

PHIL 760.001 and 760.002: Advanced Studies in Moral Theory
[Topic: Ignorance, Uncertainty, and Morality]
UNC Chapel Hill, Fall 2025

Instructors: Margaret Shea (margaret.shea@unc.edu) Alex Worsnip (aworsnip@unc.edu)

Office Hours: Mondays, 2:45pm-4:45pm and by appointment 115 Whitehead Hall*	Tuesdays, 2:00pm-3:00pm Thursdays, 3:00pm-4:00pm and by appointment 113 Whitehead Hall*
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Class meetings: Wednesdays, 12:20pm-2:50pm, Peabody Hall 2066

Course description. This seminar will explore a cluster of questions about how (if at all) our ignorance and uncertainty—both about morally-relevant descriptive facts and about moral facts themselves—affect what morality requires of us, and what we are blameworthy for. The course will be divided into four broad parts, though some of the readings cross over between multiple parts. The first part looks at debates between “objectivists” and “perspectivists” about how factual ignorance and uncertainty affect what we are morally obligated to do. The second part looks at debates regarding how our epistemic position affects our moral responsibility or blameworthiness, looking both at epistemic conditions on moral responsibility and whether moral ignorance exculpates. The third part looks at general questions about whether ‘ought’s and norms are constrained by our epistemic position. Finally, the fourth part looks at debates about how (if at all) we ought to take account of moral uncertainty in our decision-making.

Distribution requirement satisfaction. This course (when taken in normal, non-reduced writing format) satisfies the Ethics and Value Theory distribution requirement for our graduate program.

REQUIREMENTS/ASSESSMENT

Participation (*10% of grade*). Students are expected to adequately prepare for, and attend, all classes, and to participate in discussions.

In-class presentation (*10% of grade*). Beginning in the second week of class, students will take turns giving presentations. We will circulate a sign-up sheet. Here are some guidelines:

- Presentations should be 15-20 minutes long. We will not interrupt.
- Presentations should not summarize/recap a whole paper (or anything close to it). Instead, your presentation should be aimed at spurring critical discussion of one or more of the assigned readings for that week, on the assumption that everyone has already read them.
- Begin by recapping only (but, ideally, all) the aspects of the paper that are strictly necessary for setting up the points you want to raise.
- Then, raise one to three points for discussion. These could be any of the following (not an exhaustive list):
 - An interpretative question about the author’s view

* Our Whitehead Hall Offices will be available only starting a few weeks into the semester. We will advise students of an alternative location for our office hours for the first few weeks.

- A question about how two parts of the author's view relate to one another
- A question or suggestion about how two different readings relate to one another
- A (potential) criticism of the author's view
- An identification of an assumption underlying the author's view, and a question about whether this assumption is plausible
- A remark or question about the terms of debate in which the different readings for that week are engaged (e.g., an identification of a common presupposition they all make, and a question about whether it is plausible)
- **Please use a handout for your presentation.** Please email us the file by 12 noon on the day of class, and bring copies of the handout with you.

Reading responses (*10% of grade per response*). You will take turns writing short reading responses (~750 words each) on the week's reading. Each student will write three reading responses over the course of the semester. The reading responses should highlight and explain an aspect of that day's reading that you found interesting, and critically respond to it. Soon after the start of the semester, we will distribute a schedule for the responses. Reading responses are due to both of us at 11:59pm on the day before class via email.

Term paper (*50% of grade*). You will write a term paper for the class. This paper will be on a topic of your choice. Since this is an extended piece of writing, we'll follow a multi-step process:

- Initial meeting to discuss ideas. *To be completed by **Thursday, November 6th** at the latest.* Each of you will meet with us (jointly) 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. (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 **Friday, November 7th** at 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. We will write back to you either approving the proposal as it is or asking you to make modifications.
- Full draft. *Due **Sunday, November 16th** at 11:59pm.* You will write a full, complete draft of the paper. We will send you detailed comments on your draft by Wednesday, November 26th (this is the main set of comments you will receive from us on your paper).
- Final submission. *Due **Sunday, December 7th** at 11:59pm.* Finally, you will have an opportunity to revise the paper in light of our comments, before submitting the final version. We will send you your grade with some briefer comments by the end of that week.

Note: 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.

POLICIES

Reduced Writing Option. Enrolled students taking this as a Reduced Writing course are not required to write a term paper, but otherwise are required to engage in the course like any other enrolled student. In particular, they are required to attend regularly, do the reading and participate, give a presentation, and submit three reading responses. If you're taking the class as a Reduced Writing course, you must notify us by the end of the second week of classes.

