Required readings should be completed before class – they will be discussed and/or may be the topic of a response question or quiz during class. Supplemental readings are exactly that – “extra” readings that will augment your understanding of the material, but are not required.

Please note that the readings listed may be revised over the course of the semester, so be sure to check the NYU Classes page each week prior to class for the most up-to-date information and required material for each session.

Part I. The scientific study of the development of morality

Session 1 | Introduction to the study of morality and moral development.

What is morality? This class will provide an overview of the history of the study of morality and moral development, tracking its transition from the armchair, where it was pondered by philosophers and theologians, to the laboratory, where it is studied by growing numbers of developmental, social and evolutionary psychologists and neuroscientists.

Students will be asked to consider their own moral principles and the foundation upon which they are based. Is something morally wrong because some authority (e.g., god, the law) says so, because rational argument reveals it as such, or because we feel that it is wrong on a visceral or implicit level? Are children born amoral creatures who learn right from wrong from their parents, teachers and religious leaders? Or, do they possess an innate sense of morality, evidence of which can be gleaned from the actions of infants? Can science reveal the answers to these questions? If so, how? We will discuss the scientific method and its application to the study of morality across the lifespan. Students will have the opportunity to consider a set of “moral dilemmas,” and will be asked to think about how scientists can assess moral cognition in very young (e.g., preverbal) children.
Required readings:


Other media:


Session 2 | Stage and domain theories of moral development

In this class we will examine the seminal psychological theories of moral development. We will begin with Piaget’s and Kohlberg’s cognitive stage theories of moral development, and learn about the profound impact these rationalist theories have had on the study of morality. Next, we will cover the basic principles of Elliot Turiel’s domain theory, which evolved from Kohlberg’s work. Students will be introduced to the concept of social convention and will consider the difference between conventional rules and moral rules. Strengths and limitations of these rationalist theories will be considered.

Required readings:


Other media:


Session 3 | Neurodevelopmental perspectives, Part 1.

Following on from Session 2’s consideration of rationalist theories of moral development, we will discuss emerging experimental evidence that young children and even babies possess an innate sense of morality – that they feel empathy and compassion for others,
judge other people on the basis of the goodness or badness of their actions, and have a
sense of justice and fairness. We will then consider theories that build on this evidence
of an innate moral sense to view human morality as the product of a set of evolved
emotions, intuitions and cognitive adaptions. We will consider the evidence that human
morality is a product of evolution, and that other species exhibit the building blocks of
moral behavior.

Required readings:

3. Vaish A & Tomasello M (2014). The Early Ontogeny of Human Cooperation and
   Morality, in M. Killen and J. G. Smetana (Eds.), Handbook of Moral Development,
   2nd edition. Taylor and Francis

Other media:

2. Audio - NPR: The Leonard Lopate Show - Are babies born good or evil?

Session 4 | Neurodevelopmental perspectives, Part 2.

Modern advances in neurobiology and genetics, as well as studies of social behavior in
nonhuman primates and consideration of possible evolutionary perspectives on moral
development, have provided a glimpse into our moral brains. While consideration of a
neurobiological basis for morality might inspire concerns about biological determinism,
neurobiology provides evidence for both nature and nurture. This session will provide an
introduction to basic neurobiology and neuroanatomy as it relates to the development of
moral cognition throughout childhood, including limbic circuitry, mirror neurons, and
structures underlying theory of mind. Students will review findings from
neurodevelopmental and neuroimaging research, and consider how neurobiological
evidence can be integrated into the theoretical perspectives discussed in previous
sessions.

Required readings:

   Cognitive Neurosciences IV, Gazzaniga (Ed). Retrieved from:
   [**Please see accompanying images in pdf entitled The Moral Brain**]
2. Decety J & Howard L (2013). The role of affect in the neurodevelopment of
   morality. Child Development Perspectives, Volume 7, Issue 1, pages 49–54
**Session 5 | Culture, Religion, and Moral Intuition**

In this session, we will discuss current conceptualizations of how culture and religion shape moral development. In particular, we will consider Jonathan Haidt’s Moral Foundations Theory, according to which, the “first draft” of the moral mind provided by evolution gets revised during childhood by the particular culture in which the child lives. We will discuss differences in moral principles between cultures, and whether religion makes us “good”.

**Required readings:**


**Other media:**


**Supplemental readings:**


**Session 6 | The development of moral emotions and what happens when moral development goes awry**

In this session, we will discuss the development of moral emotions, focusing on the self-conscious emotions shame and guilt and how they influence morality. We will discuss neurodevelopmental disorders associated with deficits in morality, such as psychopathy. We will consider behavioral and neurobiological evidence suggesting that psychopathic individuals exhibit very different physiological and neural responses when making moral judgments and in situations requiring empathy. Students will be asked to critically assess clinical manifestations of “amorality” in light of the theories of moral developmental covered so far in the course, considering possible causes of such a disruption in a child’s evolving cognitive and/or emotional capacities.

