

PHIL 338 A01
CRN#12688

September – December 2023
TWF: 10:30pm – 11:20pm

Metaethics

Instructor: Scott Woodcock [he/they]
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Office Hours: Wed 1:30-2:30pm open hours + individual zoom meetings by appointment

Provisional Draft: This outline gives students a sense of what the course involves, but it is not the final, *official* outline.

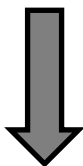
Course Description:

This course will examine philosophical issues related to the epistemic, metaphysical and semantic features of value judgements. We will assess the various theories that attempt to systematize our (often contradictory) judgments about these issues. Such theories include realism and anti-realism, cognitivism and non-cognitivism, relativism, error theory and nihilism. The literature on these topics is complicated and loaded with terminology with which students are not normally familiar. Nevertheless, we will try to keep focussed on the key questions that make metaethics so fascinating to anyone who has at some point pondered the deepest puzzles associated with ethical inquiry. What does it mean to claim that an action is morally wrong? Is this kind of claim different than ordinary descriptive claims about the world, e.g. that a table is flat or that an apple is red? Do ethical claims have an objective basis, or are they merely subjective statements that reflect our personal, emotional commitments to certain normative practices? Can ethical judgements be given truth values, and if not why do we assume that they ought to be governed by basic logical operators? The aim of this course will be for students to become familiar with positions in the current literature that try to make sense of these difficult questions.

Course Website: Online course materials will be available via Uvic *Brightspace*.

Texts: *Foundations of Ethics*, 3rd ed. by Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo
Metaethics: An Introduction, by Andrew Fisher [e-text available via Uvic]

Requirements: (Optional) First Paper (10%)
Midterm Test (10% or 20%)
Term Paper (30%)
Final Exam (40%)
Quote & Comment Assignments (10%)



Note: Due dates are posted below in the course schedule. *You are responsible for knowing these dates.* Plan ahead, and manage your workload accordingly.

Important Dates: Please consult Uvic [Academic Year Important Dates](#) for information about last dates to withdraw from courses without penalty, etc.

Grading System

Percentage	Letter Grade	Grade Point	Grade Definition
90 – 100	A+	9	An A+, A, or A- is earned by work which is technically superior , shows mastery of the subject matter, and in the case of an A+ offers original insight and/or goes beyond course expectations. Normally achieved by a minority of students.
85 – 89	A	8	
80 – 84	A-	7	
77 – 79	B+	6	A B+, B, or B- is earned by work that indicates a good comprehension of the course material, a good command of the skills needed to work with the course material, and the student's full engagement with the course requirements and activities. A B+ represents a more complex understanding and/or application of the course material. Normally achieved by the largest number of students.
73 – 76	B	5	
70 – 72	B-	4	
65 – 69	C+	3	A C+ or C is earned by work that indicates an adequate comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to work with the course material and that indicates the student has met the basic requirements for completing assigned work and/or participating in class activities.
60 – 64	C	2	
50 – 59	D	1	A D is earned by work that indicates minimal command of the course materials and/or minimal participation in class activities that is worthy of course credit toward the degree.
0 – 49	F	0	F is earned by work, which after the completion of course requirements, is inadequate and unworthy of course credit towards the degree.

Interpretation of these grade definitions is up to the discretion of the instructor. If you receive a grade during the course that you believe is unfair, please begin by discussing the matter with the instructor (or TA) in a respectful, open-minded manner. Rest assured that if you still believe the grade you received is unfair you can appeal the matter to the chair of the department.

For additional information regarding undergraduate grades, please consult the [Grading](#) section of the Uvic Undergraduate Calendar.

All evaluations of tests and assignments will be calculated according to percentage scores. Letter grades and grade point scores are listed purely for reference.

Final examinations are the property of Uvic and are not returned. They are available for viewing at the Records Office according to Uvic [Examinations](#) procedures and regulations.

Uvic is committed to providing a safe, supportive learning environment for all members. Further information regarding Uvic policies on human rights, equity, discrimination and harassment are located in the Uvic calendar [General University Policies](#), but if you have any particular concerns related to our course please do not hesitate to contact me.

Late Assignment Policy: Late assignments will be accepted for five working days after the posted due date; however, late assignments *will not receive written comments*. After five working days, documentation is required demonstrating sustained illness or family emergency.

Plagiarism: Review the [University Policy on Academic Integrity](#) carefully. Also, note that anti-plagiarism software may be used in this course, and students may be asked to provide oral explanations of their submitted written work.

Technology in Classroom: Some students require laptops for their learning strategies, so I do not prohibit their use in the classroom. However, studies demonstrate that multi-tasking reduces performance for *other nearby students*. Anyone caught on social media, playing games, internet surfing, etc. will be asked to leave the class and potentially subject to disciplinary action.

