

# Metaethics (5 weeks)

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## 1 Overview

Week	Topic
1	Moral Realism
2	Moral Anti-Realism
3	Moral Particularism
4	Naturalism
5	Non-Naturalism

Metaethics is the branch of philosophy concerned with what grounds our ethical claims. Rather than figuring out *what* the moral principles are, metaethicists try to figure out what makes certain moral principles the correct ones. It also concerns itself with the question of whether or not moral properties such as goodness and rightness can be fitted into a scientific picture of the world. Furthermore, metaethicists worry about the status of our moral judgements. Questions arise over whether or not our moral judgements should be taken as statements of objective facts about the world, or whether they should be thought of more along the lines of judgements of taste and expressions of opinion. In this course, we'll look at some of the most influential contributions to these areas of philosophy.

## 2 Course Website

I'll post the materials for these tutorials on my website as we go along. They can be downloaded at:

[www.stephenwrightphilosophy.com](http://www.stephenwrightphilosophy.com) on the right-hand side of the page under the 'Metaethics' link.

## 3 A Note on the Reading List

For each class I've identified three types of reading. Readings marked as required are exactly that – they're readings you just have to do. Some of these are hard, though, so I've set out some introductory readings that you can consult. These introductory reasons are *not* to be used as a substitute for the required readings, though. They are there to give you a route to accessing the content of the required readings. Judicious use of the introductory readings will help you understand what's at stake in some of these debates. It won't, however, give you the kind of understanding of the issues that you can get from the required readings.

† denotes required reading.

# denotes introductory reading.

\* denotes background reading.

Lastly, don't be shy about asking me if you find any of the readings hard to get hold of.

## 4 Doing Philosophy

During your time doing philosophical work, you'll want to read things that aren't on the reading lists. And it's really important that what you read is good quality. It's very easy to waste a lot of time and energy in philosophy reading stuff that just isn't helpful. If you read stuff from poor sources, you're liable to wind up confused or misinformed. You want to be reading things that are written by people who have, at the very least, more philosophical experience than you. In the case of several sources, though, there's no filtering or checking to make sure that this is the case. Obviously, the reading lists provided by the faculty are a great place to look. But even they don't contain *everything*. With that in mind, here are some guidelines for you to get you started. As always, do get in touch and ask me if you find yourself in any doubt at all.

Some good places to start your reading are:

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://plato.stanford.edu> is an excellent resource. It gives you an overview of some of the topics that we'll be working on and also comes with a useful bibliography, all of which is of an appropriate quality for you to be using.

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/> is another excellent online philosophy encyclopedia. Like the Stanford Encyclopedia, its entries are reviewed before they are published and also have useful suggestions for further reading.

Philpapers at <http://www.philpapers.org> is an online collection of philosophy articles that can be searched by category. There are some excellent articles on here and the site is a useful way of finding things to read. This site requires some caution, though. Unlike the above two, anyone can add their papers, regardless of whether or not they have actually been published in journals, or are ever going to be! As a rule of thumb, if you can't see publication details for a paper on this site, then proceed with caution. This notwithstanding, it is an excellent and important source.

Google Scholar at <http://scholar.google.co.uk/> is a relatively recent research tool and one that's extremely useful. The best thing that you can use Google Scholar for is finding papers that are relevant to what you've been reading. If you run a search for a paper that you've just read, Google Scholar will help throw up any papers that have cited the paper you searched for. This is extremely useful for helping you figure out where to go next. As with PhilPapers, however, there's no quality filter, so if you are in any doubt about what you've found (as with any of the above resources) feel free to ask me first. Lastly, note that this *is* an acceptable use of Google's resources, where searching for philosophers or themes and then reading what you find absolutely is *not*. Likewise, stay off looking for things on Wikipedia.

## 5 Week 1 – Moral Realism

A useful way of thinking about moral realism is in terms of the conjunction of two claims. The first is about what moral statements, statements of the form *killing the innocent is wrong* purport to be doing. Moral realists claim that moral statements purport to be reporting facts about the world, like *Paris is the capital of France*. The second is about what moral statements actually do. According to moral realists, moral statements do in fact report facts and are therefore true when they get the facts right. In this class, we'll be looking at the idea of moral realism and thinking about what might be said in support of it.

- † Michael Smith 1993. 'Realism' in Shafer-Landau.
- † Russ Shafer-Landau 2005. 'Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Nonnaturalism' in Shafer-Landau.
- † David Brink 1984. 'Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62:111-125.
- † Robert Audi 2008. 'Intuition, Inference, and Rational Disagreement in Ethics' *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 11:475-492.
- \* Derek Parfit 2011. *On What Matters Volume 1* Oxford, Oxford University Press. Chapter 4.
- \* Folke Tersman 2006. *Moral Disagreement* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \* Russ Shafer-Landau 2003. *Moral Realism: A Defense* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- \* John Skorupski 1999. 'Irrealist Cognitivism' *Ratio* 12:436-459.
- \* Andrew Fisher and Simon Kirchin (eds.), 2006. *Arguing about Metaethics*. London: Routledge.

*Essay Question: Critically evaluate the importance of moral disagreement for the dispute between moral realists and moral anti-realists.*

## 6 Week 2 – Moral Anti-Realism

Thinking of realism as the conjunction of two claims means that there are at least two ways of endorsing *anti-realism*, the denial of moral realism. The first involves denying the realist claim that moral statements purport to make state matters of fact. The second involves denying the claim that this is what they actually do. In this class, we'll think about different ways of endorsing moral anti-realism as well as some of the major considerations that might be brought to bear both for and against various anti-realist theories.

