

FACULTY OF ARTS  
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

PHIL 449 Contemporary Meta-Ethics  
Winter Term 2019

Course Outline

Lectures: MW 15:30 – 16.45 SS 012

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When emailing please put “449” in the subject line of the email.

Office Hours: MW 13:30 – 14:30 and after class.

I am happy to meet outside those times, but it is best to first email me for an appointment rather than just “dropping in”.

**Course Description:**

The academic discipline *ethics* (aka *moral philosophy*) can be thought of as involving, very roughly, three levels of inquiry – applied ethics, normative ethical theory, and metaethics.

In *applied ethics* we investigate questions about what our moral rights and duties are in various situations or types of situations and what things are of moral value. Thus, for example, we investigate questions like: “Is there a *moral right* to privacy? If so, could such a right be justifiably overridden or ignored?”, “Is it *morally permissible* to engage in germ-line genetic engineering?”, and so on. It seems reasonable to assume that we would if possible want our answers to such questions to be rationally justifiable in the light of soundly based reasoning and in the light of an accurate understanding of the nature of morality.

In *normative ethics theory* we try to provide an account of procedures for checking whether our answers to questions in applied ethics are indeed justifiable in the light of rational and soundly based reasoning. Famous examples of such procedures have included “divine command theory”, “natural law theory”, “utilitarianism”, “contractarianism”, “constructivism”, and procedures which involve appeal to Kantian categorical imperative (“Act in such a way that you could will that the maxim of your act could be a universal law”). These procedures will be outlined very briefly in the course.

It has traditionally been assumed (though not by all, Thomas Aquinas being an exception) that these normative ethical theories are “competing” theories – each of them purporting to provide the *one true* test of whether some answer to an applied ethics question is justified. But it has been recognized that, in at least some situations, the procedures in these different normative ethical theories give different results.

At this point we seem to be forced to face some more fundamental questions *about* our questions and answers in applied ethics and *about* the procedures offered in normative ethics: we need to address certain **metaethical questions** answers to which have important implications for the viability of the various normative ethical theories:

- (1) What do we *mean* when we say of someone that s/he has a *moral right*, a *moral duty*, or of something that it has *moral value* and indeed what are we *doing* when we say such things? For

example, **(a)** are we making statement about facts of various kinds and, if so, what kinds of facts do we take ourselves as stating **or (b)** are we (merely) expressing some possibly (or possibly not) rational and well based attitudes (approval, disapproval, indifference) to the doing of certain acts? In the first three quarters of the twentieth century the assumption was that such an inquiry would at least start as an exercise in **conceptual analysis** of the concepts of a right, a duty and of value, and of the concept of morality.

- (2) Reflection on the results of the conceptual analysis would, it might be hoped, give rise to certain questions about what would have to be case for a moral right, a moral duty, or a moral value to exist as a moral right, moral duty, or moral value. For example, **(a)** when we say that for a right, a duty, or a value to count as a **moral** right, duty, or value, must we be taking it to exist **objectively** (that is, exist independently of people’s beliefs about them and independently of people’s attitudes to their existence) and must we be taking it to be “inescapable” (that is, something we cannot escape by changing our attitudes and desires) or must it be taken to be “categorical” (that is, inescapable)? **(b)** Can **moral** rights, duties and values be analysed without remainder into certain (kinds of) *natural facts* (natural facts perhaps including facts about people’s attitudes and desires), so that moral knowledge is just a special kind of empirical knowledge? **or** are **moral** rights, duties, and values not so analysable so that there is a whole realm of existing things in addition to what is in the natural world, a possibility that raises questions about how we can know of their existence, e.g., by the use of a special kind of “intuition”? These inquiries, it is hoped, would give us the outline of an **ontological theory** of the existence conditions for moral rights, duties and values as conceived in the conceptual analysis.
- (3) Reflection on the results of the conceptual analysis and of the ontological inquiries would, it is hoped, tell us at least in outline, the kind of thing we would need to do to establish *that* someone has a moral right, a moral duty, or that such and such was of moral value; it is hoped, in other words, that this reflection would also give us, at least in outline, **an account of the logical structure of moral reasoning** and thus also a theory of what moral knowledge comes to, i.e., an **epistemology of morals**.
- (4) Reflection on the epistemology and ontology of morals can be (and historically has been) taken to have implications for the viability of the either or both of the two kinds of account of what we are saying when we make talk about moral rights, duties and values outlined in (1) above, forcing (some have argued) abandonment of the idea of moral claims as fact stating claims as described in (1)(a) and certainly of the idea of such claims as being objective fact stating claims (as described in (2)), in favour the seemingly different “expressivist” account such claims as hinted at in (1)(b), though, as some have more recently been suggesting, the difference between (1)(a) and (1)(b) might, in the end, not be as different as many have thought.

