

PHIL GR9110

Location: 716 Philosophy Hall

Time: Fall 2018, Monday 10:10-12pm

Topics in Metaethics: What, if anything, is morality?

1. Course Description

“Moral” is one of those words that philosophers (and even non-philosophers) use all the time. But what, if anything, is morality? Here are some familiar ideas. We call those norms moral that:

- are especially important,
- relate to how we ought to treat others,
- relate to how we ought to treat all persons including ourselves,
- command categorically/with necessary bindingness,
- are objective,
- are universalizable,
- are overriding,
- feel a certain way/have a distinctive phenomenology,
- play a distinctive role in combatting weakness of will.

Another tradition in ethics, however, speaks deliberately of ethics rather than moral philosophy. According to this tradition, it is not clear that the term “moral” picks out anything at all.

The seminar explores how classic and recent contributions in metaethics understand the notion of morality and why some philosophers call this notion in question.

2. Requirements

Preparation:

The class functions as a high-level survey of core themes metaethics. No specific preparation in metaethics is required. However, it is crucial that students take preparatory reading seriously. The texts we study have had tremendous influence and require careful study. The writing requirements for the class are moderate because I’m aware that the reading will be demanding.

Reading:

All readings will be available via Courseworks/Canvas/Butler Library. Students are required to read the assigned material prior to each class meeting and come to class prepared for discussion. Active participation in class, reflective of this kind of preparation, is sufficient for R-credit.

Presentations:

Students are encouraged to volunteer for 5-minute presentations. These presentations constitute an exercise. The goal is to learn how to present a complex argument briefly and concisely. It is important that the presentation genuinely takes only 5 minutes. You should summarize in 3 minutes what the main argument is, and speak for 2 minutes to one specific question or aspect of

the reading you take to be deserving of further scrutiny. Presentations are not required, but count as active participation in class. Presenters are required to send me a written version of their presentations prior to class.

Writing:

For E-credit, students are required to write two short papers or one longer paper.

Option 1: Two 5-7 page response papers. Engage with one of our readings by summarizing what you take to be its core argument and proposal, and by discussing one aspect of the paper that interests you specifically. The first paper is due by the end of October. The second paper is due by the end of the semester.

Option 2: One 15-18 page paper, due Dec 20th by email. Please email me at the latest by Nov 14th to consult about the topic. You are required to submit an outline and abstract by Nov 26.

3. Week-by-Week Plan (at times subject to change/refinement, announced by email)

Week 1, Sept 10: Introduction

Readings: Bernard Williams, "Practical Necessity," in Williams, *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, pp. 124-131; Stephen Stich, "The quest for the boundaries of morality." In: *The Routledge handbook of moral epistemology*, ed. K. Jones, M. Timmons & A. Zimmerman. Routledge (forthcoming).

Additional readings: Bernard Williams, "Morality, the Peculiar Institution," in Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Fontana Press 1985, reprinted Routledge 2006; James Griffin, "Rejecting Morality," in Griffin, *What Can Philosophy Contribute To Ethics?* OUP 2015.

Week 2, Sept 17: No Morality—Anscombe and Error Theory

Readings: Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy" (1958); Mackie, *Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977), chapter 1.

Additional reading: Richard Joyce, "Fictionalism in Metaethics," in D. Plunkett & T. McPherson (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Metaethics* (Routledge, 2017).

Week 3, Sept 24: The Normative-Descriptive Distinction

Readings: Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Lecture I (1996); Joseph Raz "Reasons: Explanatory and Normative," chapter 2 of *From Normativity to Responsibility*, OUP 2011; Ruth Chang, review of Raz, *From Normativity to Responsibility*.

Week 4, Oct 1: Kant

Readings: Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, selections on categorical versus hypothetical imperatives, absolute value and moral worth, the distinction between price-value and dignity-value, the moral-prudential distinction, and the notion of a "metaphysics of morals."

Week 5, Oct 8: Second Personal Notions in Modern Morality

Guest speaker: Stephen Darwall

Reading: Darwall, "Making the "Hard" Problem of Moral Normativity Easier," in: Errol Lord and

Barry Maguire (eds.), *Weighing Reasons* (OUP, 2016)
Commentators: Axel Honneth (CU), Thimo Heisenberg (CU)
This visit is part of the Workshop in Ancient & Contemporary Philosophy

Week 6, Oct 15: Morality and Evolution I

Readings: Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Philosophical Studies* 127 (2006): 109-166; Guy Kahane, "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments," *Nous* 45 (2011): 103-125, selection.

Additional readings on realism: Sharon Street, "Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics," *Philosophical Compass*; David Enoch, *Taking Morality Seriously: In Defense of Robust Realism* (OUP 2011), chapter 5 "Doing With Less"; Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *The Philosophical Review* (1986).

Week 7, Oct 22: Morality and Evolution II

Readings: Richard Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, "Morality and Evolution"; P. Kyle Stanford, "The Difference between ice cream and Nazis: Moral externalization and the evolution of human cooperation," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* e95 (2018): 1-13; Stephen Stich, comments on Stanford, "Do we really externalize or objectivize moral demands?" *BBS* e95 (2018): 29.

Week 8, Oct 29: Objectivity and Evaluation

Guest speaker: Justin Clarke-Doane

Reading: Clarke-Doane, *Morality and Mathematics*, chapter 6 "Objectivity and Evaluation"

Commentators: Molly Gurdon (CU) and Billy McCarthy (CU)

Additional Reading: Matti Eklund, "Ardent Realism," Chapter 1 of Eklund, *Choosing Normative Concepts* (OUP 2017).

This visit is part of the Workshop in Ancient & Contemporary Philosophy

Nov 5: Academic Holiday

Week 9, Nov 12: Realism About Well-Lived Lives

Readings: Plato, *Republic* VIII-IX; Vogt, "The Long Goodbye From Relativism," Chapter 4 in *Desiring the Good* (OUP 2017); Edouard Machery (2008), "A Plea for Human Nature," *Philosophical Psychology* 21:3 (2008): 321-329

Nov 19: Academic Holiday

Week 10, Nov 26: No Morality, No Self

Guest speaker: James Doyle, *No Morality, No Self: Anscombe's Radical Skepticism* (Harvard University Press, 2018), Part I "No Morality: "Modern Moral Philosophy (1958)"

Commentators: Jessie Qian Cao and Isabel Kaeslin

This visit is part of the Workshop in Ancient & Contemporary Philosophy

Week 11, Dec 3: Good and Good-For

Readings: Plato, *Republic* II, beginning; Peter Geach, "Good and Evil," (1956); Judith Thomson, *Normativity* (2008), beginning.

Additional reading: Christine Korsgaard, "Two Distinctions in Goodness" (1983); Brad Inwood, "Ancient Goods" (2014); Vogt, "A Blueprint For Ethics," ch. 1 in *Desiring the Good* (2017).

Week 12, Dec 10: Ethics and Empirical Psychology

Readings: “Can Moral Obligations Be Empirically Discovered?” in H. Wettstein et al. (Eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XXXI , (2007); Phillips, J., Mott, C., De Freitas, J., Gruber, J. & Knobe, J., “True happiness: The role of morality in the folk concept of happiness,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*.