

Ethical Theory PHIL 514

Fall 2020

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Class Meeting: Tu/Th 10:05AM-11:20AM on Zoom
Office Hours: M 2PM-3PM, W 10AM-11AM on Zoom
M 3PM-4PM, W 11AM-12PM on 2427 Terrace Way's porch

Course Description

This course investigates two central questions in normative theory. First, is there any account of normative properties that can explain true judgments about them? If not, we must accept an error theory, according to which all normative claims and beliefs are false. Second, should we take for granted, as most ethicists do, that any plausible ethical theory is universalist?

Learning Outcomes

This course is structured to introduce students to current work in ethical theory and metaethics. It is focused on error theory (the view that there are no moral truths) and relativist accounts (accounts which deny that all moral truths are universal). In addition, students will further develop and hone analytic, writing, and research skills appropriate to the discipline of philosophy.

Course Materials

There are two required books for this course.
Bart Streumer *Unbelievable Errors* OUP, 2017 (978-0198785897)
David Wong *Natural Moralities* OUP, 2006 (978-0195383294).

Course Requirements

Course Format

This is a fully online course, involving both synchronic and asynchronous elements. Regular high-speed internet access is essential for success in this course.

Students will attend two meetings per week, once in small groups on Tuesday and then for a class-wide discussion on Thursday.

The purpose of the meeting of the small group on Tuesday is to work through the structure of the reading, discuss seemingly relevant background issues, and come up with questions to shape class discussion on Thursday.

Students should re-read the reading on Wednesday with their Tuesday discussion in mind, and come to our class meeting on Thursday ready to dig more deeply into the week's material.

This is an entirely Web-based course. Because of the advanced material in this course students should make sure they are able to attend course meetings and in cases where this is not possible, they should be in close contact with the professor to arrange alternate ways to discuss the material.

Course Communication

If you need to get in touch with me, the best method is via email. Generally, I will reply to emails within 24 hours, but I try to respond much quicker. Please note, however, I do not check email after 8PM or on Sundays.

You may, *in emergencies*, text me if you are experiencing technological difficulties joining our Zoom meetings. For almost all questions and issues, I ask that you rely on email.

Please ensure that your email account works properly in order to receive email.

Technology Requirements

To participate in class discussions you will need:

- Access to a working computer that has a current operating system with updates installed, plus speakers or headphones to hear lecture and a camera to participate in video Zoom;
- Reliable Internet access and a USC email account;
- A current Internet browser that is compatible with Blackboard (Google Chrome is the recommended browser for Blackboard);

Course Assignments and Grading

Assignments

Students will be expected to write two papers, one due during midterms and another during the final exam period. Students will work with each other and the instructor to select and hone topics for both papers.

Undergraduate students should aim to write papers 3-6k words,
Graduate students should aim to write papers approximately 8k words.

Grading

Students will receive extensive feed-back on both papers and receive one of three grades: excellent/good/adequate. Any student may be revised.

Both papers are given equal weight in determining final grades.

Weekly Schedule

Our plan for this semester is to work carefully through two dense and interesting contemporary philosophy manuscripts. This is something most students in the class will have never done before and it is *hard*. Though we only will read one or two book chapters per week, students should expect to read those chapters several times and do outside research to familiarize themselves with any relevant background information.

I strongly suggest that students make a schedule of times they put aside for reading so that they know they'll have time to devote to reading the assigned work carefully before Tuesday's discussion and again before Thursday. Reading and carefully thinking about the text prior to class will be essential

Course Policies and Procedures

Below is more information about how this course will work and what the expectations are for both students and the instructor.

Attendance

Students are strongly encouraged to attend all synchronic Zoom discussions. If students are unable to do so, please be in touch as soon as possible so that we can make sure you're able to stay on top of the material and are able to engage with class members in some capacity.

Academic Integrity and Instructor Attitude Towards Students

I trust students. I trust them to know the academic integrity policies of the university, but more importantly, I trust them to be responsible stewards of their education. I assume that students are submitting their own work, that students are putting in as much effort as they believe they are able to given other demands, etc. Like all trust, this can be taken advantage of. But we get the most out of life by being worthy of the trust others put in us.

