

## PHIL 362: Contemporary Ethical Theory: Metaethics

UNC Chapel Hill, Fall 2017

Syllabus

**Instructor:** Alex Worsnip

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**Class Meetings:** Tues & Thurs, 12:30-1:45pm, Caldwell Hall (CW) 103

**Office Hours:** Tues 3-4pm and Wed 10-11am (or by appointment), Caldwell Hall (CW) 202A

### Course Description

We make moral judgments all the time – whenever we form views about whether we have been treated fairly, about whether we have particular duties and obligations to those around us, about whether the actions of others were justified or wrong, and so on. If you’ve taken an ethics class before, it probably involved looking at some of the moral questions that we form judgments about, and trying to figure out what the right answers to those moral questions are. But the practice of moral judgment and of doing moral philosophy also raises some more foundational questions: are there right answers to moral questions at all, and if so in what sense? Is there such a thing as “objective” moral truth? If so, (how) could we ever know what it is? Does our ordinary practice of making moral judgments presuppose that there is such an objective moral truth, or are our moral judgments more like expressions of emotion or approval? Finally, even if there is an objective moral truth, (why) does it have any legitimate authority over us – that is, (why) need we pay attention to it? These are the central questions of “metaethics”, and this class is devoted to investigating them.

### Prerequisites, Target Audience and Course Goals

This course is designed for students who have taken at least one prior philosophy class (this is a prerequisite of taking the class), but who are new to metaethics specifically. The class builds on students’ foundations in philosophical and moral thinking, introduces them to a core part of philosophy, and prepares them for upper-level courses in ethics and metaethics. It will be particularly useful to those who are majoring or considering majoring in philosophy, but the pervasiveness of questions about value and objectivity across the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences means that this could be useful class for students with a wide variety of majors. The class also aims to develop students’ philosophical reading and persuasive writing skills: to become more comfortable reading and understanding works of contemporary analytic philosophy, and to become more confident writing sustained pieces of philosophical argumentation that go beyond textual exegesis and systematically defend the student’s own point of view, at (by the final paper) a slightly longer length than students may be used to doing. Enrollment is capped at 30.

### Course Requirements

- **Participation.** Including attendance of all classes, having done adequate preparation and participation in discussions. *20% of grade*

- **Occasional, unannounced pop quizzes** will be used to additionally test preparedness. The questions will be brief, factual multiple choice questions that should be easy if you've done the reading. The quizzes will contribute to your participation grade.
- **Three reading responses.** You will take turns writing short reading responses (500-750 words  $\approx$  1½-2½ double-spaced pages each) on that day's reading; every student will write three responses over the course of the semester. The reading response should **highlight and explain an aspect** (not the whole thing) of that day's reading that you found interesting, and **critically respond** to it. A schedule for reading responses, together with further details, will be distributed in the second week of class. Reading responses are due at 5pm on the day before class. *10% of grade per response*
- **Two longer papers (prompts will be provided):**
  - Midterm Paper: 1500-2000 words ( $\approx$  5-6 double-spaced pages). Due Sat, 10/7, 5pm. *20% of grade*
  - Final Paper: 2000-2500 words ( $\approx$  6-8 double-spaced pages). Due Sat, 12/2, 5pm. *30% of grade*

In this class, the final paper fulfills the role of the final exam. There is no timed test.

NB: please submit all assignments via the Assignments function on Sakai; do not submit via email.

## Grading

- Your **participation** will be graded on the basis of 5 criteria:
  - Attendance record. Includes punctuality. I will take attendance at every class meeting, and record it on Sakai's attendance feature, where you can view your attendance. If you think I've made a mistake, let me know immediately.
  - Alertness/attentiveness. Includes (obviously) being awake! Also includes not being on your computer/tablet/phone.
  - Frequency of participation in discussion. **If you do not participate in class at all, your overall participation grade can be no higher than a C (and that's if your attendance and alertness are perfect).**
  - Respectfulness of participation. Includes respectfulness both to the instructor and to other students. E.g.: don't talk over others/drown them out; listen to others and respond to what they say, respectfully.
  - Preparedness. Assessed by (a) how well your participation reflects having done the reading and thought about it, and (b) scores on pop quizzes.

