Origins of Western Morality

The course examines the ways that early Christians appropriated, adapted, and transmitted particular moral teachings of ancient Greek, Jewish, Roman traditions. It focuses on the aspects of these traditions that came to shape the moral language and social codes of Europe and America, with particular attention to Hellenistic philosophy, the letters of Paul, the teachings attributed to Jesus, and early Christian figures such as Augustine. Students will consider questions about the relationship between religion and morality, and will critically examine the enduring impact that early Christian adaptation and transmission of ancient Greek and Roman traditions has had upon contemporary American moral discourse about sexual, familial, political, interpersonal, and psychological expectations.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of the course, successful students will be able to:

- Explain the central concerns of ancient Greek and Roman morality and discuss how Judean and Christian moralists appropriated and adapted them;
- Think critically about ancient ethical theories and understand how these theories are related to morality;
- Evaluate the ways that religion functions as a means through which culturally-conditioned expectations about moral human behavior are transmitted, and consider the implications of pairing moral teachings with divine authority;
- Identify the differences between ancient and modern morality and ethical theory, and evaluate the viability of utilizing aspects of the ancient ideas in today’s world.

Textbooks


Other required readings will be posted on Blackboard.