Meta-Ethics

Honours Philosophy Seminar

2017-18

Course Organiser: Michael Ridge mridge@ed.ac.uk
Office Hours: Thursdays 2:00-3:00 and by appointment, DSB 6.09.
Course Administrator: Ann-Marie Cowe philinfo@ed.ac.uk

Communication

Students are responsible for checking their University email and the LEARN page for this course regularly (at least once per week) so that they do not miss any important announcements for the course.

Course Aims and Objectives:

This course explores core topics in metaethics. Metaethics investigates questions at the intersection of ethics, on the one hand, and (a) metaphysics, (b) epistemology, (c) the philosophy of language, and (d) the philosophy of mind, on the other. One overarching issue is whether taking morality seriously is compatible with a broadly naturalistic (scientific) view of the world and our place in it.

We will investigate the following questions, among others:

- Do moral statements express beliefs which represent the world as being a certain way or do they express desire-like states instead?
- Does morality presuppose objective values in some important sense?
- Are there any substantive moral facts?
- Can moral properties, like the property of being morally wrong, somehow be reduced to some concatenation of natural properties?
- Does moral knowledge require something like a faculty of moral intuition?

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.
- 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.
Outline of Topics

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Readings

Week 1: Introduction to the Course

- Matthew Chrisman, *What is This Thing Called Metaethics (WITTCM)*, Introduction.

Week 2: 4 Key Questions

- Matthew Chrisman, *What is This Thing Called Metaethics (WITTCM)*, chapter 1.

Week 3: Non-naturalism

- Matthew Chrisman, *What is This Thing Called Metaethics (WITTCM)*, chapter 2.
- G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, chapter 1 (on LEARN)

Week 4: Expressivism 1: “Old School” Expressivism

- Matthew Chrisman, *What is This Thing Called Metaethics (WITTCM)*, chapter 3.

Week 5: Expressivism 2: Quasi-Realism

- Matthew Chrisman, *What is This Thing Called Metaethics (WITTCM)*, chapter 3.

**Week 6: The Error Theory**

• Matthew Chrisman, *What is This Thing Called Metaethics (WITTCM)*, chapter 4.
• J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, chapter 1 (on LEARN)

**Week 7: Naturalism 1: Aristotelian Naturalism**

• Matthew Chrisman, *What is This Thing Called Metaethics (WITTCM)*, chapter 5.
• Peter Geach, “Good and Evil,” *Analysis*, 1956. Available through JSTOR.
• Rosalind Hursthouse, chapter 9 of *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford), available via Oxford Scholarship online

**Week 8: Naturalism 2: A Posteriori Naturalism**

• Matthew Chrisman, *What is This Thing Called Metaethics (WITTCM)*, chapter 5.
• David Brink, “Realism, Naturalism and Moral Semantics,” *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 2001 (library ejournal)

**Week 9: Naturalism 3: A Priori Network Naturalism**

• Matthew Chrisman, *What is This Thing Called Metaethics (WITTCM)*, chapter 5, “A Priori Network Naturalism”
• Philip Pettit and Frank Jackson, “Moral Functionalism and Moral Motivation,” *Philosophical Quarterly*, 1995 (available through JSTOR)
• Nicholas Zangwill, “Against Analytic Moral Functionalism,” *Ratio*, 2000 (JSTOR)

**Week 10: Ecumenical Expressivism**

• Matthew Chrisman, *What is This Thing Called Metaethics (WITTCM)*, chapter 7

**Week 11: Ecumenical Cognitivism and “summing up”**

• Matthew Chrisman, *What is This Thing Called Metaethics (WITTCM)*, chapters 6-8.
Assessment Structure and deadlines

Undergraduates will be assessed by a 1500 word mid-term essay worth 40% (due on 26 October 2017 by 12 pm) and a final Take-Home Test worth 60%.

The Take-Home Test will consist of a set of short-answer questions and an essay question. The word limit for the essay question is 2000 words. The short answer questions will be worth 35% of the overall Take-Home Test grade and the essay question will be worth 65% of the overall Take-Home Test grade. There will be 7 short-answer questions worth 5 points each; you must answer all 7 of these. You will choose 1 essay question out of 4 to answer. The Take-Home Test will focus more on the second half of the course, but some questions may draw on ideas from the first half of the course as well. The Take-Home Test can be collected on 4 December, 2017 and must be returned by Thursday 7 December by 12 pm.

Senior Honours students may opt to write a long essay (5000 words) in lieu of the above, as part of their dissertation requirement in Philosophy. The title must be arranged with the instructors (no later than 26 October), and is due in to the Teaching office on 19 December by 12 pm.

Feedback on all assessed work will be provided within 3 weeks, unless otherwise notified by email.

Suggested Essay Topics

- Does Moore’s Open Question Argument provide a convincing rationale for non-naturalism?
- Does the supervenience of the moral on the natural/descriptive provide an insoluble problem for non-naturalist moral realists?
- Does the action-guiding character of moral judgment pose an insoluble problem for non-naturalist moral realists? Discuss with reference to “motivational internalism.”
- What is the Frege-Geach problem and does it refute traditional (non-hybrid) expressivism?
- Can quasi-realist expressivism succeed in its aim of accommodating the realist sounding features of ordinary thought and discourse in a broadly expressivist framework? Focus your discussion on whatever you take to be the hardest case for the quasi-realist.
- Does the possibility of various forms of akrasia pose a convincing objection to expressivism?

Feedback on drafts of essays

I will provide feedback on first drafts of essays. Although this is not a requirement of the course, I strongly encourage students to take advantage of this opportunity. There are few steps you can take to improve your essay which will be more useful than this. However, for me to be sure to have enough time to provide quality feedback in time for you to make revisions based on that feedback, you must have drafts to me (via email) no later than 1 week before the due date for the essay, which in this case means no later than Thursday 19 October by 12 pm.
Formative Work

Students are encouraged to send in a one page discussion of the reading for each week. This should be sent to the instructor for that week at least 24 hours before the next class meets. The discussion can be purely exegetical or can focus on some specific point that you found problematic or confusing. I will try to provide comments on these and they can also help us know what you are finding puzzling and this can then be fed into how the material is taught. 400 words maximum length.