

## PHIL 462: Contemporary Moral Philosophy [Topic: Metaethics]

UNC Chapel Hill, Spring 2022

**Instructor:** Alex Worsnip ([aworsnip@unc.edu](mailto:aworsnip@unc.edu))

**Class meetings:** Wednesdays, 1-3:30, Caldwell Hall (CW) 213.

**Virtual office hour:** Wednesdays, 11-12

**In-person office hour:** Thursdays, 3:30-4:30

- weather permitting: outside, at a table by the Blue Ram Café (at the back of the Campus Y)
- otherwise: in my office (Caldwell Hall, 202B). I'll email if I'm moving my office hour indoors.

Meetings outside of office hours are also always available by appointment.

**Official course catalog description.** PHIL 462. Contemporary Moral Philosophy. 3 Credits. Advanced discussion of moral issues such as fact and value, reason and morality, the nature of morality. Prerequisites: Prerequisite, two courses in philosophy other than PHIL 155, including PHIL 362.<sup>1</sup> Gen Ed: PH. Repeat rules: May be repeated for credit. 9 total credits. 3 total completions. Grading status: Letter grade.

**Semester-specific course description.** This class will be a survey of metaethics. In contrast to normative ethics, which asks questions about what we morally ought to do, metaethics asks questions *about* those questions (hence, 'meta'). In particular, it asks: are there right and wrong answers to moral questions at all? If so, how could we know what they are? What, if anything, makes moral claims true or false? When we make moral judgments – as we all do whenever we judge that we have been treated unfairly, that we have obligations and duties to those around us, and so on – what kind of state of mind are we in, and does this state of mind commit us to thinking that there are objective moral facts? Could moral truth be 'relative', and what would this mean? We will survey some of the most important attempts to answer these questions in the contemporary literature.

**Course format.** The course is designed as an "advanced introduction." It will presuppose familiarity with the methods and writing style of analytic philosophy, but not any background knowledge of metaethics specifically. Since this is a 400-level course with both undergraduate and graduate students, I will do some lecturing through the material, but there will also be lots of time for discussion.

**Course materials.** There is one required text for this course: David Enoch's *Taking Morality Seriously*. You should get hold of a copy of this book. It has been ordered into the bookstore. All other readings will be posted on Sakai.

### **Requirements/assessment**

**Participation** (20% of grade). Including: attendance of all classes (subject to COVID-related attendance policies stated below) having done adequate preparation, and participation in discussions.

**Reading responses** (10% of grade per response). You will take turns writing short reading responses (~750 words each ≈ 2 double-spaced pages) on that day's reading. Each student will write three reading responses over the course of the semester. The reading responses should highlight and explain

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<sup>1</sup> I am not enforcing the prerequisite of PHIL 362, in part because this course has not been offered in the last two years.

an aspect of that day's reading that you found interesting, and critically respond to it. Soon after the start of the semester, I will distribute a schedule for the responses. Reading responses are due at 8pm on the day before class via email.

**Final paper** (50% of grade). You will write a final paper for the class. This paper will be on a topic of your choice. For undergraduates, the length should be 3000-5000 words ( $\approx$  10-15 double-spaced pages); graduate students may (but need not) exceed 5000 words if they wish. Since this is an extended piece of writing, we'll follow a multi-step process:

