

Metaethics (Summer 2021, University of Bern)

Description and Learning Outcomes:

Ethics deals with questions about what is right or wrong, e.g., is it wrong to eat meat? Metaethics deals with (second-order) questions about ethics, e.g., are there objective moral facts? Do moral judgments aim at truth, or do they express feelings? Are moral beliefs intrinsically motivating? In this seminar, we will explore these metaphysical, linguistic, and psychological questions by reading influential texts by contemporary philosophers. Most of the texts are compiled in Shafer-Landau & Cuneo's (eds.) "Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology". The seminar allows students to:

- Critically reflect on foundational issues in ethics.
- Recognize the strengths and weaknesses of some key philosophical approaches.
- Gain a deeper understanding of one of the topics of the seminar through independent preparation.

Evaluation:

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Weight</i>	<i>Description</i>
Active participation	10%	Informed contributions to the seminar discussions (<i>ATTENDANCE IS MANDATORY</i>).
Take-home tests	30%	ABC questions about the main positions and arguments in the seminar readings. Participants will be given one week to finish each test (but they will just need a couple of minutes if they have done the readings).
Presentation	30%	Present the main points of one of the seminar readings during the relevant session (see program). Raise questions to guide the discussion.
Final essay	30%	Write a review of extant work or original contribution to one of the topics discussed in the seminar (max. 3000 words).

Program:

<i>Day</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Readings</i>
1	Introduction	---
BLOCK 1: THEORIES		
2	Error Theory	Mackie (1997) The subjectivity of values.
3	Expressivism	Ayer (1952) Critique of ethics and theology.
4	Social Constructivism	Harman (1975) Moral relativism defended.
5	Rational Constructivism	Korsgaard (1996) The authority of reflection.
6	Sensibility theory	Wiggins (1991) A sensible subjectivism.
7	Naturalist Realism	Railton (1986) Moral realism.
8	Theories Recap	Metaethical Theories Summary (ILIAS)
BLOCK 2: PROBLEMS		
9	Moral Motivation	Smith (1994) The externalist challenge.
10	Moral Reasons	Shafer-Landau (2003) Moral reasons.
11	Moral Disagreement	Khoo & Knobe (2018) Moral disagreement and moral semantics.
12	Moral Knowledge	Little (1995) Seeing and caring: The role of affect in feminist moral epistemology
13	Review and Essay Ideas	---