

# Metaethics

## Course aims and objectives

This course examines to what extent we can find a place for ethics in a naturalistic, scientific picture of the world. We begin with the topic of moral realism and the arguments for it. We then examine various challenges to the realist view, including challenges from evolutionary theory and neuroscience.

During the course we will address the following questions, among others:

- Do moral judgments express beliefs? If they do, are these beliefs ever true?
- Are there moral facts?
- What implications does evolution have for metaethics?
- What implications does neuroscience have for metaethics?
- Are there any moral explanations of non-moral phenomena? What does implications does this have for the existence of moral facts?

## Intended learning outcomes

By the end of this course, students should:

- Have a grasp of fundamental issues and views in metaethics, e.g. moral realism, error theory, expressivism and of some of the implications of evolutionary theory and recent work in neuroscience for metaethics.
- Be able to critically analyse and engage with literature by key philosophers in this field.
- Be able to present arguments clearly and concisely both within a classroom context and in an essay.
- Gain transferable skills in research, analysis and argumentation

## Syllabus

Week 1	Introduction to metaethics
Week 2	Nonnaturalist moral realism
Week 3	Error Theory
Week 4	Naturalist moral realism
Week 5	Expressivism
Week 6	The supervenience challenge
Week 7	The explanatory challenge
Week 8	The challenge from evolution
Week 9	The challenge from neuroscience
Week 10	Review

## Required readings

### Week 1: Introduction to Metaethics

1. Chrisman, M. *What is this thing called Metaethics?* Introduction and Ch 1

### Week 2: Nonnaturalist Moral realism

1. Cuneo, T. (2007) 'Moral Realism of a Paradigmatic Sort' in his *The Normative Web*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
2. Chrisman, M. *What is this thing called Metaethics?* Ch 2

### Week 3: **Error Theory**

1. Mackie, J.L. (1977) 'The Subjectivity of Values' in his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* London: Penguin.
2. Chrisman, M. *What is this thing called Metaethics?* Ch 4

### Week 4: **Naturalist Moral Realism**

1. Lenman, J. "Moral Naturalism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/naturalism-moral/>.
2. Chrisman, M. *What is this thing called Metaethics?* Ch 5

### Week 5: **Expressivism**

1. Blackburn, S. (1988) 'How to be an ethical anti-realist' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 12(1):361-75
2. Chrisman, M. *What is this thing called Metaethics?* Ch 3

### Week 6: **The Supervenience Challenge**

1. Jackson, F. (1998) 'The Location Problem for Ethics' in his *From Metaphysics to Ethics* Oxford: OUP.
2. McPherson, T. (2012) 'Ethical Nonnaturalism and the Metaphysics of Supervenience' in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* vol 7

### Week 7: **The explanatory challenge**

1. Harman, G. (1977) *The Nature of Morality*, New York: Oxford University Press, Ch 1
2. Sturgeon, N. (1985) 'Moral Explanations', in *Morality, Reason, and Truth*, D. Copp and D. Zimmerman, (eds.), Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld

### Week 8: **The challenge from evolution**

1. Street, S. (2006) 'A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,' *Philosophical Studies* 127: 109-66.
2. Vavova, K. (2014) 'Debunking Evolutionary Debunking' in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* vol 9

### Week 9: **The challenge from neuroscience**

1. Greene, J. and Haidt, J. (2002) 'How (and where) does moral judgment work?' in *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* vol 6, 517-523.
2. Joyce, R. (2008) 'What Neuroscience can (and Cannot) Contribute to Metaethics', in *Moral Psychology* vol. 3, ed. Sinnott-Armstrong

### Week 10: **Review**

This week we will bring together the themes of the course, discuss essay strategies, and anything else you'd like to go over