

**PHIL-UA 41: The Nature of Values**  
NYU, Fall 2015

**Instructor:** Alex Worsnip ([alex.worsnip@nyu.edu](mailto:alex.worsnip@nyu.edu))

**Class Meetings:** Tisch Hall (TISC) LC1, Tuesdays & Thursdays, 8:00-9:15am

**Office Hours:** Tuesdays, 10am-12noon, Philosophy Dept. (5 Washington Place) Room 504, or by appointment

### **Course Description**

We all make value judgments every day: judgments about whether we have been treated fairly, about whether we have various duties and obligations to those around us, about whether the actions of others were justified or wrong, and so on. But what is the *status* of these judgments? Do they attempt to describe an objective, mind-independent reality? If so, do they succeed? Are they like ordinary beliefs that can be straightforwardly true or false? Or are they more like expressions of emotion or approval? These are the central questions of “metaethics”, and this course is devoted to investigating them.

Much of the course will be spent examining the doctrine known as “moral realism”, the view that there are in fact objective, mind-independent moral facts. We will learn about different versions of moral realism, its relation (or lack of) to religious belief, and central arguments for it. We then turn to a series of challenges for moral realism, including its purported explanatory redundancy, the challenge from evolutionary theory, its metaphysical “queerness”, its capacity to explain the authority and motivational power of our moral judgments, and its capacity to explain widespread moral disagreement. We critically assess these arguments, before turning to various alternatives to moral realism. If there *aren't* objective moral facts, what *should* we say about our moral thought and talk? Is it somehow still capable of being true, but in a way that is somehow “subjective” or “relative” to us (and if so, what does that really mean)? Are our moral utterances the sorts of claims that aren't capable of being true or false at all, like exclamations of approval or commands? Or is it all just bluff and pretense – false talk that presupposes a moral reality that isn't there? Throughout, our primary focus is on moral judgments, but we also consider analogies and disanalogies with other value judgments, such as judgments about prudence, aesthetic value, and about what we ought to believe.

### **Enrollment/Prerequisites**

Enrollment is capped at 20 students. This class has a prerequisite of one prior philosophy class. This is for real: some of the material in this course is quite difficult, and the reading and writing assignments would be very hard to execute effectively without some prior familiarity with reading and writing philosophy – both of which are quite specific skills that your prior introductory classes are designed to teach. Check with me if you are in any doubt about this.

### **Course Materials**

There is one required text:

- David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*, Oxford University Press

You must purchase this book. Note that there is a paperback edition, which is much cheaper than the hardback. Copies have been ordered into the NYU bookstore. All other readings will be posted on the NYUClasses course site.

## Requirements/Assessment

The course consists of the following requirements:

- **Participation.** Including
  - Attendance of all class meetings
  - Adequate preparation (i.e. you must come to class having done the required reading, and ready to discuss it)
  - Contribution to class discussions (but NB: you are not being assessed on the philosophical quality of your contributions. Rather, you are being assessed on making a good faith attempt to do philosophy, with your peers, in a constructive and respectful manner. This means contributing to discussions regularly, but not in a way that drowns out the voices of others. I want to create an environment where everyone feels free to try out ideas, make mistakes, and engage in debate without fear of judgment. That is how we learn to do philosophy. I understand that some students find participation in discussions difficult, and will do everything I can to help everyone participate effectively. See the class policies for more detail on this, and feel free to talk to me at any time if you have concerns or if I can do anything to help you participate more.)

Participation is a non-negotiable part of the course. It is not an automatic A; to get an A on this component you must do all three of the above things. Inconsistent attendance will result in a fail on this component. *20% of grade*

- **Reading responses.** You will take turns writing short reading responses (500-750 words) on that day's reading. In these reading responses, you should highlight and explain an aspect of the reading that you found interesting, and critically respond to it. This critical response could take many different forms: a criticism, a counter-argument, a further argument in support of the author's position, a comparison with another reading from the class, an analysis of what the author is implicitly assuming, etc etc. Whatever you choose, it should be something manageable in the limited space rather than attempt to deal with every point made in the reading.

Every student will write three reading responses over the course of the semester. We will work out a schedule near the start of the semester. Due at 5pm on the day before class. You should also come to class ready to discuss your reading response. *10% of grade per response*

- **Two longer papers.** These are papers in which you will be asked to argue for a philosophical claim, immediately related to the topics of the class, that you find compelling.
  - Paper 1: 1500-2000 words. Due 10/21 at 5pm. *20% of grade*
  - Paper 2: 2500-3500 words. Due 12/13 at 5pm. *30% of grade*

Essay prompts will be provided. For the second paper, you have the option of proposing a prompt of your own design, but you may write on this prompt only if I clear the topic first. You should email me your proposed prompt not more than two weeks before the final due date (so, 11/29).

All assignments should be submitted via email, not hard copy. There is no exam.