Class Community

I hope that the trust I put in students they will, in turn, extend to each other. This will enable us to see each other as co-inquirers in a *collaborative* educational project. This requires expecting and extending generosity towards those we disagree with and humility when confronted with objections. It requires endeavoring to treat each other with respect and care and a willingness to ask for and extend forgiveness when we fail to do so. It requires seeing each other as fundamentally decent, caring, and well-meaning people.

This is how I endeavor to treat you all: as fundamentally good people who have your own goals and interests and are fundamentally doing what seems best to you given your circumstances. I ask you to treat each other and me in the same way.

Incomplete Grades

I think it's always better to avoid the need for an incomplete, and will work with any student to satisfactorily complete the course on time. If necessary, incompletes will be granted in accordance with university policy.

Accessibility

I am committed to ensuring course **accessibility** for all students. If there is a way that this course could be more accessible to you, please let me know.

Expectations for the Instructor

My job is to be here to structure and facilitate your learning. I think this requires several things of me.

1. Being there for you. As your instructor, I am here primarily to ensure you are able to learn. I will be available to answer questions, facilitate discussions, and guide your learning. I will be attentive and responsive to your educational needs.
2. Structuring your learning experience. This course is designed to be the arena in which you can learn. I will structure the material, assignments, and discussions in a way that I hope will foster your learning through your engagement with the material and each other. This means that I am open to amending the structure and content in response to changing circumstances and student needs.
3. Providing guidance. I can best ensure you are able to learn by actively helping you through the process. I will do this by providing materials to introduce topics and readings, answering questions, passively facilitating discussions, and

providing timely feedback on work. I also will do this by actively checking in on students who appear to be falling behind their stated goals in the course.

4. Trusting you. Learning best happens when there are relationships of trust. I trust students. I believe that, given sufficient guidance, students are best placed understand their educational interests and goals, and so I trust them to be responsible stewards of their education.

5. Respecting you. Learning best happens in communities of respect. I respect students. I will not disparage or denigrate students either inside or outside of class. I will work to see each student as an individual and to remember that students have lives that extend beyond my classroom. Respecting the wholeness of my students means I do not expect those lives to disappear when they enter my classroom and I do not punish them for the ways those lives shape their needs in and out of class. I do not assume that all of my students have the same experiences and background or that they have experiences or backgrounds like mine.

Course Schedule

Date	Topic	Assigned Readings
Wk 0 8/20-8/21	Introduction	Listen to the Podcast New Books in Philosophy episode from 2/1/18 with Bart Streumer.
Wk 1 8/22-8/28	Introducing Metaethics	Unbelievable Errors (UE) Ch 1
Wk 2 8/29-9/4	Rejecting Non-reductive Realism	UE Ch 2-3
Wk 3 9/5-9/11	Rejecting Reductive Realism	UE Ch 4-5
Wk 4 9/12-9/18	Rejecting Non-Cognitivism, Expressivism, and Others	UE Ch 6-7
Wk 5 9/19-9/25	The Error Theory	UE Ch 8
Wk 6 9/26-10/2	Reasons to Believe the Error Theory	UE Ch 9-10
Wk 7 10/3-10/9	Objections to and Applications of the Error Theory	UE Ch 11-12
Wk 8 10/10-10/16 <i>midterm week</i>	Moral Ambivalence	Naturalistic Moralities (NM) Ch 1
Wk 9 10/17-10/23	Pluralistic Relativism	NM Ch 2

Date	Topic	Assigned Readings
Wk 10 10/24-10/30	Objections to Relativism	NM Ch 3
Wk 11 10/31-11/6	Universalist Constraints on Permissible Moralities	NM Ch 4-5
Wk 12 11/7-11/13	Human Nature and Moral Criticism	NM Ch 6
Wk 13 11/14-11/20	Reasons to be Moral	NM Ch 7
Wk 14 11/21-11/27	Morality and Power	NM Ch 8
Wk 15 11/18-12/1	Morality and Need	NM Ch 9