

## Phil 634 – Seminar in Ethics: The Metaphysics of Normativity

**Spatiotemporal location:** Fridays 11:35am-2:25pm LEA 517

**Professors:** Chris Howard ([chris.howard@mcgill.ca](mailto:chris.howard@mcgill.ca)) and Stephanie Leary ([stephanie.leary@mcgill.ca](mailto:stephanie.leary@mcgill.ca))

**Course Description:** In this course, we'll discuss the metaphysics of normativity. The first part of the course concerns how normative facts metaphysically relate to non-normative facts. It has long been presupposed that the normative facts *metaphysically supervene* on the non-normative facts and some philosophers have argued that this provides a difficult explanatory challenge for moral realists in general, or at least for non-naturalist realists in particular. We'll discuss some attempts to meet these explanatory challenges, but we'll also discuss some recent attempts to rebuff the challenge by denying that the normative metaphysically supervenes on the non-normative and insisting instead that there is a distinctly normative modality with which the normative is explained by and supervenes on the non-normative. This will take us on a tour through recent developments in metaphysics and metaethics - discussions of *grounding*, *essence*, *metaphysical laws*, different kinds of *necessity*, etc. - after which we'll hopefully emerge with some useful tools to help us think about the second part of the course.

In part two, we'll discuss how different kinds of normative facts relate to one another: how do facts about reasons, values, fittingness, and oughts relate to each other? Are certain normative facts explained by others and, if so, what exactly is the explanatory hierarchy of the normative facts? Is there one kind of normative fact that is *fundamental* in the sense that it is explanatorily prior to *all other* normative facts? Or is the hierarchy of normative facts more complicated, and how so? And we'll think about what we're doing when we give an account of certain normative facts in terms of others in the first place: are we making claims about essence, metaphysical grounding, or doing something else?

### Requirements and Grades:

- (1) **Overall Participation (10%):** The success of our seminar depends on everyone participating in an active and respectful discussion. You are expected to attend class, complete all required readings beforehand, and come prepared with questions or comments. If you have extenuating circumstances that make attending the seminar difficult for you, please contact us.
- (2) **Reading responses (10%):** Over the course of the semester, you must submit 3 reading responses (3-400 words each). These should be submitted via myCourses by Thursday evenings before class and should involve some sort of reflection about the material - it may involve a brief discussion of a clarificatory question you have about the reading that you think is important to address or a critical comment or objection that you have about some argument in the reading, etc.
- (3) **Term paper proposal (20%):** You will submit a 2,000-word term paper proposal (through myCourses) that will include a brief introduction to the topic of your paper, an outline of your main argument and what objections you plan to respond to, as well as a reading list. A "guide-sheet" for the term paper proposals will be available on myCourses so you know exactly what all to include in the proposal. We're happy to talk to you about your topic in office hours, give you reading suggestions, etc. If you email us and don't get a response within 2 workdays, please email again! You are never bothering us by asking for help - *it's our job!*

- (4) **Comments on a peer's term paper (10%):** You'll be paired up with another student to swap rough drafts of your term papers. You must email your partner (and CC us!) your rough draft on the last day of class (by the start time). Then you must email your partner a mock "referee report" with comments on their draft (and CC us again!) by that Friday. Your report should *very briefly* summarize the paper and identify its strengths, but then respectfully explain what you think are the main ways in which the paper could be improved. (A sample referee report will be on myCourses to serve as a guide.)
- (5) **Final term paper with revision letter (50%):** Your final term paper should be 5,000-7,000 words and submitted through myCourses. Along with your term paper, you must include a short revision letter that explains what changes you made to your paper in light of your peer's comments or why you decided not to make certain changes suggested by your peer. (A sample letter will be available on myCourses to serve as a guide.)

### Office Hours:

Chris Howard: Wednesdays, 12pm-2pm (or by appointment) over Zoom:  
<https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/2959872915>.

Stephanie Leary: Wednesdays, 10am-12pm (or by appointment) over Zoom:  
<https://mcgill.zoom.us/j/89407734135>. Sign-up for a slot here:  
<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Qrn5cE26rY5dcyNvE4f4p4UeIOYmQEHsqUuq-7jITPE/edit?usp=sharing>

### SCHEDULE

Topic	Date	Question of the week	Reading	Optional further readings	Work due
Intro to course	03-Sep	<i>What are we doing here?</i>	Syllabus, McGill health guidelines		
Supervenience	10-Sep	<i>What is supervenience and what role does it play in debates about ethical realism?</i>	Jamie Dreier's (1) "The Supervenience Argument Against Moral Realism" and (2) "Is There a Supervenience Problem for Robust Moral Realism?"	Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry on "Supervenience in Ethics"	
Non-naturalism, supervenience, and grounding	17-Sep	<i>Can non-naturalist realists give a metaphysical explanation for supervenience?</i>	(1) Stephanie Leary's "Non-naturalism and Normative Necessities", (2) Tristram McPherson and David Plunkett's "Supervenience and the Autonomy of Essence: Lessons from Leary's Hybrid Gambit"	Gideon Rosen's "Metaphysical Dependence: Grounding and Reduction" & "Metaphysical Relations in Metaethics", Tristram McPherson's "Ethical Non-naturalism and the	

