PH3B6-15 Moral Epistemology

24/25

Department
> Philosophy

Level
> Undergraduate Level 3

Module leader
> Fabienne Peter

Credit value
> 15

Assessment
> 80% coursework, 20% exam

Study location
> University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

It seems that we have at least some knowledge of what is morally right and wrong. Rape is morally wrong and rescuing a child that has fallen into a pond is morally right. Yet we often disagree on moral matters, for example on whether eating meat is morally permissible. And while there are experts in other fields, it's less clear that there are moral experts. Moral knowledge also seems to have a motivational component. Moral wrongs have the tendency to upset us deeply and we can be motivated to do the right thing.

This module focuses on moral knowledge and its limits. It will address questions such as the following. How can we explain the possibility of moral knowledge? Do we acquire moral beliefs in the same way than we acquire beliefs in other areas? Are there moral experts? How should we respond to moral disagreements? What should we do when we're unsure about what's morally right?

We will be engaging with the recent philosophical literature in moral epistemology, including Sarah McGrath's book Moral Knowledge, Alison Hills' and Paulina Sliwa's work on moral testimony, Elisabeth Harman's work on moral ignorance, and Sharon Street's work on evolutionary explanations of moral belief, among others. The module complements other modules in moral philosophy such as Ethics and Applied Ethics, as well as modules in epistemology, but there are no pre-requisites.

Module aims

The module principally aims to: (i.) engage students in answering key philosophical questions concerning moral knowledge; (ii.) engage students with the recent philosophical literature on topics in moral epistemology; and (iii.) engage students in critical analysis of these source materials in order to develop their own view and arguments on the topics.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Sample syllabus (subject to change):

I. Acquiring Moral Knowledge

1. What is moral knowledge?
2. Moral intuition
3. Moral perception
4. Moral knowledge from others
5. Reflective equilibrium

II. Limits of Moral Knowledge
6. Moral disagreements
7. Moral uncertainty
8. Moral ignorance
9. Evolutionary debunking arguments

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Students will acquire knowledge and understanding of significant debates in moral epistemology
- Students will acquire theoretical and technical knowledge on topics in moral epistemology
- Students will practice and enhance their written and oral communication skills by engaging in learning sessions and completing assessments
- Students will practice and enhance their skills in independent research and presentation of philosophical work
- Students will practice and enhance their skills in critical analysis of source materials with a high degree of complexity
- Students will practice and enhance their ability to develop and defend their own philosophical arguments for philosophical positions

Indicative reading list

I. Acquiring Moral Knowledge
Audi, Robert. 2013. Moral Perception. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Hills, Alison. 2009. "Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology." Ethics 120: 94–127.
Huemer, Michael. 2005. Ethical Intuitionism. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

McGrath, Sarah. Moral Knowledge. New York: Oxford University Press.

Scanlon, T.M. 2002. "Rawls on Justification." In The Cambridge Companion to Rawls, S. Freeman (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 139–167.

Sliwa, Paulina. 2012. "In Defense of Moral Testimony." Philosophical Studies 158: 175–95.

II. Limits of Moral Knowledge

Bykvist, Krister. 2017. "Moral Uncertainty." Philosophy Compass 12 (3):e12408

Harman, Elizabeth. 2011. "Does Moral Ignorance Exculpate?" Ratio 24 (4):443-468.

Srinivasan, Amia. 2020. "Radical Externalism." Philosophical Review 129 (3): 395-431.

Street, Sharon. 2006. "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value." Philosophical Studies 127: 109–66.

Vavova, Katia. 2014. "Moral Disagreement and Moral Skepticism." Philosophical Perspectives 28: 302–333.

Research element

Students will produce essays that require research into the relevant literature and the development of independent critical analyses and arguments.

Subject specific skills

Students will be able to discuss clearly in speech and in writing the issues raised by their close reading and critical analysis of the set texts and materials. Students will be able to engage with these texts in a way that demonstrates relevant and appropriate philosophical and scholarly skills. Students will be able to analyse and critically evaluate the key ideas and arguments presented in the set texts, and come to an independent assessment of their merits. They will acquire an appreciation of the nature of moral knowledge, of difficulties in acquiring moral knowledge, and of the moral issues that arise in beliefs held about other people.

Transferable skills

Students will acquire a sound and incisive understanding and knowledge of several key topics and issues in moral epistemology. They will learn how to engage philosophically with texts addressing difficult and important topics. Students will be able to offer relevant support for and critical responses to the arguments and views set out in the texts and materials examined during the module.

Study

Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	18 sessions of 1 hour (69%)
Total	26 hours

Type	Required
Seminars	8 sessions of 1 hour (31%)
Total	26 hours

Private study description

No private study requirements defined for this module.

Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

Assessment

You do not need to pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Students can register for this module without taking any assessment.

Assessment group D1

	Weighting	Study time	Eligible for self-certification
2500 word essay	80%		Yes (extension)
1000 word essay	20%		No

Feedback on assessment

Students will have their essays returned with written comments. Students can share or discuss a one-page plan for each essay and will receives either verbal or written comments (as preferred).

[Past exam papers for PH3B6](#)

Availability

Courses

This module is Optional for:

- Year 3 of UPHA-V7ML Undergraduate Philosophy, Politics and Economics
- Year 3 of UPHA-V7MW Undergraduate Politics, Philosophy and Law

This module is Unusual option for:

- UPHA-L1CA Undergraduate Economics, Psychology and Philosophy

- - Year 2 of L1CA Economics, Psychology and Philosophy
  - Year 2 of L1CC Economics, Psychology and Philosophy (Behavioural Economics Pathway)
  - Year 3 of L1CA Economics, Psychology and Philosophy
- UPHA-V7ML Undergraduate Philosophy, Politics and Economics
  - Year 2 of V7ML Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Tripartite)
  - Year 3 of V7MP Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Bipartite)
- Year 4 of UPHA-V7MM Undergraduate Philosophy, Politics and Economics (with Intercalated year)
- UPHA-V7MW Undergraduate Politics, Philosophy and Law
  - Year 2 of V7MW Politics, Philosophy and Law
  - Year 3 of V7MW Politics, Philosophy and Law
- Year 4 of UPHA-V7MX Undergraduate Politics, Philosophy and Law (with Intercalated Year)

This module is Option list B for:

- Year 4 of UPHA-VQ73 Undergraduate Philosophy and Literature with Intercalated Year