

**Philosophy 333, Section 01**  
**Contemporary Moral Theory**  
**California State University, Spring Semester 2008**  
**Tuesday / Thursday 2:00-3:15 LANG 107**

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**1. THE TOPIC**

This course is primarily concerned with contemporary meta-ethics. Meta-ethics refers to philosophical theorizing *about* ethics. Meta-ethicists do not attempt to devise and defend normative ethical theories (i.e. theories that tell us how to act, what is right or wrong, what is good or bad, etc.) but rather attempt to devise and defend theories about such theories. Typical meta-ethical questions including the following: Do such theories (that is, theories of normative ethics) give us claims that can be true or false, and if so, true or false in what sense? On what grounds can moral and ethical claims be defended? What type of reason is there, if any, for doing what morality recommends or requires?

The course concerns three closely inter-related sets of topics. The first concerns what is known as practical reasoning – questions concerning the sort of reasoning one does in deciding what to do. Some theorists hold a roughly Humean position (after David Hume, the 18<sup>th</sup> century Scottish philosopher) according to which an agent needs a belief *and* a desire to be motivated. Humeans tend to hold, moreover, that desires are immune to rational criticism (i.e. one wants what one wants, and one doesn't need *reasons* to want something). Thus the Humean dictum: “reason is and ought only to be the slave of the passions.” Other theorists disagree, holding that desires can be rationally criticized, and/or that in at least some cases a belief on its own (the belief, for instance, that a certain action is morally required, or otherwise worth pursuing) can motivate.

The second topic concerns philosophy of language. A sentence like “One should keep one’s promises” appears to state a descriptive fact (the same way a sentence like “It rained yesterday” states a descriptive fact). Such sentences, it appears, can be true or false, one can believe or falsely believe them, etc. Some philosophers take these appearances more or less at face value; others—call them *expressivists* or *emotivists*—deny this, claiming that ethical claims work in some other way (expressing attitudes, say, rather than stating facts or beliefs).

The third set of topics is primarily epistemological and metaphysical, and includes moral *realism*, moral *antirealism*, moral *cognitivism*, moral *noncognitivism*, and moral *skepticism*. Moral *realists* tend to hold that moral properties, of some sort, really do exist, while moral *antirealists* deny this. (But just what is a “moral property”? A difficult question, as we will see!) Moral *cognitivists* tend to believe that at least some moral claims (i.e. claims about what we morally *ought* to do) are literally true, in just the way that other fact-stating claims (“There is a cat in the room”) are true. Moral *noncognitivists* tend to think that moral claims (“It would be wrong to lie to him”) don’t even *try* to be literally true; many noncognitivists, though, think that they can nonetheless be reasonable or useful things to say. Moral *skeptics* tend to deny some or all of the following: (1) that moral properties exist; (2) that we can *know* that moral properties exist; (3) that some moral claims are literally true; (4) that we can *know* that some moral claims are literally true; (5) that we have reason to do what is morally right; (6) that we *know* that we have reason to do what is morally right.

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### 2. REQUIRED TEXTS

(1) Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo, *Foundations of Ethics: An Anthology*. Blackwell Publishing, 2007. ISBN 1405129522.

(2) Shaun Nichols, *Sentimental Rules: On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgment*. Oxford University Press, 2007. ISBN 0195314204.

### 3. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students are required to do all of the assigned readings for the course. Readings will be announced in class and posted to the Phil 333 web site (<http://www.csuchico.edu/~tjollimore/Phil333.htm>). **Your first two readings, due for Tuesday, Feb. 5, are Moore, "From *Principia Ethica*," and Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms."** Although most readings will be from the two course textbooks, the first two will be distributed in class on Day One as handouts.

**IMPORTANT NOTE: To "do" a reading is to prepare it, i.e. to engage with it: to spend some serious time and substantial effort *before class* trying to understand what the author is trying to tell you.** (This will usually involve reading the assigned papers *at least twice*.) The professor's job is to help you understand texts you have already grappled with on your own, not to spoon-feed you summaries of texts to which you have given a cursory glance.

To help ensure that this is the case, you are **required** to pass in a **one-page summary** (single-spaced) of **every assigned reading for the course**, on the day for which the reading is assigned. Thus, your first written assignment, due on Tuesday of Week Two (i.e. Tuesday February 5), consists of two one-page summaries, one of the G.E. Moore reading, one of the Stevenson reading.