Counseling Services: Many, if not most, students experience some difficulties with their mental health during their years as undergraduate students. Make sure you are familiar with [Uvic Wellness Supports for Students](#), because it is an excellent resource to have on campus. It is hard to shake the stigma associated with problems like depression and anxiety, but if at any point you can benefit from help with mental health issues, please contact *Wellness Supports*. They genuinely want to help, and why not take advantage of this free resource?

Uvic Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response:

Sexualized violence is a serious issue on campus. You can learn more about how Uvic defines sexualized violence and its approach to prevention by visiting www.uvic.ca/svp. If you or someone you know is impacted by sexualized violence and needs information, advice, and/or support, please contact the sexualized violence resource office in Equity and Human Rights (EQHR). Whether or not you have been directly impacted, if you want to take part in important prevention work on campus, you can reach out to: Sexualized Violence Resource Office in EQHR, Sedgewick C119; email: svpcoordinator@uvic.ca.

Territory Acknowledgment

The University of Victoria is committed to acknowledging and respecting the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

For information about support for indigenous students and efforts to foster reconciliation, please visit the Uvic [Office of Indigenous Academic & Community Engagement](#).

A Note on Diversity:

Most of the readings in this course are written by white men, and you might think, “Wait a minute: why we don’t read more women and persons of colour in this course?” It is a fair question, and here are some initial answers:

1. This course introduces students to a particular thread of analytic philosophy that has been very influential and is best studied comprehensively as a linked narrative. This thread began in the early 20th century, and many of the important historical readings are subsequently by men because (regrettably) academic philosophy was even more disproportionately represented by white men in that century than it is now.
2. This narrative thread is worth studying, but its academic significance does not imply that metaethical issues don’t arise in other disciplines, cultural traditions, etc.
3. The fact that there are so few women and persons of colour on our reading list is *not* because they are less philosophically sophisticated than men! It is because Western civilization has a long history of gender discrimination, racism, and colonialism that excluded women and persons of colour from the formal study of philosophy.
4. There is still much work to be done to make philosophy fully inclusive for members of disadvantaged groups, but remember that (despite our historical sources) there are many distinguished philosophers today who are women, persons of colour, members of the LGBTQ+ community and disabled persons. Students who identify with these groups can take inspiration from the fact that these contemporary role models exist.


If you have particular concerns about diversity in our course or suggestions for how it may be more effectively promoted, please do not hesitate to contact me.


Schedule of Readings and Assignments


Note: *Dates listed are subject to change!* Regular class attendance is essential in order to stay informed about scheduling changes. Material is meant to be read before the class in which it is discussed. Readings without page numbers from our textbooks are available online via *Brightspace*. Be sure to access these readings in advance to avoid last-minute technical problems.

Week Readings

<u>Week 1</u>	Introduction to Metaethics
Sept. 6	First Meeting
Sept. 8	Introduction, <i>MI</i> pp. 1-9 General Introduction, <i>FE</i> pp. 1-5

<p><u>Week 2</u></p> <p>Sept. 12</p> <p>Sept. 13</p> <p>Sept. 15</p>	<p>Moore’s Open Question and its (Unintended) Legacy</p> <p>G.E. Moore: “The Subject Matter of Ethics”, <i>FE</i> pp. 465-473</p> <p>The Open Question Argument, <i>MI</i> pp. 11-23</p> <p>Stephen Darwall: “Moore to Stevenson”, <i>pdf</i></p> <p>A.J. Ayer: “Critique of Ethics and Theology”, <i>FE</i> pp. 40-46</p> <p>Emotivism, <i>MI</i> pp. 25-38</p>
<p><u>Week 3</u></p> <p>Sept. 19</p> <p> </p> <p>Sept. 22</p>	<p>Moral Disagreement</p> <p>C.L. Stevenson: “The Nature of Ethical Disagreement”, <i>FE</i> pp. 371-375</p> <p>David Brink: “Moral Disagreement”, <i>FE</i> pp. 376-382</p>
<p><u>Week 4</u></p> <p>Sept. 26</p> <p>Sept. 27</p> <p>Sept. 29</p>	<p>Expressivism & Quasi-Realism</p> <p>Simon Blackburn: “Is Objective Moral Justification Possible on a...”, <i>pdf</i></p> <p>Quasi-Realism, <i>MI</i> pp. 91-109</p> <p>Allan Gibbard: “The Reasons of a Living Being”, <i>FE</i> pp. 71-78</p> <p>Walter Sinnott-Armstrong: “Expressivism and Embedding”, <i>FE</i> pp. 485-494</p>
<p><u>Week 5</u></p> <p>Oct. 3</p> <p> </p> <p>Oct. 6</p> 	<p>Moral Realism</p> <p>Peter Railton: “Moral Realism”, <i>FE</i> pp. 186-205</p> <p>Moral Realism and Naturalism, <i>MI</i> pp. 55-71</p> <p>Russ Shafer-Landau: “Ethics as Philosophy”, <i>FE</i> pp. 210-221</p> <p>Moral Realism and Non-Naturalism, <i>MI</i> pp. 73-89</p> <p>*** First (Optional) Writing Assignment Due ***</p>
<p><u>Week 6</u></p> <p>Oct. 10</p> <p>Oct. 11</p> <p>Oct. 13</p>	<p>Moral Relativism</p> <p>Gilbert Harman: “Moral Relativism Defended”, <i>FE</i> pp. 84-92</p> <p>Moral Relativism, <i>MI</i> pp. 111-126</p> <p>Review</p> <p>*** Midterm Test ***</p>