**Required readings:**


**Session 7 | In-class presentations of Midterm Group Project; Summing up Part 1; The Science of Morality and the Law**

In this session we will review what we have learned about morality, its origins, its development, and its neurobiological bases. We will discuss whether the science of morality can help us in the courtroom when we must decide whether children and adolescents, psychopaths, or those with brain anomalies can be held responsible for their actions.

**Required readings:**

**Part 2. Raising moral children: the roles of parents, peers, school, and society.**

**Session 8 | Growing up moral: the role of parents**

Many social and environmental factors contribute to the moral trajectories of children, but parents represent the primary and strongest influence. It is the parents who instruct, model, encourage, and facilitate prosocial behavior and the development of empathy. We will examine this process from infancy through grade school. We will discuss how aspects of parent/child interactions, including attachment, discipline styles, and levels of responsiveness and affection affect the development of self-awareness, shame, guilt, pride, empathy, emotion regulation, and prosocial behavior.

**Required readings:**
Supplemental readings:


Session 9 | Growing up moral: the role of peers

In this session we will address the role of friends in moral development. We will address the importance of peer relationships and play in the early development of conscience and moral understanding. We will consider developmental changes in the emotional interactions between peers during late childhood, how peers come to play a much greater role than parents by early adolescence, and how peer and parental influences continue to evolve into young adulthood.

Required readings:


Supplemental readings:


Session 10 | Growing up moral: moral education at school

In a time when test scores are paramount, many schools lack the time and resources for a moral curriculum; furthermore, with the risk of litigation from parents with differing views, many educators are hesitant to broach moral subjects. Historically, however, character development was one of the primary goals of education. While schools can intentionally or inadvertently nurture the development of children who simply follow the rules, school may also actively foster moral development by providing character education, requiring service learning (volunteering), and encouraging moral reflection. This class will provide an overview of the many approaches to moral education, including positive psychology, character education, and, prevention science, which can be considered under the umbrella of positive youth development. We will also consider several examples of ethical curricula being used in schools today.
Required readings:

2. Tatman, R., Edmonson, S., Slate, J.R., Character Education: An Historical Overview. Retrieved from: http://cnx.org/content/m20338/1.2

Session 11 | The moral reader: ethics and morality in stories for children.

Since the earliest days of human society, fables and fairy tales have been used to inculcate children with moral standards and social norms. While today’s Disney-fied fairy tales tend to be sanitized “happy-ever-afters”, the original versions are dark, bloody and “Grimm.” In this class, we will examine the evolution of moral themes in children’s literature. Students will be asked to evaluate this literature through the lens of development and consider fiction teaches both ethical principles and social convention.

Required readings:


Session 12 | Cultural icons and media influences.

Children and adolescents are strongly influenced by the celebrities they see on TV, the music they listen to, and the video games they play. How do these media affect children’s moral development, and is there a critical window during which time its influence is most strongly felt? With increasing media coverage of morally dubious behavior by celebrities and violent or sexist themes in games and music, parents often struggle to shield their children from these influences. On the other hand, overly sheltering children may not be helpful. Children who experience age-appropriate and measured exposure to media with monitoring and guidance from caretakers may learn better how to modulate their own negative impulses. In this session, we will discuss the ramifications of cultural icons and media on moral development.

Required readings:


Other media:


Session 13 | The development of hate and prejudice.

When and where does hatred and bias begin? We often wish to believe that babies and children are pure, unprejudiced, and unconscious of race or ethnic difference. Surely, children acquire bias from their parents’ and teachers’ implicit and explicit statements and behaviors. But scientific evidence increasingly suggests that children as young as three months old show racial biases, and toddlers prefer individuals who share their language and even their taste in food. It is disturbing to consider that prejudice may be inborn, an unfortunate consequence of our evolution; yet to ignore it risks allowing it to continue unchecked. This session will consider the genesis of hate and bias, their biological basis, and how and to what degree experience and education can reverse both automatic and learned prejudice in the moral development of children.

Required readings:


Session 14 | Bullying and aggressive behavior.

Why do good kids do bad things? This class will examine physically and emotionally aggressive behavior in young people, including bullying and cyberbullying, and peer and relationship violence. We will attempt to understand how young people can become involved in aggressive or violent behavior and whether such behavior necessarily represents moral failing. We will consider, using the developmental lenses of the first part of the course, opportunities for prevention, response and rehabilitation.

