



FACULTY OF ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

PHIL 449 Lec 01 – “Contemporary Metaethics”

Fall Term 2012

Course Outline

Monday and Wednesday, 3.30-5.00, SS 541

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Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday, 2.30-3.15 and after class

Outside those times, for a variety of reasons, it is not a good idea just to "drop in", hoping to catch me in the office: it is much better to phone or email me for an appointment. I am happy to make such appointments, so do not hesitate to make them.

Course Description

The calendar description reads as follows: “A study of recent theories about the meaning of moral terms, the nature of moral reasoning, and the relations between facts and values. Theories to be studied may include naturalism, intuitionism, emotivism, prescriptivism, and nihilism”.

The listed prerequisite(s) are as follows: Two previous courses in Philosophy, at least one of which must be a 300 or higher level course, and one of which must be [Philosophy 249](#) or [397](#); or consent of the Department.

In greater detail: It would be best to think of the discipline “meta-ethics” as being addressed to four kinds of questions:

1. **Semantic questions**, that is, questions about the *analysis* of what have usually been thought to be morally central concepts. I will discuss at various stages *both* so-called “thin concepts” like those expressed by words and phrases like “...is good”, “... is intrinsically valuable”, “... has a right to do ...”, “... has an obligation to ...”, “... has a duty to ...”, and “... ought to ...” *and* so-called “thick concepts” like those expressed by words and phrases like “... is a *just* distribution of benefits and burdens”, “... is a *loyal* employee”, “... is *worthy of respect*”, etc. Such analyses are addressed both to questions about the *meanings* of the terms used in expressing these concepts and questions about the conditions (if any) under which claims made with such claims can be *true* and/or *acceptable* [see further 3 below].
2. **Metaphysical questions**, that is, questions about the ontological status of moral facts and moral “entities” like rights, duties, obligations, values, and so on. For example, do such facts/entities *exist* and, if so, what does a claim that they exist come to, and, if not, what does that mean for morality’s authority? And so on.
3. **Epistemological questions**, that is, questions about how, if at all, we can validate, warrant, establish [one of the issues here is the question *which* of these (and other) terms is the appropriate one] moral claims as true, as acceptable, as rational, as reasonable, etc. [again one of the issues here is the question *which* of *these* (and other) terms is the appropriate one].
4. **Logical questions** about the nature of sound or valid moral reasoning — *if* such is possible, of course.

Meta-ethical *theories* are theories about how systematically to answer such questions and these theories can be very roughly (and provisionally) be classified as either “moral realist” (objectivist) or “moral anti-realist”:

- (a) **Moral realist/objectivist theories** (sometimes called ‘cognitivist’ theories) postulate moral entities (rights, obligations, values, etc.) and claim that such entities **both** exist independently of human beliefs about them or attitudes towards them **and** (yet) give reasons to people to act or abstain from acting *or even* (though must less plausibly) have the power to ‘motivate’ (cause) people to behave in certain ways;
- (b) **Moral anti-realist theories** (sometimes called ‘irrealist’ theories) deny that such entities exist in the above sense and then either (i) adopt a so-called *nihilist* or *error-theory* stance in relation to morality and (all) moralities or (b) adopt a so-called *non-cognitivist* stance of some kind or other.

The **moral realist theories** which will be considered include both **naturalistic** and **non-naturalist** variants. Naturalistic theories examined will include both classic “natural law” and modern evolutionary ethical variants. Non-naturalist theories examined will include both classic ‘intuitionist’ theories and some modern variants.

Moral anti-realist theories examined will focus on non-cognitivist versions, including both irrationalist emotivist theories (like that of the early A.J. Ayer) and various theories (for example the ‘prescriptivism’ of R.M. Hare, the ‘expressivism’ of Alan Gibbard, and various ‘constructivist’ theories like those of Rawls) which attempt in various ways to ‘recover’ some at least of the rationality of morality and, in some ‘quasi-realist’ versions, to suggest that many or most of the features (and strengths) of moral realism can be to a large extent be ‘recovered’ or ‘replicated’.

It is worth noting even here, firstly, that the above classification of theories is far from ideal (and in the class they will be subjected to critical examination); secondly, that, in illustration of this point, some philosophers argue that to recover the rationality of morality is all that is possible and all that is needed if we are establish morality as existing ‘objectively’ in the only intelligible sense of that adverb.

Please note:

- (i) that *each* of the metaethical theories to be examined has semantic, metaphysical, epistemological and logical components;
- (ii) that these theories will be examined with varying degrees of detail, and some of them will be treated more as illustrations of certain kinds of error than anything else,
- (iii) that particular attention will be paid to the evidential status of so-called "commonsense" moral beliefs in the development of such meta-ethical theories, to the role of rationality, and to the facts of cultural diversity and the possibility of pluralism and
- (iv) that early in the course we will give close examination of some modern variants and refinements of three different arguments which some philosophers have felt are fundamental in structuring any discussion of such theories, specifically Moore’s *Open Question Argument*, *Hume’s Guillotine*, and *Hume’s Motivating Influence Argument*.

