

Course Syllabus
PHIL 334 Metaethics
Spring, 2005

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Metaethics

Metaethics is the study of the nature and status of moral judgments and their content. What do we *mean* when we say that something is right or good? Are moral facts reducible to physical facts? Are moral claims even the sort of thing that can be true or false? Do the sorts of reasons we have for acting one way or another depend on our desires? We will not examine moral theories as such in this course – utilitarianism, Kantianism, etc. Rather, we examine what must be true of normative claims in general no matter which particular normative theory turns out to be true.

Prerequisites

Although there are no formal prerequisites for this course, some prior experience in philosophy would be highly desirable. This is an upper-division philosophy elective, not an introductory-level course. And metaethics is, by its nature, a difficult subject which draws heavily on a number of other sub-fields within philosophy (metaphysics, epistemology, and philosophy of language, for instance). We will be moving at a brisk pace over some extremely difficult readings. Please speak with me if this is a concern.

Books

Most of the readings in this class come from *Moral Discourse and Practice*, edited by Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton (Oxford: OUP, 1997). This is the only required book for the course. Other readings will be placed on electronic reserve and hardcopy reserve at Copley Library for downloading/photocopy. Also recommended, but not required, is Michael Smith's book *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). Smith's book provides a useful discussion of some of the basic problems in metaethics, and this course largely follows his division of the main issues. Alexander Miller has a new book called *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003) which provides the most up-to-date and comprehensive survey of the field around.

Coursework

Your grade in this course will be based on the following components:

- **Quizzes** – I will give 5-10 unannounced, multiple-choice quizzes over the course of the semester. The purpose of these quizzes is to test your completion and comprehension of the day's reading assignment, and to encourage attendance at class. You will not be able to make up quizzes missed due to absences *unless* you either a) notify me *in advance and in writing* (email is fine) that you will be absent, or b) provide me with a *documented medical excuse* after your absence.
- **Short Papers** – I will assign two short (2-3) page papers on topics of my choosing. These will require you to present and critically evaluate a position taken by one of the authors we have read. The focus of these papers is on the careful, concise, and precise reconstruction and examination of *philosophical arguments*. I will provide detailed comments on these papers and you should view them as tools to improve your philosophical writing in preparation for your final paper. Papers must be submitted electronically via either WebCT or electronic mail.
- **Term Paper** – Your final paper will be on a topic of your choosing, and will be 12-15 pages in length. Your goal in writing should be to produce a paper of sufficient quality to submit as a writing sample to graduate school. It will be due on the day of your scheduled final (May 23rd) at 2:00.
 - **Topic** – You must clear your topic with me in advance, by submitting to me an approximately ½ page long proposal by April 11th. The topic proposal should state the subject of your paper (what debate will you be looking at), a rough version of your thesis (what position will you be arguing for), and a preliminary list of sources that you will be consulting. After your proposal has been returned to you with my comments, you should begin work on a
 - **Preliminary Draft** – During the week of May 2-4th, classes will be canceled so that we can meet individually to look at preliminary drafts of your paper. These drafts can be in outline or prose form. What is important is that by this point you should have begun to give serious thought to the sources you will be focusing on, the particular arguments your paper will examine, and the arguments you yourself will develop in response to the literature.
 - **Abstract** – Your paper should include an abstract of approximately 300 words. An abstract is meant to provide your reader with a brief overview of your paper, and should clearly indicate your topic, thesis, and argumentative strategy. I will provide examples of good abstracts in class.

Your final paper is worth a significant portion of your final grade. A successful paper will have the following qualities:

- **Original** – The paper must be written *by you and for this class*. Do not turn in a paper that you have submitted or are planning to submit to another class, and do not submit another's work as your own. I will check all submitted papers against internet sources to detect

plagiarism, and any violation of academic integrity will result in (at a minimum) failure from the course.

- **On-topic** – The paper should be focused on one of the debates we have examined in this class, unless you get my explicit permission to focus on a metaethical topic that we have not covered.
- **Well-researched** – You will be expected to discuss the material relevant to your topic that we have covered in class. You will also be expected to do some outside research on your own. The on-line database, *The Philosophers' Index*, available through Copley Library's Website, is a good place to start, and I will be happy to help you in finding good material.
- **Philosophical** – This is a philosophy paper, and so your focus should be on the *presentation and evaluation of philosophical arguments*. In other words, it should not primarily be a paper on the history of ethics, or on the sociology of ethics, etc. I will let you know if this might be a problem for your topic.

