

## **PHIL 434: Metaethics**

Tues & Thurs, 8:35–9:55

SH688, room 491

### **Contact information**

Instructor: Éliot Litalien

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Office hours: Mondays, 1:00–3:00 or by appointment, in Leacock 932

### **Description**

Normative ethics deals with the conditions under which an action is morally right (or wrong) or motives and intentions morally good (or bad). One could thus say that normative ethics is concerned with the content of morality. One could, however, also have questions about the very enterprise of normative ethics, about the very practice of moral philosophy: are right and wrong human inventions? Are they natural properties or facts? Is there such a thing as an “objective” moral truth? If so, can we ever know about it? In any case, do we presuppose in our ordinary practice of forming moral judgments that an objective moral truth exists or are moral judgments rather the expression of emotions or approval? Finally, is there any reason to believe that moral properties, if they indeed exist, are authoritative by their very nature? Metaethics is concerned with those foundational questions: rather than focusing on the content of morality, it aims at elucidating the status of moral claims or moral judgments and their relation to practical reason and action. Metaethics is thus concerned with the epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of language and philosophy of mind of moral thought and discourse. Although it certainly cannot pretend to exhaustiveness, this course aims at offering a comprehensive overview of the field of metaethics. We will thus read both classic works (including selections from G. E. Moore, A. J. Ayer, C. L. Stevenson, J. L. Mackie, Philippa Foot, Gilbert Harman, and Peter Railton) and recent journal articles or book chapters.

### **Prerequisite**

This is an advanced course in ethics, intended for students with prior university coursework in moral philosophy. Students are thus required to have taken PHIL 334 (Ethical Theory), or to have the written permission of the instructor.

### **Readings**

The instructor will make all readings available on myCourses.

Recommended introductory readings:

Fisher, Andrew. *Metaethics. An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 2011.

Miller, Alexander. *Contemporary Metaethics. An Introduction*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge: Polity, 2013.

Van Roojen, Mark. *Metaethics. A Contemporary Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2015.

## Evaluations

Weekly reading assignments	20%
Midterm paper	30%
Final paper	50%

The final mark comprises weekly reading assignments (20%), a short midterm essay (30%) and a final paper (50%). In order to pass the course, students must submit all of the required assignments. All work must be submitted and will be returned through myCourses.

Starting on the second week of the semester, students will have to submit a **weekly reading assignment**. The goal of each of these assignments is to identify and explain, in the student's own words, the central argument of one of the week's readings: what claim is the author making or defending and what reason, argument or evidence is the author offering in support of that claim? Each assignment should be **300-500 words** long. The weekly assignments are due by **11:59 PM on the Monday preceding the week of lectures dealing with the reading** about which the assignment is. Out of the twelve submitted assignments, four will be randomly selected for assessment. Each of the graded assignments is thus **worth 5%** of the final grade. The **deadline** for submission of the weekly reading assignments is strict. **Late submissions will receive a zero.**

The **midterm paper**, which is **worth 30%** of the final grade and which must be **1500-2000 words** long, is due by **24 October, 11:59 PM**. The **final paper**, which is **worth 50%** of the final grade and which must be **2500-3000 words** long, is due by **12 December, 11:59 PM**, that is, one week after the course's conclusion. In both papers, students will have to explore in detail a topic of their choice from each half of the course. Students will be expected to defend a particular thesis in their own words, with their own arguments. A list of possible topics will be made available on myCourses. Students can choose a topic that is not on the list, but the instructor must first approve it.

## Course policies

Extensions to deadlines will be granted in **exceptional** circumstances only, such as a medical emergency, provided that the student can produce a medical note or other appropriate documents. **Late papers**, excluding the weekly reading assignments (see above), **will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a grade per calendar day of lateness**. For example, an essay that would have been otherwise given a B+ will be given a B if one day late.

The use of cellphones, earbuds and headphones in class is forbidden. The use of a computer or tablet in class is permitted, but only for academic purposes. The recording of lectures is not permitted without the express consent of the instructor.

## McGill statements of policy

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [http://www.mcgill.ca/files/integrity/Code\\_of\\_Student\\_Conduct.pdf](http://www.mcgill.ca/files/integrity/Code_of_Student_Conduct.pdf) for more information).

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.