

Is There a Universal Truth about How One Should Live One's Life?

Lecturer: Dr. Gordon Davis

Schedule of topics:

Week 1

In this first class, we open up discussion about an elusive concept: Truth. We'll consider how one might distinguish 'objective' truths from 'subjective' truths. And in the context of an introduction to ethics, we'll contrast 'religious ethics' and 'philosophical ethics'. (Meanwhile, we'll need to discuss an open question: what is the role of 'truth' in ethical debates?)

Week 2

Expanding on 'religious ethics', we contrast various religious traditions with one that is quite unique: the tradition of Buddhist ethics. To appreciate its distinctiveness, we'll consider some families of philosophical ethics, including 'deontological' ethics and 'perfectionist' ethics.

Week 3

At this point, we introduce another elusive concept: 'Normativity'. From both Western and Buddhist perspectives, we'll discuss the potential for 'universals' in ethics (and also the role of 'normativity' outside of ethics).

Week 4

Introduction to the debate(s) surrounding 'relativism'. Can values as different as those of the modern West and those of Buddhism be compared at all? Is a comparative assessment possible?

Week 5

The notion of 'wisdom' - a common word in most discourse about Buddhism. Wisdom might be found where we'd least expect it in modern frames of reference; and likewise where we'd least expect it in Buddhist discourse. As well as pursuing a discussion of how 'truth' can or should relate to 'wisdom', we'll discuss some further thoughts on relativism, and on the trajectory of ethics in the future.

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