

Proposed Syllabi Metaethics

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Office Hours: Wednesday 3:00p – 4:00p, Thursday 12:00p – 1:00p or by appointment

Required Text:

Alexander Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*

Course Description

This is a course in contemporary metaethics. The field of metaethics seeks to answer questions concerning the nature of our moral judgments and practice, as well as morality itself. For instance, what do we really mean when we say that an act is wrong? Are there moral facts? Are those facts grounded in something real? Or is all our moral talk simply a useful fiction? We will consider the emotivism of Ayer and Stevenson, Blackburn's Quasi-Realism, and Gibbard's Norm-Expressivism. We will grapple with Mackie's Error Theory, the relationship between moral judgments and motivation, and the potential realism of morality. Finally, we will turn to more general issues concerning moral epistemology, i.e. whether and how we come to know moral truths.

Classroom Expectations and Attendance Policy

Everyone is expected to come to class. For each unexcused absence exceeding two prior to fall break and/or two following fall break students will receive a 5% deduction on their final grade. Students are required to have done the readings, and they should be prepared to discuss them. There will on occasion be passionate disagreement—it is vital that we remain courteous to each other and to each other's point of view. It is possible to criticize arguments without showing disrespect for the people who endorse them—that is what we will strive to do. Electronic devices are permitted for note-taking purposes only.

Late and Make-Up Work

No make-ups or extensions will be granted for any assignment unless you provide either (1) written (and approved) notice of absence beforehand, or (2) written documentation of an emergency situation afterward.

Academic Misconduct

This course will be governed by Oberlin's Honor Code. All cases of academic dishonesty will be reported to the Student Honor Committee. For further information about the Honor Code, see <http://new.oberlin.edu/students/policies/honor-system-charter>.

Disabilities

Any student who feels he or she may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact me as soon as possible. I rely on the Office of Disability Services to verify the need for accommodation based on documentation on file in that office.

Assignments and Evaluation

Citizenship (10%)

Philosophy is an activity. Like many activities, you'll only get as much out of doing philosophy as you put into it. To encourage engagement, 10% of your grade will depend in part on your being an active, appropriate, and interesting contributor to the class. I understand that speaking up in class is difficult for some students. To that end, this grade encompasses more than hand-raising. I primarily ask that all students are good citizens of the course. Thus, students who are present, clearly attentive, and who show engagement in other ways will also be rewarded.

60 seconders (15%)

For every class meeting, I will ask two of you to prepare and present a 60-second point on a specific reading.

Summary Points:

One student will be assigned a summary point. Here, I am looking for the student to remind the class of the main thesis of the article and perhaps a quick outline of the author's argument for her point. **DO NOT CRITICIZE.** It is important for philosophers to be able to present an argument from a neutral position. This is what I hope the summary points will accomplish in addition to reminding the class of the main points from the articles we have all read.

Critical Points:

The other student will be assigned a critical point. The idea is to tell us where you think the author's argument is vulnerable or underargued. **DO NOT SUMMARIZE** – we will have already heard the summary point. Instead I want you to launch directly into telling us where you think the author's argument is inadequate. Alternatively, you can do a 60-second supporting point: in this case, you should provide an argument for the author's conclusion that is different from what the author herself or himself offers. The idea here is to present additional support for some conclusion that the author didn't mention or develop. 60 seconds is a short time. In preparing for this, you will likely come up with more than one critical or supporting point. Pick one that you can articulate clearly and concisely. There will be time in the rest of class to bring up other points.

Take home essays (20%)

Students are to write a total of four short essays (1-2 pages typed, double-spaced) throughout the term. These essays will each take the form of summarizing and discussing an argument or point made in class or a reading. Students may only write one essay per topic. Essays written for a given topic are to be uploaded onto Blackboard by the beginning of the second class of the next topic.

Papers (50%)

Students will write two papers over the course of the semester, a midterm paper of 4-5 pages and a final paper of 5-6 pages. I will provide possible paper topics at least three weeks prior to the due dates of the papers. Students are permitted to write a paper based on another topic provided they meet with me to discuss their topic.

Schedule of Topics/Readings:

Week 1-2: Introduction and Moore

- Miller, Chapters 1-2
- Moore, *Principia Ethica*, Chapter 1
- Frankena, The Naturalistic Fallacy

Weeks 3-6: Non-Cognitivism

- Emotivism
 - o Miller, Chapter 3
 - o Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms"
 - o Björnsson, "How Emotivism Survives Immoralists, Irrationality, and Depression"
- Quasi-Realism
 - o Miller, Chapter 4
 - o Blackburn, "How to be an Ethical Anti-Realist"
 - o Dreier, "Quasi-Realism and the Problem of Unexplained Coincidence"
- Norm-Expressivism
 - o Miller, Chapter 5
 - o Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, selections
 - o Schroeder, "How Expressivists Can and Should Solve Their Problem with Negation"

Weeks 7-12: Cognitivism

- Anti-Realism
 - o Miller, Chapter 6-7
 - o Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, Chapter 1
 - o Nolan, Restall, and West, "Moral Fictionalism Versus the Rest"
- Naturalism
 - o Miller, Chapters 8-9
 - o Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist"
 - o Railton, "Moral Realism"
 - o Williams, "Internal and External Reasons"
 - o Svavarsdottir, "Moral Cognitivism and Motivation"
 - o Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value"
 - o Vavova, "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking"
- Non-Naturalism
 - o Miller, Chapter 10
 - o Chappell, "Why Care about Non-Natural Reasons?"

Weeks 13-15: Loose Ends in Moral Epistemology

- McGrath, "Moral Knowledge by Perception"
- Radzik, "A Coherentist Theory of Normative Authority"
- Audi, "Intuition and Its Place in Ethics"
- Walden, "In Defense of Reflective Equilibrium"
- McGrath, "Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise"
- Lutz and Ross, "Moral Skepticism"