Code of Conduct. As should go without saying in a class at this level, UNC's Code of Conduct, available at studentconduct.unc.edu, applies to all course assignments. Per department policy, for graduate work, any use of generative AI on a course assignment is prohibited, and counts as a violation of the Code of Conduct. Also, remember that you are not permitted to submit a final paper that substantially overlaps in content with a paper submitted for another class. Consult with us if in any doubt about how this requirement applies.

Accessibility, Equity & Resources.

- We are committed to making class fully accessible, and to providing accommodations for those who need them. If we can do anything to help make class more accessible to you, please let us know, or have [UNC Accessibility Resources & Service \(ARS\)](#) contact us on your behalf.
- We are 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 us know if we can do anything to improve; we appreciate suggestions.
- Mental health challenges during graduate school (among many other contexts) are very common. If you experience such challenges, we strongly urge you to seek help through UNC's [Counseling and Psychological Services](#). Though we are of course not professionals, we are also more than happy to talk, offer support, and make necessary accommodations; please don't hesitate to reach out.

COURSE READINGS (TENTATIVE – subject to change)

All readings will be made available on Canvas. (Note: within individual weeks, we have listed readings in the order in which we recommend reading them such that they make the most sense. The Canvas folders for each week list them in alphabetical order; we don't recommend reading them in this order.)

Part One: Factual Ignorance and Moral Obligation

Week 1 (August 20th): Introduction; Precursors to the Contemporary Debate

- H.A. Prichard, "Duty and Ignorance of Fact"
- Derek Parfit, *On What Matters*, ch. 7, §21

Week 2 (August 27th): Objectivism vs. Perspectivism

- Michael Zimmerman, "Is Moral Obligation Objective or Subjective?"
- Peter Graham, "In Defense of Objectivism about Moral Obligation"

Week 3 (September 3rd): Two-Tier Views

- Holly Smith, *Making Morality Work*, chs. 1, 3, 10-11

Week 4 (September 10th): Refinements of Perspectivism and Objectivism

- Benjamin Kiesewetter, “Ought and the Perspective of the Agent”
- Davide Fassio, “What the Doctor Should Do”

Part Two: Moral Ignorance and Blame

Week 5 (September 17th): The Epistemic Condition on Moral Responsibility

- Peter Graham, “The Epistemic Condition on Moral Blameworthiness: A Theoretical Epiphenomenon”
- Elinor Mason, “Moral Incapacity and Moral Ignorance”

Week 6 (September 24th): Moral Ignorance and Exculpation I

- Gideon Rosen, “Culpability and Ignorance”
- Gideon Rosen, “Skepticism about Moral Responsibility”

Week 7 (October 1st): Moral Ignorance and Exculpation II

- Elizabeth Harman, “Does Moral Ignorance Exculpate?”
- Elinor Mason and Alan Wilson, “Vice, Blameworthiness, and Cultural Ignorance”
- Optional: Brian Weatherson, *Normative Externalism*, ch. 5

Part Three: Epistemic Constraints on Oughts

Week 8 (October 8th): Normative Externalism

- Brian Weatherson, *Normative Externalism*, chs. 1-4 (skim ch. 3)

Week 9 (October 15th): Epistemic Constraints on Oughts Defended

- Jonathan Way & Daniel Whiting, “If You Justifiably Believe You Ought to Φ , You Ought to Φ ”
- Benjamin Kiesewetter, “You Ought to Φ Only If You May Believe That You Ought to Φ ”

Week 10 (October 22nd): The Epistemology of Moral Ignorance

- Declan Smithies, “The Problem of Morally Repugnant Beliefs”
- Zach Barnett, “Rational Moral Ignorance”

Part Four: Moral Uncertainty

Week 11 (October 29th): The Problem(s) of Moral Uncertainty

- Andrew Sepielli, “What to Do When You Don’t Know What to Do”
- Andrew Sepielli, “What to Do When You Don’t Know What to Do When You Don’t Know What to Do...”

Week 12 (November 5th): Decision-Theoretic Approaches: For and Against

- William MacAskill & Toby Ord, “Why Maximize Expected Choiceworthiness?”
- Chelsea Rosenthal, “What Decision Theory Can’t Tell Us about Moral Uncertainty”

Week 13 (November 11th): Skepticism about the Import of Moral Uncertainty

- Elizabeth Harman, “The Irrelevance of Moral Uncertainty”
- Brian Weatherson, *Normative Externalism*, ch. 3 (re-read more carefully)

Week 14 (November 19th): The Import of Moral Uncertainty Defended

- Zoe Johnson King, “Who’s Afraid of Normative Externalism?”
- Abelard Podgorski, “Normative Uncertainty and the Dependence Problem”

[No class November 26th – Thanksgiving Break]

Week 15 (December 3rd): Moral Uncertainty and Practical Ethics

- Ted Lockhart, *Moral Uncertainty and its Consequences*, ch. 3
- William MacAskill, “Practical Ethics Given Moral Uncertainty”