

Metaethics

PHIL 486A/PHIL 580A

Spring 2019

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Office Hours: Tuesday 3:00 – 4:00 PM; Thursday 4:00 – 5:00 PM

I will be in my office and available during office hours, but you can make appointments to see me at other times. My preference is that we make appointments by email, and have substantive discussions face-to-face.

Course Description

The course concerns the nature of morality. Rather than investigating which moral judgments we ought or ought not to affirm, or what considerations are best argumentatively deployed in favor of or against particular moral positions, we will be considering the suppositions of moral judgment and discourse, and how far those suppositions can be vindicated. We will be abstracting away from claims such as “In contemporary circumstances, eating meat is wrong” and considering what is involved in making such judgments (e.g., are we merely expressing an attitude, or are we asserting something about the world?), what kind of knowledge of them is possible, how they could be authoritative for us, how we could sensibly argue about them, whether their correctness is relative, and related matters. Although these are long-standing issues in multiple philosophical traditions, we will focus on work from the mid-20th century forward, a time of sustained theoretical interest in metaethical questions.

Learning Objectives

The student will:

- Be familiar with the main contemporary metaethical positions, and some of the major philosophical accounts of those positions
- Develop and be capable of articulating cogent views on several of the questions outlined in the course description
- Demonstrate an ability to write effectively, coherently, and analytically, and with a high degree of argumentative sophistication (C)
- Demonstrate an ability to revise and improve writing in both form and content (C)
- Develop an ability to read and critically consider difficult texts
- Improve ability to reason through and intelligently discuss complex issues
- Demonstrate an understanding of the human experience through the study of philosophy (H)

Readings

Students are expected to show up to class prepared to discuss, and answer questions concerning, the assigned reading. This is a seminar, so there will be a focus on student to student and instructor to student dialogue. There will also be group work that presupposes knowledge of the readings. Successful participation in class, then, requires familiarity with the readings for the course.

The required texts for purchase are:

Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*

Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment*

Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*

Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Volume 2)

In addition to these texts, many of the readings will be available on electronic reserves (marked “[ER]” on the schedule) through Blackboard.

Requirements:

Grade Breakdown

	<u>Undergraduate Students:</u>	<u>Graduate Students:</u>
Participation:	20%	15%
Precis:	30%	20%
Paper 1:	50%	45%
Presentation	0%	20%

Précis: Each week (excepting the first and third weeks), each student must write a short précis, which concisely summarizes an argument from the assigned reading, and offers some form of independent reflective consideration of that argument. The précis should be no longer than three pages, and ideally between one and two. Students have the discretion to choose an argument from any of the assigned reading for the week, but the summary should be considerate of the readings as a whole (i.e., it should be cognizant of the argument’s place/role in the readings). The reflective consideration can take the form of a criticism, analysis that moves beyond what is explicitly in the text, a comparison of views, noticing surprising/unexpected corollaries, indicating the importance of the argument for the overall position, and the like – i.e., strategies which move us to intelligently think through the argument. In doing any of these, the précis should (again) both concisely state an author’s argument and make an independent argument. Submit the précis to me as a paper copy (double-sided preferred) at the end of the class for which the reading is assigned (précis may be used during group work).

Paper: Undergraduate students will be required to write a term paper between 10 and 12 pages. Topics will be assigned, but students can propose their own topics. Graduate students will be required to write a 15 – 25 page paper, and are expected to develop their own topic. The writing of the paper will occur in stages, and students should expect to invest considerable effort over the course of several weeks into writing the paper.

Stage One (Topic Selection): One week after possible topics have been distributed, hand in a piece of paper indicating which of the topics you are going to write on. If you are writing on your own topic, you should discuss it with me.

Stage Two (Polished Draft): Several weeks after the assignment is distributed, you will hand in a polished complete draft of your paper. The better the draft, the more likely it is I will be able to provide you with comments that will assist you in producing a good final version. I will return the draft with comments. Failure to turn in a draft, or an inadequate one, will result in a significant penalty on the final paper grade.

Stage Three (Revision): After the draft is returned with comments, you will have a few weeks to revise your paper.

In general, papers will be assessed on the basis of: (1) accuracy and completeness in portraying the material in question, and (2) the development of a well-reasoned, original assessment of that material.

Students are required to maintain a digital backup of all submitted work until the end of the semester. All drafts should be submitted to Turnitin on Blackboard.

Participation: Students will be assessed on their contributions in class. The grade will be based on the frequency with which students provide valuable verbal contributions to the class. Such contributions include informed responses to instructor questions, participation in classroom discussions, raising relevant and cogent questions, raising such questions in response to student presentations, responding to questions posed by presenters, and actively participating in group work. Attentively attending class is insufficient for a good participation grade.