- Initial meeting to discuss ideas. *To be completed by Thurs, 3/31 at the latest.* I will meet with each of you one-on-one to discuss your ideas for a possible topic for your paper. Please come to the meeting having thought carefully about what you might like to write about. (Though this is the only required meeting, you're welcome to meet with me again at any point later on.)
  - NB: if you want to write on a topic that we're covering at the end of the semester but haven't reached yet by the date of our meeting, that is possible. If there's a forthcoming topic that catches your eye, have a look at the readings for it before our meeting.
- One paragraph paper proposal. *Due Sun, 4/3, 11:59pm.* You will write up a proposal for the topic of your paper, explaining the issue(s) you plan to discuss and (if you know) what you (tentatively) plan to argue. The proposal should be clear, should propose a well-defined, manageable and tractable topic, and should be clearly related to the themes of the class. I will write back to you either approving the proposal as it is or asking you to make modifications.
- Full draft. *Due Fri, 4/15, 11:59pm.* You will write a full, complete draft of the paper. I will send you detailed comments on your draft by Sunday 4/24 (this is the main set of comments you will receive from me on your paper).
- Final submission. *Due Fri, 5/6, 4pm.* Finally, you will have an opportunity to revise the paper in light of my comments, before submitting the final version. I will send you your grade with some briefer comments by the start of the following week.

Provided that you complete the first three steps of the paper-writing process in full and by the due dates specified above, your grade for your paper will be determined solely by the fourth step, i.e., the final submission. Thus, the other stages of the process represent a risk-free way to try out your ideas and to get feedback on them before making the final submission.

- Note: in this class, the final paper fulfils the role of the final exam. As per UNC regulations, it is due at the time that the final exam would have taken place. However, also as per UNC regulations, we will still meet for class during the scheduled time for the final exam. We will use the final session as a round-up to reflect on the themes of the class and to celebrate the end of the semester.

## Policies

**Instructional format.** The default mode of instruction for this class is in-person. However, the ongoing pandemic may require changes to this plan. I will be monitoring the situation closely. If I need to change the format of the course temporarily due to outbreaks of illness, I will announce this via email.

**Attendance.** I take attendance at each class meeting, and as a general policy (in-person) attendance is required, so long as the class is meeting in person and you do not have a University Approved Absence (consistent with the university's [Class Attendance Policy](#)). However, as per the university's instructions, you should **not** attend class if you are showing any symptoms of COVID-19 (find the full instructions [here](#)).<sup>2</sup> Instead, contact me via email and we will work out a plan. If you are showing symptoms but are well enough to join class remotely via Zoom, that can be arranged. The top priority is your safety and that of your fellow classmates, and I will show flexibility to ensure that we can prioritize this without your grade being affected. I only ask that you stay in touch so that I'm aware of your situation and can make accommodations.

**Participation-only graduate students.** Graduate students taking the class participation-only will not be required to write reading responses or a final paper. However, you will need to attend regularly just like any other student, and to show evidence that you have been doing and thinking about the reading (e.g. via participation in class discussions or via voluntary reading responses). If you're taking the class participation-only, you must notify me by the end of the second week of classes.

**Honor code.** As should go without saying in a class at this level, UNC's honor code, available at [honor.unc.edu](http://honor.unc.edu), applies to all class assignments. As a reminder, you are not permitted to submit a final paper that substantially overlaps in content with a paper submitted for another class. Consult with me if you're in any doubt about how this requirement applies.

### **Accessibility, Equity & Resources.**

- I am committed to making class fully accessible, and to providing accommodations for those who need them. If I can do anything to help make class more accessible to you, please let me know, or have UNC Accessibility Resources & Service (ARS) contact me on your behalf.
- I am also committed to making the class an inclusive and safe space for everyone irrespective of gender identity, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, or other individual or group identity. Please let me know if I can do anything to improve; I appreciate suggestions.
- The university's Policy Statement on Non-Discrimination is [here](#).
- I am a Safe Zone Ally, trained and certified by the university LGBTQ center. I am available to meet during office hours or by appointment to offer support.
- I encourage you to make use of the following campus resources as appropriate:
  - For accommodations for students with disabilities or other accessibility needs: Accessibility Resources & Service (ARS), [ars.unc.edu](http://ars.unc.edu)
  - For approval for extended absences requiring a University Approved Absence: University Approved Absence Office, [uaao.unc.edu](http://uaao.unc.edu)
  - For assistance with academic work: UNC Learning Center, [learningcenter.unc.edu](http://learningcenter.unc.edu); UNC Writing Center, [writingcenter.unc.edu](http://writingcenter.unc.edu)

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<sup>2</sup> This is in addition to those who have been ordered to isolate/quarantine due to a positive test or a recent exposure. Obviously, you should not attend class under those circumstances either! Under these circumstances, you will be eligible for an official excuse from the [University Approved Absence Office](#).

