Spring Semester, 2010  
History 510:309. History of Western Morals to 1500  
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The tension between aspiration for justice and barriers to achieving it always became clearest in moral dilemmas. Especially in a desperate crises—in matters of life and death—the limits and possibilities of moral imagination came out in sharp relief. Because moral norms varied from one age and culture to another, moral dilemmas in each age and culture we will study took different configurations. We will have cameos to compare from ancient Greece and Rome and from medieval and early modern Europe. There will be at least the question of whether there has been an evolution in morals as well as in other fields, such as politics and technology, and, if so, whether evolution of morals moved at the same rate in politics and technology, and made the same, or comparable, leaps forward.

Readings and discussions of original sources in translation will bring home the power of the crises we study. Some problems will come up at every juncture. Here are a few examples. Can commonly forbidden acts, such as lying, homicide betrayal (treason), and theft ever be justified? What are the reciprocal obligations in a household, the basic unit, and often the paradigm, of society? How does gender enter into moral imagination and action? How can institutions like slavery be taken for granted, or praised, at some times and condemned as inhuman at others?