

PHIL 338 A01
CRN#22475 COR A129

January – April 2025
TWF: 9:30pm – 10:20pm

Metaethics

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

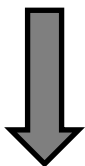
Course Description:

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: First Writing Assignment (10%)
Midterm Test (20%)
Term Paper (20%)
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 Policy: Late assignments will be accepted for five working days after the posted due date but *will not receive written comments*. After five working days, late assignments would require [unexpected or unavoidable circumstances](#).

Integrity: Review the [University Policy on Academic Integrity](#) *carefully*. Chat GPT and similar technologies are not permitted for this course. Anti-plagiarism software may be used by the instructor in this course, and students may be asked to provide oral explanations for their written work. You can consult the Library's [plagiarism guide](#) or the [Tri-Faculty Standards for Professional Behavior for Students](#) for details. It is the *responsibility of students* to be informed about these details.

Counseling: Many students experience difficulties with mental health during their years as undergraduate students. Make sure you are familiar with [Uvic Student Wellness](#), which is an excellent resource on campus. It is hard to shake the stigma associated with problems like depression and anxiety, but if you can benefit from help with mental health issues, then why not take advantage of this free resource? They are understaffed, but they genuinely want to help.

Important Dates: Please consult the Uvic calendar's [Academic Year Important Dates](#) for information about last possible dates to withdraw from courses without penalty, examinations period start/end dates, etc.

Tech in Class: Some students require laptops/tablets for their learning strategies, so I do not prohibit their use in class. However, studies prove that multi-tasking *reduces performance for nearby students*, so anyone who distracts others will be asked to leave and potentially subject to disciplinary action.

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 most of the important historical readings are by men because other groups did not have access to academic philosophy.
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 work to be done to make philosophy fully inclusive, but 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 attendance is essential to stay informed about scheduling changes. Material is meant to be read before it is discussed in class. All readings without textbook page numbers listed are available online via *Brightspace*.

Week Readings

<u>Week 1</u>	Introduction + Moore’s Open Question
Jan. 7	First Meeting
Jan. 8	G.E. Moore: “The Subject Matter of Ethics”, <i>FE</i> pp. 465-473 The Open Question Argument, <i>MI</i> pp. 11-23
Jan. 10	A.J. Ayer: “Critique of Ethics and Theology”, <i>FE</i> pp. 40-46 Emotivism, <i>MI</i> pp. 25-38

<u>Week 2</u>	Moral Disagreement
Jan. 14 Jan. 17	C.L. Stevenson: “The Nature of Ethical Disagreement”, <i>FE</i> pp. 371-375 David Brink: “Moral Disagreement”, <i>FE</i> pp. 376-382
<u>Week 3</u>	Expressivism & Quasi-Realism
Jan. 21	Simon Blackburn: “Is Objective Moral Justification Possible on a...”, <i>pdf</i> Quasi-Realism, <i>MI</i> pp. 91-109
Jan. 22	Allan Gibbard: “The Reasons of a Living Being”, <i>FE</i> pp. 71-78
Jan. 24	Walter Sinnott-Armstrong: “Expressivism and Embedding”, <i>FE</i> pp. 485-494
<u>Week 4</u>	Moral Realism
Jan. 28 Jan. 31 	Peter Railton: “Moral Realism”, <i>FE</i> pp. 186-205 Moral Realism and Naturalism, <i>MI</i> pp. 55-71 Russ Shafer-Landau: “Ethics as Philosophy”, <i>FE</i> pp. 210-221 Moral Realism and Non-Naturalism, <i>MI</i> pp. 73-89 *** First Writing Assignment Due ***
<u>Week 5</u>	Moral Relativism
Feb. 4	Gilbert Harman: “Moral Relativism Defended”, <i>FE</i> pp. 84-92 Moral Relativism, <i>MI</i> pp. 111-126
Feb. 5	Review
Feb. 7	*** Midterm Test ***
<u>Week 6</u>	Error Theory
Feb. 11 Feb. 14	J.L. Mackie: “The Subjectivity of Values”, <i>FE</i> pp. 13-22 Error Theory, <i>MI</i> pp. 39-53 Richard Joyce: “The Myth of Morality”, <i>FE</i> pp. 23-34
Feb 17-21	Reading Break – No Class

<u>Week 7</u>	The Harman/Sturgeon Debate
Feb. 25 Feb. 28	Gilbert Harman: “Ethics and Observation”, <i>FE</i> pp. 333-336 Nicholas L. Sturgeon: “Moral Explanations”, <i>FE</i> pp. 337-352
<u>Week 8</u>	Motivational Internalism vs Externalism
Mar. 4 Mar. 7	Michael Smith: “The Externalist Challenge”, <i>FE</i> pp. 231-242 Moral Psychology, <i>MI</i> pp. 127-140 Nick Zangwill: “Externalist Moral Motivation”, <i>FE</i> pp. 243-251
<u>Week 9</u>	Practical Reason
Mar. 11 Mar. 14	Phillipa Foot: “Morality as... Hypothetical Imperatives”, <i>FE</i> pp. 286-291 Christine Korsgaard: “The Authority of Reflection”, <i>FE</i> pp. 93-106
<u>Week 10</u>	Feminist Metaethics
Mar. 18 Mar. 19 Mar. 21	Anita Superson: “Feminist Metaethics”, <i>pdf</i> Julia Driver: “Constructivism and Feminism”, <i>pdf</i> Sally Haslanger: “The Sex/Gender Distinction... Construction of Reality”, <i>pdf</i> Margaret Olivia Little: “The Role of Affect in ...”, <i>FE</i> pp. 420-431
<u>Week 11</u>	Evolutionary Debunking Arguments
Mar. 25 Mar. 28	Katia Vavova: “Debunking Evolutionary Debunking”, <i>pdf</i> Justis Koon: “Recalibrating Evolutionary Debunking”, <i>pdf</i>
<u>Week 12</u>	Empirical Psychology & Metaethics
April 1 April 2  April 4	Lieuwe Zijlstra: <i>Are People Implicitly Moral Objectivists?</i> Victor Kumar & Joshua May: <i>Moral Reasoning and Moral Progress</i> *** Term Paper Writing Assignment Due *** *** Last Day to Submit Q&C Assignments *** Class Debate + Review + Course Evaluations

Warning: There will be a **Registrar Scheduled Exam in April**. 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 will be **March 12th**. Read the Q&C instructions so you understand why.

Q: I am passionate about studying ethics so that it can make a practical difference in the world. Will this course help me to apply ethical knowledge to real world events and contribute to solving contemporary moral problems?

A: No. Ethical theory can directly affect practical issues; metaethics not so much. Just as intriguing metaphysical questions about the nature of material substance will not directly help you to calculate the velocity of a speeding bus, asking deep metaethical issues is fascinating but not directly relevant to sorting out practical issues in applied ethics. If you will find this frustrating, it is good to know in advance.

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'. ☺