

PHI 117: Foundations of Ethics

University of California, Davis, Fall, 2011

Professor David Copp

Department of Philosophy

office hours: Tuesdays, 2:00 to 3:00 and Thursdays, 4:30 to 5:30, SSH 2281

phone 530-554-1386

lectures: T, Th, 3:10 - 4:30, Wellman 230

teaching assistant: Ted Shear. Office hours TBA.

Course Description

This course addresses foundational issues in the field of moral philosophy known as “metaethics.” There are three central issues. (1) Are there moral or ethical facts, facts about how we ought to live our lives? (2) If there are such facts, are they “objective” in any interesting sense? (3) If there are such facts, do we have good reason to take them into account in deciding what to do? The first and second issues are sometimes raised by asking whether “moral realism” is true. To address this question, we need to address a range of more specific questions including semantic, epistemological, and metaphysical questions. What do moral terms like ‘good’ and ‘morally right’ mean? Do moral terms ascribe moral properties to things, and do moral judgments represent the world as being a certain way? Are there moral properties? If so, what are they like? Are they natural properties or are they of some special nonnatural kind? Are there moral truths, and if so, how do we know of them? How are moral truths connected to the rationality of motivation and action? The questions raised in this course are fundamental to understanding our own thoughts about how we ought to live our lives.

The course has two goals: first, to introduce students to some of the major metaethical theories, issues, and debates of the past one hundred years; and second, to help students develop their philosophical and analytical skills.

Readings and Required Text

All readings will be from the following text, which is required. See the schedule below for the specific reading assignments for each lecture.

Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, Peter Railton (eds.), Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches (Oxford University Press).

Requirements

Completion of all assignments according to schedule; regular attendance and participation. Details are as follows:

Two short (4 page) essays: each 30% of final grade.

Take-home examination: 30% of final grade. Paragraph-long answers and brief essays.

Take-home final examination – 5% of final grade. One question, based on lectures.
Participation: 5% of final grade.

The essays are due in class on October 18 and November 10. The take-home examination is due by midnight on December 1. These assignments must be submitted electronically, using the Assignments tool on the course SmartSite. The take-home final examination is due on December 7 at 5:30 p.m. either on paper in my office or electronically, using the Assignments tool on the course SmartSite. All assignments will be available by email and on SmartSite.

Grading Policy

All assignments must be completed on time. There is no provision for make-up assignments or for extra credit. No papers will be accepted after the due date. Rescheduling of examinations and assignments will be permitted only for reasons that I find to be compelling.

Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty is not tolerated. Plagiarism on any paper will result in an automatic failing grade for the entire course. Cases of plagiarism will be reported to the relevant university office. Plagiarism is “the attempt to represent the work of another as the product of one’s own thought, whether the work is published or unpublished, or simply the work of a fellow student.”

PHI 117: Schedule of Readings, and Assignments (subject to change)

Week I –Thurs, Sept. 22: Introduction – facts and values.

Week II –Tues, Sept. 27: G.E. Moore’s “open question argument.” DGR, 51-63
Thurs, Sept. 29: Moore, continued.

Week III –Tues, Oct. 4: Charles Stevenson on “emotive meaning.” DGR, 71-82
Thurs, Oct. 6: Stevenson, continued.

Week IV –Tues, Oct. 11: J. L. Mackie’s skeptical arguments. DGR, 89-100.
Thurs, Oct. 13: discussion session.

Week V –Tues, Oct. 18: Mackie, continued. **First essay due**
Thurs, Oct. 20: Stephen Darwall on reasons, motives, and demands. DGR, 305-312.

Week VI –Tues, Oct. 25: Bernard Williams, “Internal and External Reasons,” DGR, 363-371.
Thurs, Oct. 27: Darwall and Williams, continued.

Week VII –Tues, Nov. 1: Richard Boyd, “How to be a Moral Realist,” DGR 105-135.
Thurs, Nov. 3: Boyd, continued.

Week VIII – Tues, Nov. 8: Simon Blackburn, “How to be an Ethical Antirealist,” DGR, 167-178.
Thurs, Nov. 10: Blackburn, continued. **Second essay due**

Week IX – Tues, Nov. 15: Allan Gibbard. DGR, 179-198.
Thurs, Nov. 17: T.M. Scanlon, “Contractualism and Utilitarianism,” DGR, 267-286.

Week X – Tues, Nov. 22: Scanlon, continued.
Thurs, Nov. 25: no class, Thanksgiving.

Week XI – Tues, Nov. 29: Christine Korsgaard, “The Sources of Normativity,” DGR, 389-406.
Thurs, Dec. 1: Korsgaard, continued. **Take-home examination due**

Exam Week – Wed., Dec. 7, 5:30 p.m. **Final Examination due**