**Philosophy is difficult and a philosophical text rarely yields up its full meaning on the first attempt. It is your responsibility to make sure that you have not only looked over the assigned readings, but have made a significant and genuine effort to understand their meanings.**

Each student will also be required to do the following:

- (1) submit at least one short paper during the course of the semester. Depending on the number of students enrolled, it is possible that students might be required to submit two short papers. The schedule for submitting short papers will be distributed later in the semester (not everyone will be submitting them at the same time, or writing on the same topic.)
- (2) carefully read the short papers submitted by their colleagues and show up prepared to comment intelligently on them.
- (3) turn in a final paper.
- (4) complete the final examination.

#### *Please note:*

- The instructor's policy on late assignments is very simple and straightforward: **no late written assignments will be accepted**. If you miss the deadline, you're screwed. It is therefore *very important that you do not miss deadlines*. A very effective strategy for achieving this will be discussed in class.
- Papers must be written in complete sentences according to the rules of English grammar. Points will be lost for poor grammar, misspellings, improper use of punctuation, awkward phrasing, confusing organization, etc. **Always proofread your work carefully** before submitting it.
- Your comprehension of the assigned readings will be judged not only on the basis of the written summaries you provide, but on the basis of your classroom discussion as well. *Come to class having prepared thoroughly and do your best to say intelligent things!*

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### 4. DETERMINATION OF FINAL GRADE

The base final grade is based on four equally valuable components: (1) *short papers*; (2) *one final paper*; (3) *class contribution*; (4) *final exam*.

(1) **Short papers.** The short paper is to be from 7-9 pages in length (double-spaced) and should address the assigned topic (determined by the instructor). Papers must be written in complete sentences and in accord with the rules of English grammar, spelling, etc. **Proper citation is essential (see “What is plagiarism and why is it important?”, linked from the course web page.)** You should also take care to express your ideas as clearly as possible, to show that you have carefully considered the readings you address, and to display clear, careful thinking about the issues. As noted above, if the schedule permits each student might be required to submit *two* short papers during the course of the semester.

(2) **Final paper.** The final paper is to be from 9-12 pages in length and is due on the last day of finals week. Further paper requirements will be discussed during the semester.

(3) **Class contribution.** This is most obviously manifested in class attendance and participation in discussions. Quality and quantity are both important, but the former much more so; a few very intelligent comments will go much further toward improving one’s grade than will a large number of rambling, incoherent soliloquies. The one-page summaries of assigned readings also count in this portion of the grade.

(4) **Final exam.** The final examination will be cumulative (i.e. will cover all of the material covered in the course.) The exam will be administered on Thursday, May 22, from 12-1:50 pm.

### 5. ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

The standards of academic honesty as set forth in the CSU, Chico University catalog and other relevant documents are to be conformed to. **Cheating in any form will result in a failing grade for the course, and will be reported to Student Judicial Affairs. In particular, plagiarism will not be tolerated.** Students should understand that plagiarism includes *any* uncredited use of another person’s words, ideas, or intellectual work, or any attempt to claim as one’s own the product of someone else’s intellectual labor. This means that assignments must be written predominantly in your own words, and that any use of other people’s words or ideas (including those of other students!) *must* be footnoted and cited.

See Lewis Vaughn, *Writing Philosophy*, Chapter 6, for more information on plagiarism. **It is each student’s responsibility to ensure that she understands how to avoid plagiarism. See the instructor if you have any questions or are unclear on the matter.**

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### **6. A WORD TO THE WISE: WHY BAD GRADES (SOMETIMES) HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE**

Students should keep in mind that a grade reflects one thing and one thing only: the quality of the work submitted by that student *for that particular course*. The fact that a student does well in her *other* classes is not directly relevant; the fact that she is a very nice (or not nice) person, is not relevant at all. A grade is not an evaluation of a person's character or personality; nor is it an evaluation of what he does in his other courses, or what he could have done in this one under ideal conditions (if he hadn't gotten the flu, broken up with his girlfriend, had a once in a lifetime chance in the middle of the semester to go to Mexico, etc.) Rather, one's final grade will reflect *the quality of the work actually submitted in order to complete the course*.

