

**Philosophy 120**  
**An Introduction to Meta-Ethics**

Fall Quarter 2012  
MWF 1145-1250  
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Instructor: Erick Ramirez  
Office Hours: MW 330:5pm  
Office: Kenna 207

Course Description:

In this course we will explore a few of the most fundamental (and most interesting) questions in field of ethics. Moral philosophers normally distinguish between three different kinds of ethical questions: applied, normative, and meta-ethical. Applied ethics questions involve the application of moral theory to specific ethical cases (ex. is infanticide morally permissible?). In order to address questions in applied ethics we need some knowledge of normative ethics. Theories of normative ethics give us a definition (and defense) of moral concepts like The Good, The Bad, Right, and Wrong. If we want to develop an understanding of the foundations for moral theory, however, we must to turn to *meta*-ethics.

*Meta*-ethics does not concern itself with specific ethical cases or with theories of the good. Instead, the meta-ethicist asks questions about the ultimate nature of morality. The meta-ethicist wonders whether moral goodness is a unique kind of goodness or even if it exists at all; they wonder about whether moral facts are objectively true or subjectively true and whether moral knowledge is possible. We will address many of these questions including questions about the relationship between moral truth and the will of God. The meta-ethicist is curious to know more about what it is that we are doing when we make moral judgments or get into moral disagreements. After completing this course students will develop an understanding of the different ways in which philosophers have tried to answer fundamental questions about morality and develop their own perspective on these matters.

**LEARNING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES:**

*Ethics Course Learning Goals:*

- 1.1 Reason ethically by drawing on major ethical theories and traditions, (e.g. sentimentalism, deontological or consequentialist theories); by normatively assessing individual, professional, and institutional decisions; and by articulating their personal engagement with the meaning of the right and the good.
- 1.2 Analyze, critically evaluate, and apply major ethical theories and traditions to significant personal, professional, and institutional decisions. As part of such efforts, students will be able to articulate that they understand some central ethical concepts such as justice, happiness, the good, virtue, dignity, rights, and equality.
- 1.3 Demonstrate appreciation of nuance and ambiguity, as well as clarity and precision, in their thinking and writing about moral problems, concepts, and ideals.
- 1.4 Reflect on their own ethical decisions and actions, on their roles as morally responsible members of the human community, and on what it means to be a good person.

## Assessment Plan:

- 1) An in-class midterm exam containing questions on the debate over philosophical Naturalism, the debate over internalism and externalism about moral facts, and skeptical arguments against moral realism [30%]
- 2) A final paper focusing on a central debate between moral realists, anti-realists, and subjectivists about moral properties and advancing a distinct thesis within this debate [30%]
- 3) Three short (~700-800 word) response papers on three separate readings throughout the quarter [15% total, 5% each]
- 4) Consistent attendance and participation [15%]

All of the elements in the assessment plan help us to meet our course objectives. Participation and attendance are not only necessary, they expose students to key examples of academic philosophy within several major ethical traditions. Our response papers are roughly two pages in length and require students to not only analyze and explain specific arguments from philosophers actively engaged in debates over the nature of ethical theory and morally psychology. Response papers also invite students to critically evaluate arguments with an eye toward the practical applications (or shortcomings) of each view. The midterm examination requires students to demonstrate a mastery of the central concepts and questions in contemporary meta-ethical theory while the final paper requires that students successfully integrate all four learning objectives; the final paper challenges students to engage in nuanced reasoning about the elements of moral psychology and to advance an original position on questions about motivational internalism and psychopathic responsibility; it also requires that students explore the practical moral consequences of the position each student advances.

## Late Assignments

Late assignments will not be accepted without prior notification to and an okay from me. This means giving me at least **24** hours notice that you will not be able to turn in a paper on time. You will be given each assignment far in advance of its due date so be prepared to explain why you couldn't complete an assignment within the allotted time frame.