- For those experiencing mental health challenges: Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), [caps.unc.edu](http://caps.unc.edu)
- For LGBTQ students in need of support or community: LGBTQ Center, [lgbtq.unc.edu](http://lgbtq.unc.edu)
- For those experiencing discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking: visit [safe.unc.edu](http://safe.unc.edu), or contact the Title IX Coordinator ([titleixcoordinator@unc.edu](mailto:titleixcoordinator@unc.edu)), the Report & Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance (EOC) Office ([reportandresponse@unc.edu](mailto:reportandresponse@unc.edu)), or the Gender Violence Service Coordinators ([gvsc@unc.edu](mailto:gvsc@unc.edu); confidential).

### **Schedule of readings (TENTATIVE – subject to change)**

The course is structured around the classic debate between realists, who hold that there are mind-independent moral truths, and anti-realists, who hold that there are not. In Part I of the course, we'll look at some initial motivations and arguments for realism, as well as different varieties of it. In Part II, we'll look at a series of (putative) problems for realism. Finally, in Part III, we'll survey a number of anti-realist views.

#### **Part I: Moral Realism and its Varieties**

##### **1/12 Moral Realism Introduced and Motivated**

- David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 1
- Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*, ch. 8

##### **1/19 Arguments for Moral Realism**

- David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, chs. 2-4

##### **1/26 Naturalist Moral Realism**

- Peter Railton, "Moral Realism"

##### **2/2 Non-Naturalist Moral Realism: Minimal and Robust**

- T.M. Scanlon, *Being Realistic about Reasons*, ch. 2
- David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 5

#### **Part Two: Problems for Realism**

##### **2/9 Epistemology I: Explanation & Evolution**

- Gilbert Harman, "Ethics and Observation"

- Sharon Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value”<sup>3</sup>
- Optional: David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 7

## 2/16 Epistemology II: Disagreement & Expertise

- J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, pp. 36-38
- John Doris & Alexandra Plakias, “How to Argue about Disagreement: Evaluative Diversity and Moral Realism”
- Sarah McGrath, “Skepticism about Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for Moral Realism”
- Optional: David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 8

## 2/23 Metaphysics: “Queerness” & Supervenience

- J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, pp. 38-42
- Simon Blackburn, “Moral Realism”
- Optional: David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 6

## 3/2 Motivation & Authority

- Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*, sec. 1.3
- Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, ch. 2
- Optional: David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously*, ch. 9

## 3/9 Authority Continued

- Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, ch. 1

[3/16 No class – Spring break]

## **Part Three: Anti-Realism and its Varieties**

### 3/23 Error Theory

- J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, pp. 15-35, 42-49
- Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, secs 1.0-1.1, ch. 7

### 3/30 Non-Cognitivism: Emotivism

- A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, ch. 6 (up to end of first para on p. 119)
- C.L. Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”

### 4/6 Non-Cognitivism: Expressivism

- Simon Blackburn, “How to be an Ethical Anti-Realist”
- Allan Gibbard, “An Expressivistic Theory of Normative Discourse”

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<sup>3</sup> Sections 8 and 9 are optional.

**4/13 Constructivism**

- Sharon Street, “Constructivism about Reasons”
- Optional: Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, ch. 3

**4/20 Relativism**

- James Dreier, “Internalism and Speaker Relativism”
- John MacFarlane, *Assessment Sensitivity*, ch. 1

**4/27 Anthropological Foundations of Relativism**

- Michele Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*, chs. 1 & 3

**5/6 Final Roundup/End-of-Semester Celebration**

**4pm**