For this reason, personal circumstances, etc., are essentially irrelevant to the question of grading. If a student should face extraordinarily difficult circumstances that prevent her from completing the course in a satisfactory manner (for instance, a serious accident or disruptive illness), the professor will be willing, should it be appropriate, to drop the student from the course without penalty. Under no circumstances, however, will the professor raise a student's grade in order to reflect his estimate of what that student might have done under better conditions. *Thus, the only way to earn an A for this course is to submit work that merits an A.*

### **7. DISABILITY POLICY:**

Please let the professor know if you have a disability and have course-related accommodation needs. It is your right, in accordance with the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act, to make such requests.

### **8. TENTATIVE LIST OF READINGS (we won't cover *all* these but will do as many as we can)**

G.E. Moore, "From *Principia Ethica*" (handout)

C.L. Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms" (handout)

A.J. Ayer, "A Critique of Ethics" (*Foundations of Ethics* [FE])

Gilbert Harman, "Ethics and Observation" (FE)

Mackie, "The Subjectivity of Values" (FE)

Richard Joyce, "The Myth of Morality" (FE)

Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives" (FE)

Williams, "Internal and External Reasons" (FE)

Russ Shafer-Landau, "Moral Reasons" (FE)

Margaret Little, "Virtue as Knowledge: Objections from the Philosophy of Mind" (FE)

John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities" (FE)

Russ Shafer-Landau, "Ethics as Philosophy: A Defense of Ethical Non-Naturalism" (FE)

Blackburn, "How to be an Ethical Antirealist" (FE)

Shaun Nichols, *Sentimental Rules: On the Natural Foundations of Moral Judgment*. (As many chapters as we can get to!)

**9. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

Q. Do I *really* have to do *all* of the assigned reading for a given day *before* the class begins?

A. Yes!

Q. What if I miss a class?

A. Find out what you missed *from one of the other students*. (Do *not* come into office hours expecting the instructor to re-present the material he has already presented during the regular class session.)

Q. If I miss a class, do I need to get the instructor an excuse?

A. No. A missed class is a missed class. If you miss two or fewer, there will be no penalty. If you miss three or more, there will be a penalty regardless of your reason for missing them. The only special case is if you miss so many that you cannot successfully complete the course, *and* have a very compelling justification for missing that many (some sort of *serious* life crisis). In that case, *provided with appropriate documentation, etc.*, the instructor may be willing to drop the student from the class. See section 6, "A Word to the Wise," for more on the practice of grading.

Q. If I am e-mailing the instructor about something related to the class, what should I put in the subject line?

A. Just make sure the course number (333) is in the subject line. This will make it much less likely that your e-mail will get lost in the ether.

Q. Is it okay to read newspapers during class time?

A. No! It's very rude (and this applies to all your classes, not just this one.) Reading newspapers is fine, and indeed a good habit to get into; but do it in the coffeeshop or by the creek, not in the classroom.

Q. Are we allowed to use laptops to take notes, etc.?

A. No. First, the "etc." is worrying—the instructor can never know whether you are actually paying attention, or whether you are surfing the web, *etc.* Second, even if you are paying attention, it tends to distract other students. Third, even if you *think* you are paying attention most laptop users are *themselves* fairly distracted, and are rarely capable of fully participating in classroom discussions. While taking notes is a good practice, and indeed quite necessary, your *primary* focus of attention should be the conversation in the classroom; and for some reason, taking notes by hand, with a pen, does not seem to require the kind of attention that taking notes via a computer keyboard does.

Also: no cell phone use (including texting). No iPods. Basically, the rule is: no technology in the classroom that G.E. Moore wouldn't have had access to. (He died in 1958.)

Q. What if I *really need* an A (to keep my scholarship, keep my parents from disowning me, etc.)?

A. Then you better work hard! Grades are assigned on the basis of merit, not on the basis of need. "I really need an A" is something *you* need to keep in mind, not something your *instructor* needs to know!

Q. What sort of extra credit is available in this class? And if I'm not happy with my final grade, is it possible to improve it after the course is over?

A. None and no. That's why you need to come to every class, keep up with the readings, get your papers in on time, and generally stay on top of things.

Q. Isn't that expecting kind of a lot?

A. Yes! And you're perfectly capable of it. As Steinbeck said, "It is the nature of man to rise to greatness, if greatness is what is expected of him." If other instructors expect less of you, *they're* the ones you should complain to—they're not giving you enough credit.