### Prerequisites:

Two previous courses in Philosophy, at least one of which must be at the 300 level, or higher, and one of which must be [Philosophy 249](#) or [397](#). Phil 249 is described as follows: An introduction to philosophy through discussion of morality, virtue and the role of morality in society. Phil 397 is described as follows: An intensive study of selected topics in value theory.

### Course Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course students

- should be aware of what issues are currently viewed as being fundamental to the discipline *Metaethics* as described above and should be able to state and critically engage with the arguments for and against the central theses of the metaethical theories;
- should be familiar with, be able to use, and be aware of the limitations of the investigative tools currently being used in such metaethical inquiries; including the use of the resources of conceptual analysis, of rational choice theory, and of contemporary evolutionary ethical theory;
- should have developed and refined their ability (i) to formulate explicit and precise analyses of the reasoning in academic papers in the field, such analyses setting out the *direction* of the reasoning,

the steps in the reasoning, and the unstated but critical background assumptions of the reasoning in such papers, (ii) clearly and concisely to frame and state arguments both for and against philosophical theses, and (iii) to gain the kinds of skills in analysis, argumentation, and research that would be of value in law, government and business policy development and implementation.

### **Required/Recommended Texts:**

All of the readings for the course will be available on-line through D2L or on-line through the UofC library.

In addition, several articles in *The Stanford Online Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

[<https://plato.stanford.edu/>] may be useful at various points in the course and including:

- Geoff Sayre-McCord, 2012, "Metaethics".
- Stephen Finlay & Mark Schroeder, 2012, "Reasons for Action: Internal vs. External".
- Connie Rosati, 2006, "Moral Motivation".
- William Fitzpatrick, 2014, "Morality and Evolutionary Biology".
- Mark van Roojen, 2013, "Moral Cognitivism vs Non-Cognitivism".
- Richard Joyce, "Moral Anti-realism".
- Carla Bagnoli, 2011, "Constructivism in Metaethics", *Stanford University Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

### **Assignments, due dates, and grading**

#### ***Assignments:***

1. Weekly reading assignments will be set. 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 anyone who misses a class to find out what readings have been set. These readings will serve as the background reading for the two essays.
2. Essay 1 (about 1200 words maximum, excluding footnotes, and bibliography). Details will be posted in D2L.
3. Essay 2 (about 1700 words maximum, excluding footnotes, and bibliography). Details will be posted in D2L.
4. There will be no registrar-scheduled final examination.
5. Assignments are to be uploaded as MS-Word or rtf files (**not as pdf files**) to this course's digital drop box in D2L

#### ***Due-dates:***

Essay 1: Due 4pm, February 15<sup>th</sup>.

Essay 2: Due 4pm, April 16<sup>th</sup>.

#### ***Grading***

1. Essay 1 will be worth 45% of the final grade.
2. Essay 2 will be worth 55% of the final grade.
4. If an essay is submitted after the stated deadline, then it will receive at most a B and then only if submitted by 9am of the day after the due day: it will receive at most a C if submitted by 9am of the day after that, and so on;
5. Later virtue will be allowed to redeem earlier sin.
6. Percentages will be computed using the numbers set by the University as equivalent to the letter grades.

## IMPORTANT DEPARTMENTAL, FACULTY AND UNIVERSITY INFORMATION

### Academic Honesty

Cheating or plagiarism on any assignment or examination is regarded as an extremely serious academic offense, the penalty for which will be an F on the assignment or an F in the course, and possibly a disciplinary sanction such as probation, suspension, or expulsion. See the relevant section K.5 on 'Academic Misconduct' in the current University Calendar <http://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/k-5.html>.

