

PHI 3630 – Metaethics

Spring Semester 2019, AC02 (New Academic Block) TR 009, Wednesdays and Fridays 10:10 to 11:40

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Office Hours: Thursdays, 10:00 to 12:00, in AC02 (New Academic Block) 320 and by appointment

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About This Course: Topic and Goals

In this course, we will learn about metaethics. We will learn about four key approaches in metaethics: non-naturalism, naturalism, expressivism/fictionalism, and constructivism. Then we will investigate various other metaethical topics chosen from a list of potential topics via vote.

Below are the **goals** for this course. Our class sessions and homework are designed not just to help you learn about philosophy and metaethics, but also for you to learn how to:

- Generate and respond to questions about complicated philosophical topics
- Develop and refine definitions for complicated philosophical terms
- Articulate a philosophical view and defend it in a holistic evaluation against its competitors

Course Content

First, we will learn about the four key approaches mentioned above. Then, as a class, we will choose which topics to address next. I have the list of possible readings and the schedule in a separate document. All readings are available on the course web site at <https://canvas.instructure.com/courses/1498968>. **Please bring the readings to class each day**, either printed out or in *easily accessible* electronic form.

Assignments and Grading

There are six kinds of assignments in this class: **weekly reading quizzes, weekly questions, question responses, debate performance and self-evaluation, glossary entries**, and the **final take-home exam**. Late assignments will not be accepted except in case of emergency. (Computer issues are not an emergency.) The one exception is the final, which will lose 4 points for each day it is late. Grading rubrics for the various assignments can be found on Canvas.

Weekly Reading Quizzes (5% of your grade) are to help you focus on the important parts of the reading and to get instant feedback on whether you have understood the reading. Quizzes are due 11:59 Tuesday night. There is 1 quiz per week for a total of 12 quizzes. Your lowest 2 quiz scores will be ignored.

Weekly Questions (10% of your grade) are to help you get practice focusing on and talking about specific ideas in the text in order to attain a greater understanding. They are due 11:59 PM Thursday night. There are 10 total.

Question Responses (20% of your grade) are to help you develop your expertise on narrow metaethical questions and your ability to write concisely and clearly. There are 6 total and the due date varies depending on which group you are assigned to. Your 2 lowest scoring responses will be ignored.

Debate Performance and Self-Evaluation (20% of your grade) are to help you develop your presentation and argumentation skills with respect to complex philosophical topics. Your grade is based on your presentation and on your participation by responding to others. You will also turn in a self-evaluation, and optionally you will turn in your preparation materials (if you have any).

Glossary Entries (15% of your grade) are to help you gain expertise with the complex terms in metaethics and with explaining these terms to others in writing. You will be assigned 2 glossary entries. You may write more if you'd like: only your two highest scoring entries will count. You will be graded once on your progress (due 11:59 PM March 1st) (5% of your grade) and once when they are due 11:59 PM April 26th (10% of your grade). You may submit your glossary entries for feedback and a grade as often as once a week any time after the progress grade until the due date on April 26. Any higher grade you receive will replace your older lower grade.

The **Take-Home Final Exam** (20% of your grade) has two parts. The first part asks you to compile a "frequently asked questions" document for one of the four main metaethical theories we've looked at. The second asks you to examine in detail one argument we've discussed in the class and to evaluate it. Both parts are due 11:59 PM May 10th.

Class Participation (10% of your grade) is required. This includes attendance, listening respectfully to me and to your fellow students, and offering thoughtful questions and contributions to the discussion. Using mobile phones or computers for non-academic purposes, browsing the Internet, coming in late, not showing up, or otherwise ignoring people is not respectful and will reduce your participation grade.

Grade Breakdown:

- 5% - Weekly Reading Quizzes (12, lowest 2 ignored)
- 10% - Weekly Questions (10)
- 20% - Question Responses (6, lowest 2 ignored)
- 20% - Debate
- 15% - Glossary Entries (2)
- 20% - Take-Home Final (due May 10th)
- 10% - Class Participation

Class Grade Rubric:

- 100-97% = A+
- <97-94% = A
- <94-90% = A-
- <90-87% = B+
- <87-84% = B
- <84-80% = B-
- <80-77% = C+
- <77-74% = C
- <74-70% = C-
- <70-67% = D+
- <67-64% = D
- <64-61% = D-
- <61-0% = F

Disabilities

If you have disabilities which require some form of accommodation, please contact me ahead of time.

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity

Any time you use **words, phrases, ideas, or anything else** in your writing that you did not think up on your own, you must **cite** your source the best of your ability. Words and phrases from others must be enclosed in quotation marks to show that you did not write them yourself. Failure to cite a source is **plagiarism** and it's not okay. Plagiarism may result in a zero on the assignment or in other point reductions. You should not need to use (or cite) outside sources for this class, but if you do use them, you must cite them. It is perfectly okay to use points made by your classmates in class or on the discussion boards, *as long as you cite them to the best of your ability*. The one exception is that you do not need to cite me for your writing assignments in this class.

