



FACULTY OF ARTS
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

PHIL 449 Lec 01 – “Contemporary Metaethics”

Fall Term 2013

Course Outline

Monday and Wednesday, 3.30-5.00, SS 541

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Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday, 2.15-3.15 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”.

In greater detail: It would be best to think of the discipline “meta-ethics” as being addressed to four kinds of questions, questions which are definitely heavily interrelated in the sense that answering one kind of question has implications for the other kinds of questions:

1. **Semantic questions**, that is, questions about the *analysis* of morally central concepts. We will examine, at various stages of the course, **both** (i) so-called “thin concepts” like those expressed by words and phrases like “... has a right to do ...”, “... is intrinsically valuable”, “... has an obligation to ...”, “... has a duty to ...”, and “... ought to ...” **and** (though more briefly) (ii) 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.
N.B. Such “analyses of concepts” address both 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 "entities" like rights, duties, obligations, values, and so on. For example, do they *exist* and, if so, in what sense, and, if not, what does that mean for morality’s “authority”?
3. **Epistemological questions**, that is, questions about how, if at all, we can validate, warrant, establish moral claims as true, as acceptable, as rational, as reasonable, etc. [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. Can such reasoning be said to be in some sense *rational*, and, if so, in what sense?

Meta-ethical theories are theories about how systematically to answer such questions and, indeed, each of the metaethical theories to be examined has semantic, metaphysical, epistemological and logical components.

Metaethical theories can be very roughly be classified as either “moral realist” (in some sense ‘objectivist’) or “moral anti-realist” (in some sense ‘subjectivist’):

- (a) **Moral realist/objectivist theories** (sometimes called ‘cognitivist’ theories) say (i) that moral rights, obligations, values, etc. both *exist objectively* (i.e., independently of human beliefs about them or attitudes towards them) **and** (ii) (yet) they *serve as reasons for people to act in certain ways*;
- (b) **Moral anti-realist theories** deny that such rights, obligations and values **exist** in the sense specified in (a)(i) and then attempt to make sense of the idea that acting on moral rights, obligations, and values can be viewed as being *in some sense rational* and as *in some sense giving us reason to respect them in our decision making*.

The **moral realist theories** which will be considered include both traditional “natural law” theories and modern evolutionary ethical theories and classic ‘intuitionist’ theories.

In examining **moral anti-realist** theories we will start by examining and rejecting classic *irrationalist* emotivist theories found in the writings of the early A.J. Ayer, but we will focus on various moral anti-realist theories that, while rejecting moral realism, nevertheless attempt to “recover” or “replicate” most of the *rationalist* features of moral realist/objectivist theories. In this part of the course we will examine the work of R.M. Hare (who called his theory “prescriptivism”), Alan Gibbard (whose approach is usually referred to as “expressivist”), and “constructivists” like John Rawls and more recently David Copp.

In examining the above two families of meta-ethical theories attention will be given to the evidential role to be played by so-called “commonsense” moral beliefs, rational choice theory, the facts of cultural diversity, and the possibility of pluralism. But it will emerge that central to the history of discussions of the above metaethical theories has been the perceived importance of three very important arguments (or better, perhaps, families of arguments) – Moore’s *Open Question Argument*, *Hume’s Guillotine*, and *Hume’s Motivating Influence Argument*. Although the standard names of these arguments involve the name of figures in the history of philosophy – G.E. Moore (1873-1958) and David Hume (1711-1776) – the arguments (or their modern variants) have been and still are viewed as being of central importance in metaethics. The course will begin with an examination of the role that the arguments have been thought to play in assessment of the moral realist theories we will discuss. It will emerge that the first two of these arguments are distinctly problematic though the third, if reformulated from Hume’s version can be turned into a very powerful tool not only in assessments of the moral realist theories but also in attempts to develop a plausible anti-realist theory. Accordingly, the course will begin with an examination of these arguments and their roles in assessments of what have been the classic moral realist theories.

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*. As we go along, these selections will be posted on Blackboard and, in lots of time before the class, I will post an ‘announcement’ in Blackboard telling you what to read for that class (I also send an email giving the substance of the ‘announcement’).

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 or pad if you wish: otherwise bring a hard copy.

Assignments, due dates, and grading

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 the equivalent of 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. As I said above, 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 or pad if you wish: otherwise bring a hard copy.

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 essay** (about 1500 words) will be set. The essay readings for the essays will significantly overlap with, or be identical to, the readings mentioned in 1 and 2. Details of topics and readings will be announced in class and posted on Blackboard.
4. There will be **two** in-class tests. These tests will address the materials covered up to the time of the test. Details about the test (including a list of questions from which the questions that appear on the tests will be drawn) will be posted on Blackboard.

Please note:

(i) The three analysis-and-critique assignments and the two essays must be submitted electronically in the Blackboard digital dropbox.