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

The student accommodation policy can be found at: [ucalgary.ca/access/accommodations/policy](http://ucalgary.ca/access/accommodations/policy).

Students needing an Accommodation because of a disability or medical condition should communicate this need to Student Accessibility Services in accordance with the Procedure for Accommodations for Students with Disabilities <http://www.ucalgary.ca/policies/files/policies/student-accommodation-policy.pdf>.

Students needing an Accommodation based on a Protected Ground other than Disability, should communicate this need, preferably in writing, to their instructor.

### D2L Help

Desire2Learn is UCalgary's online learning management system. Important information and communications about this course may be posted on D2L. Go to <https://ucalgary.service-now.com/it> for help.

### General Academic Concerns and Program Planning

Have a question but not sure where to start? The Arts Students Centre is your information resource for everything in the Faculty of Arts. Drop in at SS102, call 403-220-3580, or email [ascarts@ucalgary.ca](mailto:ascarts@ucalgary.ca). Advisors in the ASC can also provide assistance and advice in planning your program through to graduation. Visit the Faculty of Arts website at <https://arts.ucalgary.ca/advising> for detailed information on common academic concerns

### 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 Undergraduate Advisors. David Dick – Undergraduate Program Director ([dgdick@ucalgary.ca](mailto:dgdick@ucalgary.ca)), Megan Delehanty – Honors Advisor ([mdelehan@ucalgary.ca](mailto:mdelehan@ucalgary.ca)) or Allen Habib ([anh Habib@ucalgary.ca](mailto:anh Habib@ucalgary.ca)).

### Registration Overload/Prerequisite Waivers

If you are seeking to register in a Philosophy course that is full or to get permission to waive the prerequisites for a course, email the Philosophy Department Undergraduate Program Administrator (UPA), Rebecca Lesser ([rebecca.lesser@ucalgary.ca](mailto:rebecca.lesser@ucalgary.ca)). Include the specific course information and your UCID number in your request.

### Writing

All written assignments (including, although to a lesser extent, written exam responses) will be assessed at least partly on writing skills. Writing skills include not only surface correctness (grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, etc.) but also general clarity and organization. Research papers must

be properly documented. Students are also encouraged to use Writing Support Services and other Student Success Centre Services, located on the 3rd floor of the Taylor Family Digital Library. Writing Support Services assist with a variety of assignments, from essays to lab reports. Students can book 30-minute one-on-one appointments online, sign up for 15-minute drop-in appointments, and register for a variety of writing workshops. For more information on this and other Student Success Centre services, please visit [www.ucalgary.ca/ssc](http://www.ucalgary.ca/ssc).

### **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 or teaching assistant.

### **Internet and Electronic Communication Devices**

The instructor reserves the right to establish course policies regarding the use of devices such as laptops, tablets, and smartbooks. If allowed, these devices must be used exclusively for instructional purposes and must not cause disruption to the instructor or to fellow students. Cell phones and paging devices should be set to silent mode during lectures. Audio or video recording of lectures is not permitted without the written permission of the instructor. Students violating this policy are subject to discipline under the University of Calgary's Non-Academic Misconduct policy

### **Emergency Evacuation:**

In case of an emergency evacuation during class, students must gather at the designated assembly point nearest to the classroom. The list of assembly points is found at <http://www.ucalgary.ca/emergencyplan/assemblypoints>. Please check this website and note the nearest assembly point for this course.

### **Other Helpful Contacts**

- Safewalk and Campus Security: 403-220-5333.
- Faculty of Arts Student Representatives: 403-220-6552, [arts1@su.ucalgary.ca](mailto:arts1@su.ucalgary.ca), [arts2@su.ucalgary.ca](mailto:arts2@su.ucalgary.ca), [arts3@su.ucalgary.ca](mailto:arts3@su.ucalgary.ca), [arts4@su.ucalgary.ca](mailto:arts4@su.ucalgary.ca)
- Student Union: <https://www.su.ucalgary.ca/>; 403-220-6551.
- Student Ombudsman: <http://www.ucalgary.ca/provost/students/ombuds>
- Campus Mental Health Strategy: <https://www.ucalgary.ca/mentalhealth/>