PHIL743: ETHICS PROSEMINAR
New North 204; M 2-4:30 PM

Mark Murphy
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Office Hours: M 11:30-12:30, W 11-12,
and by appt.

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Course description

This course is a graduate-level introduction to ethical theory, focusing on issues in metaethics and moral psychology.

Course objectives

Through active participation in this seminar, you will

- get some grip on the importance of metaethical positions
- become acquainted with how we do ethics now
- get prepared to pass that damned comp

Course format

The format of the course is a fairly even mix of lecture and discussion.

Course requirements

Course requirements include three short papers, one longer paper, a final examination, and seminar participation.

The short papers. Each of the three short (1000-1250 words) papers should be a criticism of an argument offered in one of the readings for that week’s seminar meeting. Each should be submitted by e-mail as a .pdf document by 10 PM the evening before the seminar will meet to discuss that particular reading. Members of the seminar have complete freedom to decide which readings they wish to write their short papers on, subject to two provisos: at least one of the papers should be turned in no later than February 11, and one can turn in only one paper per week.
Course requirements (continued)

These short papers have a threefold purpose. First, they serve to keep you thinking in a focused, critical way about the views we are discussing in class. Second, I will sometimes use these papers as material for critical discussion. (Because I need to read these papers before class, none of these papers will be accepted after the 10-PM-the-night-before deadline.) Third, one of these papers will serve as a springboard for the longer paper.

Note: These are to be short, but not sloppy. Write as if you will be offering these pieces to Analysis, or reading them as comments at an APA meeting.

The longer paper. The longer (3000-3500 words) paper should be an enlargement of one of the short papers turned in on April 15 or earlier. Apart from taking into account my critical remarks and any relevant class discussion, the longer version should consider in greater detail the extent to which the criticism put forward can be answered by the view. This paper will be due April 26.

The final exam. There will be a final exam, which will also serve as the qualifying exam in ethics. It will be at the time scheduled by the registrar (Monday, 5/6, 1 PM), unless there is unanimous, uncoerced (even by social sanctions) agreement to hold it earlier.

Seminar participation. Let’s not turn this into some sort of philosophical Bataan Death March toward the qualifying exam. Ethics is fun, dammit. Let’s keep it lively and interesting.

Texts
Michael Smith, The Moral Problem; Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo, Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology; Foot, Natural Goodness; other papers available electronically.

Consulting

I’m around on Monday a bit, but not much more than the listed office hours. Wednesdays I am much more free. Fridays I am around, but likely preparing for a UCRT meeting, so you should check in advance when I’m free to meet. I’m around almost never on Tuesdays and Thursdays.
SCHEDULE

1/9
READING. Smith, The Moral Problem, ch 1.
TOPICS. The distinction between metaethics and normative ethics. Smith’s ‘Moral Problem’ as a metaethical problem.

1/14
TOPICS. Can moral concepts be defined? Non-naturalistic and naturalistic definitions. The open question argument. Smith’s diagnosis.

1/21
NO CLASS: MLK DAY

1/28
READING. Blackburn, “How to Be an Ethical Anti-Realist,” in FE, pp. 47-57; Blackburn, “Attitudes and Contents,” in FE, pp. 474-484; Schroeder, from Noncognitivism in Ethics (electronic)
TOPIC. Expressivism. The Frege-Geach Problem.

2/4

2/11
READING. Hume, excerpt from A Treatise of Human Nature (electronic); Nagel, excerpt from The Possibility of Altruism (electronic); McDowell, “Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?” (electronic); The Moral Problem, Ch. 4.
TOPICS. The Humean theory of motivation. Does the Humean theory call into question the existence of categorical moral requirements? Alternatives to Humeanism.

2/18
NO CLASS: PRESIDENTS’ DAY

2/25
TOPICS. Error theory.

3/4
NO CLASS: SPRING BREAK

3/11
TOPICS. Constructivism.

3/18
TOPICS. Reductivist naturalism I.
TOPICS. Non-naturalist realism.

4/1 NO CLASS: EASTER MONDAY

TOPICS. Reductivist naturalism II.

4/15 READING. Foot, Natural Goodness, chs. 1-5 (pp. 1-82)
TOPICS. Nonreductivist naturalism.

TOPICS. Supernaturalist realism.

Final WRAPUP WITH DINNER AT MURPHY’S: DATE/TIME/TOPICS/MENU TBA