

9.46 The Neuroscience of Morality

Fall 2017

Instructor: Rebecca Saxe

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Neuroscience of Morality

Questions about morality:

Where do morals come from?

Are there universal human morals?

Is morality unique to humans?

Is humans are moral, why is there war?

Is morality the opposite of selfishness?

Why do people cheat?

Why do we punish?

What can brain science teach us about morality?

How can I live a good life?

Neuroscience of Morality

Rebecca Saxe:

Born & raised in Toronto



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I study social cognition



https://www.ted.com/talks/rebecca_saxe_how_brains_make_moral_judgments

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Undergrad at Oxford



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And human brain development



<http://www.tedxcambridge.com/portfolio-item/rebecca-saxe/>

PhD at MIT

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Neuroscience of Morality

Why I teach *this* class:

1. The topic is so fascinating. These are questions I'm trying to figure out, and that matter for how to live.
** How to raise good kids? How to improve criminal justice?*
2. We confront every hard problem in cognitive science and neuroscience: How the brain computes abstract thoughts. Human uniqueness. Innateness. Cultural variability. Learning and change. Disease and disability. Law and policy.
3. My core value as a professor: college is for thinking like an adult. Working on real, actual problems, that no one else can answer for you. I'm your coach.

Neuroscience of Morality

Rosa Lafer-Sousa

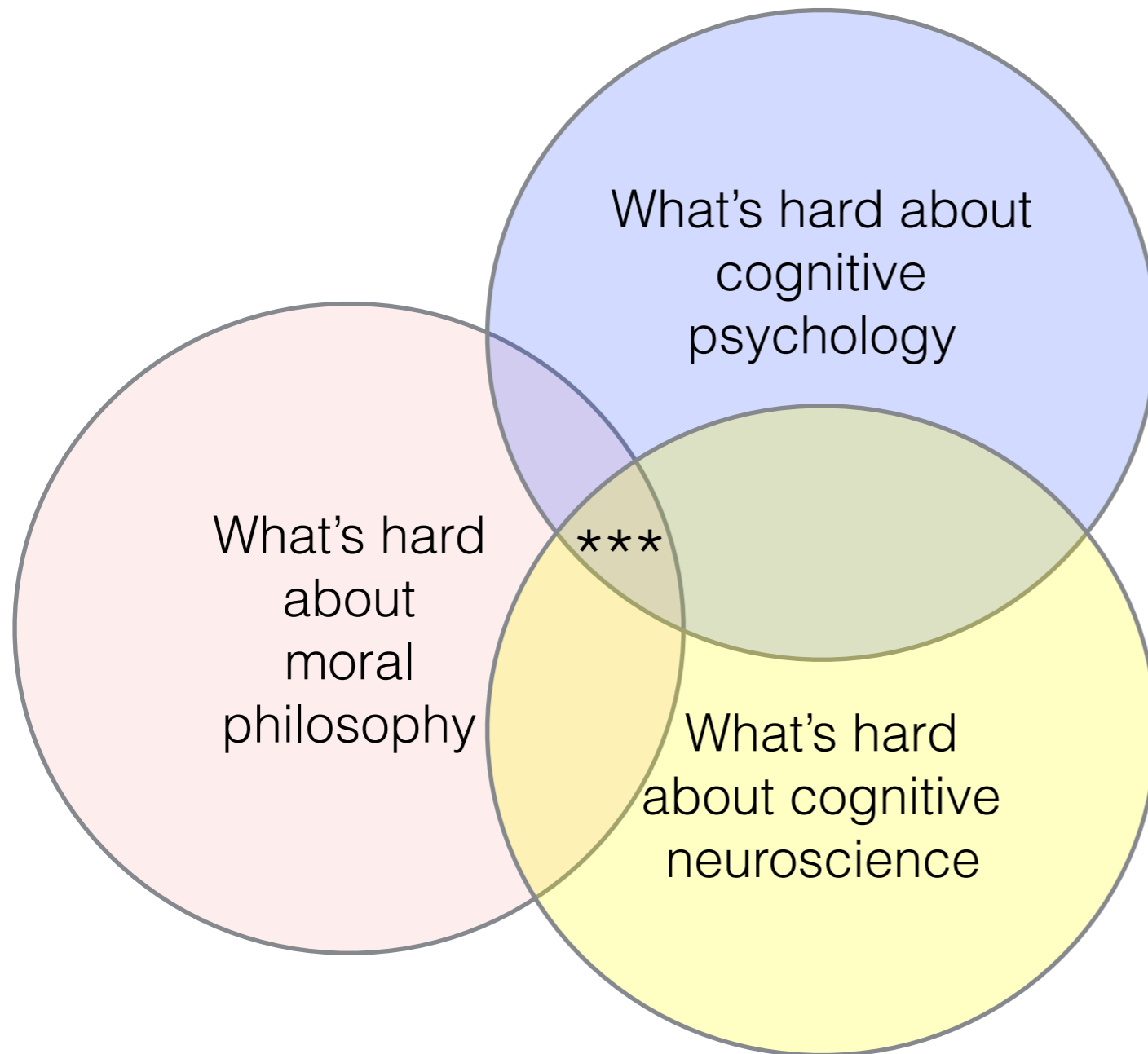
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Anyone else?

