

## PHIL 152: RECENT ETHICAL THEORY SPRING 2009

**Class Meetings:** MW Noon-1:15pm, DH 208  
**Instructor:** Dr. Christina Bellon  
**Office Hours:** MTW 9-10am; and by appointment.  
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### **CATALOGUE DESCRIPTION**

Major topics in ethical theory with attention to their contemporary formulation, including such topics as utilitarianism vs. rights-based theories and the dispute over the objectivity of ethics. 3 units.

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course is primarily designed around contemporary developments in the dispute over the objectivity of ethics. As such it will offer an opportunity to explore both normative and meta-ethical issues on the nature of moral philosophy, moral theories, ethical value, and moral propositions. The focus is on the major schools of 20th Century meta-ethics: intuitionism, emotivism, subjectivism, moral skepticism, objectivism, realism, and rationalism. Each of these schools or approaches embraces unique claims and assumptions about the nature of ethical value, the metaphysics involved in its existence or non-existence, and the epistemology of moral propositions and judgements about moral value. The implications at the level of theory will also be discussed.

These approaches to ethics are distinguished by their answer to this basic analytic question:

*Are moral propositions true?*

If the answer is *yes*, then this implies some form of cognitivism (objectivism, universalism, realism, rationalism). *Cognitivism* is the general approach to ethical propositions which holds that they describe *some feature of the world* and are *more or less subject independent*. A cognitivist meta-ethical position supports most of the major theoretical accounts of ethics including Deontology and Egoism, and some variations of Utilitarian and Virtue ethics.

If the answer is *no*, then this implies some variation of non-cognitivism (subjectivism, intuitionism, emotivism, moral skepticism). *Non-cognitivism* is the general approach to ethical proposition which holds that they do not describe or attach to anything *in the world*, but rather describe or attach to *some feature of the moral subject*. A non-cognitivist approach to meta-ethics generally supports any variety of ethical relativism, including some variations of Utilitarian and Virtue ethics.

This course will explore the implications of this division within contemporary ethical theory.

**Warning!**

*This is an UPPER division course, designed primarily for PHIL majors and advanced non-majors with some prior experience in ethics. Students will be expected to read considerable amounts of occasionally complex and technical material, write cogently and lucidly on difficult theoretical issues, and to come prepared to participate thoughtfully in class discussion. For students who have never taken an ethics class before, I would recommend postponing taking this course until you have attained some familiarity with introductory ethics. The Philosophy Department has several such courses on offer each semester.*

**TEXTS**

There are no assigned texts to purchase for this class. As such, your outlay of cash should be minimal. However, this does not mean there are no assigned readings. On the contrary! All assigned readings are available as PDF documents in electronic form at our course site in WebCT. Please note that these articles are copyrighted and are intended for your use in this class only. You should download the documents and bring them to class for discussion.

Assigned readings amount to 2-3 articles (approx 50 pages) per week, occasionally more, infrequently less. You are expected to read all the material assigned for the start of each course segment. You are responsible for reading ahead and keeping pace with class discussion as we progress through the material.

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

ASPIRATION/OBJECTIVE	PRACTICAL GOALS	ASSESSMENT TOOLS
Develop competence in philosophical and ethical language and literature, especially as these arise in contemporary theoretical discussions	1. Accurately describe and distinguish between a variety of ethical concepts, theories, and positions; 2. Express one's own ethical judgements in a cogent and clear fashion; 3. Engage in cogent and respectful discussion of difficult and sometimes controversial issues; 4. Analyse specific ethical arguments for consistency and credibility (including one's own).	1. Pre and Post course open-ended assessment. 2. Content in each of: a. Written essays b. On-line discussion c. Reading summaries d. Discussion questions

Develop written and oral communication skills, especially as those are associated with argumentative writing and public speaking.	1. Writing competently in concise, precise and well developed logical style; 2. Expression of a point of view through the formulation of a coherent and consistent argument in response to specific questions; 3. Presentation of an exposition of text in a coherent manner to an audience of peers.	1. Quality of the form (essay structure, logic) and mechanics (syntax, grammar) of each of: a. Written essays b. On-line discussion c. Reading summaries 2. Substance, structure, and oral delivery of the reading summary.
Develop an appreciation of the relation between theoretical and sometimes highly abstract ethical concepts and analyses to the practice of living a good life.	Accurately describe and distinguish the central elements of each theoretical issue and relate these to various social, political and moral contexts and practices.	Responses to essay questions designed to elucidate the relation of theory to practice.

