Philosophy 4310: **TWENTIETH-CENTURY METAETHICS** (Fall 2008)
Tuesdays-Thursdays, 11:30-1:00
Earth and Planetary Sciences 203

**Instructor and Office Hours**
Eric Brown  
Wilson 213  
Tuesdays, 4:00-5:00, and by appointment  
eabrown@wustl.edu  
935-4257

**Description**

Metaethics is the study of how one can and should (or cannot and should not) understand and justify ethical judgments. Here are some examples of ethical judgments, from the clearly moral to what possibly lies outside of ethics: 'It is wrong to torture babies for profit'; 'Setting cats on fire for personal amusement is not to be done'; 'Bill is a pig-headed creep'; 'We don't do that sort of thing, young lady'; 'You shouldn't pass out at your boss' party'; 'It is rude to fart loudly without apologizing'. The following are some metaethical questions we might ask about these judgments. What do they mean? Are they true or false? If they are true or false, in virtue of what? If they are true or false, can knowledge of them be had? How, or why not? If they are not true or false, what status do they have? If they are not true or false, can some of them be justified and others not? How, or why not?

The goal of the course is to explore the answers that have been given to these questions by the most influential writings in metaethics, so that everyone in the course is prepared to explore some problem(s) in metaethics independently.

**Requirements**

This is a graduate-level course. Attendance is not optional, and participation is expected. To pass the course or to receive a quality grade, one must satisfy the writing requirement and the examination requirement.

The writing requirement may be satisfied in one of two ways.

(A) Two short papers (maximum 2500 words each, excluding notes), one due at noon on **Friday, 10 October**, and the other due at noon on **Friday, 12 December**. The papers should be submitted as e-mail attachments, and they should include a word count.

(B) One longer, research paper (maximum 7500 words, excluding notes), due at noon on **Friday, 12 December**. As a research paper, this is expected to take account of the literature in the field. Anyone wanting to write a longer paper should notify me in writing (email is fine) by Friday, 10 October.

All writing submitted for this class should satisfy the desiderata noted in "Some Guidelines for Writings" distributed in class. The writing requirement is worth 200 points, 100 points each for the short papers of option A or 200 points for the long paper of option B.

The examination will be a short in-class exam at a **time to be announced**. The exam will present a list of a dozen passages from our readings or perhaps just names of concepts and
arguments (e.g., the naturalistic fallacy), and you will be asked to characterize ten of them, by explaining each of the ten and its significance in twentieth-century metaethics. The exam is worth 100 points.

When final grades are assessed, participation will be taken into account for borderline cases.

Books

All of the reading for this course will be available for downloading on-line. Students will have to be able to navigate successfully to three kinds of on-line sources:

1. The "e-Journals" at http://library.wustl.edu (if you are on campus) or at http://libproxy.wustl.edu (if you are not).
2. "E-Res" at http://eres.wustl.edu, using the password 'Ethics' (exactly what is between the inverted commas).
3. Individual websites of some philosophers.

In the syllabus, for every required text, I have indicated whether that text is available in an on-line journal ('e-Journal'), via E-Res ('E-Res'), or at a philosopher's webpage (URL identified).

Some of you might nevertheless like to own a compendium or two of essays in twentieth-century metaeathics. The following three very general and outstanding collections include much of metaethical interest:

- Cahn and Haber, eds. 20th Century Ethical Theory. Prentice-Hall, 1995.

Among collections tailored more narrowly for metaethics, the following are the two biggest:


Also valuable are:


Some of you might also want an introductory text or two. I recommend the following:

- S. Darwall, Philosophical Ethics. Westview.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy on-line is also a useful resource, with articles on

Metaethics (G. Sayre-McCord)
Practical Reason (R. Jay Wallace)
Moral Reasoning (H. Richardson)
Moral Cognitivism vs. Non-cognitivism (M. van Roojen)
Moral Motivation (C. Rosati)
Moral Epistemology (R. Campbell)
Moral Skepticism (W. Sinnott-Armstrong)
Realism (A. Miller)
Moral Realism (G. Sayre-McCord)
Moral Anti-realism (R. Joyce)
Moral Naturalism (G. Lenman)
Moral Non-Naturalism (M. Ridge)
Moral Relativism (C. Gowans)
Value Theory (M. Schroeder)
Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Value (M. Zimmerman)
Value Pluralism (E. Mason)

One thing to notice is that the various authors of these articles are not in perfect agreement about how to use the various labels. Be careful.

