

Phil 434: Metaethics
Winter 2020, McGill University

SYLLABUS

Professor: Stephanie Leary

Spatiotemporal location: M/W 4:05-5:25 pm, SH688 491

Course Description

Metaethics is a branch of philosophical inquiry into the nature of our moral thought and talk and how moral “reality” (i.e. whatever that thought and talk is *about*) fits into the rest of reality. So, it’s an area where questions in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology all converge onto a common subject matter: morality. For example, here are some of the questions we will engage with in this course:

- (1) *Philosophy of language & mind questions:* Are moral claims best understood as expressing *beliefs* about the way the world is, which can be true or false, or are moral claims simply expressions of pro or con attitudes that can’t be true or false? If they are statements of belief, is their truth-value always relative to some individual or group? Does having a sincere moral judgment require having some corresponding motivation to act?
- (2) *Metaphysical questions:* Does reality contain moral facts and properties? If so, what are they like: are they like the sorts of facts and properties investigated by the sciences, or are they entirely different in kind? Do the moral facts depend on features of our psychologies?
- (3) *Epistemological questions:* If there are moral facts, how do we know them? How can we take ourselves to know anything about moral matters, given that there is rampant moral disagreement? Does the fact that evolution played a role in shaping our moral judgments imply that those judgments aren’t justified?

***Prerequisite:** PHIL 334 or permission from the instructor.

Course Goals

The primary goal of this course is to develop the sorts of thinking, writing, and conversation skills that are essential to doing philosophy. Doing metaethics, in particular, requires some very difficult, abstract thinking about one of the most puzzling phenomena of our world – morality. So, the skills we will be honing in this course are: (i) the ability to read and understand difficult philosophical texts, (ii) critical thinking and problem solving skills, (iii) the ability to present philosophical views and arguments in a clear and logical way, and (iv) the ability to share your ideas in a clear way in both writing and conversation.

Assignments and Grades

Participation (10%)
Midterm paper draft worksheet & peer review (5%)
**Midterm paper – 4-5 double-spaced pages (35%)
Final paper draft worksheet & peer review (5%)
**Final paper – 6-8 double-spaced pages (45%)

Due Dates

always
*Mon, February 10th
Fri, February 14th
*Mon, April 6th
Tues, April 14th

*The two paper draft worksheets must be turned into myCourses *and* you must bring three hardcopies to class for the peer review sessions. These will be graded pass/fail, but in order to receive full points, you must participate in the peer review session held during class (you cannot just submit it to myCourses).

**In order to pass this course, you must turn in a midterm and final paper, or else you will receive an automatic F.

myCourses

There is a myCourses site for this class and you need to know how to use it. All of the readings are available here (there is no textbook for this course). I will be using myCourses to post announcements, assignments, and grades, and you will use it to turn in all written work. It's your responsibility to make sure that myCourses has your correct email so that you receive email notifications.

In-Class Participation

Philosophy is a social practice that requires asking questions and learning to discuss ideas with others, so come to class prepared to do just that! This means you need to come to *every* class meeting having done the reading in advance, and you must bring the reading with you. You will earn participation points by asking questions during lecture, participating in class discussions and group activities, and doing occasional in-class writing. You may miss *two* classes without your participation grade being penalized. If you miss more than two classes, you will begin to lose points, unless you have a serious excuse (like a medical or family emergency) and notify me of your situation.

Late Work/Extensions Policy

I do not accept late work. However, I am willing to negotiate extensions for written work, as long as you give me plenty of advance notice. So, you anticipate that you will need an extension, email me as soon as possible so that we can work out a reasonable alternative deadline for your work.

Language Policy

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

Academic Integrity Policy

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/ for more information).

Electronic Devices Policy

Cell phones must be put away and silenced during class at all times. Laptops or tablets may be used in class only for purposes related to *this course* (e.g. reviewing the readings and taking notes).

Meta-policy

I reserve the right to amend the readings, assignments, and policies as the semester progresses. I will only do so fairly, for good reasons, and with plenty of warning.

Professor's Contact Information

Email: stephanie.leary@mcgill.ca

Office hours and location: Tues 3:30-5:30pm (or by appointment), LEA 942

Schedule of Topics and Readings

Topic	Date	Reading	Work Due
Introduction to metaethics	06-Jan		
Moral judgment and motivation	08-Jan	Michael Smith's "Chapter 3: The Externalist Challenge" from <i>The Moral Problem</i>	
	13-Jan	Sigrun Svavarsdottir's "Moral Cognitivism and Motivation"	
	15-Jan	Alex King's "The Amoralist and the Anaesthetic"	
Relativism	20-Jan	"Moral Relativism" entry of the <i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i> : https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/	
Non-cognitivism	22-Jan	Stevenson's "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms" and A. J. Ayer's "A Critique of Ethics" from <i>Language, Truth, and Logic</i>	
	27-Jan	Jamie Dreier's "Metaethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism"	
	29-Jan	NO CLASS	
	03-Feb	Andy Egan's "Quasi-Realism and Fundamental Moral Error"	
	05-Feb	Michael Smith's "Evaluation, Uncertainty, and Motivation"	
	10-Feb	Midterm Paper Peer Review Session: bring draft worksheets!	Midterm paper draft worksheet
Non-naturalist realism	12-Feb	G.E. Moore's <i>Principia</i> (excerpt)	
	14-Feb (Friday)		Midterm paper due
	17-Feb	J.L Mackie's <i>Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong</i> (excerpt)	
	19-Feb	Stephanie Leary's "Non-naturalism and Normative Necessities"	

	24-Feb	Sarah McGrath's "Moral Knowledge by Perception"	
	26-Feb	Daniel Wodak's "Moral Perception, inference, and intuition"	
NO CLASS	March 2-4	MCGILL READING WEEK	
	09-Mar	David Enoch's "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?"	
	11-Mar	Katia Vavova's "Moral Disagreement and Moral Skepticism"	
Naturalist realism	16-Mar	Mark Schroeder's "The Humean Theory of Reasons"	
	18-Mar	Michael Smith's "Realism"	
	23-Mar	David Enoch's "Why Idealize?"	
	25-Mar	Sharon Street's "In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally coherent eccentrics and the contingency of what matters"	
Evolutionary debunking	30-Mar	Sharon Street's "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value"	
	01-Apr	Katia Vavova's "Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism"	
	06-Apr	Final Paper Peer Review Session: bring draft worksheets!	Final paper draft worksheet due
Last class!	08-Apr	METAETHICS JEOPARDY - extra credit opportunity	
	14-Apr (Tuesday)		Final paper due