

## CONTEMPORARY METAETHICS

[DRAFT SYLLABUS, SUBJECT TO CHANGE]

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Department: Philosophy  
Central European University

Course Status: Elective. 4 credits. Winter, 2018-19

Course e-learning site: <https://ceulearning.ceu.edu/course/view.php?id=9407>

Time and location: Tu 11-12:40, Th 9:10:14; in N13/302

Office hours:

Tuesdays 1:00-3:00, Thursdays 11:00-1:00. Please  
visit: <http://simonrippon.youcanbook.me> to check availability and reserve a slot.

### Course Description

This course aims to provide a foundation and an entry point into current debates in metaethics for students of philosophy. We will investigate questions such as: Do moral thoughts and moral sentences represent properties that exist in reality? If so, are these properties “natural” or *sui generis*? How can different theories of the subject matter of ethics account for moral knowledge? How can they account for the practical action-guiding role of moral judgments? We will emphasize some ways in which metaethics relates to other subfields of philosophy including metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and normative ethics. By co-teaching the course, the instructors aim to counterpose some differing metaethical views and provoke active debate in the seminar, while also providing a textbook-supported introduction to the field. No prior knowledge of metaethics is assumed.

### Learning outcomes

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- demonstrate a clear understanding of some of the main positions in contemporary metaethics, explain some of the points of contention between them
- charitably reconstruct arguments the arguments of others, and summarise them clearly and succinctly
- explain some of the strengths and weaknesses of different positions in contemporary metaethics
- formulate and evaluate arguments for and against positions in metaethics, both orally and in writing
- draw connections between metaethics and other subfields of philosophy

### Requirements

Regular attendance, carefully completing the assigned readings before class, AND active participation in seminar discussions will be expected from *all students*, whether registered for audit or taking the class for credit.

In addition, for students taking the class for credit there will be the following four required assignments:

- 1) Two in-class presentations. Each student will give two short (15-20 minute) presentations of selected issues. The presentation should introduce an important argument from, or related to, the assigned readings, and raise questions and potential criticisms for discussion. Students may wish to prepare a handout (2 pages maximum), or slides, to assist their presentation to the class, but will not be required to do so. Advance consultation during office hours on the presentation is welcome, and recommended. Although in-class presentations will be based on the readings, it is most important that they do not merely reproduce them in a briefer form: they should offer significant clarifications, raise important questions, and/or add the presenter's own well-grounded opinions and arguments.
- 2) A take home mid-term exam. Two answers maximum 500 words each, to assigned questions. Due date: **Monday, February 18th**
- 3) Presentation of a 1-page draft outline plan for the final paper. This assignment is intended help you to work out, logically organize, and concisely communicate the central points you intend to make in your final paper, and to provide an opportunity to discuss and think through potential objections and amendments. The outline should clearly state the intended thesis of the paper, and concisely present the main steps of your argument for it (bullet points are recommended!). Students may present and discuss their outlines either in class, time permitting, or in appointments with the instructor.  
Due date: **TBA**
- 4) A 3,000 word (maximum) final paper.  
Due date: **Monday, April 15th**

## **ASSESSMENT AND GRADING CRITERIA**

### Assessment

30% mid-term exam; 70% final paper. Participation in the seminar will be taken into consideration in cases of borderline grades for each of the written assignments, and may result in a higher or lower grade.

*All course requirements must be completed in order to earn a grade for the class.*

### Grading criteria for exam answers

To earn a B+ grade or higher, the mid-term exam answer must clearly and concisely answer the exact question asked. It must be presented in good academic English and be of appropriate length. The most relevant views, arguments, principles and concepts will be identified, and clearly explained in your own words with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

To earn an A-, the exam answers must demonstrate the above qualities to a higher degree. Any omissions, or problems with your exposition or argument, will be minor.

Answers that earn an A will be nearly flawless in writing style, organization, exposition and soundness of arguments.

## Grading criteria for final papers

### Quantity:

All other things being equal, it is better if the assignment is close to the required length. Writing a good paper using fewer words is more difficult than writing a good paper using more words, and that will be taken into account in the grading. So any additional length will need to be well-justified. In any event, don't go more than 20% over the required length.