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What makes this class hard

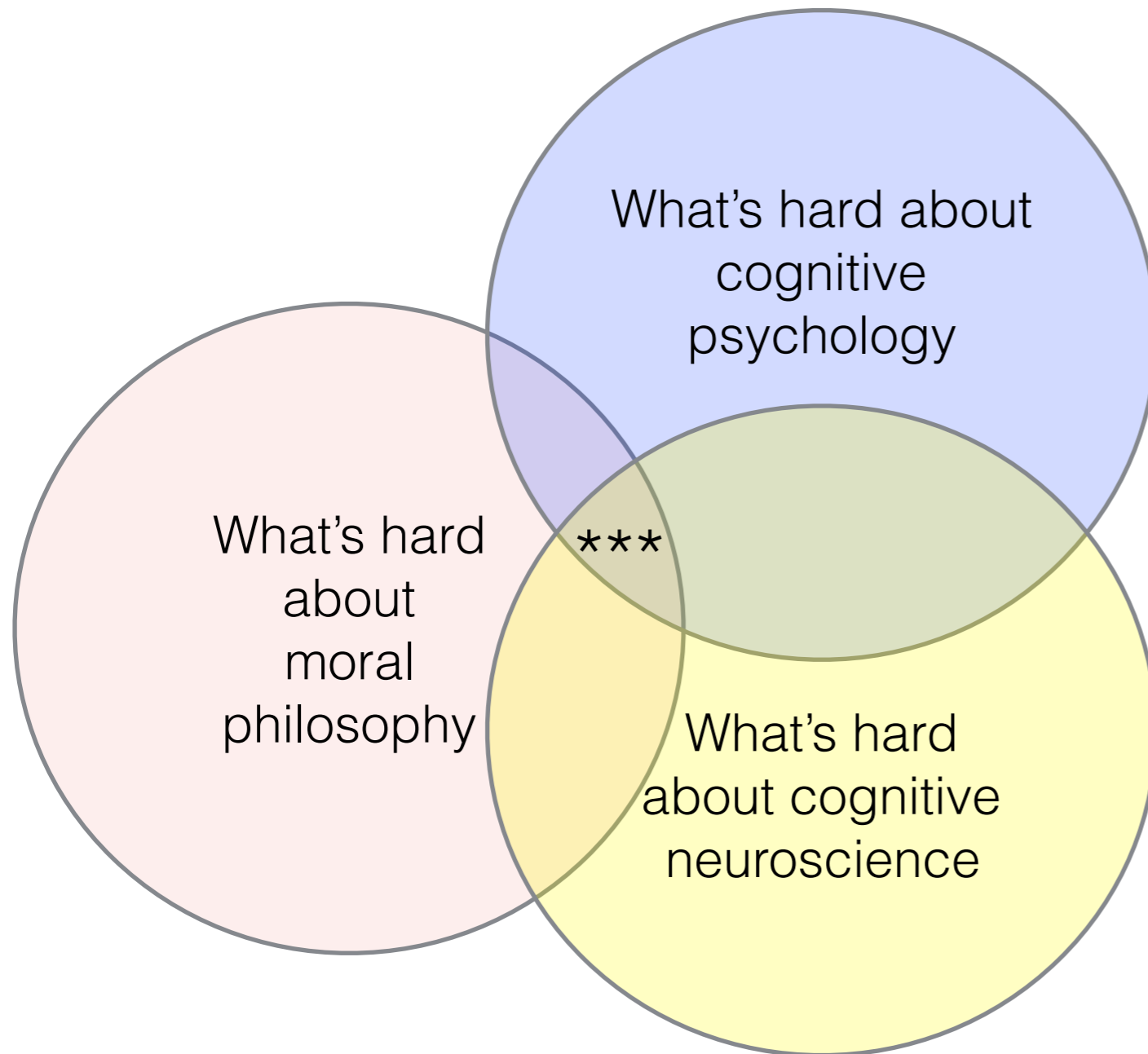


The questions (& concepts) are new;
The methods are new;

The experts don't yet agree on many basics

Neuroscience of Morality

What makes this class **harder**



The questions (& concepts) are new;
The methods are new;

The experts don't yet agree on many basics

We've made progress: important discoveries, key distinctions, and unintuitive facts

Neuroscience of Morality

Skills and goals

1. Translate interesting questions into neuroscientifically testable hypotheses
2. Evaluate the strengths and limits of existing neuroscientific methods and results
3. Identify puzzles and open questions, and consider how to make future progress
4. Structure an argument based on evidence

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What to expect (A):

In class time: Seminar-style discussion

Weekly exercises

2% /week, up to 20% of grade

Expand/ synthesize/ challenge the readings.

First draft due Sunday 6pm

Sometimes in groups, sometimes individually.

Discussed, expanded, revised in class

Example: next week — Empathy & Morality

Is morality basically ‘feeling bad when others suffer, therefore feeling motivated not to hurt them’?

On Stellar: Readings, A list of 11 questions, A sign up sheet

Responses ~ 1 page submitted as a google doc

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**Laptops will be used in class. No email, messaging, or outside work*

Side note: one peculiar moral norm of mine

I am distracted, disrupted, distressed, and displeased when people arrive late for lecture. Please don't.

**Door will be closed from 11:05-11:40 & 11:45-12:25; wait at couches if late*

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What to expect (B):

Final essay:

You pick a topic & 6-9 papers from the “course list”

Topic proposal: Due Sep 26, 5%

First draft, and a plan for future extended reading

Due Oct 17, 10%

Second draft includes extended reading

Due Nov 21, 10%

Your final essay is a piece of writing you will be proud of after you leave MIT.

Final essay: Due Dec 8, 25%

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What to expect (C):

Final exam:

12 short essay questions; you answer 4 of them.

Open book & notes.

Tests your ability to synthesize and express coherent ideas in real time.

30%, Date and time TBA

Practice exams will be available
(More details when this gets closer)

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What to expect (D):

An idea we're considering: a course pod-cast

Weekly discussions, recorded Thursday at Rosa's house

Two students per week

Option A: each student does one weeks

Option B: a few students do all the weeks

Please discuss w Rosa ASAP if you are interested

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By the end of today:

Submit the introductory survey

Look over the syllabus; tell us if you have concerns

If you can't get access to Stellar, let me or Rosa know

Sign up for one question in the weekly exercise for week 2

Side note: enrollment cap, pre-requisites

Any questions?

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<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

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