### **ASSIGNMENTS AND REQUIREMENTS**

Evaluation of your progress toward the development of these abilities will be conducted by several means. The following assignments comprise the whole of the mandatory requirements for this course.

### **Grading Scale**

<b>A</b> Outstanding (96pts and above)	<b>A-</b> Very Good (90-95pts)
<b>B</b> Range Satisfactory (75-89pts)	<b>C</b> Range Minimally Satisfactory (60-74pts)
<b>D</b> Range Poor (50-59pts)	<b>F</b> Unacceptable (below 50pts)
This is based upon a 100 pt scale with 1pt = 1%	

### **Class Participation (20pts)**

As this is an upper division class, it should be taken as an opportunity for you to enhance your communication skills. Attendance will be taken each class period, though it will not count directly toward your grade (it's a way for me to get to know you and see who's coming or not).

I strongly encourage you to come regularly, do the readings ahead of time, and participate in class discussions and activities. To reward your efforts in this regard, this section of the course will be worth 20%. Please take very seriously this component of the course. Suitable performance in this regard consists of more than being present in class. You must be active, both as a listener and as a contributor to the success of the course. Mere attendance in class without contribution to class discussion will result in a minimal participation grade of C- (60% or 12/20).

Arriving late, falling asleep, chatting while others are speaking, and using your cell phone are serious distractions for everyone. Any of these will result in a deduction of 1pt per occurrence. All cell-phones should be turned off during class.

**Essay Analyses (20pts each x 3 = 60pts)**

You will be required to write and submit three essays, each of which will consist of a 5-6 page (double spaced, normal font & margins, approximately 1300-1500 words) explication and analysis of the theoretical issue identified in the essay assignment for each course segment. *You must submit all four essays to complete the course. Failure to do so will result in a grade of F for the course.*

**On-Line Discussion (20pts)**

On-line discussion serves as a virtual classroom for extended discussion of course material. This is primarily an opportunity for student to share thoughts/reflections/criticisms of course material and to continue discussion begun in class. Contributions may consist of

- (i) asking philosophical questions which probe the reading and engage in further explication and analysis of the text,
- (ii) responding thoughtfully to someone else's question,
- (iii) suggesting connections between this reading and other course material,
- (iv) bring current events and other empirical facts/evidence to bear on the reading.

All of this must be conducted in the effort to better understand the texts and to further our appreciation of the material's strengths and weaknesses. Polemics, ideological shortcuts, and other rather thoughtless and unscholarly contributions will not satisfy this requirement and should be resisted. Proper on-line etiquette is expected; violations will not be tolerated.

Each student must have made a total of 15 contributions to on-line discussion by the end of semester (with at least two to each of the 7 course sections). Further, each student must have read at least ¾ of the available contributions of their fellows in each discussion section to qualify for a satisfactory grade of C+ or better (regardless of how many submissions they have made).

**COURSE POLICIES****Attendance**

Regular attendance is expected from all class participants. Disruptions, rudeness and private discussions, including cell phone disruptions, will not be tolerated. This means while in class, you should be focused on classroom activities and material. Cell phones should be turned off prior to class start. If you have an emergency purpose phone (parent/childcare, EMT) and require your phone to be on, please set it to vibrate and notify the instructor that you must have it on during class period.

Attendance may be taken but will not be explicitly counted. Hence, it will not be explicitly penalized. HOWEVER, your participation in class is premised upon being here, so if you do not attend regularly and in a timely fashion, be aware that your participation grade will suffer. Generally, if you miss more than 25% of the scheduled meetings, expect to receive no more than a C+ for your participation, no matter how perfect your participation was when you did

show up. More than 50% of the class periods missed and you fail the participation grade, again, no matter how wonderful your participation in class.

### **Late Assignments**

All essay assignments are due at the beginning of class on the day listed in the course calendar/schedule. Late assignments will be penalized at a rate of 10% per *calendar day* (not merely *class period*) beginning with the due date. **After three days, acceptance of the assignment is at the instructor's discretion.** If you know you will not be able to meet a due date, it is your responsibility to consult with the instructor **before** the assignment is due. It is your responsibility to know the due dates and to plan accordingly. Leaving an assignment until the day or two prior is risky and makes you more vulnerable than you already are to factors and events in the universe beyond your control!

