

THE NATURE OF VALUES

V83.0041-001

Department of Philosophy

New York University

Fall 2003

Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:00-3:15 p.m.

Silver Center 206

INSTRUCTOR

Sharon Street

E-mail: sharon.street@nyu.edu

Office phone: (212) 998-8324

Office: 503 Silver Center

Office hours: Wednesdays from 4-5 p.m. and by appointment

TEACHING ASSISTANT

Dana Evan

E-mail: de285@nyu.edu

Office phone: To be announced.

Office: To be announced.

Office hours: To be announced.

COURSE OVERVIEW

Course summary: This course will provide an intensive introduction to metaethics, which is the branch of moral philosophy that centers around questions such as the following: When we use moral language, are we making claims that are capable of being true or false, or are we merely expressing our feelings or giving voice to some other state of mind? Should truth in morals be understood by analogy with truth in the sciences, or must it be understood according to an entirely different model? Are there objective moral truths that hold across all times and cultures, or is some version of moral relativism correct? Readings will be drawn primarily from contemporary sources.

Course goals: The course has four main goals. The first is to provide you with a broad overall map of the field of contemporary metaethics—a survey of its central questions and most commonly held positions. The second goal is to begin filling in selected regions of this “map”; our approach will be to read closely a small but representative set of writings by some of today’s most influential theorists on the nature of value. The course’s third aim is to enhance your ability to read and critically evaluate philosophical texts; the fourth is to sharpen your philosophical writing skills.

Organization of topics: The course is divided into seven units. In the first unit, we will examine some important background to the current debate with three readings from the early 20th century. In the second unit, we will look at several readings which capture some of the main puzzles about the nature of value—puzzles which we may view the authors of later readings as attempting to solve. The five remaining units will be devoted to examining five commonly held types of positions in contemporary metaethics: (1) ethical naturalism, (2) non-cognitivism, (3) sensibility theories, (4) normative realism, and (5) constructivism.

Level of the course: This course has a prerequisite of one previous course in philosophy or consent of the instructor. The course is intended for philosophy majors or for those with at least one previous course in philosophy who have a special interest in the topic of the course. If you are at all unsure whether this course is a good choice for you, please feel welcome to come and talk with me about it.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Lectures and class participation

Lectures have two main purposes. The first is to supply background for the readings and to place them in a larger philosophical context. The second is to demonstrate, by example, how to go about identifying, analyzing, and assessing the central claims and arguments in the readings. Lectures will present key material not covered in the readings, so regular attendance is crucial if you are to do well on the papers and final exam.

One of the best ways to practice the skills of analyzing and evaluating philosophical arguments is to discuss them, so we will devote a portion of most class periods to discussion. Your contributions to class discussions cannot lower your final grade, but they can improve it, especially in a borderline case.

Readings

The reading assignments are generally short but difficult, and you will need to read them at least twice (sometimes more) if you are to achieve an adequate understanding of them. It is expected that you will have completed each reading assignment before the class meeting during which it will be discussed. This is essential if you are to get the most out of the lectures and be able to participate in discussion.

Books. Two books are required for the course. Both may be purchased at the NYU Main Bookstore at 18 Washington Place.

- Darwall, Stephen, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, eds. *Moral Discourse and Practice*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Korsgaard, Christine M. *The Sources of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Coursepack. One coursepack is also required for the course. It may be purchased at Unique Copy Center at 252 Greene Street.

Readings from online sources will also occasionally be assigned.

Papers

Assignments. Three 5-6 page papers, each worth 25% of your final grade, will be assigned. The papers are tentatively scheduled to be due as follows:

- First paper due in class on Friday, October 3rd.
- Second paper due in class on Thursday, November 6th.
- Third paper due in class on Tuesday, December 9th.

Late papers. Late papers will be penalized one-third of a letter grade for each day late (for example, from A to A-, from A- to B+, and so on). Weekend days count. If you finish a late paper during a weekend, e-mail it to me right away, and turn in a hard copy later.

Extensions. Extensions will not be granted except under extreme circumstances.

Plagiarism. The penalty for plagiarism is an F in the course and referral to the dean. If you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism, please see the Statement on Academic Integrity at <http://www.nyu.edu/cas/map/integrity.html>. Consult me or Dana if you have further questions.