Presentation: Graduate students are required to give an in class presentation on one of the assigned readings. Students can identify a reading of interest to them, or I can assign a one. In either case, presentation assignments should be completed by the third week of classes. The presentation will be twenty to thirty minutes long, and should include: (1) an exposition of some portion of the reading, properly contextualized within the reading as a whole, (2) a critical assessment, and (3) questions to initiate discussion. The precise format of the presentation is within the presenter's discretion, but we can discuss it in advance. Presenters do not have to submit a precis the week of their presentation.

Course Policies

Attendance: Attendance in class is mandatory. Students should arrive promptly at the beginning of class with the assigned reading for the day in hand. Students are permitted (3) unexcused absences without penalty. Each additional unexcused absence will result in the student's final grade being reduced by one-third a letter grade (e.g. a B becomes a B-).

Late Papers: Papers turned in late will be penalized one-third a letter grade per day of lateness, including weekend days.

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism and other forms of academic misconduct will be dealt with harshly in accordance with Harpur College policies. The **Student Academic Honesty Code** can be found at: <http://bulletin.binghamton.edu/integrity.htm>.

Schedule of Readings

The following plan is subject to revision - I will inform the class of any changes as we go. At each meeting, we will discuss the reading(s) listed to the right of the date. Readings with "[ER]" next to them are available under "Content" on Blackboard.

Date:	Reading:
Jan. 22	Introduction to the course
Jan. 24	Richard Joyce, <i>The Myth of Morality</i> , Preface, Ch. 1
Jan. 29	Joyce, Ch. 2
Jan. 31	Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value" <i>Philosophical Studies</i> 127 (2006), 109 – 166 [ER]
Feb. 5	Joyce, Chs. 7, 8, and Epilogue
Feb. 7	Ian Hinkfuss, <i>The Moral Society</i> , Chs. 2, 3 [ER]
Feb. 12	Hinkfuss, Chs 4, Conclusion [ER]
Feb. 14	Charles Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms" <i>Mind</i> 46 (1937), 14 – 31 [ER]
Feb.19	R.M. Hare, selections from <i>Moral Thinking</i> [ER]
Feb. 21	Allan Gibbard, <i>Wise Choices, Apt Feelings</i> , Chs. 1, 2
Feb. 26	Gibbard, Chs. 3, 4
Feb. 28	Gibbard, Chs. 8, 9
Mar. 5	Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended" <i>The Philosophical Review</i> 84 (1975) 3 – 22 [ER]
Mar. 7	David Wong, "Constructing Normative Objectivity in Ethics" <i>Social Philosophy and Policy</i> 25 (2008), 237 – 266 [ER]
Mar. 12	Sharon Street, "Constructivism About Reasons" <i>Oxford Studies in Metaethics</i> 3 (2008) 207-245 [ER]
Mar. 14	James Lenman, "Humean Constructivism in Moral Theory" <i>Oxford Studies in Metaethics</i> 5 (2010) 175 – 193 [ER]

Mar. 26	Christine Korsgaard, <i>The Sources of Normativity</i> , Lecture 1
Mar. 28	Korsgaard, Lecture 2 Paper Topics Distributed
Apr. 2	Korsgaard, Lecture 3
Apr. 4	Korsgaard, Lecture 4 Select Paper Topic
Apr. 9	G.A. Cohen, “Reason, Humanity, and the Moral Law” (Lecture 5 in <i>Sources of Normativity</i>)
Apr. 11	Philippa Foot, <i>Natural Goodness</i> , Chs. 1 – 3 [Available as e-book from BU library]
Apr. 16	Foot, Chs. 4, 5
Apr. 18	Jay Odenbaugh, “Nothing in Ethics Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution? Natural Goodness, Normativity, and Naturalism” <i>Synthese</i> 194 (2017), 1031 – 1055 [ER] Submit Term Paper Draft
Apr. 23	Derek Parfit, <i>On What Matters</i> , Vol. II, Ch. 30
Apr. 25	Parfit, Ch. 31
Apr. 30	Parfit, Ch. 32 Term Paper Draft Returned w/ Comments
May 2	David Enoch, “The Argument from the Moral Implications of Objectivity (or Lack Thereof)” in <i>Taking Morality Seriously</i> (2011) 16 – 49 [ER]
May 7	David Enoch, “An Outline of an Argument for Robust Metanormative Realism” <i>Oxford Studies in Metaethics</i> 2 (2007), 21 – 50 [ER]
May 9	Closing Discussion

TERM PAPER DUE BY 5 PM, MAY 17 – PAPER COPY MUST BE SUBMITTED WITH FIRST DRAFT AND MY COMMENTS