

Philosophy 525

**Topics in Metaethics**

Spring 2019

Thursdays, 1:30-4:20pm

Marx 201

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	1879 Hall, Room 120	Marx 209
	office hour: Wed. 3:15-4:15pm	office hour: Fri. 10-11am

The following guest professors will visit the seminar:

Katia Vavova, Mount Holyoke College  
Justin Clarke-Doane, Columbia University  
Matti Eklund, Uppsala University  
John MacFarlane, University of California, Berkeley  
Zoe Johnson King, New York University

**Course Description:**

The course will discuss the following five topics.

Do evolutionary considerations “debunk” moral beliefs, if moral realism is true?: We believe that our moral beliefs track a moral reality that holds independently of what we happen to think about it. But our moral beliefs have been shaped by the history of human evolution. This may seem to create a dilemma: either we must believe there has been a massive coincidence whereby evolutionary forces happen to land us on the moral truth, or we must accept that the moral truth is not independent of what we think about it. We will discuss this dilemma and various ways to try to escape it.

What can we learn from comparing moral epistemology to the epistemology of math? In this unit we will extend the discussion of skeptical debunking arguments, and consider how moral realism fares as compared to mathematical realism when it comes to facing indispensability arguments, debunking stories, and reliability challenges.

How do normative terms get their reference? The question is made pressing by the following (apparent) possibility. There are bad guys who do bad things and are motivated by bad desires, and whose terms “good” and “right” play exactly the same normative role in their deliberations as our terms “good” and “right” play in ours--their normative terms just differ from ours in extension. (So for example, when we say, “that was not good!” to the bad guys, they reply, “So what? It was good\*!”) We want to say that we are right and the bad guys are wrong--that *our* normative terms or concepts have a special normative significance or “glow.” The challenge is to supply an account of the reference of normative terms that secures this.

Is there a single true morality, or is moral truth relative? We will examine the case for moral relativism, and then delve into a particular version of relativism about moral truth: the view that all moral truth is *assessment relative*. On this view, whether a moral claim is true depends on the context in which it is assessed: the same moral claim is true relative to one context of assessment, and false relative to another context of assessment. This view may help to make sense of the way it can seem true that someone ought to perform one action, given the information she has, while it also seems true that she ought to do something else, given the actual situation she is in.

Does a person who wants to do the right thing because it is right exhibit an inappropriate *moral fetishism*? On the one hand, it seems like a good person is someone who wants to do the right thing, even if she doesn't know what that would come to in a given case. But on the other hand, it seems like a good person should be directly moved by, say, the plight of those in need, rather than by the further thought that helping the needy is right. We will explore the possibilities for reconciling these thoughts.

The course syllabus will be posted on Blackboard. Check there for revisions.

### **Course Schedule:**

This schedule is tentative. Readings may be removed, and readings may be added. All readings will be posted on Blackboard, or linked from Blackboard.

### **Unit 1: Debunking Arguments**

Thursday, February 7

- Sharon Street, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value" (*Philosophical Studies* 2006)

Thursday, February 14

- NOTE UNUSUAL TIME: We will meet from 2:30pm to 5:20pm
- **Guest Professor Katia Vavova (Mount Holyoke College) visits**
- Katia Vavova, "The Limits of Rational Belief Revision: A Dilemma for the Darwinian Debunker" (manuscript)
- Matt Bedke, "No Coincidence?" (*Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 2014)

*There is no session on February 21.*

### **Unit 2: More Epistemological Challenges for Realism: the Morality/Math Comparison**

Thursday, February 28

- Justin Clarke-Doane, *Morality and Mathematics* (forthcoming OUP). Ch 1. "Introduction" (pp. 7-23); Ch. 3, "Observation and Indispensability" sections 3.1-3.3 (pp. 94-108); Ch. 4, "Genealogical Debunking Arguments" (pp. 135-166).
- *Optional background:* Gilbert Harman, "Ethics and Observation."

Thursday, March 7

- **Guest Professor Justin Clarke-Doane (Columbia University) visits**
- Justin Clarke-Doane, Ch. 5, “Explaining our Reliability” (pp. 167-214).
- *Optional background:* Paul Benacerraf, “What numbers could not be.” (*Philosophical Review* 1974); Josh Schechter, “Explanatory Challenges in Metaethics” (*Routledge Handbook of Metaethics* 2017)

### **Unit 3: Reference for Realists: how do normative terms refer?**

Thursday, March 14

- Terrence Horgan and Mark Timmons, “Troubles for New Wave Moral Semantics: The ‘Open Question Argument’ Revived” (*Philosophical Papers* 1992)
- Matti Eklund, *Choosing Normative Concepts* (Oxford University Press 2017). Ch. 1, “Ardent Realism”

*Spring Break is March 16-24*

Thursday, March 28

- Matti Eklund, Ch. 2, “Alternative Normative Concepts” (pp. 18-44); Ch. 3, “Qualifications and Objections” (pp. 45-62)

Thursday, April 4

- **Guest Professor Matti Eklund (Uppsala University) visits**
- Matti Eklund, Ch. 8, “Connections”; Ch. 10, “Some Metaphilosophical Issues”

### **Unit 4: Relativism about Moral Truth**

Thursday, April 11

- Gilbert Harman, “Is There a Single True Morality?”
- John MacFarlane, Chapters 1 and 2, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications*

Thursday, April 18

- John MacFarlane, Chapter 4, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications*

Thursday, April 25

- **Guest Professor John MacFarlane (University of California, Berkeley) visits**
- John MacFarlane, Chapter 7, *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth and its Applications*

## Unit 5: Moral Fetishism

TUESDAY, April 30, 4:30 - 7:20pm

- NOTE UNUSUAL DATE AND TIME.
- Michael Smith, selection from *The Moral Problem*, Wiley-Blackwell, 1994.
- Nomy Arpaly, selection from *Unprincipled Virtue*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

Thursday, May 2

- **Guest Professor Zoe Johnson King (New York University) visits**
- Zoe Johnson King, “How to Be a Moral Fetishist” (manuscript)

### Getting Credit for the Course:

Graduate students in the philosophy department can take the course for credit to earn a unit in either of the following ways:

1. Do one class presentation, write one 5-6 page paper due in week six, and write one 15-20 page paper due during reading period (the week after classes end).
2. Do one class presentation and take a written exam on the course material during reading period.

Undergraduate students, graduate students in the politics department, and graduate students in the classics department can take the course for credit and get a grade by taking option 1 above.

*All undergraduates, and graduate students in departments other than philosophy and politics, need the permission of the instructors to audit the class or to take the class for credit.*

### Electronics:

Laptops, phones, and tablets are distracting. We encourage class participants to consider keeping these out of sight, inside bags. If class participants use electronics, we ask that they be used only for class purposes during class.