Final exam

The final exam, worth 25% of your final grade, is scheduled for noon-1:50 p.m. on Tuesday, December 16th. The exam will consist of quotation identifications and essay questions. The essay

questions will be drawn from a larger set of study questions that will be distributed on the last day of class.

CALENDAR OF ASSIGNMENTS

This calendar may be revised as the semester progresses. Readings followed by “(MDP)” are in Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton’s *Moral Discourse and Practice*.

Introduction to the Course

Tuesday, September 2nd

- No assignment

Unit 1: Background to the Current Debate

Thursday, September 4th

- G. E. Moore, selection from *Principia Ethica* (MDP)

Tuesday, September 9th

- A. J. Ayer, Chapter 6 of *Language, Truth, and Logic* (coursepack)

Thursday, September 11th

- Charles Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms” (MDP)

Unit 2: Problems

Tuesday, September 16th

- J. L. Mackie, selection from *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (MDP)

Thursday, September 18th

- Gilbert Harman, “Ethics and Observation” (MDP)
- Begin reading Gilbert Harman, “Is There a Single True Morality?” (coursepack)

Tuesday, September 23rd

- Finish reading Gilbert Harman, “Is There a Single True Morality?” (coursepack)

Unit 3: Ethical Naturalism

Thursday, September 25th

- Begin reading Nicholas Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations” (coursepack)

Tuesday, September 30th

- Finish reading Nicholas Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations” (coursepack)

Thursday, October 2nd

- NO CLASS. A MAKE-UP MEETING WILL BE HELD ON FRIDAY, OCTOBER 3RD FROM 2:00-3:15 P.M. IN OUR REGULAR CLASSROOM.

Friday, October 3rd

- Begin reading Peter Railton, “Moral Realism” (MDP)
- FIRST PAPER IS TENTATIVELY SCHEDULED TO BE DUE.

Tuesday, October 7th

- Finish reading Peter Railton, “Moral Realism” (MDP)

Thursday, October 9th

- Don Loeb, “Full-Information Theories of Individual Good” (coursepack)

Tuesday, October 14th

- Connie Rosati, “Naturalism, Normativity, and the Open Question Argument” (available online at <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0029-4624%28199503%2929%3A1%3C46%3ANNATOO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-W>)

Unit 4: Contemporary Non-Cognitivism

Thursday, October 16th

- Simon Blackburn, “How To Be an Ethical Antirealist” (MDP)

Tuesday, October 21st

- Begin reading Allan Gibbard, précis of *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (MDP)

Thursday, October 23rd

- Finish reading Allan Gibbard, précis of *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (MDP)
- Begin reading Allan Gibbard, Chapter 6 of *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (coursepack)

Tuesday, October 28th

- Finish reading Allan Gibbard, Chapter 6 of *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (coursepack)

Unit 5: Sensibility Theories

Thursday, October 30th

- John McDowell, “Values and Secondary Qualities” (MDP)

Tuesday, November 4th

- John McDowell, “Projection and Truth in Ethics” (MDP)

Unit 6: Normative Realism

Thursday, November 6th

- Thomas Nagel, “Value” (available online at <http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/nagel80.pdf>; read pp. 23-43/97-117 of the PDF file)
- SECOND PAPER IS TENTATIVELY SCHEDULED TO BE DUE.

Tuesday, November 11th

- Begin reading Ronald Dworkin, “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe It” (available online at <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0048-3915%28199621%2925%3A2%3C87%3AOATYBB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-X>)

Thursday, November 13th

- Finish reading Ronald Dworkin, “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe It” (available online at <http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0048-3915%28199621%2925%3A2%3C87%3AOATYBB%3E2.0.CO%3B2-X>)

Unit 7: Constructivism

Tuesday, November 18th

- Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, selections from Lecture 1

Thursday, November 20th

- Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, selections from Lecture 2

Tuesday, November 25th

- Begin reading Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Lecture 3

Thursday, November 27th

- NO CLASS. THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY.

Tuesday, December 2nd

- Finish reading Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Lecture 3

Thursday, December 4th

- Begin reading Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Lecture 4

Tuesday, December 9th

- Finish reading Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, Lecture 4
- THIRD PAPER IS TENTATIVELY SCHEDULED TO BE DUE.
- FINAL EXAM STUDY QUESTIONS WILL BE DISTRIBUTED; FINAL EXAM IS ON TUESDAY, DECEMBER 16TH, FROM NOON-1:50 P.M.