Y3 Moral Philosophy 2022
PHIL10213

Course Organiser: Matthew Chrisman [matthew.chrisman@ed.ac.uk], DSB 4.11
Course Secretary: Ann-Marie Cowe [philinfo@ed.ac.uk], DSB G.06

Course Description

This course covers moral philosophy, the branch of philosophy that deals with the nature, extent, and foundation of obligations, duties, virtues, practical reasons, and moral rights. Precise topics vary from year to year; representative topics include: Where do moral obligations come from, and what motivates people to follow them? How do we know what we morally ought to do? Do people have moral rights; what about animals? What reasons do we have to help those in need? Do we have moral duties to ourselves; to our loved ones? Is the aim of providing a fully general, informative, moral theory achievable? Is there a universal human morality?

This year, we will be focusing on the source and nature of morality rather than first-order normative ethical theories or concrete ethical dilemmas. As a result, students will have the opportunity to develop philosophical background necessary for advanced study of metaethics, metanormative theory, metaphysics, social epistemology, critical theory, theories of meaning, philosophy of law and political philosophy. We will also concentrate on further developing general skills in writing analytic and persuasive essays by incorporating a peer-review step to the process of creating final papers.

Course Delivery

The first step in learning the course material is reading the required text for each week, which you are expected to do ahead of the weekly in-person seminar. This seminar will meet from 14:10-16:00 on Tuesdays during semester 2. As a nudge, there will be short pop quizzes in six of the seminars.

There will also be space for small group discussion of the course material and group work designed to deepen your understanding and prepare you for the assessments. All students will be signed up for a weekly 1h tutorial on Thursdays (from the second week of the semester). And we will facilitate the creation of informal study groups for any students who want to discuss the material regularly with peers.

You should regularly check your university email and check for announcements on the course Learn page.

Office Hour

The course organiser will be available for a weekly drop-in office hour by Zoom, on Wednesdays from 13:00-14:00 where anyone who wants to can turn up to chat about course material. You are encouraged to use this as an opportunity to firm up your understanding of
topics covered in the seminars in preparation for the assessments. For other matters, 1-to-1 meetings with the course organiser can be organised by email.

Background Material

The following texts are not required reading, but they will give you a good overview of what the course is about and if you’re feeling lost, they will provide orientation.

- Matthew Chrisman, “Morality: Objective, Relative or Emotive?” in Chrisman and Pritchard (eds.) Philosophy for Everyone, second edition, Routledge 2017, pp. 20–33. <also available as a lecture online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=R7gHPxNvmac&list=PLwJ2VKmefxqgiDHRppT_jnqEXuKLmKY6&index=15&t=502s>

Assessment

- Quizzes 5%: There will be six unannounced quizzes, primarily to test your understanding of the assigned reading; your lowest mark (including 0 for non-attendance, for whatever reason) will not be counted.
- Midterm essay (1500 words) 30%: A short piece where you will be expected to explain in detail some philosopher’s argument for a view; an essay prompt will be posted on the course’s LEARN site. This must be submitted on Learn by Wednesday 23 February (12pm).
- Peer-feedback exercise 5%: In preparation for your final essay, you will have the opportunity to trade drafts with a peer and complete a peer review; half of this mark pertains to the completeness of your draft, the other half pertains to the quality of your peer review. The draft essay must be submitted on Learn and in hard copy brought to class on Thursday 31 March, the peer review must be submitted on Learn and given to your peer by Thursday 7 April.
- Final essay (2500) words 60%: A longer piece where you will be expected to defend your own view about a topic of the course, by critically and constructively building on the arguments we consider in our readings. This must be uploaded on Learn by Thursday 21st April (12pm).

The Philosophy–specific marking guidelines will be used in marking your essays: www.ed.ac.uk/ppls/philosophy/current/undergraduate/assessment/marking-guidelines

For an explanation of how Philosophy ensures reliable marking and feedback, look here: www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/reliablemarking_0.pdf

Texts

See the description of weekly content below for specific required and recommended reading, and other relevant content. All of the texts for this course are available through the library, see link to the Resource List on the Learn site for the course. A key text for the course is Matthew Chrisman, What Is This Thing Called Metaethics (London: Routledge, 2017).
Learning Resources

There are several valuable resources available outside the class that will enhance your learning in the class. Please see this page for details:
www.ed.ac.uk/ppls/philosophy/current/undergraduate/handbooks

In particular, I’d like to highlight the very useful Guide to common problems in philosophy essays and the PPLS Skills Centre which can help you with writing philosophy essays.