**Syllabus**

**Introduction (Thurs Aug 28)**

**UNIT ONE: NONNATURALISM**

The Open Question Argument (Tues Sept 2)

Intuitionism (Thurs Sept 4)
Predecessors include Price (*A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals* [1757]) and Reid (*Essays on the Active Powers of Man* [1788]).
Fellow-travelers include Moore (*Principia Ethica* [1903] and "The Conception of Intrinsic Value," reprinted in his *Philosophical Studies* [1922] and in the "revised edition" of *Principia* [1993]), Prichard ("Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?," *Mind* 21 (1912), and *Duty and Interest* [1928]), and Ewing (*Definition of Good* [1947]).
Successors include Audi (*The Good in the Right* [2004]) and recent essays by McNaughton and Rawlings.

**UNIT TWO: NON-COGNITIVISM**

Emotivism (Tues Sept 9)
Predecessors include, in some sense, Hume.
Fellow-travelers included the positivists, including, most influentially, Ayer (in *Language, Truth, and Logic*). One might compare Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics."
Successors include the expressivists (see below).

Prescriptivism (Thurs Sept 11)

**UNIT THREE: TOWARD ARISTOTELIAN NATURALISM**

Toward Aristotelian Naturalism (Tues Sept 16)
Geach, "Good and Evil," *Analysis* 17 (1956): 33-42. (e-Journal)
Thick Ethical Concepts (Thurs Sept 18)

From Is to Ought (Tues Sept 23)

Moral Motivation (Thurs Sept 25)

UNIT FOUR: FROM HUMEANISM TO ANTI-REALISM

Humeanism (Tues Sept 30)

Humeanism and Moral Reasons (Thurs Oct 2)

Anti-Realism: Queer Properties and Disagreement (Tues Oct 7)
Successors include Joyce, The Myth of Morality (2001). Joyce goes through error theory to fictionalism; for a different route to fictionalism, see Kalderon, Moral Fictionalism (2005).

Anti-Realism: Explanation (Thurs Oct 9)

UNIT FIVE: NATURALISM

Non-reductive Naturalism, aka "Cornell Realism" (Tues Oct 14)

"Cornell Realism" on Disagreement and Queerness (Thurs Oct 16)
"Cornell Realism" on Explanation (Tues Oct 21)

Reductive Naturalism (Thurs Oct 23)
There is a vlog of a debate between Railton and his former student Don Loeb at http://bloggingheads.tv/diavlogs/13443

UNIT SIX: PROBLEMS FOR THE NATURALISTS

Problems with Externalism (Tues Oct 28)

Externalist Reply (Thurs Oct 30)

Problems with Supervenience (Tues Nov 4)

Problems with Moral Semantics (Thurs Nov 6)
UNIT SEVEN: MODERN NON-COGNITIVISMS AND OFFSPRING

Blackburn's Quasi-Realism (Tues Nov 11)

The Frege-Geach Problem, Part One (Thurs Nov 13)

The Frege-Geach Problem, Part Two (Tues Nov 18)

Gibbard's Norm-Expressivism (Thurs Nov 20)

Horgan and Timmons' Nondescriptivist Cognitivism (Tues Nov 25)

NO CLASS — Thanksgiving (Thurs Nov 27)

UNIT EIGHT: SUBJECTIVISMS

Ideal Observer Theory and Subjectivism (Tues Dec 2)

Relativism (Thurs Dec 4)

Review Session (TBD)

Final Exam (Tues, Dec 16, 1-3 pm)