Required readings:

2. Don’t be a bystander. Slate. Retrieved from: http://www.slate.com/articles/life/bulle/2013/02/bullying_can_we_teach_kids_to_stop_being_bystanders.html

Other media:


Examinations and Grades:

Class participation (10%): Students are expected to attend and actively participate in all class sessions and to demonstrate familiarity with the content of the assigned readings during class discussions and activities.

Midterm 1 - Group Project (30%): For the first midterm assignment, students will work in small groups (assigned by the instructor) to devise a presentation that will demonstrate and teach an assigned aspect of moral psychology to a specific (lay) audience. The goal is to (1) explain the assigned concept concisely but thoroughly, (2) be geared toward an audience at a specific developmental stage, (3) be creative and engaging. The presentation can take any form you like, as long as it can be demonstrated/presented in 5 minutes. Some example formats are: a podcast, an interview or debate with an expert or experts in the field (role-play), a web survey, a newspaper or magazine column, a short movie, play or skit. The project will be assessed by means of a group presentation (on 3/11/14) as well as an individual written report (Deadline: 3/11/14).

Moral Autobiography (25%): In this second midterm assignment (Deadline: 4/22/14), students will write their own “Moral Autobiography”, synthesizing and integrating information from assigned readings and materials, lectures, and class discussions. Students will consider various contributions (theories, experimental evidence, etc.) from the psychological, biological, and social perspectives we have discussed in the course, and the role these different factors have played in shaping your own moral development.

Final Exam (35%): Students will complete a 100-minute final examination composed of multiple choice and short answer questions based upon the material covered in class, on the slides, and in the readings.

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Policy on late submissions: Late papers will be accepted. However, grades on all late papers will be lowered by 1/3 for each day they are late (e.g., from an A- to a B+ on late day #1, from a B+ to a B on late day #2, etc.). Under no circumstances will any papers be accepted after the assigned date of the final exam. Papers received after this date
will not be graded and will receive a score of zero. Students requesting an exemption from the late submission policy must present a written note from a school Dean, Academic Advisor, or personal physician (i.e., not the student's parent or family member) justifying the late submission, which will then be considered by the instructors.

**Policy on writing quality:** Good writing is fundamental to academic success. Not only does writing well help others to understand the message you are trying to communicate, it also helps you to better understand your work. Accordingly, writing quality will be taken into account when grading written assignments. Resources to help students achieve good quality writing are available in the Resources section of the NYUClasses website.

**Plagiarism [source: http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity]:** Academic honesty means that the work you submit - in whatever form - is original. Students are expected to build their work on that of other people, just as professional researchers and writers do. Giving credit to someone whose work has helped you is expected; in fact, not to give such credit is a crime. Plagiarism is the severest form of academic fraud. Plagiarism is theft. Copying all or part of an assignment straight from a book, the Internet, or a fellow student is a violation of this principle. Other examples are:

- presenting an oral report drawn without attribution from other sources (oral or written);
- writing a paragraph which, despite being in different words, expresses someone else's idea without a reference to the source of the idea [I've highlighted this one because many students fail to appreciate that this constitutes plagiarism];
- submitting essentially the same paper in two different courses (unless both instructors have given their permission in advance);
- giving or receiving help on a take-home examination or quiz unless expressly permitted by the instructor (as in collaborative projects)
- presenting as your own a phrase, sentence, or passage from another writer's work without using quotation marks;
- presenting as your own facts, ideas, or written text gathered or downloaded from the Internet;
- submitting another student's work with your name on it;
- purchasing a paper or "research" from a term paper mill;
- "collaborating" between two or more students who then submit the same paper under their individual names.

When in doubt about whether your acknowledgment is proper and adequate, consult your instructor. Show the instructor your sources and a draft of the paper in which you are using them. The obligation to demonstrate that work is your own rests with you, the student. You are responsible for providing sources, copies of your work, or verification of the date work was completed. While all this looks like a lot to remember, all you need to do is to give credit where it is due, take credit only for your original ideas, and ask your instructor or adviser when in doubt.

Consult the APA, MLA, or Chicago style guides for accepted forms of documentation. You can access these resources, as well as additional information on proper citations on the NYU Libraries Citation Style Guide(http://nyu.libguides.com/content.php?pid=27555).
The penalty for academic dishonesty is severe. The following are the procedures as approved by the Faculty of Arts and Science. See http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity and the College Bulletin for further details.

If a student cheats on an examination or in laboratory work or engages in plagiarism, appropriate disciplinary action should be taken. The Department can take the following actions:

1. The faculty member, with the approval of the Director of Undergraduate Studies (Director), may reduce the student's grade or give the student an F in the course.

2. If after lowering the grade or assigning an F the department believes a more severe penalty (i.e., probation, suspension, expulsion) is warranted, it can refer the case to the Dean or his/her representative (Associate Dean for Students) for further action.