Weekly Plan

1. **Introduction**: What is moral philosophy? What are we going to learn about it in this course? How are we going to do that?
   - Required reading:
     - “Socrates’ Question” and “The Archimedean Point” by Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Routledge 1985), chs. 1–2

2. **The Source and Genealogy of Morality**: Where does morality come from? How (if at all) is it based in human nature? Does the evolution and genealogy of morality vindicate or undermine its place in our lives?
   - Required reading:
   - Recommended reading:
   - Other relevant content:
     - “The Brains behind Morality” TED lecture by Patricia Churchland, www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJ7szK1Rz4w
     - Overview of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*, www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-vtmA5c3Xk
3. **An Overview of Metaethics**: What are the key issues separating various metaethical theories? What are some of the initial theoretical options regarding these issues? And what methodology should we use to develop our own views about these issues and about the viability of metaethical theories?

- **Required reading**:

- **Recommended reading**:

4. **Naturalism, Virtue Ethics and Relativism**: One of the capstones of Enlightenment philosophy is the idea that all genuine explanation of facts will ultimately be naturalistic explanation, which leads some to conclude that the only facts there really are ones that are discoverable in nature (ontological naturalism). If that’s right, then how might we conceive of moral facts such that they plausibly come out as a kind of natural fact?

- **Required reading**:
  - “Naturalism” only secs. 1–2, from Matthew Chrisman, *What Is This Thing Called Metaethics* (London: Routledge, 2017), ch. 5
  - “Naturalism” from Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), ch. 9

- **Recommended reading**:

- **Other relevant content**:

5. **Non-Naturalism**: For any natural property $F$ claimed to be equivalent to the property of moral goodness, it seems that we sensibly wonder whether things that are $F$ are really good. This has suggested to some philosophers that there are irreducible moral facts, but can we make sense of a picture of reality containing irreducible moral facts?

- **Required reading**:
  - “Nonnaturalism” from Matthew Chrisman, *What Is This Thing Called Metaethics* (London: Routledge, 2017), ch. 2
- “Non-Naturalistic Realism in Metaethics” by David Enoch in The Routledge Handbook of Metaethics (New York: Routledge, 2018), ch. 1

  • Recommended reading:

  • Other relevant content:
    - “Why Care about Morality, Robustly Realistically Understood,” research talk by David Enoch www.youtube.com/watch?v=S11vVwMENb0
    - “Metaphysics” by Derek Parfit in On What Matters, volume 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), ch. 31

**First Essay due Wednesday 23 February (12pm) – submit through Learn.**

Flexible Learning Week: Feb 21-25 – no classes**

6. Error-Theory & Fictionalism: On the assumption that objective moral values, were they to exist, would have to be irreducible to natural properties, should we conclude that there aren’t really any objective moral values? If so, why do we seem to talk as if there are?

  • Required reading:

  • Recommended reading:
    - “Fictionalism” and “Moral Fictionalism” by Richard Joyce in Myth of Morality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), chs. 7-8.

  • Other relevant content:
    - “Moral Error Theory…Now What” a lecture by Kane Baker, www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNXUrKcRdQ
7. **Expressivism:** Statements about what is morally good and bad are a distinctive kind of evaluation. Could we analyse them as expression of people’s evaluative attitudes rather than attempts to describe reality? How then do we explain the linguistic similarities between ethical statements and descriptive statements?

- **Required reading:**

- **Recommended reading:**

- **Other relevant content:**
  - “The Frege-Geach Problem (And the Quasi Realist Solution)” Philosophy Vibe youtube explainer video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Wg1l7_ldf4

8. **The Future of Metaethics:** Are any of the four main metaethical theories on the right track? What’s the best methodology for addressing metaethical questions? Where might there be conceptual space for novel theories?

- **Required reading:**
  - “Summary and Chart” and “Theories that are Hard to Classify in Traditional Terms” by Matthew Chrisman in *What Is This Thing Called Metaethics* (London: Routledge, 2017), ch. 6-7.