### Quality:

To earn a B+, the written assignment must meet the formal requirements, must clearly and concisely address the selected question, and must be written in good academic English. Insofar as these are relevant, you must demonstrate a solid understanding of the arguments from readings in the course as well as in-class presentations and discussions. Important principles and concepts should be clearly explained. The views of others should, where necessary, be accurately, charitably, clearly and succinctly reconstructed, and properly cited with a bibliography. The assignment must show that you have analyzed and independently organized the material yourself in response to the question, rather than simply following the organization of in-class presentations or parts of the literature.

To earn an A-, the assignment must demonstrate all the above plus evidence of *genuine progress* as a result of your own independent thinking, such as your own substantive evaluation and critique of the validity and soundness of the arguments of others, or your own original positive argument. If there are any problems with the exposition or arguments in the assignment, these will be minor. Any obvious objections to your argument will have been anticipated and answered.

Assignments that earn an A will demonstrate all the above virtues, to the extent that they are nearly flawless in writing style, organization, exposition and soundness of arguments. While remaining entirely relevant to the question, an assignment that earns an A will be ambitious in scope and will demonstrate an exceptional degree of understanding and insight into the topic.

## **COURSE SCHEDULE AND WEEKLY READINGS**

NB: The schedule is not set in stone, but is subject to change for pedagogical reasons as the course progresses! The course web site will always include the latest information.

### **Part I: Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics**

In this first half of the course, we'll work through a recently published textbook, introducing the puzzles that metaethics addresses and the main positions that philosophers take in response to them. In class, we will seek to reconstruct and clarify the views presented in the book, and to further discuss the questions and arguments raised.

In general, readings in Part I of the course are chapters from:

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

NB An explanation of the content of each chapter can be found in the book's Introduction

#### Week 1

1. Introduction, and
2. A Subject Matter for Ethics?
  
3. Moral Epistemology and the Empirical Under-Determination of Ethical Theory.

#### Week 2

No classes

#### Week 3

4. The Practicality of Morality and the Humean Conception of Reason and Motivation

5. Error Theory.

#### Week 4

6. Simple Subjectivism.

Additional required reading:

Quinn (1994), "Putting Rationality in its Place" [on internal reasons]

7. The Cognitivist Heirs of Simple Subjectivism – Ideal Observers and Ideal Agents.

#### Week 5

8. Noncognitivist Heirs of Simple Subjectivism.

9. Fictionalism.

#### Week 6

10. Externalist Backlash.

11. Scientific Naturalism I: Cornell Realism.

#### Week 7

12. Scientific Realism II: Moral Functionalism and Network Analyses.

13. Nonnaturalism and Anti-Reductionism.

14. Odds, Ends and Morals.

## **Part II: In-Depth Discussions**

Week 8, Feb 25–March 1

David Enoch Visit \*\*Two additional classes this week\*\*

### Epistemic Challenges to Robust Realism

1. Enoch, David. ‘The Epistemological Challenge to Metanormative Realism: How Best to Understand It, and How to Cope with It’. *Philosophical Studies* 148, no. 3 (1 April 2010): 413–38. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-009-9333-6>.

Optional: Parfit, ch 32 “Epistemology” and ch 33 “Rationalism” from *On What Matters* vol. 2

2. Rippon, “Moral Realism and Reflective Equilibrium” (dissertation chapter).

### Quietism, Constructivism, Robust Realism

3. Parfit, Chapter 31 “Metaphysics” and 38 “Non-Realist Cognitivism” from *On What Matters* vols 2, 3

4. Enoch, David. “Can There Be a Global, Interesting, Coherent Constructivism about Practical Reason?” *Philosophical Explorations* 12, no. 3 (September 1, 2009): 319–39.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13869790903067683>

(Explains constructivism in procedural terms, and argues that it is unlikely to offer a plausible, distinctive metaethical position).

Street, Sharon. ‘What Is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?’ *Philosophy Compass* 5, no. 5 (1 May 2010): 363–84.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2009.00280.x>

(An important elaboration and defence of constructivism, in part replying to Enoch)

Weeks 9-12

TBA