By far the deepest questions in meta-ethical theory are questions about what patterns of reasoning are useable in arguments for or against the kinds of meta-ethical theories just outlined. Three “methods of meta-ethics”, as I will call them, i.e., methods by which these deeper methodological questions can be addressed will be developed and discussed — the following names are not standard in the literature, but are, I think, useful:

- (i) What I will call “the method of analysis”: according to this method one begins from careful analysis of the concepts (‘thin’ and ‘thick’) used in moral talking and reasoning and from those analyses one develops both an account of the so-called ‘logic of moral reasoning’ and at least schematic answers to the ontological, epistemological questions which meta-ethical theories are meant to answer — famous exponents of this approach included the classic emotivists, the English philosopher Richard Hare, and most recently the Australian philosopher Frank Jackson, but the method in one form or another is used to some extent by pretty well all people working on issues in meta-ethics;
- (ii) What I will call “the method of rational reconstruction”: according to this method (a) one begins from the reflective judgments (what some have called ‘intuitions’) of mature moral agents *both* on *substantive* moral issues *and* on the issue of what is *relevant* in decisions about what one ought to do, about what things are of moral value, and so on, and (b) one then tries to find a meta-ethical theory which can be brought into “reflective equilibrium” with these two classes of reflective

judgments, the theory offering at least schematic answers to the four classes of questions (listed above) which meta-ethical theories are meant to address. Since the reflective judgments of the two classes are given epistemic privilege, it is clear that this method of meta-ethics is designed to *reconstruct* the morality/moralities of the mature moral agents; and since the judgments of the two kinds are ‘reflective’ and since being “reflective” involves in some sense being subject to rational (and typically empirical) assessment designed to root out superstitions and erroneous metaphysical, empirical and logical mistakes, it is felt appropriate to refer to it as “*rational*” reconstruction. Famous examples of exponents of this method in one form or other include the British ‘intuitionists’, W.D. Ross and H.A. Prichard, and the Americans, John Rawls, D.A. Richards, and Norman Daniels, but again the method is used to some extent in one form or other by pretty well all people working on issues in meta-ethics.

- (iii) What I will call “the method of rational replacement”: according to this method (a) one develops firstly an account of rational choice useable in interpersonal situations, situations moreover in which cooperation may enable those involved in the situation to benefit more than they would benefit without cooperation, and then (b) one uses this account of rational to evaluate various principles and modes of cooperation, (c) accepting those principles and modes of cooperation which survive such assessment. It is important that in developing the account of rationality in (a) one does not in any way rely on views (reflective judgments) about what a correct morality might say on anything: in this the method of rational replacement differs radically from the method of rational reconstruction — hence it is not unreasonable to call the method a method of “rational replacement”. This said, however, the account of rational choice can, according to the method of radical replacement, serve as a tool by which we can assess principles and modes of interaction which common moralities (the moralities found accepted in various societies) have espoused: the idea is not only that we can call the principles and modes of interaction which survive the assessment rational, but also that we can call it a “rational morality” because it does address issues *any* morality is meant to address, that is, issues about how people “ought” or “rationally” to relate to one another. Famous examples of exponents of this method include the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (in his *Utilitarianism* though not in some of his other writings) and more recently the Canadian David Gauthier and the American John Harsanyi.

I will be concerned to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of these three “method of meta-ethics”.

Required Texts

The basic structuring of the examination of the issues in the course will be provided by selections from my *Lectures in Metaethics*. These selections will be posted in one form or another on Blackboard as we go along.

The other readings for the course will consist of journal articles available through the University Library on-line or book chapters also available online. Instructions on how to access these will be posted in the Course Documents section of Blackboard.

Note that often in class we will be engaged in careful, line by line, examination of arguments found in the readings. As we go along, I will post on-line (in Blackboard) an announcement about which article/chapters we will be discussing in class. Students should ensure that they bring to class copies of the article/chapter to be discussed. Feel free in class to use an electronic copy on your laptop if you wish: otherwise bring a hard copy.

Assignments and due dates

Assignments:

1. ***Weekly reading assignments*** will be set. Except in the weeks when essays are actually due to be submitted (see 3 below), I will on the average set about two articles/chapters per week. ***Sometimes I will simply assume that an article or chapter has been read*** and the class will proceed on that assumption. It is the duty of any students who miss classes to find out what readings have been set.
2. Students will be asked to prepare three brief (point form) ***analyses-and-critiques***. What an “analysis-and-critique” involves will be posted on Blackboard at the beginning of term and explained in class. Samples of ‘analyses-and-critiques’ will be posted on Blackboard and discussed in class.