## Class Policies

See the separate class policies sheet, which I have uploaded to the Resources folder of the NYUClasses course page. This document is essential reading. It contains lots of information about how to participate in the class effectively and responsibly, avoiding academic dishonesty and plagiarism, what I'm looking for in assignments, and more. You can likely get a much better grade in this class by

reading and taking account of the rules and advice that it provides. It also contains information about my commitments to you, including accessibility and disability accommodation information.

### Schedule of Readings

All readings are required unless otherwise stated. I have tried to keep the amount of reading under control so that you will have time to read everything carefully.

- Thurs Sept 3 Introduction  
Reading: Mary Midgley, “Trying Out One’s New Sword” (+ syllabus & class policies)
- Tues Sept 8 Introducing Moral Realism  
Reading: Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, ch. 8
- Thurs Sept 10 Moral Realism and God  
Reading: Plato, *Euthyphro*  
Please also watch Stephen Darwall’s short video, “God and Morality”, parts 1 and 2:  
▪ <http://www.wi-phi.com/video/god-and-morality-part-1>  
▪ <http://www.wi-phi.com/video/stephen-darwall-god-and-morality-part-2>
- Tues Sept 15 Arguments for Moral Realism I  
Reading: David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 2 (skip section 2.7)
- Thurs Sept 17 Arguments for Moral Realism II  
Reading: David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 3
- Tues Sept 22 Naturalist Moral Realism  
Reading: Peter Railton, “Moral Realism”
- Thurs Sept 24 “Non-Metaphysical” Moral Realism  
Reading: T.M. Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, ch. 2
- Tues Sept 29 Non-Naturalist Moral Realism  
Reading: David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 5 (skip section 5.2)  
Optional: Enoch, ch. 6
- Thurs Oct 1 Problems for Moral Realism: Explanation I  
Reading: Gilbert Harman, “Ethics and Observation”
- Tues Oct 6 Problems for Moral Realism: Explanation II  
Reading: Nicholas Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations”
- Thurs Oct 8 Problems for Moral Realism: Evolutionary Debunking I  
Reading: Sharon Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value”
- Tues Oct 13 *No class – classes meet according to Monday schedule*
- Thurs Oct 15 Problems for Moral Realism: Evolutionary Debunking II

Reading: Katia Vavova, “Debunking Evolutionary Debunking”  
Optional: David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 7

- Tues Oct 20 Problems for Moral Realism: “Queerness” I  
Reading: J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, ch. 1 sections 1, 6 and 9 (pp. 15-17, 27-30 and 38-42); Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, ch. 2
- Thurs Oct 22 Problems for Moral Realism: “Queerness” II  
Reading: Matthew Bedke, “Might All Normativity Be Queer?”  
Optional: Lee Shepski, “The Vanishing Argument from Queerness”
- Tues Oct 27 Problems for Moral Realism: Motivation  
Reading: Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*, section 1.3  
Recommended: David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 9
- Thurs Oct 29 Problems for Moral Realism: Authority  
Reading: Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, ch. 1 (skip sections 1.3.1-1.3.4)
- Tues Nov 3 Partial Detour: The Authority of Morality  
Reading: Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives”  
Highly recommended: John McDowell, “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?”
- Thurs Nov 5 Problems for Moral Realism: Disagreement I  
Reading: J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, ch. 1 section 8 (pp. 36-38); John Doris & Alexandra Plakias, “How to Argue about Disagreement: Evaluative Diversity and Moral Realism”
- Tues Nov 10 Problems for Moral Realism: Disagreement II  
Reading: David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 8
- Thurs Nov 12 Problems for Moral Realism: Expertise  
Reading: Sarah McGrath, “Skepticism about Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for Moral Realism”
- Tues Nov 17 Anti-Realism: Error Theory  
Reading: J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, ch. 1 sections 1-2, 7 and 10 (pp. 15-18, 30-35 and 42-46); Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, sections 1.0-1.1, ch. 7
- Thurs Nov 19 Anti-Realism: Non-Cognitivism I: Emotivism  
Reading: A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, ch. 6 (up to end of first paragraph on p. 119)
- Tues Nov 24 Anti-Realism: Non-Cognitivism II: Expressivism/Projectivism  
Reading: Simon Blackburn, “How To Be An Ethical Anti-Realist”  
Optional: Allan Gibbard, “Normative and Recognition Concepts”

Thurs Nov 26 *No class – Thanksgiving break*

Tues Dec 1 Anti-Realism: Constructivism I  
Reading: Christine Korsgaard, “Realism and Constructivism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Moral Philosophy”

Thurs Dec 3 Anti-Realism: Constructivism II  
Reading: Sharon Street, “Coming to Terms with Contingency: Humean Constructivism about Practical Reason”

Tues Dec 8 Anti-Realism: Relativism I: Speaker Relativism  
Reading: Gilbert Harman, “Moral Relativism Defended”  
Highly recommended: James Dreier, “Internalism and Speaker Relativism”

Thurs Dec 10 Anti-Realism: Relativism II: Assessment Relativism  
Reading: John MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, ch. 1

Tues Dec 15 Quietism  
Reading: Ronald Dworkin, “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe It”