



Philosophy 5324: Metaethics (Spring, 2017)

Professor: Daniel Wodak dwodak@vt.edu 217 MWH
Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays, 2.30-3.30/by appointment.
Time and place: Seminars take place on Thursdays, 5-7.30, 215 MWH.

Course Description:

This course has three main aims. The first is to explore central theories in moral epistemology, with a particular focus on theories that have the best hope of justifying the predominant methodology of moral philosophy. By theories in moral epistemology, I mean theories that seek to explain why our moral beliefs are justified, or amount to knowledge. By the predominant methodology of moral philosophy, I mean reflective equilibrium. Moral philosophers typically proceed by appealing to intuitions about general theories and particular cases, with the goal of reaching a state of coherence. Whether this methodology can yield justification or knowledge is one of the most significant questions in ethics.

The second aim is to explore three general challenges in moral epistemology. These challenges concern disagreement, genealogy, and testimony, respectively. The disagreement challenge is that given the pervasiveness of moral disagreement, we should significantly reduce our confidence in our own moral views. The genealogical challenge is that the explanation for why we have the moral beliefs that we do has nothing to do with their truth—we believe that stealing is wrong because of how we evolved, not because of the wrongness of stealing—so these beliefs are not justified. The testimony challenge is that there is a distinct, puzzling problem with deferring to moral experts—it is inappropriate to defer to a

moral philosopher about morality in a way that it is not inappropriate to defer to a physicist about physics. These challenges are often thought to be particularly difficult for moral realists, and especially for non-naturalist moral realists. And some, like Kieran Setiya, suggest that they should prompt us to adopt a wholly different theory in moral epistemology. (Since the discussion of the first two challenges overlaps, we will go back and forth between the two, as well as Setiya's theory, in weeks 4-12.)

The third aim is pedagogical. An important, neglected skill in philosophy is asking good questions while reading, and especially while interacting with philosophers. We will focus on developing this skill throughout the course. And you will be able to practice it when six of the eleven authors that we are reading in the course visit the class (two via Skype, four IRL).

Course Readings:

All readings will be available on Canvas. For those with no prior exposure to epistemology, it may be worth your while to supplement these readings with a survey text survey text survey text such as Richard Feldman's *Epistemology* or Alvin Goldman and Mathew McGrath's *Epistemology*.

Course Schedule:

Date	Topic	Readings	Guest
January 19	Coherentism	Geoff Sayre-McCord, 'Coherentist Epistemology and Moral Theory'	
January 26	Reflective Equilibrium	Sarah McGrath, 'Reflective Equilibrium'	Sarah McGrath
February 2	Intuitionism	Michael Huemer, 'Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism'	
February 9	The Disagreement Challenge I	Sarah McGrath, 'Moral disagreement and moral expertise'	

February 16	The Genealogical Challenge I	Sharon Street, 'A Darwinian Dilemma'	
February 23	Reductive Epistemology and Disagreement	Kieran Setiya, <i>Knowing Right From Wrong</i> , ch 1-2	
March 2	Reductive Epistemology and Genealogy	Kieran Setiya, <i>Knowing Right From Wrong</i> , ch 3-4	Kieran Setiya (via Skype) *NB: this class may meet from 4-6.30 pm.
March 16	The Genealogical Challenge II	Katia Vavova, 'Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism' and 'The Limits of Rational Belief Revision'	
March 23	Disagreement II	Katia Vavova, 'Moral Disagreement and Moral Skepticism'.	Katia Vavova (via skype)
March 30	The Genealogical Challenge III	Josh Schechter, TBC	Josh Schechter
April 6	The Genealogical Challenge IV	Justin Clarke-Doane, 'Justification and Explanation in Mathematics and Morality'.	
April 13	The Genealogical Challenge V	David Faraci, 'Knowledge, Necessity and Defeat'	David Faraci
April 20	Testimony	Sarah McGrath, 'Skepticism about Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for Moral Realism'; Alison Hills, 'Moral Testimony'	

April 27	Testimony	Errol Lord, 'How to Learn about Aesthetics and Morality Through Acquaintance and Testimony' and 'On the Rational Power of Aesthetic Testimony'	Errol Lord
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Assessments:

Due Date	Assessment	% of Grade
Weekly	Reading Responses	20
Ongoing	Participation	10
2/19, 4/2, 4/7	Essay(s)	60
4/7	Peer Review	10

Reading Responses will involve you writing a short (less than one page) discussion of one to three points about the reading for the week. You will be expected to submit these by the Wednesday prior to the class in question. In your responses, you should aim to clearly and succinctly state each point – be it a question, an objection, a suggestion, or a solution to a problem posed by the author – in the form that you would ask it in class, then explain in more detail why the point in question is important. You will only be graded on your best ten responses over the semester.

Participation will involve active participation in the seminar.

The **Essay(s)** will be the main form of assessment for the course. I will offer you two ways of approaching this assessment. The first involves writing three shorter essays (5 pages). The second involves writing one long essay (15 pages). If you submit three essays, they will be due every 5 weeks. If you submit one essay, you will be expected to submit an outline in week 5, a draft in week 10, and the final essay at the end of the term. So either way, the due dates will be the same. The weighting will, however, be different. The 5 page essays are weighted equally (20%). The outline (5%), draft (15%) and final (40%) 15 page essays are weighted unequally.

You can write essays on any topic, subject to my approval.

In week 11 you will also engage in a **Peer Review** session where you will give a fellow student extended written feedback on either (a) their second 5-page essay, or (b) their draft of their 15-page essay. These will be submitted via email. All other assessments will be submitted on canvas.

Honor Code Procedures:

“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.

The Virginia Tech honor pledge for assignments is as follows: “I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance on this assignment.”

The pledge is to be written out on all graded assignments at the university and signed by the student. The honor pledge represents both an expression of the student’s support of the honor code and an unambiguous acknowledgment that the student has, on the assignment in question, abided by the obligation that the Honor Code entails. In the absence of a written honor pledge, the Honor Code still applies to an assignment.

For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit:

<https://www.honorsystem.vt.edu/>

To pre-register for one of the “Understanding the Virginia Tech Honor Code” sessions that are held in August, or to complete the Academic Integrity Module, please email honorsys@vt.edu.

Other Administrative Issues:

Lateness Policy

Late assignments will be penalized (5% of the assignment grade per day, or portion thereof), unless due to documented illness or (at my discretion) other extenuating circumstances. If you foresee a problem with a due date, please email me well in advance to arrange an 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 your TA 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 call 540-231-0858 or visit their website at

www.ssd.vt.edu/students.htm for more information.