

THE FORMS OF LIFE
ETHICS, NATURE AND NATURAL SELECTION

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Course Description

The general purpose of this course is to explore the role, if any, that Darwinian theory and evolutionary biology should have in shaping our ethical thinking and theories. There is a great deal of literature now on the relation of traditional moral philosophy and social theory to Darwin's insights and their development in evolutionary biology. Much of it is concerned with human morality and social relations, although some application has been made to non-human animals and other living things. We will be interested both applications.

The course will begin with some of the classic literature on these issues (Huxley, among others), but it will emphasize the influential contemporary developments of those who pioneered sociobiology, e.g., W.D. Hamilton and Robert Trivers. These contributions will be assessed in light of the best contemporary philosophical literature engaging it (both sympathetically and critically): focusing for example on the work of Philip Kitcher, Elliot Sober and others.

The main specific purpose of the course will be to reflect upon and interrogate critically the very idea of ethics or morality and, in particular, the idea of intrinsic value, central to traditional theory. Instructors Guevara and Campagna believe that these ideas need to be radically reconsidered in light of the question of the value of non-human nature and great variety of life forms. With this in mind, we will consult ancient and other classic philosophical sources, e.g. Aristotle and David Hume, as naturalistic philosophies of value. These sources are not widely consulted or adequately understood by the biological and environmental/conservationist community of scholars, and yet they contain some of the most important reflections for a naturalistic conception of ethics and value generally. We will attempt to bring the two—the scientific and the traditional ethical theories—into reflective and critical relation with each other.

Also, as a main contemporary source, the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein looms large inasmuch as it basis so much of its philosophy on the very idea of a form of life, and also is radically critical of traditional approaches, their language and conceptual schemes.

Finally, towards the end of the course there will therefore be an effort to apply especially the contributions of Wittgenstein to the concept of life, in light of the

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remarkable and potentially revolutionary advances in synthetic biology, de-extinction, and other issues of cutting-edge significance.

All in all, the course will emphasize the Darwinian paradigm of evolution and its implications, if any, for moral theory and moral systems, from social Darwinism to Synthetic Biology. The main goal is a fundamental and critical reexamination of traditional ethics and moral philosophy, especially in the concern to rethink the fundamental concepts and language of value, in light of the great variety of forms of life. Some application of this critical rethinking will be made to specific issues in conservation biology and environmental ethics more broadly.

Intended Audience

The course will be of interest to students in philosophy, environmental science, politics, sociology, and many other disciplines. But this course is crosslisted with biology because the purpose and content of the course will strongly benefit from the exchange of ideas between philosophers and biologists.

Students in biology do not often have occasion to confront in depth the question of the relevance of ethical systems to their work, or of the relation of science as a source of facts and theory that could be important to ethical theory and thinking. This course offers such an occasion, through a philosophically and historically informed study, and with some application to issues in conservation biology and environmental ethics.

Philosophers typically have a rough sense of the basic ideas in evolutionary theory, and the possible relevance of those ideas to moral philosophy, but are rarely exposed to evolutionary thinking as advanced by biologists in specific cases. The interaction of the fields will be an attraction rarely present in course offerings at UCSC. Indeed, this course is unique here, so far as we know.

The course will meet once per week for three hours, will require brief weekly papers on the discussion topics, a seminar presentation, and a term paper on topics to be decided during the course.

Topics and Readings by week

1. What is morality or ethics? Intrinsic value and other central ethical concepts. Selections from Plato, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Wittgenstein.
2. Value systems and virtue. Ethical systems versus regulation-legal systems. Aesthetic value and Nature. Selections from Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Mill, Wittgenstein.

3. Common misunderstandings about the workings of natural selection: Selections from Hamilton, Mayr, Trivers, Dawkins.
4. Common misunderstandings about the relation of fact to value (the so-called naturalistic fallacy): Hume, Peter Singer, Philippa Foot.
5. The ethical consequences of the theory of evolution by natural selection (classic sources): Darwin, Huxley, Spencer and Social Darwinism.
6. The ethical consequences of the theory of evolution by natural selection (recent sources): Selections from Hamilton, Trivers, Alexander, Ayala, Wilson.
7. Traditional ethical theory and questions of life, death, reproduction, and harm, in light of the processes of natural selection. Selections from Singer, Sober, Kitcher, Ruse and Wilson.
8. An ethics for species: ethical reflections on natural and culturally driven species extinction (foundations of conservation biology, old and new). Selections from Soule, Leopold, Kareiva, Marvier, McCord, Sandler.
9. On the very concept of life: the philosophical challenges of synthetic biology to the concept of a form of life. The radical reconception of foundational issues in our concepts and language: Wittgenstein, the value of the method of language games. Selections Wittgenstein, Diamond, Foot.
10. Overview, final assessments of the possibility of an ethics of nature. Guidance for completion of term papers.