

Phil 434: Metaethics
Fall 2024, McGill University

SYLLABUS¹

Professor: Alexis Morin-Martel

Location: Tuesday/Thursday 11:35 am-12:55 LEA 109

Course Overview

Metaethics is a branch of philosophical inquiry into the nature of our moral thought and talk and how moral “reality” (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, we will discuss the following:

- (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 moral facts depend on facts about us (our desires, ends, etc.)?
- (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?

***Prerequisite:** PHIL 334 or PHIL 230.

Learning Goals

The primary goal of this course is for students to develop their philosophical skills to an advanced level of proficiency. These skills include: (i) the ability to read and understand difficult philosophical texts, (ii) critical thinking skills, (iii) the ability to reconstruct philosophical views and arguments in a clear and precise way, and (iv) the ability to clearly articulate and defend your own ideas in both writing and conversation. You will demonstrate these skills by writing philosophical papers, reading reflections, and participating in class discussions.

Assignments and Grades

Attendance and in-class participation (10%)

3 reading reflections (15% total)—see assignment instructions in myCourses!

*Midterm paper (30%)

*Final paper (35%)

**Paper draft worksheets & peer reviews (5% each, 10% total)

¹ I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to Stephanie Leary who shared her material and valuable insight with me. This syllabus is almost entirely based on hers.

*You *must* submit the midterm and final papers to pass this course. Failure to do so will result in an automatic F.

**See the assignment on myCourses for how worksheets are graded. If you do not submit your worksheet or attend the peer review session, the 5% of your grade will be redistributed to your midterm or final paper.

Attendance and participation

Participation involves reading the assigned papers, attending class, participating in polling, class discussions, and occasional small group discussions. Participation will be self-assessed and justified by the students themselves. I reevaluate the assessment.

myCourses

All of the readings are available on myCourses (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 your assignments are successfully submitted.

Contacting the Professor

If you have logistical questions about the course, please ask your question during class so that all students can benefit from hearing the answer. If you have substantive questions about the material that you want to ask outside of class or questions about your work for this course, I'm happy to talk to you during office hours (please don't email). But you are welcome to email me for other reasons like (a) getting paper topics approved, (b) asking for an extension for written work, or (c) notifying me of a situation that is interfering with your ability to attend class regularly.

Office hours: Tuesday, 1:00 pm - 3:00 pm (location to be announced) or by asking for an individual Zoom appointment at another time.

Email: alexis.morin-martel@mail.mcgill.ca

Late Work/Extensions Policy

Late work will not be accepted for credit unless you are given an extension (e.g., under circumstances of serious (mental or physical) illness, a death in the family, or something of equal seriousness). Extension requests must be made at least 24 hours before the due dates.

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).

Language Policy

In accordance 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 offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

The use of generative AI (such as Chat-GPT) is **strongly discouraged** when writing papers or reflections for this course. If an essay is primarily the work of an AI, then it is not the work of the person whose name is on it. That misrepresentation is not acceptable even if it is not plagiarism (because there is no particular person whose work is being presented as one's own). For this course, our practice will be that every essay must include a brief appendix indicating whether you used an AI tool, which tool it was, and a detailed description of how you used it. Writers will have to decide what they consider an appropriate use of AI tools. I will agree or disagree and grade your work accordingly.

Meta-policy

In the event of an emergency, I may make changes to the course schedule, assignments, and policies as the semester progresses. I will only do so fairly, for good reasons, and with plenty of warning.

Schedule

Topic	Date	Reading to be discussed in class	Work Due
	29-Aug	NO CLASS	
Introduction to metaethics	03-Sep	Syllabus	
1. Metaphysics: Naturalist and Non-naturalist Realism	05-Sep	G.E. Moore's <i>Principia</i> (excerpt)	
	10-Sep	Frank Jackson's "The Location Problem of Ethics: Moral Properties and Moral Content"	
	12-Sep	Horgan and Timmons "Analytical Moral Functionalism meets Moral Twin Earth" and (Section 3 and 3.1 from Externalism About the Mind (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy))	
	17-Sep	Jamie Dreier's "Is There a Supervenience Problem for Robust Moral Realism?"	
	19-Sep	(catch up)	
2. Epistemology: concerns about realism	24-Sep	J.L Mackie's <i>Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong</i> (excerpt)	
	26-Sep	David Enoch's "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?" (skip sections 5-7) (catch up)	
	01-Oct	Sharon Street's "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value"	

	03-Oct	(catch up)	
	08-Oct	Katia Vavova's "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking"	
3. Language: Moral relativism and non-cognitivism	10-Oct	Moral Relativism (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)	
	Oct 15 & 17	NO CLASS (Reading Break)	
	22-Oct	Peer Review for Midterm Papers	Midterm Draft Worksheet
	24-Oct	CL Stevenson's "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms"	
	29-Oct	Bob Beddor's "Non-Cognitivism and Epistemic Evaluations"	Midterm Papers Due
	31-Oct	Mark Schroeder's "What is the Frege-Geach Problem?"	
	05-Nov	(catch up)	
	07-Nov	Andy Egan's "Quasi-Realism and Fundamental Moral Error"	
4. Mind: internalism and externalism	12-Nov	Michael Smith's "Chapter 3: The Externalist Challenge" from <i>The Moral Problem</i>	
	14-Nov	NO CLASS	
	19-Nov	Sigrun Svavarsdottir's "Moral Cognitivism and Motivation"	
	21-Nov	(catch up)	

5. All-encompassing arguments	26-Nov	Michael Smith's "Realism"	
	28-Nov	Sharon Street's "In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally coherent eccentrics and the contingency of what matters"	
	03-Dec	Peer Review for Final Papers	Final Draft Worksheet Participation Self-Evaluation Due
	09-Dec		Final Paper Due