Note: you will not be graded on the philosophical quality of your contributions, as I want people to be able to speak freely and try out new ideas without fear of judgment. I also want to add that asking questions can be a great way to participate. If you are unsure or feel confused about something, either in a text or in lecture, that shows that you are thinking about, interrogating, and trying to understand the ideas. And if you're confused, chances are that others are too. So asking for more clarity in these situations is a great service to the class discussion. Finally, I understand that participation can be difficult or intimidating for many students. I want to create an environment in which you feel comfortable participating. If you are having difficulty, please come to office hours or email me and we can set up a meeting to discuss strategies.

- **Reading responses** will be graded on their clarity, their accuracy, and their cogency of argumentation.
- **Papers** will be graded on a rubric that includes 5 criteria: (i) approach; (ii) cogency & argumentation; (iii) conclusion; (iv) originality; and (v) writing. I will assign a number for each category and base the total grade off of these numbers. A more detailed grading rubric for papers will be available on Sakai.
  - NB: I will grade your papers in *anonymized* form: that is to say, without knowing your identity at the time that I assign the grade. To facilitate this, please do not include your name anywhere on your papers. Use your UNC PID instead, and in the title of the file, write the assignment name (e.g. 'Midterm Paper') followed by your PID. After I have finished grading a batch of papers, I will match up the PIDs to names before returning them to you.

In addition to communicating them to you directly, I will post all grades for the course on the Gradebook feature of Sakai. If you want to understand a grade you have received, and the reasons for it, you are more than welcome to meet with me. However, all grades are final: I will not negotiate grades.

### Honor Code

UNC's honor code, which is available at [honor.unc.edu](http://honor.unc.edu), applies to all class assignments. Violations of the honor code will be taken very seriously and will be reported to the Student Attorney General. In addition, please take note of the following points:

- Reusing a paper that you have written for another class qualifies as academic dishonesty.
- Summarizing ideas or arguments that you have found in articles or on the internet, without citing your sources, qualifies as academic dishonesty. **It doesn't matter if you put them into your own words.** If you have got an idea from a source, you must acknowledge the debt by citing the source.

If you are in any doubt at all about whether something contributes academic dishonesty, **err on the side of caution** and talk to me **before** you submit the assignment to clarify the policies.

### Other Class Policies

- *Electronic Devices.* The use of laptops, tablets and cell phones in class is forbidden, unless they are required for class participation due to a disability.
- *Extensions.*
  - For reading responses, I will only grant extensions under extraordinary circumstances. This is because the whole point of the responses is for them to be completed *before* class, to get your reaction to the article from your *reading*, rather than from the class discussion.
  - For papers, I am somewhat more flexible. If you have a good reason and make a reasonable extension request **in advance of the deadline**, I will usually grant your request. However, I will not grant (i) extensions after the deadline has already passed; (ii) very lengthy extensions; (iii) more than one extension on any one individual paper; (iv) extensions when you have had to ask for extensions on multiple previous assignments; (v) extensions where I judge that you are simply looking to put off the work

rather than to put extra care and attention into it; (vi) extensions that will get in the way of your ability to keep up with other required work for the class; or (vii) extensions that get in the way of my ability to submit your final grades in a timely manner.

- If any assignment is late without my having agreed to an extension, it will lose 1/3 of a letter grade per day.
- In exceptional circumstances, I may permit rewrites, but only when you have a clear strategy for substantially improving your paper and I judge that it will not interfere with other assignments that are coming up. You must always seek my permission first if you want to do a rewrite. Rewrites that simply incorporate comments I make on your paper, put into your own words, will not improve your grade.
- I am very happy to meet with you at any time to discuss your progress in the class, to discuss assignments (before or after they are submitted) or simply to talk more about the topics of the class. Please come to my office hours, or if those times don't work, email me to set up an appointment. You are particularly encouraged to meet with me in the early stages of planning your papers. This is free advice and almost always improves your paper (and its grade) considerably.
- I am committed to making class fully accessible regardless of disabilities. If I can do anything to help make the class more accessible to you, please do let me know, or (if you would prefer) have UNC Accessibility Resources & Service contact me on your behalf.
- I am also committed to making the class a safe space for everyone irrespective of gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, religion, or other individual or group identity. As should go without saying, personal attacks or discriminatory treatment of others on any of these bases will not be tolerated under any circumstances.

