

## *The Nature of Values*

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Class meetings: MW 3:30-4:45, GCAS L-261, Office Hours: Tues 2-4, 3 Washington Place room 308

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will address questions like the following:

- Does the existence of widespread moral disagreement mean that there can't be any objective facts and it's all just a matter of opinion?
- Can we reconcile the idea of an objective moral reality with evolutionary and sociological arguments that explain how we developed our moral beliefs?
- Is it strange that there can be facts that tell you what to do?

We will begin by examining three famous arguments for an “anti-realist” view of morality: J.L. Mackie's arguments from disagreement and from “queerness”, and Sharon Street's “Darwinian dilemma”. All three of these arguments are supposed to challenge the “realist” idea that our moral beliefs reflect some kind of mind-independent moral facts. We will begin to develop philosophical skills through close analysis of these arguments, identifying their logical structure and the places where they could be challenged. We will then apply these skills to a series of classic texts defending alternative views of the nature of morality and our relationship to it, including quasi-realism, reductive and non-reductive naturalism, and constructivism. We will explore these four positions and the main challenges to each of them. Throughout, we will ask whether our moral beliefs are on surer footing than some of our other kinds of normative beliefs, especially beliefs about rationality and - most importantly - beliefs about what we should believe.

### COURSE GOALS

By the end of this class, students will have developed the following knowledge and skills:

- An in-depth understanding of the main ways of answering the three questions above, and the advantages and shortcomings of each possible answer.
- An in-depth understanding of the main claims made by each of the theories listed above, the central arguments for them, and some of the most famous criticisms of them.
- The ability to *identify the structure of arguments* – including their central premises, conclusion/s, and the way in which the premises are thought to provide support for the conclusion/s – and to give a formal presentation of this structure.
- The ability to *present focussed objections to arguments*, which concentrate on either a particular premise or a particular inference in the argument's structure and suggest reasons to be dubious of it.
- The ability to *analyze the strength of different objections to an argument*, thinking about how an objection works, how central to the argument is the point that is challenged by the objection, and how easy it would be to modify the argument so as to avoid the objection.
- The ability to *rationaly defend a point of view*, by explaining and then presenting valid arguments in favor of each of its central tenets, and identifying and responding to potential objections to it.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

This course has five components: in-class presentations (10%), forum posts (10%), a mid-term response paper (20%), a final paper (30%), and a final exam (30%).

- *In-class presentations*  
All students are required to give a 15-minute presentation on one of our readings during recitation. Students may choose which reading to present on, and may also choose what to focus on in their presentations. Our fabulous TA Julia will distribute a sheet for students to use to sign up to present on a reading of their choice, and will discuss with you her standards for grading presentations.
- *Forum posts*  
There is a forum for discussion on our Classes page. This forum exists to give all students enrolled in the class a space to discuss the readings, both to ask questions of clarification and to talk about the philosophical content. All students are expected to contribute actively to the forum — I expect you to write 300-500 words per week, either as original posts starting a new conversation topic or as responses to others' posts. Responses should be constructive and should advance the dialectic. We will talk in class about what this means.
- *Mid-term response paper*  
The mid-term response paper will assess students' understandings of one of the three most famous challenges to the objectivity of morality, and of the main responses to this challenge. We will focus on the ability to analyze the structure of arguments and assess the strength of objections.
- *Final paper*  
The final paper will allow students to develop their own argument regarding a view on the status of moral discourse and practice, and to defend this view over its rivals. We will focus on the ability to summarize, unify and critically comment on a range of different positions in metaethics.
- *Final exam*  
The cumulative final exam will assess students' understanding of all course material. It will consist of a combination of multiple-choice questions and short-answer questions, plus one short essay written in response to a choice of one of three questions. I will upload to Classes and distribute a review sheet and a list of sample questions a week in advance, and will also hold a review session. The date of the final exam is currently TBD; I'll announce it on Classes as soon as I know.

Of the 30% of the course grade allotted to the final paper, 5% of this is an *improvement grade*. We are going to write two papers over the course of this class, and I want you to see this as an opportunity to improve your philosophical writing. To that end, our fabulous TA Julia will offer one-on-one, personal feedback meetings after the first paper deadline, for you to discuss your paper's main strengths and weaknesses with me and to set a target for how to improve next time. You can earn improvement credit by (a) signing up for a one-on-one feedback meeting, (b) choosing a target, and (c) meeting that target in your second paper. But this is all optional, not required. You can skip it and forego the 5% if you would prefer to do that.

In this class there is no grade for attendance. Attendance in class is necessary, but not sufficient, for doing well; attending is not an academic achievement in and of itself.

There is also no grade for general participation. However, I have designed our classes to incorporate a lot of "active learning" activities rather than just lecture. You will learn more by participating in these activities.

## COURSE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

### COURSE WEBSITE

There is a course website site for this course, which can be accessed via NYU Classes. All course documents (syllabus, assignments, readings, and some documents with helpful tips for reading and writing Philosophy papers) will be available on this site. Please check the site regularly for announcements – when I want to send a message to all students, I will do so by posting an announcement on the website.

### ELECTRONICS IN THE CLASSROOM

In this class there is a ban on electronics – including laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc. There is a lot of research indicating that the use of electronics in the classroom prevents you and people sitting around you from learning. If you have a special reason to need electronic equipment for note-taking, that's a different matter; in this case, please contact me to discuss a waiver from the ban.

