

Ethical Theory

Instructor

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Course description

This course provides an introduction to contemporary *metaethics*. This branch of ethical theory investigates 'second-order' questions regarding the metaphysics, epistemology, psychology, and semantics of moral discourse and practice—in contrast to *normative* and *applied ethics*, which investigates 'first-order' questions regarding what are, in fact, the specific principles or theories that regulate moral behavior. The 'second-order' questions we will take up include: is there a fact of the matter about what morality dictates? If so, then what is the nature of these moral facts, what is their ultimate source, and how can we know what they are? But if not, then what is the function of our thought and talk, if not to describe what moral reality is like?

Course learning goals

- To develop an in-depth understanding of some of the main questions, positions, and concepts at play in contemporary metaethics
- To reconstruct and evaluate important and influential arguments for/against these positions
- To hone your critical reading skills, and practice how to present and critique your opinions and those of others clearly, crisply, fairly, and cogently in writing
- To enhance your philosophical creativity

Course prerequisites

The only formal requirement is successful completion of two courses in philosophy (subject code: 730). However, as this is a 400-level course, I will presuppose that all students have philosophical reasoning and writing skills appropriate to any advanced undergraduate seminar. Moreover, since the course overlaps with topics in metaphysics, epistemology, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of mind, I will presuppose basic familiarity with the foundational concepts and issues in these discipline areas.

Course assessments

Your final grade in the course will be based off three components.

One component of your grade will be based on **your engagement with the assigned readings through [Perusall](#)**, which you can launch from the Canvas course website. Each week, we'll use Perusall to collectively 'tear the texts apart' in real time by annotating them with questions and comments, which will then start discussion threads that can be up-voted based on how useful others find them to be. Think of it like a mix between Facebook, a Slack channel, and a run-of-the-mill PDF annotator. It will not be the same as face-to-face discussion, sadly, but it should be both useful and a lot of fun once it gets started. I will soon upload a video with more detailed instructions about how this will work, but for now I recommend you take a look at [this video](#) on the pedagogical concepts behind Perusall, and [this video](#) for a basic idea of what to expect. This component will be worth **30 points of your final grade**.

Another component of your grade will be **four essays worth 10, 15, 20, and 25 points** respectively. To encourage you to start early and to reap the benefits of peer review on both sides, I may offer bonus points to those willing to upload their drafts to Perusall, and those who make annotations, if there is enough interest.

I will also offer **1 bonus point** for each twice-a-week online discussion section you meaningfully participate in. These will count **up to 30 points towards the total allotted for the Perusall assignments**; and if that total is exhausted, these will count **up to 5 points towards the total allotted for your four essays**. (For instance, suppose that you earn 20 total points on the Perusall assignments, 60 total points for your four essays, and attend 15 discussion sections. Then 10 of these bonus points would bring your final Perusall grade to 30 points, and the remaining 5 bonus points would bring your final essay grade up to 65 points, thus totaling 95 final points.)

Course texts and website

All course correspondence will be carried out on the Canvas course website. Course readings will also be distributed on Canvas. Although not required, you may find the following books useful for understanding the readings:

- Matthew Chrisman, *What is This Thing Called Metaethics?*, 2017, Routledge.
- Andrew Fisher, *Metaethics: An Introduction*, 2011, Acumen Publishing.
- Alexander Miller, *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (2nd edition), 2003, Polity Press.

Although you are not required to purchase it, we will also be reading most of the following book:

- Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defense*, 2003, Oxford University Press.

Tentative order of course readings (dates TBD)

What is metaethics?

1 Chrisman “Introduction” and “Four key issues”

Supernaturalism

2 Adams “A new divine command theory”

3 Wielenberg “God and morality”

Non-naturalism I

4 Moore Selections from *Principia Ethica* (“The subject-matter of ethics”)

5 Ross Selections from *The Right and the Good* (“What makes right acts right?”)

Non-cognitivism

6 Stevenson “The emotive meaning of ethical terms”

7 Hare Selections from *The Language of Morals* (“Prescriptive language”, “Commending and choosing”, and “‘Good’ in moral contexts”)

8 Blackburn “How to be an ethical antirealist”

9 Gibbard Selections from *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*

10 Horgan & Timmons “Nondescriptivist cognitivism”

Error theory

11 Mackie Selections from *Ethics: Invention Right and Wrong* (“The subjectivity of values”)

12 Joyce Selections from *The Myth of Morality* (“Error theory and motivation” and “Error theory and reasons”)

Naturalism

13 Harman Selections from *The Nature of Morality* (“Ethics and observation”)

Sturgeon “Moral explanations”

14 Boyd “How to be a moral realist”

15 Railton “Moral realism”

16 Jackson & Pettit “Moral functionalism and moral motivation”

17 Thomson Selections from *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (“Evaluatives and directives”)

18 Horgan & Timmons “New wave moral realism meets Moral Twin Earth”

Constructivism

18 Harman “Moral relativism defended”

19 Korsgaard Selections from *The Sources of Normativity* (“The authority of reason”)

20 Milo “Contractarian constructivism”

Non-naturalism II

21 Shafer-Landau Selections from *Moral Realism: A Defense*

22 Shafer-Landau Selections from *Moral Realism: A Defense*

23 Shafer-Landau Selections from *Moral Realism: A Defense*

24 Shafer-Landau Selections from *Moral Realism: A Defense*

Academic integrity policy

Cheating, plagiarism, and other forms of academic malfeasance come in many forms—if you haven't already, I would recommend familiarizing yourself with the Academic Integrity Policy (<http://academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy/>) for a list of examples. Any suspected violation—and I am quite talented at detecting these—will be automatically referred to the Office of Judicial Affairs, and can carry penalties up to and including a failing grade in the course or expulsion from the university. Note: ignorance about what counts as academic malfeasance, or carelessness in acting in accordance with this policy, is *not* a defense. Thus, if you have any questions about whether you are toeing the line, please do not hesitate to consult with me *before* you submit your work.

University disability statement

Rutgers University welcomes students with disabilities into all of the University's educational programs. In order to receive consideration for reasonable accommodations, a student with a disability must contact the appropriate disability services office at the campus where you are officially enrolled, participate in an intake interview, and provide documentation. For more info, please visit <https://ods.rutgers.edu/students/documentation-guidelines>. If the documentation supports your request for reasonable accommodations, your campus's disability services office will provide you with a Letter of Accommodations. Share this letter with your instructors and discuss the accommodations with them as early in your courses as possible. To begin this process, please register by following this link: <https://webapps.rutgers.edu/student-ods/forms/registration>.