### Course Materials

There are no required books for this class. All readings will be posted on Sakai.

### Schedule of Readings

Date	Topic	Readings
<b>Part One: Moral Realism</b>		
Tues 8/22	Introduction	Mary Midgley, "Trying Out One's New Sword"
Thurs 8/23	God & Morality	Stephen Darwall, "God and Morality" (2-part video)
Tues 8/29	Moral Realism I	Thomas Nagel, <i>The View from Nowhere</i> , ch. 8
Thurs 8/31	Moral Realism II	David Enoch, "An Outline of an Argument for Robust Metanormative Realism"
Tues 9/5	Moral Realism III	Peter Railton, "Moral Realism"
Thurs 9/7	Moral Realism IV	[Catchup/discussion – no new reading]
<b>Part Two: Problems for Moral Realism</b>		
Tues 9/12	Explanation	Gilbert Harman, "Ethics and Observation"
Thurs 9/14	Evolution I	Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theory of Value" (sections 8 and 9 and the endnotes are optional)
Tues 9/19	Evolution II	[Catchup/discussion – no new reading]

Thurs 9/21	Disagreement	J.L. Mackie, <i>Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong</i> , ch. 1 section 8 (pp. 36-38); John Doris & Alexandra Plakias, “How to Argue about Disagreement: Evaluative Diversity and Moral Realism”
Tues 9/26	Expertise	Sarah McGrath, “Skepticism about Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for Moral Realism”
Thurs 9/28	Disagreement/Expertise	[Catchup/discussion – no new reading]
Tues 10/3	“Queerness” I	J.L. Mackie, <i>Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong</i> , ch. 1 section 9 (pp. 38-42); Richard Joyce, <i>The Myth of Morality</i> , ch. 2
Thurs 10/5	“Queerness” II	[Catchup/discussion] Recommended additional reading: Matthew Bedke, “Might All Normativity Be Queer?”
Tues 10/10	Motivation	Michael Smith, <i>The Moral Problem</i> , section 1.3
Thurs 10/12	Authority I	Christine Korsgaard, <i>The Sources of Normativity</i> , ch. 1 (skip sections 1.3.1-1.3.4)
<b>Interlude: The Authority of Morality</b>		
Tues 10/17	Authority II	Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives”
Thurs 10/19		<i>No class – Fall break</i>
Tues 10/24	Authority III	Stephen Darwall, “Making The “Hard” Problem of Moral Normativity Easier” (up to end of section 2)
<b>Part Three: Anti-Realism</b>		
Thurs 10/26	Error Theory I	J.L. Mackie, <i>Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong</i> , ch. 1 sections 1-2, 6-7, 10 (pp. 15-18, 27-35, 42-46)
Tues 10/31	Error Theory II	Richard Joyce, <i>The Myth of Morality</i> , sections 1.0-1.1, ch. 7
Thurs 11/2	Non-Cognitivism I	A.J. Ayer, <i>Language, Truth and Logic</i> , ch. 6 (up to end of first paragraph on p. 119)
Tues 11/7	Non-Cognitivism II	Simon Blackburn, “How To Be an Ethical Anti-Realist”
Thurs 11/9	Non-Cognitivism III	[Catchup/discussion – no new reading]
Tues 11/14	Constructivism I	Christine Korsgaard, “Realism and Constructivism in 20 <sup>th</sup> Century Moral Philosophy”
Thurs 11/16	Constructivism II	Sharon Street, “Coming to Terms with Contingency: Humean Constructivism about Practical Reason”
Tues 11/21	Relativism I	James Dreier, “Internalism and Speaker Relativism”
Thurs 11/23		<i>No class – Thanksgiving break</i>
Tues 11/28	Relativism II	John MacFarlane, <i>Assessment Sensitivity</i> , ch. 1
Thurs 11/30	Final Roundup	[No new reading]
Tues 12/5		<i>No class – I am away giving a talk</i>