				Metaphysics of Supervenience", Stephanie Leary's "What is Normative Non-naturalism?"	
Normative grounding and necessity	24-Sep	<i>Is normative explanation distinct from metaphysical explanation?</i>	(1) Selim Berker's "Unity of Grounding", (2) Gideon Rosen's "What is a moral law?"	Stephanie Leary's "Normativity" (chapter from the Routledge Handbook of Metaphysical Grounding), Ralph Bader's "The Grounding Argument Against Non-reductive Moral Realism"	
The strength of moral laws	01-Oct	<i>Are moral laws metaphysically contingent?</i>	(1) Gideon Rosen's "The Modal Status of Moral Principles", (2) Pekka Vayrynen's "Against Moral Contingentism"	Gideon Rosen's, "What is Normative Necessity?", Selim Berker's "The Explanatory Ambitions of Moral Principles", David Enoch's "How Principles Ground"	
Rethinking supervenience	08-Oct	<i>Are there good reasons to reject supervenience after all?</i>	(1) Debbie Roberts's "Why Believe in Normative Supervenience", (2) Anandi Hattiangadi's "Moral Supervenience"		
Reasons and oughts	22-Oct	<i>How are reasons related to oughts?</i>	(1) Stephen Kearns & Daniel Star's "Reasons: Explanations or Evidence?", (2) Daniel Wodak's "Redundant Reasons"		
Reasons and reasoning	29-Oct	<i>How are reasons related to reasoning?</i>	(1) Conor McHugh and Jonathan Way's <i>Getting Things Right: Reasons, Value, and Fittingness</i> , ch. 1, (2) Pamela Hieronymi's "Reasoning First"		
Reasons and value	05-Nov	<i>How are reasons related to value?</i>	(1) Wlodek Rabinowicz & Toni Ronnow-Rasmussen's "Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-attitudes and Value", (2) Barry Maguire's "The Value-Based Theory of Reasons"		
	<b>Mon Nov 8</b>				<b>Term Paper Proposal</b>

Fittingness	12-Nov	<i>What is fittingness?</i>	(1) Conor McHugh and Jonathan Way's <i>Getting Things Right: Reasons, Value, and Fittingness</i> , ch. 3, (2) Chris Howard's "Fittingness"		
Fittingness and value	19-Nov	<i>How is fittingness related to value?</i>	(1) Conor McHugh & Jonathan Way's <i>Getting Things Right: Reasons, Value, and Fittingness</i> , ch. 4, (2) Christine Tappolet's "Values and Emotions: Neosentimentalism's Prospects"	Chris Howard's, "Fitting-Attitude Theories of Value"	
Nobody on first?	26-Nov	<i>Might multiple normative properties be normatively fundamental?</i>	(1) Daniel Wodak's, "Who's on First?", (2) Andrew Reisner's, "Not Fittingness, Not Reasons, and Not Value: Against the 'First' Views"		
	<b>Mon Dec 6</b>				<b>Rough Draft Peer Swap</b>
	<b>Fri Dec 10</b>				<b>Peer Comments</b>
	<b>Fri Dec 17</b>				<b>Final Term Paper &amp; Revision Letter</b>

## Course Policies

### Public Health Policies

Our top priority is to keep ourselves and each other healthy and safe. Please review and follow the [Health Guidelines for Students](#), and it is imperative that you understand when to stay home if, for example, you are [experiencing COVID-19 symptoms](#). Take special note of the following:

- **You must wear a mask covering your nose and mouth in the classroom at all times.** This means we cannot eat in the classroom, so we will have a long break in the middle of class to allow everyone to step outside and eat something. Masks are available on campus and are to be worn when entering and circulating in buildings and classrooms.
- If you develop COVID-19 symptoms while on campus, please follow the [required guidelines](#), which include ensuring you have a mask on, isolate in a closed, private room, immediately call 1-877-644-4545 (Info-Santé) for instructions, and notify the University by calling 514-398-3000.
- If you are in a situation that might require you to miss some lectures or assignments because of short-term absences due to COVID-19, you are to request an academic accommodation using the online form found under the "Personal" menu in Minerva; the form is called "**COVID-19 Academic Accommodations Request Form**".

- Finally, the context of attending University during a pandemic will bring on additional stress and may impact your wellbeing. Please do not hesitate to reach out for support if necessary, and access resources available, including, for example, [Student Services](#), the [Office of the Dean of Students](#), and your Faculty's Student Affairs Office.

The best way to ensure the health and safety of our class is for all of us to be fully vaccinated. If you are not fully vaccinated, you can find information about how to get vaccinated here: <https://www.mcgill.ca/coronavirus/health-safety/get-vaccinated>.

### **Extensions Policy**

Because of the unusual circumstances we're living in, issues might arise where you need an extension for your work. If you find yourself in this situation, please email us ASAP and we can negotiate an alternative deadline.

### **Language Policy**

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.

### **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/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/) for more information).

### **Metapolicy**

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