



PHIL5324 Metaethics (Fall, 2018)

Contact Information (and Policy):

Professor: Daniel Wodak (dwodak@vt.edu)

Office Hours: Tuesdays 11.00 – 1.00 pm in 217 Major Williams Hall. If you would like to meet but cannot attend office hours, email me to request an appointment listing three possible meeting times.

Email Policy: I intend to respond to all emails sent at reasonable times promptly, provided that your email clearly explains what you are asking, and is not requesting information that you could readily find yourself.

Course Description:

This course will focus on three related topics about moral reasons:

- Reasons internalism: the view that whether you have a reason to act depends on what you desire;
- Moral rationalism: the view that if morality requires you to do something, you necessarily have a reason to do it; and,
- Moral relativism: the view that what morality requires you to do depends on what you desire.

Many metaethicists find the case for reasons internalism and moral rationalism very compelling. But if one accepts both, it is difficult to deny moral relativism, which many metaethicists and moral philosophers consider to be implausible. The course will focus on core work on all three topics, and a recent book by Julia Markovits, *Moral Reason*: Markovits makes a case for reasons internalism and moral rationalism, but denies that these views entail an implausible form of moral relativism.

Meetings and Course Materials:

Meeting times

Lecture: Thursdays, 3:00 – 6:15 pm, MWH 225.

Required text: Julia Markovits, *Moral Reason* (OUP, 2014)—you can download it from www.oxfordscholarship.com, but I cannot provide you with PDFs. All other readings will be available as PDFs on Canvas.

Assessments:

This table provides a snapshot of the assessment schedule, including when you can expect assessments to be returned with feedback:

Due Date	Assessment	% of Grade	Date Graded/Returned
Ongoing	Participation	10	November 30
TBD	Presentation	10	November 30
October 1	Short Essay	30	October 15
November 13	Questions for J.M.	5	November 20
December 3	Long Essay	45	December 10

Participation

You are expected to come to each class with the course text and your notes, ready to discuss the material and actively participate in discussion.

Presentations

You will present on one week's readings. Your presentation should be for five to ten (ten to fifteen for joint presentations), followed by up to five minutes of Q&A. You are expected to summarize the reading briefly, then raise at least two substantive issues and questions about its content. Your presentation should *not* be mostly focused on summarizing the reading.

Short Essay

You are expected to write a 1,500-word essay defending a position on moral rationalism. You will be expected to explain (in premise-conclusion

form) an argument offered by one author we considered in week one to five, and explain and evaluate a response to this argument on behalf of another author that we considered in week one to five.

Questions for Julia Markovits

Before she visits the class via Skype, you are expected to submit one page of questions for Julia Markovits. Each question should be clear and concise (ideally ~30 words), reflect substantive engagement with *Moral Reason*.

Long Essay

You are expected to write a 2,500-word essay defending a position on one of the philosophical issues that we consider in the second half of the course. You will be expected to compose a valid argument for your position, defend its premises, and consider and respond to an objection.

Five Simple Tips for How to Improve

1. Improve your research habits.

If you mostly rely on Wikipedia and blogs, you'll do badly. These sources *might* contain some good philosophical analysis. But they're just as likely to contain simple philosophical mistakes. *Rely on peer-reviewed sources.* Use google scholar instead of google. Try the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (www.plato.stanford.edu) or the journal *Philosophy Compass*.

2. Read about reading and writing about philosophy.

I strongly recommend that you read Jim Pryor's '[Guidelines on Reading Philosophy](#)' and '[Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper](#)'. They're short, and will save you much time and stress in the long run.

3. Practice.

Learning philosophy for the first time involves learning some new skills. Like learning to ride a bike, that takes time and involves trial and error. It also becomes easier and easier the more you do it. Practice analyzing and

developing arguments throughout the course, and it'll become easy.

4. Take notes.

Perhaps the simplest thing you can do to improve in philosophy is to take notes *for every reading and lecture and discussion section*. You will absorb more of the material if you actively read and listen. And you will *not* be given lecture notes in this course—so your notes will be a crucial resource.

5. Make philosophy a social activity.

An easy and fun way to improve is to talk about the key arguments and ideas from course with your friends, and/or with other students from the course. Consider creating a study group. They will help you understand material that you are struggling with. And you will reach a deeper understanding yourself when you explain ideas and arguments to others.

Honor Code Procedures:

This is an ethics course. Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will be treated very seriously. The normal sanction I will recommend for a violation of the Honor Code is an **F*** sanction as your final course grade.

The Undergraduate Honor Code pledge that each member of the university community agrees to abide by states: “As a Hokie, I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times. I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do.”