<p><u>Week 7</u></p> <p>Oct. 17</p> <p> </p> <p>Oct. 20</p>	<p>Error Theory</p> <p>J.L. Mackie: “The Subjectivity of Values”, <i>FE</i> pp. 13-22</p> <p>Error Theory, <i>MI</i> pp. 39-53</p> <p>Richard Joyce: “The Myth of Morality”, <i>FE</i> pp. 23-34</p>
<p><u>Week 8</u></p> <p>Oct. 24</p> <p> </p> <p>Oct. 27</p>	<p>The Harman/Sturgeon Debate</p> <p>Gilbert Harman: “Ethics and Observation”, <i>FE</i> pp. 333-336</p> <p>Nicholas L. Sturgeon: “Moral Explanations”, <i>FE</i> pp. 337-352</p>
<p><u>Week 9</u></p> <p>Oct. 31</p> <p> </p> <p>Nov. 3</p>	<p>Motivational Internalism vs Externalism</p> <p>Michael Smith: “The Externalist Challenge”, <i>FE</i> pp. 231-242</p> <p>Moral Psychology, <i>MI</i> pp. 127-140</p> <p>Nick Zangwill: “Externalist Moral Motivation”, <i>FE</i> pp. 243-251</p>
<p><u>Week 10</u></p> <p>Nov. 7</p> <p> </p> <p>Nov. 10</p>	<p>Practical Reason</p> <p>Phillipa Foot: “Morality as... Hypothetical Imperatives”, <i>FE</i> pp. 286-291</p> <p>Christine Korsgaard: “The Authority of Reflection”, <i>FE</i> pp. 93-106</p>
<p><u>Week 11</u></p> <p>Nov. 14-5</p> <p>Nov 17</p>	<p>Practical Reason Revisited</p> <p>Reading Break</p> <p>Ruth Chang: “Three Dogmas of Normativity”, <i>pdf</i></p>
<p><u>Week 12</u></p> <p>Nov. 21</p> <p>Nov. 22</p> <p>Nov. 24</p> <p></p>	<p>Feminist Metaethics</p> <p>Anita Superson: “Feminist Metaethics”, <i>pdf</i></p> <p>Julia Driver: “Constructivism and Feminism”, <i>pdf</i></p> <p>Sally Haslanger: “The Sex/Gender Distinction and Social Construction of Reality”, <i>pdf</i></p> <p>Margaret Olivia Little: “The Role of Affect in ...”, <i>FE</i> pp. 420-431</p> <p>*** Term Paper Writing Assignment Due ***</p>

<u>Week 13</u>	Evolutionary Debunking Arguments
Nov. 28	Katia Vavova: “Debunking Evolutionary Debunking”, <i>pdf</i>
Nov. 30 	Justis Koon: “Recalibrating Evolutionary Debunking”, <i>pdf</i> *** Last Day to Submit Q&C Assignments ***
Dec. 1	Class Debate + Review + Course Evaluations

Warning: There will be a **Registrar Scheduled Exam in December**. I don't control the date of this exam, so *do not book travel* until you know the dates of your exams.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Do I need to read the material before class? It is very hard to understand.

A: Yes, *make the effort*. We can sort things out in class, but reading the material on your own first will prepare you for class and help you to understand the content at stake.

Q: I'm over the word count. Does this really matter?

A: Would I include it in the instructions if it didn't? If you are only a few words over I won't give you a zero, but still: use the opportunity to work on *editing* your writing.

Q: Are you willing to look over drafts of our assignments?

A: In principle, yes, but in a large class it is not always feasible. It is preferable to send me a provisional outline of your argument so that I can make suggestions.

Q: I didn't read the instructions for the Q&C Assignments. Now it's the last week of class. Can I hand in retroactive assignments on readings we already covered?

A: No. It defeats the point of the assignment. Read instructions. Read course outlines.

Q: When is the last day to start handing in Q&C's if I want to get full marks?

A: This term it would be Nov. 1. Read the Q&C instructions so you understand why.

Q: I am a hardcore nihilist, and all I want to do is tell people “I believe in nothing” and lecture them about the fact that value statements should be dismissed as if they are complete nonsense. Should I take this course?

A: Not unless you are open to other viewpoints... and potentially failing without being able to claim that the grades you received are 'unfair'. 😊