If a paper will be turned in late it is subject to a penalty (out of fairness to students that turn their papers in on time) unless evidence of significant illness or other hardship is presented. Please see me if you have any questions regarding the policy over late papers.

## Office Hours

I will hold office hours every week and am available by appointment also. Please don't hesitate to ask for other meeting times if you can't make my posted office hours.

### Disabilities Accommodation:

To request academic accommodations for a disability, students must contact Disability Resources in Benson Center, (408) 554-4111 or TTY (408)554-5445. Students must register with Disability Resources and provide appropriate documentation to that office prior to receiving accommodations. For more information please refer to:

<<http://www.scu.edu/advising/learning/disabilities/index.cfm>>

### Academic Integrity:

The University is committed to academic excellence and integrity. Students are expected to do their own work and to cite any sources they use. A student who is guilty of a dishonest act in an examination, paper, or other work required for a course, or who assists others in such an act, may, at the discretion of the instructor, receive a grade of "F" for the course. In addition, a student found guilty of a dishonest act may be subject to sanctions, up to and including dismissal from the University, as a result of the student judicial process as described in the Student Handbook. A student who violates copyright laws, including those covering the copying of software programs, or who knowingly alters official academic records from this or any other institution is subject to similar disciplinary action. For more information please refer to:

<<http://www.scu.edu/academics/bulletins/undergraduate/Academic-Integrity.cfm>>

### Tentative Schedule

Below you will find a tentative reading schedule. All readings listed as [A] are required reading; those listed under [B] are recommended but not required. I will try to make recommended readings available on CAMINO but feel free to ask me for copies if they aren't available online. I've tried to keep readings short and accessible; this reading list is subject to modification.

#### Week 1

- M Introductions, Ethics, Normative Ethics, and Meta-Ethics
- W Reflective Equilibrium and A Brief History of Meta-Ethical Questions  
HW: [A] Read: Plato's "Euthyphro"
- F Reflective Equilibrium, Meta-Ethical Concerns Over Naturalism and Voluntarism  
HW: [A] David Brink "The Objectivity of Ethics"

#### Week 2

- M What Role(s) Should God's Will Play Within the Realm of Ethics? Naturalism v. Voluntarism  
HW: [A] Gilbert Harman, "Ethics and Observation"  
[B] Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton "The Revival of Meta-Ethics: Back to Basics" in *Toward Fin de Siecle Ethics: Some Trends* (pp. 125-131)

- W Are Moral Observations Like Scientific Observations? Harman's Skepticism  
 HW: [A] Don Loeb "Moral Explanations of Moral Beliefs"  
 [B] Brian Leiter, 'Moral Facts and Best Explanations'
- F Responses to Harman and the Continuing Debate.  
 HW: [A] John Mackie "The Subjectivity of Values" from *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*  
 [B] William Ross "What Makes Right Acts Right?"  
 <<http://www.ditext.com/ross/right2.html>>

### Week 3

- M Mackie's Error Theory of Moral Judgments  
 HW: [A] Richard Joyce, 'Moral Fictionalism'
- W Discussion: Moral Facts, Moral Beliefs, and Moral Properties  
**Last Day to Turn in First Response Paper!**  
 HW: [A] David Brink "Moral Motivation"  
 [B] Sigrun Svavarsdottir "Moral Cognitivism and Motivation" and Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton "Non-Cognitivism" in *Toward Fin de Siecle Ethics: Some Trends* (pp. 125-131)
- F Humean Moral Psychology and the Terms of the Internalism/Externalism Debate  
 HW: [A] Michael Smith "Internal Reasons"  
 [B] Michael Smith "In Defense of *The Moral Problem*: A Reply to Brink, Copp, and Sayre- McCord"

### Week 4

- M Smith's Internalist Conception of Moral Reasons as Idealized Desire Sets  
 HW: [A] John McDowell "Virtue and Reason"  
 [B] Eve Garrard and David McNaughton "Mapping Moral Motivation"
- W McDowell's Rejection of Humean Moral Psychology and A New Kind of Internalism  
 HW: [A] Nick Zangwill "Besires and the Motivational Debate"
- F Are Besires Distinct Psychological States?  
 HW: [A] James Lenman "The Externalist and the Amoralist"

