

PRELIMINARY COURSE DESCRIPTION

PHIL 434, Ethics II

Prof. Sarah Stroud, Fall 2011

Topic: central issues in twentieth-century meta-ethics

Class meetings: MW 1:05-2:25 pm, in Leacock 212. N.B.: since this is a “computer classroom,” no food or beverages are allowed in the room.

Prerequisite: at least *two* previous courses in moral philosophy, *including PHIL 334* (Ethical Theory); or written permission of the instructor. Barring special reasons, I will not generally grant written permission to students who do not meet these prerequisites.

Summary description: Meta-ethics investigates the semantic, metaphysical, and epistemological status of moral claims and their relation to practical reason and to action. Its aim is to analyse moral thought and discourse in general, rather than to propose or defend a particular normative ethical theory. Some of the most important philosophical work on ethics in the twentieth-century analytic tradition has addressed meta-ethical questions, and we will read some of that work in this course. Among the authors we will read are Moore, Stevenson, Ayer, Mackie, Foot, Williams, Harman, and Railton.

We will investigate questions like the following: are moral claims best understood as attempts to state facts? if so, are any moral claims actually true, i.e., does reality contain any moral properties or facts? if so, are they “natural” facts of the same general kind as those investigated by science? are they independent of human sensibilities and responses? do moral judgements necessarily involve motivation to act? does everyone have reason to comply with moral requirements?

Principal text: *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*, ed. Shafer-Landau and Cuneo (Blackwell, 2007). Available for purchase at Paragraph Books and on reserve at Redpath Library.

Further required readings are either collected in the course pack (for sale at McGill Bookstore, and on reserve at Redpath Library), or accessible electronically (you may use hyperlinks from the reading list posted on WebCT). *You are responsible for obtaining all required readings, whether electronically or in hard copy.*

Two further books are available for sale at Paragraph, as we will be reading multiple chapters from them. You may however choose to access those chapters on line if you prefer:

David Copp, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory*

Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness*

Provisional course requirements (to be confirmed on the official syllabus distributed in the first week of classes): two essays of 2500-3000 words each; plus a series of weekly discussion questions on the readings, to be submitted by WebCT.