

Philosophy 233: Contemporary Western Moral Theories

Professor Behrends

Stevenson Hall 352

Tuesday and Thursday from 4:00 – 5:15

Course Description and Goals

Morality is the part of philosophy that is concerned with how people *should* act, with what things are *good* or *bad*, with what actions are *right* or *wrong*. As the name of course suggests, we will be concerned with moral theories that have been important in the recent Western philosophical tradition. But, because moral theorizing has been going on for over 2,000 years in that tradition, we will take a somewhat liberal view of what counts as “recent.” Specifically, we’ll concern ourselves with moral theorizing from the early 20th century forward.

Moral philosophy in the 20th century was dominated for a significant amount of time by an interest in what is known as *meta-ethics*, an area of moral theorizing that continues to attract close attention today. Whereas *normative ethics* is concerned with providing a general theory of moral rightness/wrongness, one that identifies the conditions under which some action will count as morally right or morally wrong, meta-ethics is concerned with providing a theory of the *status* of morality. In this course, we will examine some of the most significant issues in meta-ethics of the past 100 years or so. Some of the questions with which we will be concerned during the term are:

- Are there moral truths at all, in the way that there are truths about, say, what time it is right now, or how long it takes the Earth to rotate on its axis? Or is thinking about moral “truths” or “facts” instead a kind of mistake from the get-go?
- If there are moral truths, are they objective? Or do the moral truths instead somehow depend on what we believe about morality?
- When someone makes the judgment that *killing innocent people is wrong* (or whatever), what kind of judgment are they making? Is it the kind of thing that they could be correct or incorrect about? Is it an expression of their emotions?
- How widespread is moral disagreement, and what is its philosophical significance? Does moral disagreement give us reason to doubt that there are objective moral truths, for example?
- If there are moral truths, how could we come to find out what they are? That is, how do we gain moral knowledge?

This is an intermediate level course in philosophy. So, while I will not presuppose any familiarity with the course content, neither will I dedicate significant in-class time to developing introductory skills in philosophical reading and writing. One goal of the course, though, is to help you develop such skills further, and to that end much of what you will be asked to do is to *practice* philosophy, since practicing is the way by which we develop practical skills. Another goal of the course is more content-oriented. By the end of the course, you should have an adequate understanding of many of the major developments in 20th century meta-ethics.

I think that this course is very unlikely to be easy (as those of you with coursework in philosophy know, doing philosophy rarely is). Reading philosophical texts, and writing and thinking

philosophically are typically difficult tasks. The good news is that repeated practice at these kinds of tasks does pay dividends; students who dedicate themselves to the work of this course typically show significant progress in the kinds of skills we'll be seeking to develop. But it will take work, and I want you to have a clear understanding of that as we begin the term.

Contact Information

Email: jmbehre@ilstu.edu

Office: 323H Stevenson Hall

Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday, 10:30 – 11:30

I'm usually quite quick to reply to e-mails. It's very rare that I will take longer than 24 hours to respond to an email, and it's usually much faster than that (except on the weekends). Please understand, though, that I cannot *guarantee* very quick responses, so please adjust your expectations accordingly. You are of course welcome to email me with any questions or concerns you have, but you should be aware that I might respond by inviting you to set up a meeting to discuss the issue in person; email is sometimes not well suited to philosophical discussion or instruction.

I know that my office hours will not be convenient for everyone. *Please* feel free to schedule appointments with me at different times if you'd like to come by.

Required Texts

Whatever Happened to Good and Evil? Russ Shafer-Landau

Foundations of Ethics, editors Terence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau

Both texts are available at the university bookstore

Course Requirements

The following requirements will determine your grade for the course:

Reading Memos: 60%

At the beginning of the term, I will divide the course into two groups, A and B. We will cover one reading per week, and As and Bs will be responsible for producing Reading Memos on alternating weeks, for a total of six throughout the term. Each will be worth 10% of your final grade. See the Reading and Assignment Schedule below for the readings for which each group is responsible.

These assignments should be at least one page in length, and no longer than two (no more than double-spaced, no less than 1.5-spaced, with reasonable font sizes). In your memo, you must do all of the following:

- i. Identify some claim for which the author has argued. This can be any conclusion for which the author argues in the assigned reading for the relevant day. Provide a page citation for the claim in question.
- ii. Briefly explain how the author argues for that conclusion, providing citations to the text when appropriate. If you are comfortable representing arguments in premise-and-conclusion form, you may do so, but you are *not* required to.

- iii. Critically assess *at least one* part of that argument. That is, you should evaluate the argument by either attacking or defending some part of it.
- iv. Identify *at least two* questions that you would like the class to discuss. These might include: questions about some part of the text that you found confusing; questions about whether you've represented the author's argument correctly; questions about whether the class agrees with the assessment you've given of the argument; new questions that the reading has caused you to wonder about, etc. The idea here is to come prepared with *explicitly pre-formulated* potential topics for discussion.

You must submit your Reading Memo to me, via email, no later than noon on the Monday prior to the day we will begin discussing the article. For example, Group A must submit their Reading Memos on A.J. Ayer's "Critique of Ethics and Theology" no later than noon on Monday, January 18th (see Reading and Assignment Schedule Below).

I will provide hard copies in class of all of the Reading Memos prepared for the day's meeting. During class I will ask some students to talk through the memo that they have prepared, and then to act as the primary discussion leader as the rest of the class takes up discussion of the argument presented, and of the questions raised in the memo. I may not call on every student who has written a memo to present it, but you should *always* be prepared to do so. No one will go long stretches of meetings without having their memos selected for discussion.