### **Plagiarism and Cheating**

Plagiarism is a serious academic offence and will not be tolerated in this class. Assignments in which plagiarism is found will **at the least** be graded at 0 (not just an F). **ALL** incidents of plagiarism will be reported both to the Department Chair and to the Judicial Officer in the Office of Student Affairs for possible further administrative sanction. *It is your responsibility to know and comply with the University's Academic Honesty Policy*  
<http://www.csus.edu/um anual/student/UMA00150.htm>.

### **Disability Accommodation**

If you have a documented disability (visible or invisible) and require accommodation or assistance with assignments, tests, attendance, note taking, etc., please see the instructor by the end of the **third week of classes** so that arrangements can be made. Failure to notify and consult with the instructor by this date may impede my ability to offer you the necessary accommodation and assistance in a timely fashion. Also be sure to consult with the Services to Students with Disabilities (Lassen Hall) to see what other campus services and accommodation options are available for you.

### **WEEKLY COURSE OUTLINE**

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|--------------------------------|---|
| <b>Week 1</b>                  | Course preview and student introductions. Philosophical Ethics Review<br>Read: Lecture Notes in "Ethics: The Basics" Folder in SacCT.   |
| <b>Section I/<br/>Week 2-3</b> | <b>Contemporary Normative and Meta-Ethics<br/>Moral Theory and Concepts</b><br>Read 2: Frankena, "The Concept of Morality," Baier, "Extending the Limits of Moral Theory," Held, "Moral Subjects: the Natural and the Normative."<br>Read 3: Kagan, "The Structure of Normative Ethics," Rawls, "The independence of Moral Theory." |
| <b>Week 4-5</b>                | <b>Why Meta-Ethics Matters</b><br>Read 4: Olafson, "Meta-Ethics and the Moral Life," Taylor, "The Function of Meta-Ethics" (Reply to Olafson).  |

Read 5: Mothersill, "Moral Philosophy and Meta-Ethics," Sumner, "Normative Ethics and Meta-Ethics," Macklin, "Moral Progress,"

*Week 6 Essay #1 Due on Normative and Meta-ethics.*

## **Section II / Non-Cognitivism**

### **Week 6 Moral Skepticism and Error Theory: Oops...**

Read: Mackie, from *Ethics* (1977), Tolhurst, "The Argument from Moral Disagreement"

### **Week 7 Emotivism: Ouch, bad....Mmmmm, good.**

Read: Ayer, "Critique of Ethics and Theology," Harrison, "Can Ethics Do Without Propositions?" Blackstone, "Objective Emotivism"

### **Week 8-9 Intuitions: Seems to me....**

Read 8: Strawson, "Ethical Intuitionism," Fuss, "Conscience,"

Read 9: Audi, "Kantian Intuitionism," McNaughton, "An Unconnected Heap of Duties,"

### **Week 10 Spring Break – no classes!**

*Week 11 Essay #2 Due on Forms of Non-Cognitivism*

## **Section III/ Cognitivism**

### **Week 11 Let's be Reasonable: Do we have to?**

Read: Korsgaard, "Skepticism about Practical Reason," Singer, "Freedom from Reason," Phillips, "Why Be Reasonable?"

### **Week 12-13 Objectivity and Moral Prescriptions: So it is written...**

Read 12: Wellman, "Emotivism and Objectivity," Hare, "Objective Prescriptions," Ehman, "Moral Objectivity,"

Read 13: Tannoch-Bland, "From Aperspectival Objectivity to Strong Objectivity," Sen, "Positional Objectivity,"

### **Week 14-15 Moral Realism and Moral Senses: Oh, there it is...**

Read 14: Dancy, "Two Conceptions of Moral Realism," Foot, "Moral Realism and Moral Dilemma,"

Read 15: Werner, "Ethical Realism," Postow, "Werner's Ethical Realism," Werner, "Ethical Realism Defended."

### **Week 16 Review and Closure**

*Week 17 (Exam Week) Essay #3 Due on Cognitivism*

**No Final Exam.**