Students enrolled in this course are responsible for abiding by the Honor Code. A student who has doubts about how the Honor Code applies to any assignment is responsible for obtaining specific guidance from the course instructor before submitting the assignment for evaluation. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the University community from the requirements and expectations of the Honor Code. For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit <https://www.honorsystem.vt.edu/> or contact honorsys@vt.edu.

The Virginia Tech honor pledge for assignments is as follows: “I have

neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on this assignment.” It must be written out and signed on every assignment in this course.

Your written assignments may be reviewed through the University’s plagiarism prevention and detection software called *Turnitin-Feedback Studio*, which is a resource designed to detect and prevent plagiarism. I have every intention of using this software, which is a tool that works by cross-referencing submitted materials with journals, essays, newspaper articles, papers, books, the internet, and other literary works. Turnitin-Feedback Studio does not identify all forms of plagiarism. The software also does not replace my judgement regarding what constitutes plagiarism.

Any of the following constitutes academic misconduct: cheating, plagiarism, falsification, fabrication, multiple submissions, complicity, or violation of university, college, department, program, course, or faculty rules.

Other Administrative Issues:

Electronics Policy

No electronics can be used in class (including phones and laptops). Exceptions will be made for students with disabilities, or volunteer notetakers with SSD, or for similar causes. This is a strict rule.

Lateness Policy

Late assessments will be penalized at the rate of 5% per day, unless (a) you have a documented illness or other extenuating circumstance, and (b) you have explicit prior authorization to hand in the assignment late, from me, to be granted at my discretion. If you foresee a conflict between an assessment due date and another commitment, please email me well in advance so that I can provide a fair alternative.

Absences

“Students who miss class due to circumstances beyond their control can request to have the absence verified. Each faculty member will make the

final determination in allowing the request to make-up missed academic work. Verification of absence does not override the authority of a faculty member. For family or personal emergencies, contact the Dean of Students Office (109 East Eggleston Hall, 231-3787). For absence related to mental health, contact Cook Counseling Center (McComas Hall, 231-6557). For absence related to physical health, contact Schiffert Health Center (McComas Hall, 231-6444). Please note, Schiffert Health Center will only verify absences resulting from prolonged illness (at least 5 days). In addition, Schiffert does not notify faculty of one-time student appointments in the Health Center. Relevant documentation is required for any verification of absence. The Dean of Students office does not verify absences related to religious and ethnic holidays.”

Disabilities

I wholeheartedly endorse Tech’s policy and practice of creating inclusive learning environments for all students, including students with disabilities. If aspects of this course – such as time limited exams or inaccessible web content – result in barriers to your inclusion or your ability to meet course requirements please notify me as soon as possible. We will adapt methods, materials or testing in order to offer fair terms of participation. You are also encouraged to contact the Services for Students with Disabilities office to discuss and arrange reasonable accommodations. Please visit www.ssd.vt.edu/students.htm for more information.

Class Schedule:

Date	Topic	Readings
August 23	Introduction	Julia Markovits, <i>Moral Reason</i> , ch. 1: 'Reasons and Moral Relativism'
August 30	Reasons Internalism I	Bernard Williams, 'Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame'
September 6	Reasons Internalism II	Julia Markovits, <i>Moral Reason</i> , ch. 2 & 3: 'Internalism and the Motivating Intuition' & 'Why Be an Internalist About Reasons?'
September 13	Reasons Internalism III	Derek Parfit, <i>On What Matters</i> , vol. 1, pp. 73-91 & Sharon Street, 'In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference'
September 20	Reasons Internalism IV	David Sobel, <i>From Valuing to Value</i> , ch. 14: 'Parfit's Case against Subjectivism' & Ruth Chang, 'Grounding practical normativity'
October 4	Moral Rationalism I	Peter Railton, 'Moral Realism'
October 18	Moral Rationalism II	Philippa Foot, 'Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives'
October 25	Moral Rationalism III	Christine Korsgaard, 'Skepticism about Practical Reason' & Sharon Street, 'Coming to Terms with Contingency'
November 1	Moral Rationalism IV	Julia Markovits, <i>Moral Reason</i> , ch. 4 & 5: 'Kant's Argument' & 'Kantian Internalism'
November 8	Moral Relativism I	Julia Markovits, <i>Moral Reason</i> , ch. 6: 'Is the Moral Imperative Categorical?'
November 15	Moral Relativism II	Julia Markovits, <i>Moral Reason</i> , ch. 7: 'What Do We Have Moral Reason to Do?' * Markovits will join us via Skype
November 29	Moral Relativism III	Jamie Dreier, 'Internalism and Speaker Relativism'

NB: There will be no classes on September 27 and October 11.