Reading Memos will be graded both on their content, and on the student's discussion performance in class (when selected, of course). I will provide brief feedback when necessary in order to help you improve your future performance in both areas.

No one is required to write a Reading Memo for the final reading of term, but everyone has the option to. If you complete the optional memo, I will grade it and replace your lowest previous Reading Memo grade with the score for the optional memo.

Exams: 20%

There will be two exams in the course, each worth 10% of your final grade. The Second Exam will not be cumulative. Both exams will consist of essay questions. I will distribute a list of possible questions ahead of time, and choose some number of them that you must answer during the exam period. So, although you will not have any choices about which question you respond to, you will have access to all of the possible questions ahead of time.

Attendance and Participation: 20%

Developing a skill requires practice, and much of that practice will be available only during our meetings. You are allowed up to three absences during the semester, no questions asked. Except in exceptional circumstances, missing more than three meetings will negatively impact this portion of your grade. Your involvement in class discussions will also be taken in to consideration (we'll talk throughout the term about the several ways in which you can be a productive participant in our discussions), as will any discussions during office hours.

Grading Scale

Final grades will be calculated as follows:

A	100 – 90%
B	89 – 80%
C	79 – 70%
D	69 – 60%
F	<59%

Grades that fall in between these divisions will be rounded up or down at my discretion. There will be no opportunity for extra credit in the course.

Cheating of any kind, including plagiarism, will not be tolerated. If you are found to be in violation of the University’s policies governing academic dishonesty, you will be penalized in accordance with University guidelines. For information concerning the University’s policies concerning academic dishonesty, see Section V.B of the [Code of Student Conduct](#). See also <http://deanofstudents.illinoisstate.edu/conflict/conduct/code/academic.php> and the relevant links contained therein.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments (subject to revision)

Week 1 (1/12 – 1/14): Course Introduction and Introduction to Moral Realism

1/11: No readings; course introduction

1/13: Chapters 1 and 2, WHTGAE?

Weeks 2 – 3 (1/19 – 1/28): Non-Cognitivism

1/19: Ayer, “Critique of Ethics and Theology” **A**

1/26: Hare, “Descriptive Meaning and Moral Principles” [ReggieNet] **B**

Weeks 4 – 5 (2/2 – 2/11): Error Theory

2/2: Mackie, “The Subjectivity of Values” **A**

2/9: Joyce, “The Myth of Morality” **B**

Weeks 6 – 7 (2/16 – 2/25): Constructivism

2/16: Harman, “Moral Relativism Defended” **A**

2/23: Firth, “Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer” **B**

Week 8 (3/1 and 3/3): Review and First Exam

3/1: Review

3/3: First Exam

Week 9: Spring Break

No meetings on 3/8 or 3/10

Weeks 10 – 12 (3/15 – 3/31): Moral Realism Revisited

3/15: Chapters 3 – 11, WHTGAE? **A**

3/22: Chapters 12 – 16, WHTGAE? **B**

3/29: Chapters 17 – 20, WHTGAE? **A**

Weeks 13 – 14 (4/5 – 4/14): Disagreement4/5: Stevenson, “The Nature of Ethical Disagreement” **B**4/12: Brink, “Moral Disagreement” **A**Weeks 15 – 16 (4/19 – 4/28): Knowledge4/19: Daniels, “Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics” **B**4/26: Audi, “Intuitionism, Pluralism, and the Foundations of Ethics” **BONUS OPTION**Week 17: Exam Week**Date of Second Exam TBD****Special Needs**

Any student needing to arrange a reasonable accommodation for a documented disability should contact Disability Concerns at 350 Fell Hall, 309-438-5853, www.disabilityconcerns.ilstu.edu

Classroom Etiquette

As in all classroom settings, it is important that we be respectful of each other’s time and views. Please remember that, in philosophy, no matter how confident you are that your position is correct, or that another’s is incorrect, it is never appropriate to conduct yourself in a way that demeans your classmates. I don’t anticipate any problems with this requirement, but I will moderate discussions as necessary to avoid offensive behavior, and I will also address any problems individually with offending parties.

I expressly forbid the use of phones in class, except in emergency situations. I will usually provide a verbal warning for first-time offenders. Egregious violators, though, even first-time offenders, may be asked to leave class. Habitual violators will be asked to withdraw from the course, in accordance with University guidelines. If you know in advance that you will need to be reachable by phone during class, please do let me know.

I have also decided to forbid the use of laptop computers in class. This policy is new for me, and somewhat experimental, but I intend to stick by it for the entire semester; I welcome student feedback on the policy at the end of the term. I came to this policy grudgingly, but decided to enact it mostly for two reasons: (1) many of my past course evaluations included comments from students complaining of the distraction of the laptop use of other students in class, and (2) there is actual documented, empirical evidence that using a laptop in a university class makes not only the user perform less well in that class than she otherwise would have, but also causes *students around the user* to perform less well.

Other Concerns

Life at college can be very challenging. Students sometimes feel overwhelmed, lost, anxious, or depressed. Sometimes they experience relationship difficulties and low self-esteem. I care about your success in this course, and I care even more about your success in life. Please feel free to come to me if you’re struggling. I’m happy to listen and to help you find help. Student Counseling Services is staffed by experienced, professional psychologists and counselors, who are attuned to the needs of college students. Their services are free and confidential. Find out more by calling 309-438-3655 or consulting www.counseling.illinoisstate.edu.