### EMAILS

When emailing me about this class, please write “Phil UA-41” in the subject line, and maintain a formal tone. I will endeavor to reply to all emails within 48 hours. If I do not manage to do this, it is okay to email again to remind me – but please wait 48 hours first.

### PLAGIARISM

You are responsible for making sure that none of your work is plagiarized. You must cite any work that you draw from in your papers, both direct quotations and paraphrased ideas. You are strongly encouraged to discuss the course material, including assignments, with your classmates, but all written work that you submit must be your own. For more information, see my “Plagiarism” handout on our course website. You should also be familiar with the academic integrity policies of the College of Arts and Sciences, which are available at <https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/academic-integrity.html>; I will respond to all cases of possible plagiarism in accordance with sections 2 and 3 of these policies.

### DISABILITY

If you think you need an accommodation for a disability, please let me know at your earliest convenience. Some aspects of this course, the assignments, the in-class activities, and the way the course is usually taught can be modified to facilitate your participation and progress. As soon as you make me aware of your needs, we can work with the NYU Center for Students with Disabilities to determine appropriate academic accommodations. Any information that you choose to provide is confidential and will be treated as such.

### CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Taking college courses can be mentally and emotionally challenging. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, or in need of support, lots of services are available. You can contact NYU's Counseling and Wellness Services team by calling (212) 998-4780 or emailing [wellness.exchange@nyu.edu](mailto:wellness.exchange@nyu.edu), or by visiting <https://www.nyu.edu/students/health-and-wellness/counseling-services.html> and checking out the links there. They also have walk-in offices in Manhattan and Brooklyn (addresses on the website).

## SCHEDULE & READINGS

Required readings are required. Some weeks also have optional readings; optional readings are optional. If you find the required readings hard, try the optional readings, then return to the required readings and see if this has helped to make things clearer. (If not, it's time for a forum post! ☺)

Week 1: January 28 – INTRODUCTION

- no readings

**NO CLASS JANUARY 30** (I'm away; a makeup will be scheduled at the end of the semester)

Week 2: February 4 and 6 – J. L. MACKIE'S ARGUMENTS FROM DISAGREEMENT AND QUEERNESS

- Required: J. L. Mackie – excerpt from *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*
- Optional intro 1: Richard Joyce, "[Mackie's Arguments for the Moral Error Theory](#)"
- Optional intro 2: Alexander Miller, "[Realism](#)", §3

Week 3: February 11 and 13 – SHARON STREET'S DARWINIAN DILEMMA

- Required: Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value"
- Optional intro: Richmond Campbell, "[Moral Epistemology](#)", §4

Week 4: February 20 and 25 – OBJECTIONS TO MACKIE

- Required: Bart Streumer, "Can We Believe the Error Theory?"
- Required: Stephen Finlay, "The Error in the Error Theory", §1-2 (not §3)

Week 5: February 27 and March 4 – OBJECTIONS TO STREET

- Required: Katia Vavova, "Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism"
- Required: Eric Sampson, "The Self-Undermining Arguments from Disagreement"

Week 6: March 6 – HOW TO WRITE A PAPER

- no readings

Week 7: March 11 and 13 – REDUCTIONIST NATURALISM

- Required: Peter Railton, "Moral Realism"
- Required: Kate Manne, "Locating Morality: Moral Imperatives as Bodily Imperatives"

**MARCH 18: MIDTERM PAPER DUE**

Week 8: March 25 and 27 – NON-REDUCTIONIST NATURALISM

- Required: Richard Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist"
- Required: Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit, "Moral Functionalism and Moral Motivation"
- Optional intro: James Lenman, "[Moral naturalism](#)", §4.2, paragraphs 1 to 5

Week 9: April 1 and 3 – OBJECTIONS TO MORAL NATURALISM

- Required: G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, §10-13 (no other sections!)
- Required: Terence Horgan and Mark Timmons, “New Wave Moral Realism meets Moral Twin Earth”
- Optional intro: James Lenman, “[Moral naturalism](#)”, §2.1

Week 10: April 8 and 10 – PHILOSOPHY SKILLS BOOTCAMP & FUN GAMES

- no readings

Week 11: April 15 and 17 – NON-COGNITIVISM

- Required: C.L. Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”
- Required: Simon Blackburn, “Is Objective Moral Justification Possible on a Quasi-realist Foundation?”
- Optional intro: Richard Joyce, “[Projectivism and Quasi-Realism](#)”

Week 12: April 22 and 24 – OBJECTIONS TO NON-COGNITIVISM

- Required: Jamie Dreier, “Metaethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism”
- Required: Mark Schroeder, “What is the Frege-Geach problem?”

Week 13: April 29 and May 1 – CONSTRUCTIVISM

- Required: Christine Korsgaard, excerpt from *The Sources of Normativity*
- Optional intro: Carla Bagnoli, “[Constructivism](#)”, §2.2

Weeks 14-15: May 6, 8, and 13 – OBJECTIONS TO CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE RETURN OF ROBUST REALISM

- Required: David Enoch, “Agency, Schmagency”
- Required: David Enoch, “An Outline of an Argument for Robust Meta-Normative Realism”

**MAY 20: FINAL PAPER DUE**

Date and time TBD: Review session (to make up for lost class on January 30)

**DATE AND TIME TBD: FINAL EXAM**