

**Philosophy 173: Metaethics
Harvard University, Fall 2022**

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Description:

Long ago, the Greek philosopher Democritus proclaimed that all that exists in the world are “atoms and the void”: no values, no colors, no tastes, but only collections of tiny, indivisible particles moving around and interacting with one another in empty space. Since then our conception of the most basic physical constituents of the universe has changed, but Democritus’ general picture remains a pervasive one. However, this raises a problem: how do we find a place for the subject matter of ethics in this stark, physicalist worldview? How do collections of quarks acquire duties and commitments? How do we group protons, neutrons, and electrons together to get obligations, rights, values, needs?

In this course, we will focus on a family of philosophical positions that respond to this *prima facie* tension between ethics and the scientific worldview by attempting to get rid of, or in some way deflate, the ethics portion of the conflict. The three most widely discussed positions in this camp are *moral nihilism* (roughly: the view that there is no such thing as morality), *moral relativism* (roughly: the view that moral claims are true only relative to the conventions or standards of a given group), and *moral expressivism* (roughly: the view that moral claims do not assert anything about the world, but rather serve to express the speaker’s feelings and decisions). Our main task will be to closely examine these three positions by reading several prominent defenders of each, as well as some of their more penetrating critics.

Time and Place:

Lectures: Tue., Thu., 12:00–1:15 p.m., Emerson 101

Sections: time, location TBD

In addition to the regular discussion sections led by the teaching fellow, there will be a discussion section for philosophy PhD students (as well as other graduate students in GSAS) led by the instructor. Non-GSAS graduate students will be assigned to the regular discussion sections.

Course URL: <https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/106677>

The course website will contain all handouts and assignments, as well as uploads of the readings not included in the books available at the Coop. Note that you must login using your HarvardKey to access all of the site’s content. If you do not have a HarvardKey, you can visit <<https://iam.harvard.edu/get-started/authentication>> for more information on how to obtain one.

Prerequisites:

None, but a previous course in philosophy will be helpful. Auditors are welcome to attend the lectures, but only if they get the instructor’s approval beforehand, and only if they have an official affiliation with Harvard University or another academic institution in the area.

Required Texts:

The following books are available for purchase in the textbook section of the Coop:

Blackburn, Simon. *Spreading the Word*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984.

Gibbard, Allan. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990.

Harman, Gilbert, & Judith Jarvis Thomson. *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996.

Moser, Paul K., & Thomas L. Carson, eds. *Moral Relativism: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

A number of additional readings will be made available for downloading on the course website.

Requirements:

Reading, discussing, and writing about the assigned readings will be the central activities of the course. There is a reading assignment for each lecture. The readings are often fairly short, but tend to require close study. It is essential that you complete the assigned readings *before* each lecture, as many lectures will presuppose familiarity with the material in the texts. Also, lectures will introduce material not in the readings, so attendance at each and every lecture is crucial if you want to do well in the course.

The breakdown of grades will be as follows:

20% *Attendance and participation in section and lecture.*

Evaluation will be based on attendance, preparation, and contributions to discussion. If you don't feel comfortable talking during section or lecture, coming in to discuss course material during either the instructor's or the teaching fellow's office hours may count toward your contributions to discussion.

60% *Three 5-page papers.*

Paper topics will be distributed in advance and will ask students to analyze and discuss material covered in class. *The first paper must be rewritten in light of your teaching fellow's comments and resubmitted.* Your final grade for this paper will be an average of your grades on the two versions. (Note that revised papers are held to a higher standard.)

20% *Final exam.*

You will be required to take a three-hour final exam on the material covered throughout the term. The final exam will be approximately 2/3rds essay format, and the essay questions will be selected from a list distributed at the beginning of Reading Period. The exam will be closed-notes and closed-books. (Graduate students taking the course for credit have the option of taking a take-home version of the final exam instead.)

Late work will be penalized 1/3rd of a letter grade per day (e.g. from a B+ to a B). Extensions on assignments will be granted only when requested *before* the assignment's due date.

Academic Integrity Policy – Collaboration Permitted in Written Work:

Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with the course instructor, your TF, or your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this course.

Laptop Use:

The use of laptops, tablets, cell phones, etc. during lectures and section meetings is strictly prohibited (except in cases of medical necessity, in which case follow the guidelines given below for students with disabilities).

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:

Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present the instructor with a Faculty Letter from the Accessibility Education Office (AEO) by the end of the second complete week of term, namely Fri., Sept. 16. All discussions will remain confidential.

Assignment and Lecture Schedule:

NOTE: Readings followed by ‘(*)’ can be downloaded from the course website.

Thu., Sept. 1: Introduction

I. Moral Nihilism

Tue., Sept. 6: Mackie’s Argument from Queerness for Nihilism

Mackie, “The Subjectivity of Values” (*)

Thu., Sept. 8: The Motivational Interpretation of Mackie’s Argument

Brink, “Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness” (*)

Brink, “Externalist Moral Realism” (*) [optional]

Tue., Sept. 13: Other Interpretations of Mackie’s Argument

Garner, “On the Genuine Queerness of Moral Properties and Facts” (*)

Mackie, “The Subjectivity of Values” (*) [reread]

Thu., Sept. 15: The Explanatory Argument for Nihilism

Harman, “The Inference to the Best Explanation” (*) [optional]

Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, chs. 1–2 (*)

Tue., Sept. 20: Sturgeon on the Explanatory Argument for Nihilism

Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations” (*)

Thu., Sept. 22: Thomson on the Explanatory Argument for Nihilism

Thomson, “Epistemological Arguments for Moral Scepticism” (ch. 6 of Harman & Thomson)

Tue., Sept. 27: The Evolutionary Argument for Nihilism

Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, ch. 6 (*)

Thu., Sept. 29: Can Nihilists Live Their Nihilism?