Resources

The resources section of my website (<http://dannyweltman.com/resources.html>) has resources on reading, writing, and researching philosophy. These resources include a glossary for unfamiliar words or phrases and the rubric that I use for grading your writing assignments. I encourage you to examine these resources.

Preliminary Readings and Assignment Schedule

All reading assignments should be read prior to the class meeting for that reading. Reading quizzes are due each week on Tuesday night at 11:59 PM and are about the reading for Wednesday. Questions are due each week on Thursday night at 11:59 PM and are about the reading for Friday, or, if you want, both readings that week if they are related to each other. Question reply due dates vary depending on your group:

Group 1: Non-naturalism: 2 responses due 11:59 PM, February 10.

Group 2: Naturalism: 2 responses due 11:59 PM, February 24.

Group 3: Expressivism and Fictionalism: 2 responses due 11:59 PM, February 15.

Group 4: Constructivism: 2 responses due 11:59 PM, March 3.

Those are the dates for the first 2 responses. The next 4 will be determined once we pick the readings for the latter part of class.

Primary Readings: January 23 through March 1

For the first six weeks of the class we will learn about four main metaethical views, plus evolutionary debunking arguments and companion in guilt arguments. Our main source for readings will be Matthew Chrisman's book *What is this thing called Metaethics?* (Routledge, 2017).

January 23 – What is metaethics, how to read philosophy, and Enoch's article

Reading: David Enoch, "Wouldn't It Be Nice If p, Therefore, p (for a moral p)"

Quiz Due the night before (January 22) at 11:59 PM

January 25 – What is metaethics part 2, course outline and structure

Reading: Chrisman Chapter 1

PRACTICE QUESTION ANSWER (optional) due the end of the week at 11:59 PM January 27th

January 30 – Nonnaturalism

Reading: Chrisman Chapter 2

Quiz Due the night before (January 29) at 11:59 PM

February 1 – Evolutionary debunking

Reading: Katia Vavova, "Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism"

Question Due the night before (January 31) at 11:59 PM

February 6 – Expressivism

Reading: Chrisman Chapter 3

Quiz Due the night before (February 5) at 11:59 PM

February 8 – Error theory and fictionalism

Reading: Chrisman Chapter 4

Question Due the night before (February 7) at 11:59 PM

February 13 – Naturalism part 1

Reading: Chrisman Chapter 5

Quiz Due the night before (February 12) at 11:59 PM

February 15 – Naturalism part 2, Cornell realism

Reading: Mark van Roojen, "Scientific Naturalism I: Cornell Realism", *skip sections 11.3 and 11.4*

Question Due the night before (February 14) at 11:59 PM

February 20 – Companions in guilt arguments

Reading: Christopher Cowie, “Companions in guilt arguments”

Quiz Due the night before (February 19) at 11:59 PM

February 22 – Constructivism

Reading: Sharon Street, “What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?”

Question Due the night before (February 21) at 11:59 PM

February 27 – Picking sides in metaethics

Reading: Chrisman Chapter 6

Quiz Due the night before (February 26) at 11:59 PM

March 1 – Debate prep

Today we will prepare for the debate that will happen after the mid-term break.

Glossary Entry Progress Report due 11:59 PM March 1

No New Reading

No Question Due

Mid-Term Break

March 13 & March 15 – Debates

Debates. No readings or assignments due.

Potential Readings

The remaining readings will be chosen via vote. Below is a list of the possible topics. Topics without any description are topics that we will learn about in the course of the class. Topics with a * next to them indicate a *synergy opportunity*: if we pick certain combinations of these topics, this will trigger an extra topic.

Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives

Philippa Foot has a classic paper in which she argues that there’s nothing wrong with seeing morality as less than categorical, that is, as something which applies to us only in certain cases rather than in every case.

Reading: Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives”

Moral Explanation*

Readings: Gilbert Harman, “Ethics and Observation” and Nicholas Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations”

Synergy Opportunity: This topic synergizes with creeping minimalism. If we pick both, we’ll also read Gilbert Harman, “Moral Relativism is Moral Realism”

Reasons Internalism and Externalism

Readings: Bernard Williams, “Internal and external reasons”; Peter Railton, “Internalism for Externalists”; and Kate Manne, “Internalism about reasons: sad but true?”

Moral Deference

According to some philosophers, it would be strange to defer to someone’s moral judgment by just accepting that something is right or wrong because they say so even if you think otherwise. Sarah McGrath argues that this can be used to generate an argument against moral realism. We’ll read her argument and a reply.

Readings: Sarah McGrath, “Skepticism About Moral Deference as a Puzzle for Moral Realism” and Cory Davia and Michele Palmira, “Moral Deference and Deference to an Epistemic Peer”

The Open Question Argument

Readings: Connie Rosati, “Agency and the Open Question Argument” and/or “Naturalism, Normativity, and the Open Question Argument”

Ought Implies Can

According to many philosophers, “you ought to X” implies “you can X.” That is, you can’t be obligated to do something impossible. Is this principle true? If so, why?