Your Grade

Each activity in this class is worth a certain number of points. Your grade will be determined based on a straight (un-curved) analysis of percentage of points earned vs. total points.

Quizzes 5-10 @ 5 points each	25-50
2 Short Papers @ 20 points each	40
Topic Proposal	3
Preliminary Draft	6
Abstract	3
Final Paper	40
Total Points:	117-142

A+	97 - 100%
A	93 - 97.9
A-	90 - 92.9
B+	87 - 89.9
B	83 - 86.9
B-	80 - 82.9
C+	77 - 79.9
C	73 - 76.9
C-	70 - 72.9
D+	67 - 67.9
D	63 - 66.9
D-	60 - 62.9
F	59.9 or below

Schedule

Week 1 (January 31 – February 2)

Introduction – The Moral Problem and Moore’s Anti-Naturalism

- *Recommended:* Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*, Chapter 1
- G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Chapter 1 (DG+R)

Week 2 (February 7 – 9)

Morality and Motivation I – Internalism

- Williams, “Internal and External Reasons” (DG+R)
- Darwall, “Reasons, Motives and the Demands of Morality: An Introduction,” (DG+R)

Week 3 (February 14 – 16)

Morality and Motivation II – The Humean Theory of Motivation

- David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, Book II, Part III, Section III & Book III, Part I, Section I
- Michael Smith, “The Humean Theory of Motivation,” *Mind* (1987), pp. 36-61

Week 4 (February 21 – 23)

Morality and Motivation III – Externalist Realism

1st Short Paper Due Feb 21

- Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives” (DG+R)
- David Brink, “Externalist Moral Realism,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (1986, Supplement) pp. 23-40.

Week 5 (February 28 – March 2)

Morality and Motivation IV – Externalist Realism Continued

- Nicholas Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations,” in Copp and Zimmerman, eds., *Morality, Reason and Truth* (Totawa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1985) pp. 49-78.
- Richard Boyd, “How to be a Moral Realist” (DG+R)

Week 6 (March 7 – 9)

Morality and Motivation V – Externalism Realism Continued

- Peter Railton, “Moral Realism” (DG+R)
- Michael Smith, “The Externalist Challenge,” Chapter 3 of *The Moral Problem*

Week 7 (March 14-16)

Anti-Realism: Moral Epistemology and Mackie's Error Theory

- Harman, "Ethics and Observation," chapter one of *The Nature of Morality* (DG+R)
- J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Chapter 1 (DG+R)

Week 8 (March 21 – 23)

Easter Break – No Classes

Week 9 (March 28 – 30)

Noncognitivism

No Class March 28th

- A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1952) Introduction + chapter 6
- R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford:OUP, 1952) pp. 1-31, 111-26, 137-50.

Week 10 (April 4 – 6)

Constructivism

2nd short paper due April 6th

- Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," in Sellers and Hospers, eds., *Readings in Ethical Theory*, 2nd ed. (NY: Merideth, 1970) pp. 200-21.
- David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Suppl. Vol. (1988-89).

Week 11 (April 11 – 13)

Paper Topic Due Monday, April 11th

Constructivism Continued

- T.M. Scanlon, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism" (DG+R)
- Christine Korsgaard, "The Sources of Normativity" (DG+R)

Week 12 (April 18 – 20)

Relativism

- Gilbert Harman, "What is Moral Relativism?" in Goldman and Kim, eds., *Values and Morals* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978), pp. 143-61.
- James Dreier, "Internalism and Speaker Relativism," *Ethics* 101 (October 1990) pp. 6-26.

Week 13 (April 25 – 27)

Non-reductive Realism:

- John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities" (DG+R)

- Ralph Wedgwood, "The Price of Non-Reductive Moral Realism" in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 2, 1999

Week 14 (May 2 – 4)

Paper Conferences – No Classes

Week 15 (May 9 – 11)

Michael Smith's Solution(?) to the Moral Problem

- Michael Smith, Chapters 5 and 6 of *The Moral Problem*

Week 16 (May 16)

Catchup

Final Paper Due: Monday, May 23, 2:00