- **Recommended reading:**

- **Other relevant content:**

9. **Special Topic – The Nature and Evolution of Morality:** The best explanations for our capacity to form beliefs about nature will appeal to the existence of objective natural facts, which we have been evolved to imperfectly but reliably track; arguably the same is not true of our capacity to make moral judgments. Does that mean that we shouldn’t believe in objective moral facts?

- **Required reading**
• Recommended reading:

• Other relevant content:
  - “The Darwin Day Lecture 2018: The evolution of human morality” a public lecture by Diana S Fleischman, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6L6WxwRBnM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6L6WxwRBnM)

10. Special Topic – Morality and Ideology: Critical theorists argue that most of our pre-reflective values and ways of living are artefacts of capitalist transnational economic-political relations that are peculiar to a particular geo-cultural-historical moment. Does that mean we should reject ethics or at least be sceptical of our moral intuitions?

• Required reading:

• Recommended reading:

• Other relevant content:
11. Wrap-up and Conclusion
   • Required reading: None!
   • Recommended reading: None!
   • Other relevant content: None!

**Frequently Asked Questions**

In an attempt to cut down on email traffic, here are answers to some frequently asked questions. Feel free to ask other questions, preferably during class or in office hours.

1. How do I sign up to or switch tutorial groups?
   → You are assigned by Timetabling. If you cannot make your assigned tutorial due to a timetabling clash, please discuss with the course secretary at philinfo@ed.ac.uk

2. When do tutorials start?
   → Week 2 of the semester, and they are on Thursdays, generally drawing on the seminar held the previous Tuesday.

3. What should I cite in my essays?
   → You should cite books, articles, websites, blogposts, twitter threads, unpublished lecture notes, or anything else you quote or otherwise draw on in formulating the argument of your paper. There is no prescribed number of references, and you are not generally expected to cite all the scholarly literature related to your topic. However, you should cite the sources that you learned from or that you object to, including class readings. You don’t need to cite class discussions.

4. What referencing style should I use?
   → I’m happy with any consistent style that would in principle let me find the source of your citation. I prefer essays with endnotes rather than footnotes. More information about normal referencing practice in philosophy is here: www.ed.ac.uk/files/atoms/files/reference_style_in_philosophy.pdf

5. I’m not sure what counts as plagiarism, could you explain?
   → The basic principle is that you shouldn’t present someone else’s work as your own work. This includes presenting work you previously submitted for a course as newly created for this course. All submitted work is automatically checked for similarity with sources on the internet and in repositories of essays previously submitted at universities around the world. So, don’t copy & paste from someone else’s essay or
writing. For more detail about correct academic referencing practice, start here:

6. **How much of the reading do I have to do?**
   → For each week, you are expected to do the required reading *before you come to the seminar on Tuesday*. The recommended reading will flesh out your understanding and knowledge of the topic and will be helpful if you are writing an essay on the topic. The other relevant content is purely optional, and may help you if you were considering researching the topic in more detail.

7. **I’m going to miss class next week because …, can you excuse the absence, and what can I do to keep up?**
   → It’s your choice whether to come to class or not, but you might miss a quiz and I hope the class discussions are a good opportunity for consolidating your learning. If you do have to miss a class, I’d suggest you read the required and recommended readings and find a time to discuss them with a friend in the class. You can also drop by my office hour.

8. **I have special circumstances; can I have an extension for my essay?**
   → Special circumstances are handled by the PPLS student support officers (SSOs): PPLS.SSO@ed.ac.uk. Extensions are handled by the Central Extension Service CES: www.ed.ac.uk/student-administration/extensions-special-circumstances/continuing-students Please note that for the draft essay and peer-review exercise, there will be no extensions (because of the need to coordinate with others in the class on the timing of the assignment).

9. **The topic of week X is really fascinating, and I think I might like to write a 4th year dissertation about it, do you think that’s a good idea?**
   → Very possibly yes! There will be more advanced Y4 courses touching on many of these topics, so the most straightforward way to do this is to plan to do a coursework dissertation in one or two of those courses. But you might also consider writing an independent dissertation on these topics, in which case let’s have a chat about that, as I can signpost further readings and tell you which faculty members are most interested in these topics.