

Metaethics

Fall 2020, 1:30 p.m. (5-8 节) -- Dongrong Building 902

Instructor: Nicholas Rimell

Office: Kuang Yaming Building 440

Email: nrिमell@jlu.edu.cn

Office Hours: Thursdays 12:00 p.m. – 1:00 p.m.

Course Description

What is right and what is wrong? What makes someone a good person? What things are valuable? How do we live a good life? These are all *first-order* ethical questions. To pursue these questions – to discuss them and to think about them – is to engage in first-order, normative ethics. *Metaethics* is the study of this pursuit. Metaethics is the study of our moral discourse and our moral thought – i.e., of our discussions and our thoughts about the first-order ethical questions. Metaethicists are interested in what exactly we are doing when we take stances on how to answer these questions. They are also interested in how, if at all, our stances reflect – or at least purport to reflect – the way things are.

The purpose of this seminar is to explore some big-picture questions in metaethics and, in the process, to hone our skills as thinkers, as readers and listeners, and as writers. The questions we will explore in this class include: Are our moral judgments (at least sometimes) true? If so, are they true *absolutely*, or are they merely true *for me* or *for you* (but false for someone else)? Where do moral facts come from? Is moral belief consistent with a scientific worldview? How do we know what's right and wrong? Why be moral? In the process of exploring these questions, we'll look at how different philosophers' answers to these questions inform – and are informed by – their own overarching metaethical positions.

Course Goals

- To practice composing and evaluating metaethical arguments
- To practice discussing and writing about philosophical issues in English
- To become familiar with major metaethical questions and theories
- To develop (and to question) our own thoughts on metaethical issues
- To master key metaethical concepts
- To come to understand some of the ways in which first-order ethical questions relate to metaethical questions

Course Requirements

I. Attendance and Participation (20%). Philosophy is about the giving and taking of reasons. Discussing our reasons for or against particular philosophical claims or arguments will be a central part of this seminar. Consequently, attendance is required, and active participation in discussion will be expected. (This includes your work on the presentations, but it also includes your weekly contribution to class discussion.) Note also that *assigned readings should be done prior to the class in which they will be discussed.*

II. Follow-up Presentation (included with participation). Each week, I will present on the reading material, and we as a class will engage in discussion on this material. I want each of you, at some point in the semester, to begin one of our meetings by presenting on *part* of the *previous* week's discussion

and then by leading us in a brief, continued discussion. (We will arrange a schedule for these presentations in class.)

III. Short Response Paper (20%). This is essentially the written version of the short presentation. Your paper should be at least two full pages and at most three full pages in length (double spaced, 12-point font, 1” margins). It should consist of an explication and then evaluation of a particular argument, objection, or theory from one of the weekly readings. (You can decide which reading, but it must be listed **in bold** on the schedule.) You must turn the paper in before the class period *after* the reading is discussed.

IV. Term Paper (40%). You will be required to write a term paper on a topic of your choosing, just as long as it is closely related to something we discuss in the course. (You will need to get your topic approved by me before class on **November 19th** at the latest.) This paper should be largely evaluative. It should be around 3000 words, and it will be due by **5 p.m. on December 17th**.

V. Mini Quizzes (20%). From **October 12th through November 26th** (so for six classes in a row) we will begin each class with a short (10-20 minute) quiz. The quiz will consist of questions on the reading for the day, on my lecture or our discussion from the previous class meeting, or on both. Out of the six quizzes, I will drop your lowest score and average the other five scores together.

Classroom Policies and Related Notes

Screen-free classroom. I want the majority of your time in class to be spent listening, thinking, asking questions, and offering constructive comments. I do not want the majority of your time spent attempting to type up everything I say. Consequently, I prefer that laptops and other electronic devices *not* be used during class. If you have a reason why you need to use such a device, please see me.

Accommodations. I hope to have designed this course so that everyone can succeed. I also appreciate that there are multiple ways to learn. I would welcome students to discuss with me their learning styles and how we can make sure that they are represented in our course.

My email and meeting policy. I am happy to answer short questions over email, and I am also happy to discuss more involved questions in person (either in my office hours or, if you can't make my office hours, at some other time we arrange ahead of time). But please email me at least **two business days** in advance of when you would like a response, and if you wish to meet with me in person (and cannot make my office hours) please email me at least **four business days** in advance of when, at the latest, you would like to meet. (This includes, especially, the days leading up to deadlines.)