- † James Lenman 2013. 'Ethics Without Errors' *Ratio* 26:391-409.
- † J.L. Mackie 1977. 'The Subjectivity of Values' in Shafer-Landau.
- † P. T. Geach 1960. 'Ascriptivism' *Philosophical Review* 69:221-225.
- † James Dreier 2009. 'Relativism (and Expressivism) and the Problem of Disagreement' *Philosophical Perspectives* 23:79-110.
- \* James Lenman 2012. 'Expressivism and Constructivism' In James Lenman & Yonatan Shemmer (eds.), *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*. Oxford University Press.
- \* Mark Schroeder 2008. *Being For: Evaluating the Semantic Program of Expressivism* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- \* Allan Gibbard 1990. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- \* R.T. Garner 1994. *Beyond Morality*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- \* Gilbert Harman 1975. 'Moral relativism defended' *Philosophical Review* 84:3-22.

*Essay Question: What does it mean to say that morality is not an objective matter? Is there any defensible way of maintaining that morality is not an objective matter?*

## 7 Week 3 – Moral Particularism

According to the moral particularist, we can give a perfectly good account of why some actions are right, others are wrong and any other ascriptions of moral properties without the need for general moral principles. The idea is that, a set of considerations that might properly motivate someone to do something in one case might properly fail to motivate her to do the same thing in another case. In this class, we will examine the claim that what is a moral reason in one case might be no reason at all in another.

- † Jonathan Dancy 2004. *Ethics Without Principles* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 15-37.<sup>1</sup>
- † Robert Audi 2006. 'Ethical Generality and Moral Judgment' In James Lawrence Dreier (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory* London: Blackwell Publishing pp. 6-285.
- † Mark Lance & Margaret Olivia Little 2006. 'Defending Moral Particularism' In James Lawrence Dreier (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory*. Blackwell Publishing pp. 305-321.
- # The Internet Encyclopedia Entry on 'Moral Particularism' available [here](#).
- # The Stanford Encyclopedia Entry on 'Moral Particularism' available [here](#).
- \* Pekka Vayrynen 2006, 'Moral Generalism: Enjoy in Moderation' *Ethics* 116:707-741.
- \* Richard Holton 2002. 'Principles and Particularisms' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 67:191-209.
- \* Sean McKeever and Mike Ridge 2005. 'What does Holism have to do with Particularism?' *Ratio* 18:93–103.

*Question:* 'A moral reason to  $\phi$  in one case might not be a moral reason to  $\phi$  in another case.' *Discuss.*

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<sup>1</sup>I've listed pages 15-37, though you could usefully read up to page 70 if you have time.

## 8 Week 4 – Naturalism

In this class, we'll be looking at naturalist theories of moral philosophy. Rather than thinking about the ontological status of the facts that moral claims purport (or not) to represent, we'll be thinking about what type of facts moral facts might be. Primarily, we'll be looking at a view called *reductive naturalism*. According to reductive naturalists, moral properties are, ultimately, just natural properties in the world.

- † Mark Schroeder 2005. 'Realism and Reduction: The Quest for Robustness' *Philosophers Imprint* 5:1-18.
- † Peter Railton 1986. 'Moral Realism' *Philosophical Review* 95:163-207.
- † G.E. Moore 1903. *Principia Ethica* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Chapter. 1.
- # The Stanford Encyclopedia Entry on 'Moral Naturalism' available [here](#).
- \* Bart Streumer 2011. 'Are Normative Properties Descriptive Properties?' *Philosophical Studies* 154:325-348.
- \* Paul Bloomfield. 1997. 'Of Goodness and Healthiness: A Viable Moral Ontology' *Philosophical Studies* 87:309-332.
- \* Russ Shafer-Landau 2003. *Moral Realism: A Defence* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 3.
- \* Susana Nuccetelli & Gary Seay 2007. 'What's Right with the Open Question Argument' In Susana Nuccetelli & Gary Seay (eds.), *Themes from G. E. Moore: New Essays in Epistemology and Ethics* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

*Question: What is moral naturalism and in what way is it challenged by the Open Question Argument.*

## 9 Week 5 – Non-Naturalism

In this final class, we will look at non-naturalist moral theories. Non-naturalists reject the naturalist claim that moral properties are either reducible to, or supervene on, non-moral properties. Our interest will be particularly on the relationship between moral properties and non-moral properties in terms of supervenience. We will also think more carefully about exactly what is meant by ‘natural’ and ‘non-natural’ properties. As we will see, the dispute between moral naturalism and moral non-naturalism cuts across the debate between moral realism and moral anti-realism.

- † Mike Ridge 2007. ‘Anti-Reductionism and Supervenience’ *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 4:330–348.
- † Simon Blackburn 1984. ‘Supervenience Revisited’ In Ian Hacking (ed.), *Exercises in Analysis: Essays by Students of Casimir Lewy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press pp. 59-74.
- † Russ Shafer-Landau 2003. *Moral Realism: A Defence* Oxford: Oxford University Press. Chapter 4.
- # The Stanford Encyclopedia Entry on ‘Moral Non-Naturalism’ available [here](#).
- \* David E. Alexander 2011. ‘Problems for Moral/Natural Supervenience’ *Religious Studies* 47:73-84.
- \* Anthony Brueckner 2002. ‘Blackburn’s Modal Argument Against Moral Realism’ *Theoria* 68:67-70.
- \* Carl Ginet (1979). ‘Performativity’ *Linguistics and Philosophy* 3 (2):245-265.

*Question: In what ways does supervenience present a problem for moral non-naturalism? How might moral non-naturalists seek to respond to the problem?*