

THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Theories of Morality

PHIL2310

Academic Year 2024-2025, Term II

Instructor : David Villena (dvillena@hku.hk)

Lectures : Tuesdays, 16:30-18:20

Classroom : LE8 (LG2/F Library Extension Building, Main Campus)

Credits : 6.0

Course abstract

Moral judgments are about what is good or bad, right or wrong, and virtuous or vicious. Normative theories (like utilitarianism) try to explain what sorts of behaviors and actions are good or bad, or right or wrong. The topic of this course, however, is metaethics. Metaethical theories are about normative ethical theories: they try to explain what is distinctive about moral judgments, and how they are similar to or different from other kinds of judgments. In this course, we shall explore the nature of moral judgments, and how they are related to motivation, truth, and objectivity. Do moral judgments always accompany motivation to act in a certain way? How can moral judgments be true or false? Is morality relative or absolute? These are the key metaethical questions we shall explore together in the course.

Learning outcomes

On successful completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the argument structure and norms of argumentation specific to debates in metaethics and critically evaluate key arguments within this domain.
- Construct persuasive arguments that address foundational questions in metaethics, such as the nature of moral judgment, moral language, and moral facts, and the practical implications of these issues.
- Present and critically evaluate ideas and arguments related to metaethics, identifying and exploring alternative perspectives.
- Articulate their own views on the practical implications of metaethics, developing insights into fundamental questions about the metaphysics of morality, moral epistemology, moral semantics, and moral psychology.
- Engage in constructive, open-minded discussions with others who hold different views on metaethics, presenting their own positions clearly and logically.
- Appreciate the range and variety of projects related to metaethics, understanding how these perspectives have evolved throughout history and across different societies.
- Use philosophical skills to interpret and understand the views of others concerning metaethics, expressing their own views clearly, concisely, and effectively both orally and in writing.
- Appreciate the role of open, rational discussion in the shared pursuit of knowledge about metaethics and its implications for society.

Assessment methods

- Midterm test (20%)
- Final test (20%)
- Group presentation 1 (15%)
 - Presentation and critical evaluation of an influential thesis and argument related to metaethics.
- Group presentation 2 (20%)
 - Poster presentation of group's personal view and argument related to the metaethics.
- Peer review and feedback on group presentation 1 (5%)
- Peer review and feedback on group presentation 2 (5%)
- Short paper (1200 words not including references) (15%)

Grading scale

≥ 90%	A+	≤ 100%	Excellent
≥ 85%	A	< 90%	
≥ 80%	A-	< 85%	
≥ 75%	B+	< 80%	Good
≥ 70%	B	< 75%	
≥ 65%	B-	< 70%	
≥ 60%	C+	< 65%	Satisfactory
≥ 55%	C	< 60%	
≥ 50%	C-	< 55%	
≥ 45%	D+	< 50%	Pass
≥ 40%	D	< 45%	
0%	F	< 40%	
			Fail

Academic honesty

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense. Coursework submitted for assessment purposes must be students' own work and properly acknowledge all sources. Students who plagiarize might be referred to the University's disciplinary committee and might be expelled from the University as a result. You can find more information at <http://www.hku.hk/plagiarism>. (Also, visit this: <http://arts.hku.hk/current-students/undergraduate/assessment/plagiarism>) If you have any doubts as to whether the work you are handing in constitutes plagiarism, please don't hesitate to consult with the instructor beforehand.

Disabilities

Inform the instructor if you have a visible or non-visible disability that may have some impact on your work in this class, so reasonable accommodations and assistance can be provided to you.

Screen recommendations

It would be greatly appreciated if you could minimize the use of your phone and other screen devices like laptops, tablets, smartwatches, and e-readers during class. If you have an emergency or expect an important call, please inform the instructor.

Additionally, you do not need to take pictures of the slides, as they will be available to download on Moodle. While the use of laptops is not completely discouraged, we kindly ask that you use them primarily for note-taking purposes. This is because multitasking, like surfing the internet or emailing during class, can potentially distract you and those around you in the classroom. We understand that everyone has different learning styles, so we just ask that you consider these recommendations for the benefit of both your learning experience and that of your classmates.

Course contents

- Introduction
 - Course overview,
 - Ethics and morality
 - Key distinctions and concepts in metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics.
- Mapping Ethical Quandaries
 - Moral facts and properties
 - Moral knowledge and disagreement
 - Moral language and meaning
 - Moral reasoning, motivation, emotion, and action.
- Naturalism
 - What is moral naturalism?
 - Arguments for and against naturalism
 - Examples of naturalistic ethical theories
- The Evolutionary Debunking Argument
 - The evolution of morality
 - Debunking moral realism: Street's Darwinian dilemma
 - Responses to evolutionary critiques of morality
- Nonnaturalism
 - What is moral nonnaturalism?
 - Intuitionism and moral truths
 - Hume's Law
 - Criticisms of nonnaturalism
- Error Theory
 - The nature of moral error theory

- Mackie's arguments from relativity and queerness
- Common objections to error theory
- Expressivism
 - Emotivism, prescriptivism, projectivism, quasi-realism, and norm-expressivism
 - Expressivism vs. moral realism
 - Challenges to expressivism
- Conclusion
 - Review of key questions, arguments, and theories
 - The future of metaethics: New directions and debates
 - Final reflections on moral judgments

Bibliography

- Anscombe, G. E. M. (2000). *Intention*. Harvard University Press.
- Aristotle. (2010). *Nicomachean ethics*. Brill.
- Ayer, A. J. (1946). *Language, truth and logic* (2nd ed.). V. Gollancz Ltd.
- Chrisman, M. (2023). *What is this thing called metaethics?* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Enoch, D. (2011). *Taking morality seriously: A defense of robust realism*. Oxford University Press.
- Hare, R. M. (1952). *The language of morals*. Oxford University Press.
- Harman, G. (1977). *The nature of morality: An introduction to ethics*. Oxford University Press.
- Hume, D. (1998). *An enquiry concerning the principles of morals*. Clarendon Press.
- Joyce, R. (2006). *The evolution of morality*. MIT Press.
- Kant, I. (2019). *Groundwork for the metaphysics of morals* (C. Bennett, J. Saunders, & R. Stern, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- MacPherson, T., & Plunkett, D. (Eds.). (2018). *The Routledge handbook of metaethics*. Routledge.
- Mill, J. S. (2003). *Utilitarianism and On liberty: Including Mill's "Essay on Bentham", and selections from the writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Austin*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Moore, G. E. (1903). *Principia ethica*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. W. (2007). *On the genealogy of morality*. Cambridge University Press.

- Plato. (2002). *Five dialogues: Euthyphro, apology, crito, meno, phaedo* (G. M. A. Grube, Trans.). Hackett Publishing.
- Sauer, H. (2024). *The invention of good and evil: A world history of morality*. Oxford University Press.
- Shafer-Landau, R. (2003). *Moral realism: A defence*. Oxford University Press.
- Shafer-Landau, R. (2023). *The fundamentals of ethics* (6th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Singer, P. (Ed.). (1993). *A companion to ethics* (With corrections). Blackwell Reference.
- Singer, P. (2011). *Practical ethics* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Street, S. (2006). A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value. *Philosophical Studies*, 127(1), 109–166.
- Tomasello, M. (2019). *Becoming human*. Harvard University Press.
- Williams, B. (1985). *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*. Routledge.