Schedule

10/8 Introduction: Ethical Objectivism and Moral Skepticism

- *In-class scheduling of Shafer-Landau mini presentations.*

10/15 Moral Skepticism Reconsidered: Moral Relativism

- Parts I & II of Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?*
- *Shafer-Landau mini-presentations, plus in-class scheduling of follow-up presentations.*

10/22 Moral Skepticism Reconsidered: Moral Motivation and Non-Cognitivism

- §2.3.3 & §3.1.1 (just pgs. 238-241) of Hume, *The Treatise Concerning Human Nature*

- **Chapter One of Smith, *The Moral Problem***

10/29 Where Do the Moral Facts Come from?

- **7a – 11b of Plato, *Euthyphro***
- Part III, Ch. 5 (“Where Do Moral Standards Come From?”) of Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil*

11/5 Moral Belief in a Scientific Worldview

- **Part III, Ch. 6 (“Values in a Scientific World”)** of Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil*

11/12 How Do We Know What’s Right and Wrong?

- §3.1.1 (just the final paragraph) of Hume, *The Treatise Concerning Human Nature*
- Part III, Ch. 7 (“Moral Knowledge I: Four Skeptical Arguments”) of Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?*
- **Part III, Ch. 8 (“Moral Knowledge II: The Regress Argument”)** of Shafer-Landau, *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?*

11/19 Why Be Moral? Part One.

- **Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives”**
- *Term paper topics must be approved before class.*

11/26 Why Be Moral? Part Two.

Chapter 8, §5 of Nagel, *The View from Nowhere*

12/3 To Be Determined Based on Class Direction/Progress*

12/10 To Be Determined Based on Class Direction/Progress*

*Possibilities to be discussed (and agreed upon by 11/5):

- Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value”
- Korsgaard, “Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy”
- Term paper presentations
- Debate camp
- Continued discussion of above topic

Term paper due 12/17, 5:00 p.m.

Recommended Readings

For 10/22: Introduction and §1 of Rimell, “Metaethics”

For 10/29: §2.1 of *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, “Moral Naturalism”; Chapter 1, §1 - §9, of Moore, *Principia Ethica*; §2 of Rimell, “Metaethics”

For 11/5: Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value”

For 11/12: §3 & §4 of Rimell, “Metaethics”

For 11/19: Chapters 1 & 2 of Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*; McDowell, “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?”

For 11/26: Korsgaard, “Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy”

Course Bibliography (Plus Additional References)

Ayer, A. J. (1946). *Language, Truth and Logic*, London: Gollanz.

Blackburn, Simon (1998). *Ruling Passions*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Firth, Roderick (1952). “Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer Theory,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 12: 317–45.

Foot, Philippa (1972). “Morality as a system of hypothetical imperatives.” *Philosophical Review* 81 (3): 305-316.

Harman, Gilbert (1975). “Moral Relativism Defended,” *Philosophical Review*, 85: 3–22.

Hume, David, (1739/1888). Selby-Bigge, L.A. (ed.), *The Treatise Concerning Human Nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kant, Immanuel (2012). Gregor, Mary, and Timmermann, Jens (ed.), *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Revised Edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Korsgaard, Christine M. (2008). “Realism and Constructivism in Twentieth-Century Moral Philosophy,” in Korsgaard, Christine, *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. 302-326.

Mackie, J. L. (1977). *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, London: Penguin Books.

McDowell, John (1978). Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives? *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 52:13-29+31-42.

Moore, G.E. (1903). *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nagel, Thomas (1986). *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Plato (2002). *Euthyphro*, in Grube, G.M.A. (transl.) and Cooper, John (revised), *Plato: Five Dialogues: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Meno, Phaedo*, Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company.

Plato (1997). *Republic* (Grube, G.M.A. & Reeve, C.D.C., transl.), in Cooper, John M. (ed.), *Plato: Complete Works*, Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett Publishing Company. pp. 971 – 1223.

Rachels, James (2003). *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, Volume 4. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Rimell, Nicholas. Metaethics. (Manuscript.)

Scanlon, T.M. (1998). *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Shafer-Landau, Russ (2003). *Moral Realism: A Defence*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shafer-Landau, Russ (2003). *Whatever Happened to Good and Evil?* Oxford University Press.

Smith, Michael, 1994, *The Moral Problem*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Street, Susan, 2006, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," *Phil. Studies*, 127: 109–66.

van Roojen, Mark (2018). "Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-Cognitivism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/moral-cognitivism/>>.

Williams, Bernard (1981). "Internal and External Reasons," in Williams, Bernard (1981), *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wong, David (1984). *Moral Relativity*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.