Morality in Childhood, FALL 2015

Course Number: CAMS UA 145

Instructor: Rebecca Rialon Berry, PhD
Clinical Assistant Professor of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
NYU School of Medicine
Tel: 646.754.4887
Email: Rebecca.Berry@nyumc.org

Prerequisites: No prerequisites.

Time and Location: Thursday (beginning September 3, 2015), 9:30am-12:15pm; Building GCASL, Room 261

Office Hours and Contact Information: One Park Avenue, 7th Floor: Room 7-203

Hours: Office hours are held on Tuesdays and by appointment only. Please email to confirm date and time.

Course Description: How do children come to know right from wrong? Do we enter the world with a blank moral slate and must learn right and wrong, or are we born with an innate moral sense? How do parents, peers, school, culture, and the media influence and shape our moral development? To answer these questions, this course explores 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 this course, we first define morality and learn about how it is studied scientifically. We then 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. Next, we consider in more detail the role of parents, peers, school, and society in shaping moral development from infancy to adulthood. We will consider 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.
Course Aims

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

1. Explore and evaluate theoretical perspectives on morality and its origins.
2. Compare and critically evaluate theories on the development of morality in childhood.
3. Evaluate the role of biological, social, and cultural influences on children’s moral development, including family, school, religion, peers, literature, and the media.
4. Explore and analyze issues of bullying 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 are available through NYUClasses, and 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 NYUClasses page each week prior to class for the most up-to-date information and required material for each session.

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

What is morality? Where does it come from? How do we become moral? 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?

Required readings:

Other media:


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***Journal assignment guidelines can be found in a separate document.***
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Journal 1: Describe an everyday moral decision or dilemma you have faced (e.g., giving money to a homeless person; giving up your seat on the subway; doing your fair share of communal chores or other responsibilities). Evaluate your experience in light of the topics (e.g., philosophical schools of thought on morality) discussed in class. DUE: Sunday, September 6, 2015, 12:00pm.

SESSION 2 | The Rationalist Perspective: 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 in childhood. Next, we will cover the basic principles of Elliot Turiel’s domain theory, which evolved from Kohlberg’s work. Students will consider the differences between conventional rules and moral rules. Strengths and limitations of these rationalist theories will be considered.

Required readings:

2. DeVries, R. (1997). Piaget's Social Theory. Educational Researcher, 26(2) 4-17 [read pages 1-7 only, as marked].

Other media:


Journal 2: Unobtrusively observe children engaged in a moral interaction (e.g., dispute, negotiation, cooperation) in an ordinary situation (e.g., in the park, on the subway, at home). Describe and evaluate the interaction from the perspective of at least one of the theoretical frameworks discussed in class. DUE: September 13, 2015, 12:00pm.
SESSION 3 | Nativist Perspectives

Following on from Session 2’s consideration of rationalist theories of moral development, we will discuss emerging experimental evidence that young children and babies possess innate prosocial tendencies, perhaps even 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 also discuss the development of moral emotions, focusing on the self-conscious emotions shame and guilt and how they influence morality.

Required readings:


Other media:


SESSION 4 | Evolutionary Perspectives

Building on the evidence that humans possess innate prosocial tendencies, we discuss human morality as the product of evolution: a set of evolved emotions, intuitions and cognitive adaptations. We will consider the evidence other species also exhibit the building blocks of moral behavior. We will also consider religion and its influence on morality from an evolutionary perspective.

Required readings:


Other media:


Journal 3: Reflect on the evidence for the evolution of morality as discussed in class and contained in the readings. What is your response to these ideas? Are you convinced by the evidence? If not, why not? If yes, do you think any of your attitudes, values, or behaviors will be altered by this knowledge? DUE: September 27th, 2015, 12:00pm.
SESSION 5 | Haidt’s Moral Foundations Theory, Moral Intuition, and Culture

In this session, we will consider Jonathan Haidt’s Moral Foundations Theory, to describe the different building blocks (foundations) that make up a culture’s morality and to explain cultural differences in morality. His theory also emphasizes the role of intuition (gut feelings) and emotion over reason and controlled cognitive processes in moral judgments. Using this framework, we will discuss differences in moral principles between cultures, and whether religion makes us “good”.

Required readings:


Other media:


Supplemental readings:


Journal 4: Reflect on the Moral Foundations Questionnaire you completed in class. Discuss your scores in light of Haidt’s theories, as discussed in class and in the assigned material. Did you learn anything new about your morality as a result of this questionnaire? Do the results alter your thinking about morality or attitudes toward your morality or the morality of others in any way? DUE: October 4th, 2015, 12:00pm.

SESSION 6 | The Neuroscience of Morality; Psychopathy

If morality evolved, we should be able to identify moral circuitry within our brains. In this session we will consider the brain bases of moral cognition and emotion and their development throughout childhood. While consideration of a neurobiological basis for morality might inspire concerns about biological determinism, neurobiology provides evidence for both nature and nurture.

We will also discuss neurodevelopmental disorders associated with deficits in morality, particularly 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 | 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:


Journal 5: Reflect on the parenting style(s) you experienced as a child or discuss the parenting style experienced by a specific character in a movie or book. Discuss in light of the theories, concepts, and studies discussed in class and in the reading material. DUE: October 18th, 2015, 12:00pm.
SESSION 8 | GROUP PROJECT PRESENTATIONS.

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:


Journal 6: Reflect on the peer relationships you had as a child, in light of the concepts, theories, and studies discussed in class and in the reading material. Can you remember a specific incident or interaction that had an influence on your morality? If you cannot remember a specific incident, discuss the influence of peers on your morality more generally. DUE: November 1st, 2015, 12:00pm.