### Week 5

- M Can Internalism Explain the Amoralist?  
 HW: [A] Shaun Nichols "How Psychopaths Threaten Moral Rationalism"  
 [B] Jeanette Kennett "Do Psychopaths Really Threaten Moral Rationalism?"  
**Midterm Study Guide Handed Out**

- W Amoralists, Psychopathy and the Nature of Moral Reasons  
[A] James Dreier “Internalism and Speaker-Relativism”
- F Does Psychopathy Imply Moral Relativism? **Last Day to Turn in Second Response Paper**  
HW: Study For Midterm Exam

### Week 6

- M **Midterm Exam**
- W An Introduction to Realism, Subjectivism, and Everything In Between  
HW: [A] David Brink “Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness”
- F Addressing the Skeptics: Brink's Moral Realism  
HW: [A] Richard Boyd “How to Be A Moral Realist”  
[B] Sharon Street “A Darwinian Dilemma for Moral Realism;” Michael Rubin “Is Goodness a Homeostatic Property Cluster?”

### Week 7

- M Discussion: Moral Realism and Its Critics  
HW: [A] Mill “What Utilitarianism Is” from *Utilitarianism*; Kant “Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals” [excerpt]  
[B] John Rawls “Classical Utilitarianism”
- W Moral Realism: Utilitarianism and Deontology  
HW: [A] John McDowell, “Values and Secondary Qualities”  
[B] David Wiggins “A Sensible Subjectivism”
- F Subjectivism and Sensibility Theory  
HW: [A] Peter Railton “Red, Bitter, Good”  
[B] Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton “Sensibility Theories” in *Toward Fin de Siecle Ethics: Some Trends* (pp.152 – 165)

### Week 8

- M Subjectivism and Dispositional Theories of Value: Should We Rigidify Moral Concepts?  
HW: [A] Jesse Prinz “The Genealogy of Morals” from *The Emotional Construction of Morals*  
[B] Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson “Sentiment and Value;” Jonathan Haidt “Body, Psyche, Culture;” David Hume excerpt from Book II.
- W Sentimentalism and Speaker-Relativism  
HW: [A] Gilbert Harman “Moral Relativism Defended”

F Harman's Relativism  
HW: None

Week 9

- M Film: We Need to Talk About Kevin  
HW: [A] Harry Frankfurt "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of A Person"  
[B] Harry Frankfurt "Alternative Possibilities and Moral Responsibility"
- W Finish Film, An Introduction to Moral Responsibility and Extreme Cases  
HW: [A] John Fischer "Responsibility and Control"  
[B] John Fischer "Responsiveness and Moral Responsibility" from *My Way: Essays on Moral Responsibility*
- F Compatibilist Theories of Responsibility and the Problem of Psychopathic Agency  
HW: [A] Neil Levy "The Responsibility of the Psychopath Revisited"  
**Final Paper Prompt Handed Out**

**\*\*\*Thanksgiving Break: November 19-23\*\*\***

Week 10

- M Psychopathic Responsibility: Levy's Account of Psychopathic Blamelessness  
HW: [A] Manuel Vargas and Shaun Nichols "Psychopath's and Moral Knowledge"  
[B] Manuel Vargas and Shaun Nichols "How to Be Fair to Psychopaths;" Bennett and Hacker "Criminal Law as It Pertains to Patients Suffering from Psychiatric Diseases"
- W What Does It Mean to Understand Right and Wrong? Vargas and Nichols' View  
HW: [A] Patricia Greenspan "Responsible Psychopaths;" Matthew Talbert "Moral Competence, Moral Blame, and Protest"
- F Revising our Views: Greenspan and Talbert on Responsibility  
HW: Work on Final Paper