(ii) The submitted files must be in a format readable in Microsoft Word.

(iii) DO NOT submit the essays in pdf format.

Due-dates:

Analysis-and-critique 1: Details will be posted on Blackboard and announced in class on Monday, September 9th. The completed assignment will be due on Monday, September 23rd, at 9am.

Analysis-and-critique 2: Details will be posted on Blackboard and announced in class on Monday, 23rd September. The completed assignment will be due on Monday, 7th October at 9am.

Essay 1: Detailed information about the first essay will be posted on Blackboard and announced in class on Monday, 7th October. The completed essay will be due on Monday, October 21st, at 9am.

First in-class test: Information about the test (including a list of questions from which the questions that appear on the test will be drawn) will be posted on Blackboard and announced in class on Monday, October 21st. The test will take place on Wednesday, 28th October.

Analysis-and-critique 3: Details will be posted on Blackboard and announced in class on Monday, October 28th. The completed assignment will be due on Wednesday, November 13th, at 9am.

Second in-class test: Information about the test (including a list of questions from which the questions that appear on the test will be drawn) will be posted on Blackboard and announced in class on Wednesday, November 13th. The test will take place on Wednesday, November 27th.

Essay 2: Detailed information about the second essay will be posted on Blackboard and announced in class on Monday, November 18th. The completed essay will be due on Thursday, December 12th.

Grading

1. *Ceteris paribus*, the first analysis-and-critique will be worth 10% of the final grade and each of the second and third analyses-and-critiques will be worth 15%.
2. *Ceteris paribus*, the first essay will be worth 15% and the second worth 25% of the final grade.
3. *Ceteris paribus* each of the two in-class tests will be worth 10% of the final grade.
4. 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 essays, and each of the two in-class tests are submitted **and** (b) each of the two in-class tests receives a passing grade.
5. Later "virtue" will be allowed to redeem earlier "sin".
6. 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 4(a) above can only reasonably be satisfied

in relation to that assignment 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 6 will still apply.

Academic Honesty

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, an F in the course, academic probation, or requirement to withdraw from the University. See the relevant sections on 'Academic Misconduct' in the current University Calendar. Intellectual honesty requires that your work include adequate referencing to sources. Plagiarism occurs when you do not acknowledge or correctly reference your sources. If you have questions about correct referencing, consult your instructor.

Academic Accommodation

It is the student's responsibility to request academic accommodation. If you are a student with a permanent disability or temporary impairment who may require academic accommodation, you must first register with the Student Accessibility Resource Office located in MacEwan Student Centre 452; phone 403-220-8237; email access@ucalgary.ca. Students who have not registered with the Student Accessibility Office are not eligible for 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. Go to <http://www.ucalgary.ca/access/> for further information.

Blackboard Help

Go to <http://www.ucalgary.ca/computersupport/onlineservices/blackboard> for Student Help and FAQs about Blackboard. Troubleshooting tips and a tutorial are available at <http://elearn.ucalgary.ca/blackboard/students>.

Student Advising and Information Resources

- **General Academic Concerns** – Have a question but not sure where to start? The Faculty of Arts' Program Information Centre (PIC) is your information resource for everything in Arts. Drop in at SS110, call 403-220-3580, or email artsads@ucalgary.ca. You can also visit the Faculty of Arts website at <http://arts.ucalgary.ca/undersgraduate> for detailed information on common academic concerns.
- **Program Planning** – For assistance and advice in planning your program through to graduation, contact the Student Success Centre at 403-220-5881 or visit it on the 3rd Floor of the Taylor Family Digital Library.
- **Advice on Philosophy Courses** - You may find answers to your more specific questions about a philosophy degree on the Department of Philosophy's website <http://phil.ucalgary.ca> or contact one of Philosophy's current Undergraduate Advisors (see below)
- **Registration Overload/Prereq Waivers** – If you are seeking to register in a Philosophy course that is full or to get permission to waive the prereqs for a course, email the instructor of the course.

Protection of Privacy

The University of Calgary is under the jurisdiction of the provincial Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) Act. 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.

Student Ombudsperson and Students' Union Representatives

The Student Ombuds Office provides independent, impartial, and confidential support for students who require assistance or advice in addressing issues and concerns related to their academic careers. For more information, see www.ucalgary.ca/provost/students/ombuds. For the Students' Union Faculty of Arts rep: arts1@ucalgary.ca.

Safewalk

Call 403-220-5333 (24/7/365) for a Safewalk volunteer to accompany you safely to your destination on campus including parking lots, housing, and the LRT station or use a Campus Help Phone.

PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT

The Department of Philosophy is located on the 12th floor of the Social Sciences Building and on the web at www.phil.ucalgary.ca

PHILOSOPHY UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAM ADVISORS FOR FALL 2013:

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For assistance with registration issues in Philosophy courses, contact Merlette Schnell (schnell@ucalgary.ca)