

Phil 434: Metaethics
Fall 2022, McGill University

SYLLABUS

Professor: Stephanie Leary

Spatiotemporal location: Mon/Wed 1:05-2:25pm BIRKS 205

Course Overview

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, 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? Does the fact that evolution played a role in shaping our moral judgments imply that we should be skeptical of them?

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

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: (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 logical way, and (iv) the ability to clearly articulate and defend your own ideas in both writing and conversation.

Assignments and Grades

Attendance and in-class participation (10%)

Short writing assignment (10%)

3 reading reflections (10% total)

*Midterm paper and final paper (30% each)

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

(+ Metaethics Jeopardy extra credit opportunity!)

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

****Paper draft worksheets will be graded pass/fail and you'll only receive feedback from your peers. To receive full points, you must turn your worksheet into myCourses by the beginning of class, bring hardcopies to class, and participate in the peer review session held during class. (If you only submit the worksheet/rough draft to myCourses, you will receive a 40% (F) for the assignment, and if you don't submit the worksheet/rough draft to myCourses and don't come to the peer review session, you will receive a 0%.)**

Attendance and participation

Philosophy is a social practice that requires asking questions and discussing ideas, so come to class prepared to do just that! This means you need to come to class 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. But given the COVID-19 situation, there will be some leeway for attendance (everyone will automatically be given a reasonable number of excused absences, no questions asked). Please don't come to class if you feel ill and make sure you familiarize yourself and follow McGill's health guidelines. If a situation arises where you need to miss a large number of classes, please notify me of your situation ASAP (i.e., not at the end of the semester when grades are due).

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 (please don't email). 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) negotiating deadlines for written work, or (c) notifying me of a situation that is interfering with your ability to regularly attend class.

Office hours: Tuesdays, 10am-12pm (or by individual appointment) over Zoom:

<https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/89407734135>. There's a sign-up sheet for office hours here:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Qrn5cE26rY5dcyNvE4f4p4UeIOYmQEHsqUuq-7jITPE/edit?usp=sharing>

Email: stephanie.leary@mcgill.ca

Course Policies

Late Work/Extensions Policy

I am willing to give extensions for written work (except for draft worksheets), as long as you ask with plenty of advance notice (no questions asked). So, if you anticipate needing an extension, email me as

soon as possible so that we can negotiate a reasonable alternative deadline for your work. Unless you have been given an extension, I do not accept late work.

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). If you use your device for anything else during class, I will ask you to put it away and not use it during class for the remainder of the semester because doing so not only interferes with your learning, but also that of those around you. So don't abuse your power!

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).

Meta-policy

I reserve the right to make minor adjustments 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. (For example, given the COVID-19 pandemic, we may need to move some of our classes online.)

SCHEDULE

Topic	Date	Reading to be discussed in class	Work Due
Introduction to metaethics	31-Aug	Syllabus	
Non-naturalist realism	07-Sep	G.E. Moore's <i>Principia</i> (excerpt)	
Epistemological challenges	12-Sep	J.L Mackie's <i>Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong</i> (excerpt)	
<i>1. Explaining moral knowledge</i>	14-Sep	(catch up)	
	19-Sep	Sarah McGrath's "Moral Perception and Its Rivals"	
	21-Sep	Daniel Wodak's "Moral perception, inference, and intuition"	

2. <i>Moral Disagreement</i>	26-Sep	David Enoch's "How is Moral Disagreement a Problem for Realism?" (skip sections 5-7)	Short Writing Assignment
	28-Sep	(catch up)	
	03-Oct	NO CLASS – VOTING DAY	
Metaphysical challenges	05-Oct	Stephanie Leary's "Non-naturalism and Normative Necessities"	
	Oct 10 & 12	NO CLASS (and no makeup class on Thurs Oct 13)	
Moral judgment and motivation	17-Oct	Michael Smith's "Chapter 3: The Externalist Challenge" from <i>The Moral Problem</i>	
	19-Oct	Sigrun Svavarsdottir's "Moral Cognitivism and Motivation"	
	24-Oct	(catch up)	
	26-Oct	Peer Review for Midterm Papers	Midterm Draft Worksheet
Moral relativism	31-Oct	"Moral Relativism" entry of the <i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i> : https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-relativism/	
	02-Nov	(catch up)	Midterm Papers Due
Non-cognitivism	07-Nov	Stevenson's "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms"	
	09-Nov	Mark Schroeder's "What is the Frege-Geach Problem?"	
	14-Nov	Andy Egan's "Quasi-Realism and Fundamental Moral Error"	
Naturalist moral realism & challenges	16-Nov	Michael Smith's "Realism"	

	21-Nov	Sharon Street's "In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally coherent eccentrics and the contingency of what matters"	
	23-Nov	Frank Jackson's "The Location Problem of Ethics: Moral Properties and Moral Content"	
	28-Nov	Horgan and Timmons "Analytical Moral Functionalism meets Moral Twin Earth"	
	30-Nov	Peer Review for Final Papers	Final Draft Worksheet
	05-Dec	Metaethics Jeopardy – Extra Credit Opportunity!	
	06-Dec		Final Paper Due