3. **One shortish** (about 1200 words) **essay** and **one longer** (about 1500) **essay** will be set. The readings for the essays will significantly overlap with, or be identical to, the readings mentioned in 1 and 2. Details will be announced in class and posted on Blackboard.
4. There will be one **in-class** test. This test will address the materials covered up to the time of the test. Details about the test will be posted on Blackboard.
5. There will be a **two hour closed book registrar scheduled Final Examination**. This examination will cover the material studied throughout the course: a set of *possible* essay questions will be posted on Blackboard fairly early in the term. The final class of term will be devoted to a review of the course material.

Due-dates:

Analysis-and-critique 1: Details will be announced in class on Monday, September 10th. The completed assignment will be due on Monday, September 24th, at 9am.

Analysis-and-critique 2: Details will be announced in class on Monday, 24th, September. The completed assignment will be due on Monday, 8th October at 9am.

Essay 1: The details about the first essay will be announced on Monday, 8th October. The completed essay will be due on October 22nd.

Analysis-and-critique 3: Details will be announced in class on Monday, October 22nd. The completed assignment will be due on Monday, November 5th at 9am.

In class test: The details will be announced in class on Monday, November 5th. The test will take place on Wednesday, 21st November.

Essay 2: The details about the second essay will be announced on Wednesday, November 14th. The completed essay will be due on Wednesday, December 5th.

Grading

1. *Ceteris paribus*, the first analysis-and-critique will be worth 5% of the final grade and each of the second and third analyses-and-critiques will be worth 10%.
2. *Ceteris paribus*, the first essay will be worth 10% and the second worth 20% of the final grade.
3. *Ceteris paribus* the in-class test will be worth 10% of the final grade.
4. *Ceteris paribus* the registrar scheduled final examination will be worth 35% of the final grade.
5. Except in very exceptional circumstances, and at the discretion of the instructor, a passing grade in the course will be received only if (a) each of the three analyses, each of the two short essays, and the final examination are submitted **and** (b) the final examination receives a passing grade.
6. Later virtue will be allowed to redeem earlier sin.
7. Fairness to those who submit their assignments on time demands that lateness in submission of assignments be penalized. Accordingly, assignments handed in after the stated deadline will receive at most B if submitted by 3.00 pm of the day after the due day and C if submitted by 3.00 pm of the day after that, and so on, unless, of course, some sort of university recognized ground for delay — e.g. some sort of evidence of illness — is submitted.

NOTE: If a student fails to submit her or his analysis of an article before I hand out my analysis of that article, then clearly the requirement set out in point 5(a) above can only reasonably be satisfied in relation to analyses if the student submits an analysis of some different article from that originally assigned. If this situation arises then the student will need to approach me for a replacement assignment. Note that point 7 will still apply.

INTELLECTUAL HONESTY

Intellectual honesty is the cornerstone of the development and acquisition of knowledge and requires that the contribution of others be acknowledged. As a result, cheating or plagiarism on any assignment or examination is regarded as **an extremely serious academic offence**, the penalty for which may be an F on the assignment and possibly also an F in the course, academic probation, or requirement to withdraw. The University Calendar states that plagiarism exists when:

- *the work submitted or presented was done, in whole or in part, by an individual other than the one submitting or presenting the work (this includes having another impersonate the student or otherwise substituting the work of another for one's own in an examination or test);*
- *parts of the work are taken from another source without reference to the original author;*
- *the whole work (e.g., an essay) is copied from another source; and/or*
- *a student submits or presents work in one course which has also been submitted in another course (although it may be completely original with that student) without the knowledge of or prior agreement of the instructor involved.*

While it is recognized that scholarly work often involves reference to the ideas, data and conclusions of other scholars, intellectual honesty requires that such references be explicitly and clearly noted. Plagiarism occurs not only when direct quotations are taken from a source without specific acknowledgement, but also when original ideas or data from the source are not acknowledged. A bibliography is insufficient to establish which portions of the student's work are taken from external sources; footnotes or other recognized forms of citation must be used for this purpose.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION

It is the student's responsibility to request academic accommodation. If you are a student with a documented disability who may require academic accommodation and have not registered with the Disability Resource Centre, contact their office at 220-8237. Students who have not registered with the Disability Resource Centre are not eligible for formal academic accommodation. You are also required to discuss your needs with your instructor no later than fourteen (14) days after the start of this course.

STUDENTS' UNION REPRESENTATIVES

The Faculty of Arts Representatives are: Sarah Damberger arts1@su.ucalgary.ca; Hana Kadri arts2@su.ucalgary.ca; Kelsy Norman arts3@su.ucalgary.ca; Jack Mills arts4@su.ucalgary.ca

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND PROTECTION OF PRIVACY (FOIP) ACT

The University of Calgary is under the jurisdiction of the provincial FOIP Act in all aspects of its operations as a publicly funded institution. The Department of Philosophy ensures the student's right to privacy by requiring all graded assignments be returned to the student directly from the instructor.

SAFEWALK

Call 403-220-5333 (24 hours a day/7 days a week/365 days a year) for a Safewalk volunteer to accompany you safely to your destination on campus including parking lots, housing, and LRT station. Or use a Campus Help phone.