SESSION 10 | Growing up moral: moral education at school; bullying

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 discuss Social and Emotional Learning, one of the most successful approaches to moral education. This class will also examine bullying and cyberbullying, and educators’ responses to these growing concerns.

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

Other media:


Supplemental readings:


**SESSION 11 | NO CLASS**

**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:**

Morality in Childhood  
Syllabus


Other media:


Supplemental readings:


Journal 7: Do you think that school had an influence on your morality? If it did, was this due to specific educational programs, or something less specific? If not, why not? What do you think is the most important thing schools can do to encourage morality and moral behavior in students? Consider these questions in light of the concepts, theories, and studies discussed in class and in the reading material. DUE: November 22nd, 2015, 12:00pm.

SESSION 13 | NO CLASS -- THANKSGIVING

SESSION 14 | The Development of Hate and Prejudice

When and where does hatred and bias begin? We often wish to believe that children are unprejudiced and unconscious of race or ethnic differences. 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 innate, 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 15 | The moral reader: ethics and morality in stories for children

+ FINAL EXAM REVIEW

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:


Recommended readings:


SESSION 16 | ***FINAL EXAM***
EXAMINATIONS AND GRADES:

Class attendance and participation (10%)
Students are expected to attend all class sessions, to actively participate in discussions and class activities, and to demonstrate familiarity with the content of the assigned course materials. If you do not participate in class discussions, it has a negative effect on the other students.

Attendance will be taken, though not at the same time in each class. **If you miss 2 classes** without emailing the instructor in advance (or providing a medical note, on official headed notepaper) your final course grade starts at 95%, **if you miss 3 or more classes** without emailing the instructor in advance (or providing a medical note, on official headed notepaper), your final course grade starts at 90%.

Journal Article Presentation (5%)
Be prepared to present a few slides on the main points and lead a discussion regarding one of the assigned readings. Please provide a brief overview of the article and main findings. Then, share three key points that you appreciated most from the reading and think are important for your peers to know, and lead a discussion in class using questions that you prepared ahead of time.

Journal Entries (35%)
Full details of the journal assignment requirements are provided in a separate guidelines document available in the Resources section of the NYUClasses site.

In brief, seven journal entries are required, the main body of which should be no longer than 1 single-spaced typed page. Journals will be graded from 0 (extremely poor) to 5 (outstanding) – see guidelines document for details.

Journal entries are due via NYUClasses within 72 hours of the end of class (i.e., by Sunday at noon). **Late submissions will not be accepted.**

Creative Project (25%)
Students will work in groups of 2 to devise “moral modules” - ways to encourage moral decision-making and actions among either children (grade school) or teens (high school).

For example, a moral module could focus on ways to promote cooperation and collaboration, empathy, or moral decision-making, on parenting or peer influence, or on ways to reduce bullying, antisocial behavior, or prejudice – any of the other moral domains covered in class. The project will be assessed by means of a group presentation during Session 8 (October 29th, 2015).

The format of the moral module can take any form you like, as long as it can be demonstrated/presented in seven minutes. Some example formats are: a podcast, a buzzfeed article, a newspaper or magazine column, a short movie, play or skit.

Each respective individual in the group must also submit an original, one-page summary of their project, both digitally (via NYUClasses) and as a hard-copy to accompany the presentation. The summary should include the following information:

- Project title
- Group members
- The target audience
- A summary of your project including how your "moral module" relates to the material you've learned in this class (i.e., the primary theoretical frameworks you relied on in devising the module).
- A list of the sources used, in APA format
Examples of the projects include:
- Increasing empathy in social media by changing how comments are made and read in platforms like Facebook.
- A skit aimed at decreasing moral disengagement in teens by illustrating how it occurs and how to overcome it.

Final Exam (25%)
Students will complete an in-class (on December 17th, 2015), closed-book final examination lasting 1 hour and 45 minutes, and comprising multiple choice, short-answer and longer (paragraph-length) format questions to assess students’ knowledge of and ability to synthesize the material covered in class, on the slides, and in the readings. If you require accommodations, please work through the Moses Center at the start of the semester.

Makeup exams. Not permissible.

GRADES:
A ≥ 94
A- = 90-93.9
B+ = 88-89.9
B = 83-87.9
B- = 80-82.9
C+ = 78-79.9
C = 73-77.9
C- = 70-72.9
D+ = 68-69.9
D = 63-67.9
D- = 60-62.9
F < 60

Note on grades: If a “borderline” grade (e.g., 89.8, B+) is going to be increased (e.g., to 90, A-), it will be done **BEFORE** grades have been released to students. Please do not query your grade assignment after grades have been released unless you have strong reason to believe an error has been made. “Grade grubbing” will not be viewed favorably.

Policy on late submissions: Late papers/assignments will **not** be accepted (unless a medical note, on official headed notepaper, is provided). Late submissions receive 0.

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 considered academic fraud, a crime, and can severely mess with your life. Copying all or part of an assignment straight from a book, the Internet, or a fellow student is a violation of this principle.
The penalty for academic dishonesty is severe. For procedures approved by the Faculty of Arts and Science, see [http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity](http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity) and the College Bulletin.

**Cell Phones.** Please do not use and keep in your bag during class. This includes talking, texting, email, apps, whatever. Please note that if I see you use a Cell Phone or other internet device during an exam, you get a ZERO.

**Laptops.** For taking notes: Cool. For anything else: Uncool.