PHIL 434
Metaethics

Fall 2016
MW 10:05 – 11:25
Educ 613

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office: Leacock 942, x3250
office hours TBA

Prerequisite: at least two previous courses in moral philosophy, including PHIL 334 (Ethical Theory); or written permission of the instructor. (But as this is an advanced course in ethics, I will not generally grant written permission to students who do not meet these prerequisites.)

Summary description: Metaethics is the epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of language, and philosophy of mind of ethical thought, discourse, and reality. It investigates the semantic, metaphysical, and epistemological status of moral claims, as well as their relation to practical reason and to action. It aims 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 analytic tradition has addressed metaethical questions. We will read some of that classic work in this course, including selections by Moore, Stevenson, Ayer, Mackie, Foot, Williams, Harman, and Railton. We will also read a number of very recent journal articles and (parts of) books.

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?


Course requirements: Two essays, each 1500-1800 words (5-6 pages), each worth 20% of your final mark. Take-home exam, 45% of your final mark. Submission of questions on the readings, 15% of your final mark. (Further details will be provided first week of class.)

Course policies: In order to pass the course, you must complete, submit, and receive a passing mark (prior to any lateness penalties) on both essays and on the take-home exam. Essays must be submitted in hard copy, not by e-mail or WebCT.

Essays handed in late will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a grade per calendar day of lateness (e.g., from a B+ to a B after one day of lateness). Unless otherwise stated on the paper topics sheet, no essays will be accepted more than ten days after the date they are due. No extensions on the essays will be granted, save for the following case: requests for extensions will be considered (but not automatically granted) when requested at least one business day before the essay is due and substantiated at the time of request by a medical note documenting illness.
The following are *forbidden* during class sessions:
• holding or using handheld devices such as cell phones
• wearing earbuds or headphones

The following is *permitted* during class sessions, *but only for course activities*:
• using a computer

Students not complying with these policies may be asked to exit the class.

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/) for more information).

In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.