Williams, “The Amoralist” (*)

Nagel, “Ethics,” §§I–III (in Moser & Carson) [optional]

Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, pp. 178–80 (*)

Mon., Oct. 3: FIRST PAPER DUE BY 11:59 P.M.

Tue., Oct. 4: A New Kind of Nihilism: Moral Fictionalism

Joyce, “Moral Fictionalism” (*)

II. Moral Relativism

Thu., Oct. 6: The Argument from Disagreement for Relativism

Harman, “Moral Relativism” (ch. 1 of Harman & Thomson)

Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism” (in Moser & Carson)

Tue., Oct. 11: More on the Argument from Disagreement for Relativism

Brandt, “Ethical Relativism” (in Moser & Carson)

Moody-Adams, “The Empirical Underdetermination of Descriptive Cultural Relativism” (in Moser & Carson)

Thomson, “Response to Harman’s Part I,” §10.6 (pp. 204–6) (in Harman & Thomson)

Shafer-Landau, “Rationality and Disagreement” (*) [focus on p. 220]

Thu., Oct. 13: The Coherence of Relativism

Williams, “Interlude: Relativism” (*)

Lyons, “Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence” (in Moser & Carson) [skip or skim the section titled “Relativistic Justification”]

Tue., Oct. 18: The Motivational Argument for Relativism

Harman, “Is There a Single True Morality?” (in Moser & Carson)

Harman, “Moral Relativism Defended,” pp. 3–11 (*)

Wed., Oct. 19: REWRITE OF FIRST PAPER DUE BY 6 P.M.

Thu., Oct. 20: Harman’s Social Custom Relativism

Harman, “Moral Relativism Defended,” pp. 11–22 (*)

Harman, “Social Contracts” (ch. 2 of Harman & Thomson)

Thomson, “Response to Harman’s Part I,” §§10.1–10.3 (pp. 188–96) and §§10.8–10.9 (pp. 208–17) (in Harman & Thomson)

Tue., Oct. 25: Attempts at a Benign Version of Relativism (Part 1)

Foot, “Moral Relativism” (in Moser & Carson)

Foot, “Art and Morality” (*) [optional]

Thu., Oct. 27: Attempts at a Benign Version of Relativism (Part 2)

Scanlon, “Fear of Relativism” (in Moser & Carson)

III. Moral Expressivism

Tue., Nov. 1: Old-School Expressivism: Ayer’s Emotivism

Ayer, “Critique of Ethics and Theology” (*)

Geach, “Ascriptivism” (*)

Wed., Nov. 2: SECOND PAPER DUE BY 11:59 P.M.

Thu., Nov. 3: New-School Expressivism I: Blackburn’s Quasi-Realism

Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, ch. 5, §§1–6 (pp. 145–71), and ch. 6, §1 (pp. 181–89)

Fri., Nov. 4: The Argument from Supervenience for Expressivism (OPTIONAL CLASS)

Blackburn, “Moral Realism,” §§I–II (*)

Blackburn, “Supervenience Revisited” (*)

Tue., Nov. 8: More on Blackburn’s Quasi-Realism

Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, ch. 6, §§2–6 (pp. 189–220)

Thu., Nov. 10: Blackburn on the Frege-Geach Problem

Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, ch. 6, §2 [reread]

Schueler, “Modus Ponens and Moral Realism” (*)

Blackburn, “Attitudes and Contents” (*) [skip or skim from top of p. 513 to bottom of p. 516]

Rosen, “Blackburn’s *Essays in Quasi-Realism*,” §§I–IV (*)

Tue., Nov. 15: Is Completed Quasi-Realism Still Expressivism?

Rosen, “Blackburn’s *Essays in Quasi-Realism*,” §§V–VIII (*)

Blackburn, “How to Be an Ethical Anti-Realist” (*) [skip or skim §II and Addendum]

Thu., Nov. 17: New-School Expressivism II: Gibbard's Norm-Expressivism
Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, pp. 3–9 and ch. 3

Tue., Nov. 22: More on Gibbard's Norm-Expressivism
Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, chs. 4–5

Thu., Nov. 24: NO CLASS (Thanksgiving Break)

Tue., Nov. 29: Expressivism and Normative Authority
Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, pp. 153–55 and pp. 164–83

IV. Interconnections

Thu., Dec. 1: Is Expressivism Relativism? Is Expressivism Nihilism? Is Relativism Nihilism?
Blackburn, “Relativism” (*) [optional]
Lewis, “Quasi-Realism Is Fictionalism” (*)
Boghossian, “The Maze of Moral Relativism” (*)
THIRD PAPER DUE BY 11:59 P.M.

Final Exam on Sat., Dec. 17, at 9:00 a.m.