

Omar Fakhri
Moral Epistemology Seminar

An advanced seminar on moral disagreement and debunking arguments

Course Description

This course has two main parts. The first part is on the problem of moral disagreement. There are three types of problems of moral disagreement: metaphysical, semantic, and epistemic. We will focus only on the epistemic problem of moral disagreement. According to this problem, certain types of moral disagreement undermine our justification for moral knowledge. We will then consider different replies to this problem. The second part of the seminar is on evolutionary debunking arguments against moral realism. If moral facts are mind-independent, as moral realism claims, then can realists explain the reliability of our moral beliefs? Debunkers argue that our current knowledge of evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology suggests that the answer to the question is “no” because evolutionary considerations undermine the reliability of our moral beliefs by calling their genealogical history into question. We will then consider a host of objections to these types of arguments. Lastly, we will conclude the seminar by asking whether there is a connection between arguments from moral disagreement and debunking arguments.

Course Requirements:

- Presentation 20% – At the beginning of the semester, each of you will sign up to present on one of the assigned readings for that week. You should prepare a handout that clearly outlines the general structure of the paper, and the main arguments and objections. You are expected to spend 10-15 minutes summarizing the main claims made by the author, and then raise a few critical discussion questions.
- Seminar Paper 80% - This is a substantial paper of about 15-20 double-spaced pages. You will be required to get your paper topic approved by me first. Ideally, you should aim to do this at least a month before the paper is due. I will be happy, and even encourage students, to send me drafts of their papers before the due date. I will read drafts if and only if they are sent at least three weeks before the due date.

Required Text:

There is no required text for this course. All the readings will be uploaded to the course website by the instructor.

Course Schedule

(* = optional reading)

Background reading:

Richard Rowland: The Epistemology of Moral Disagreement
Richmond Campbell: Moral Epistemology (SEP article), section 4

Part 1: Moral Disagreement

Unit 1: Moral skepticism

Sarah McGrath: Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise

Decker & Groll: On the (In)Significance of Moral Disagreement for Moral Knowledge

Eric Sampson: The Self-Undermining Arguments from Disagreement

* King: McGrath on Moral Knowledge

*McGrath: Reply to King

*King: Rejoinder to McGrath

Unit 2: Moral spinelessness

Kieran Setiya: Knowing Right from Wrong, ch. 1

Robert Simpson: Epistemic Peerhood and the Epistemology of Disagreement

James Fritz: Conciliationism and Moral Spinelessness

Katia Vavova: Moral Disagreement and Moral Skepticism

*Elga: Reflection and Disagreement, sec. 12

*Christensen: Disagreement, Question-Begging and Epistemic Self-Criticism, sec. 6

Part 2: Debunking Arguments

Unit 3: Evolutionary debunking argument

Gilbert Harman: The Nature of Morality, ch. 1

Richard Joyce: The Evolution of Morality, ch. 6

Sharron Street: A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value

Sharron Street: Constructivism about Reasons

* Bedke: No Coincidence?

*Street: Mind-Independence without the Mystery: Why Quasi-Realists Can't Have It Both Ways

Unit 4: Not all moral beliefs are influenced by evolution

William FitzPatrick: Why There Is No Darwinian Dilemma for Ethical Realism

Derek Parfit: On What Matters, vol 2, ch. 33.

Shafer-Landau: Evolutionary Debunking, Moral Realism and Moral Knowledge

Unit 5: Third-factor responses

David Copp: Darwinian Skepticism about Moral Realism

Kieran Setiya: Knowing Right from Wrong, ch. 2

David Enoch: The Epistemological Challenge to Metanormative Realism

Eric Wielenber: On the Evolutionary Debunking of Morality

*Street: Reply to Copp: Naturalism, Normativity, and the Varieties of Realism Worth Worrying About

Unit 6: Debunking leads to general skepticism

Katia Vavova: Debunking Evolutionary Debunking

Selim Berker: Does Evolutionary Psychology Show That Normativity Is Mind-Dependent?

Unit 7: Is there a connection?

Folke Tersman: Debunking and Disagreement