

COURSE OVERVIEW

It's hard to be good. The difficulty in knowing and the difficulty in doing the right thing tend to engender skepticism about morality. We find ourselves questioning the reality and the relevance of ethical truth. Do moral rules express anything beyond mere personal preference? Are they simply a matter of social custom and environmental conditioning? Can there even be moral truths if there is no God? Is it possible to be virtuous? Does being good have anything to do with being happy?

In the first part of this semester, we will consider such skeptical challenges. In each case, we will try to precisely formulate the challenge. We will then consider how it might be answered. In the second part, we will look at some concrete views about what moral goodness consists in. Our focus will be on two philosophers: Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill. Each gives a very different, and, you might think, a very plausible answer to this question. In the third part, we turn from broad theories to specific issues that raise questions regarding our duties towards one another, animals and the environment. These include: (1) wealth and poverty, (2) animal rights and (3) pollution.

Throughout the course, we will be honing our logical skills. This is crucial. Nearly every error that you will find in your peers' moral views is rooted in some logical sloppiness. My hope is that you will come away from this course with the ability to disarm many of these confusions. You will then be in a position to begin upon serious ethical thought.