Readings: Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, “‘Ought’ Conversationally Implies Can” and Bart Streumer, “Does ‘Ought’ Conversationally Implicate ‘Can’?”

The Normativity of Requests

When I ask that you do something (like raise the blinds so the sun can come in) this gives you a reason to do it. How does this work? Can we create reasons just by making requests?

Readings: James H.P. Lewis, “The Discretionary Normativity of Requests” and David Enoch, “Giving Practical Reasons”

Evolutionary Debunking

Reading: Jessica Isserow, “Evolutionary Hypotheses and Moral Skepticism”

A Moral Argument Against Moral Realism

Metaethics is mostly unrelated to normative ethics. But, sometimes there are links between the two. For instance, could there be moral reasons to think moral realism is false?

Reading: Melis Erdur, “A Moral Argument Against Moral Realism” and/or “Moral Realism and the Incompleteness of Morality”

Social Practices and Reasons

Societies have various practices and traditions. Do we have any reason to go along with these?

Reading: Kate Mann, “On Being Social in Metaethics”

Saints and Being Too Moral

Is it possible to be *too* good? Is morality the most important thing, or are there good reasons to be immoral?

Readings: Susan Wolf, “Moral Saints” and Robert Merrihew Adams, “Saints”

The Toxin Puzzle*

An eccentric millionaire offers to pay you 1 crore rupees on Thursday if you intend on Wednesday to drink a toxin on Friday. The toxin will make you feel intensely ill for a week but will otherwise have no bad effects. Can you rationally get the money?

Readings: Gregory Kavka, “The Toxin Puzzle” and David Gauthier, “Rethinking the Toxin Puzzle”

Synergy Opportunity: this topic synergizes with the self-torturer puzzle. If we pick both, we will also read Michael Bratman’s “Toxin, Temptation, and the Stability of Intention”

Proleptic Reasons

Imagine that I’m teaching a music appreciation class, and I’m frustrated with my students because they’re all taking my class to get an easy A instead of because they appreciate music. But, if they appreciated music, they wouldn’t have any reason to take my class in the first place. I’m supposed to be teaching them to appreciate music. So, I want students who want to care more about music than they already do, not for bad reasons (a good grade) but for music reasons (which, if there’s any reason for them to take my class, they don’t already have). That’s sort of weird. This puzzle sets up the idea of proleptic reasons which generate an argument against a form of internalism, or so Agnes Callard argues.

Reading: Agnes Callard, “Proleptic Reasons”

Moral Imperatives as Bodily Imperatives

Kate Manne offers a response to the queerness objection by suggesting that morality can be located in features of bodies.

Reading: Kate Mann, “Locating Morality: Moral Imperatives as Bodily Imperatives”

Creeping Minimalism*

What do moral realism and anti-realism actually mean? Is everyone a realist of some sort?

Reading: James Dreier, “Meta-ethics and the problem of creeping minimalism”

Synergy Opportunity: This topic synergizes with moral explanation. If we pick both, we’ll also read Gilbert Harman, “Moral Relativism is Moral Realism”

Moral Dumbfounding

One recent innovation in metaethics is the usage of empirical psychological data. One sort of argument concerns the phenomenon of “moral dumbfounding,” which is when people hold moral beliefs and cling to them even when presented with contrary arguments they cannot respond to.

Reading: Royzmann et al., “The Curious Tale of Julie and Mark: Unraveling the Moral Dumbfounding Effect”

Mackie, Moral Skepticism, Disagreement, and Queerness

Reading: David Brink, “Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness”

Reasons

What makes a reason for action a reason for action? That is, what is a reason?

Reading: Ruth Chang, “Grounding practical normativity: going hybrid”

The Self-Torturer Puzzle*

You’re hooked up to a machine for the rest of your life. The machine has a dial that goes from 1 to 1000. The dial starts at 1, and the machine is causing you a *tiny* amount of pain. If you turn it up to 1000, it will cause you an *enormous* amount of pain. Each time you increase the dial by 1, the pain goes up imperceptibly, and you can never turn the dial back down, but you get 1 lakh rupees. It seems rational to increase the dial by 1, no matter what the dial is set to. But if you keep turning the dial, you’ll turn it to 1000 and live in terrible agony. What’s going on here?

Reading: Sergio Tenenbaum and Diana Raffman, “Vague Projects and the Puzzle of the Self-Torturer”

Synergy Opportunity: this topic synergizes with the toxin puzzle. If we pick both, we will also read Michael Bratman’s “Toxin, Temptation, and the Stability of Intention”

Moral and Aesthetic Realism

Moral realism is popular. Aesthetic realism isn’t. Is there any good reason to accept this asymmetry?

Reading: Louise Hanson, “Moral Realism, Aesthetic Realism, and the Asymmetry Claim”

Moral Uncertainty

What should you do if you’re not sure what you should do?

Reading: Elizabeth Harman, “The Irrelevance of Moral Uncertainty”