

## Syllabus

### Instructor

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### Course Description

We make value judgments – e.g., “It’s wrong to eat meat,” “Death is bad” – all the time. But what are we doing when we do this? Are we describing an objective moral reality, or just expressing our preferences? Are such statements ever true? Can we ever know one to be true? If there are moral facts, are they just a subclass of the natural facts about the world? If there are facts about what morality requires, do we have any reason to do what they tell us to do? These are some questions in metaethics, to which the first part of this course will provide an introduction.

The second part of the course will ask questions not about moral statements but about our actual moral obligations. These are questions in normative ethics. We will investigate whether there are limits to the sacrifices that morality can demand of us, and whether certain types of acts are simply forbidden, even when necessary for promoting the overall good.

### Pro-Seminar Pledge

Since this course is a pro-seminar, each of us pledges not to pretend he/she understands something when in fact he/she doesn’t, not to hesitate to ask dumb questions, to stall the discussion to request that the relevant background be reviewed, to interrupt a conversation to check that one is getting it, and in general to help create a cool environment appropriate to exploring some of the coolest questions imaginable.

### Website

Here is our website: <http://spot.colorado.edu/~heathwoo/phil5100/>. Not sure we’ll need it.

### Readings

Two books are required:

Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford, 2003).

Shelly Kagan, *The Limits of Morality* (Oxford, 1989).

They are available at the CU Bookstore. Any additional readings will be provided.

## **Course Requirements**

**Very Short Papers:** You are required to write four very short papers (somewhere in the 400 to 800 word range). Your paper will be a response to that week's reading. The best thing to do in your paper is (i) to pick some argument or thesis or claim from the reading that you think is mistaken, (ii) briefly explain it, and (iii) explain clearly and persuasively why it is wrong.

But there are other things you can do. E.g., if you think the author is unfair to some view he is attacking, in that a defender of that view has a good response that the author doesn't discuss, that could make for a nice paper.

Or if you think the author's discussion of some issue is confused or in need of clarification in some way, a way you can pinpoint and resolve, that could also make for a nice paper.

Or you can always write about something in the reading that you simply find puzzling or confusing, and explain why you find it puzzling or confusing. These sorts of papers can still demonstrate sophistication and insight.

Although these papers are short, I still take them seriously. Put thought into each one. Style matters, too.

Your paper will receive a 1, 2, 3, or 4. 4 is very rare; it means that your paper demonstrates substantial and original insight. 3 is a good grade; it means your paper has done what it was supposed to do, meets expectations, and has no major flaws. A 2 means that your paper doesn't meet expectations, because it suffers from some fairly serious defect or misunderstanding. 1 represents a totally unacceptable paper, and will require a do over.

Papers are due according to following scheme. You'll be divided into groups A, B, and C. Group A has papers due in weeks 2, 5, 9, 13. Group B in weeks 3, 7, 10, 14. Group C in weeks 4, 8, 12, 15.

**Question for Russ.** Russ Shafer-Landau, the author of one of the books we'll be reading, will be visiting our class on Friday, April 13 for an informal Q&A about his book. Everyone is required to have at least one question for Russ. (You can run your question by me in advance, if you like.)

**Term Paper.** A 12-15 page paper is due at the end of the semester, on some topic of your choice relevant to the course. I recommend discussing your topic with me before you begin writing.

## **Rough Course Schedule** ("No course schedule survives contact with the students")

Readings are due the day they are listed.

**W 1/17** First Day Stuff. No readings due.

**F 1/19** Field trip to Kelly/McPherson talk. Shafer-Landau, "Introduction" (1-9)

- W 1/24 Shafer-Landau, "The Non-Cognitivist Challenge" (13-39)  
 F 1/26 "The Constructivist Challenge" (39-53)
- W 1/31 "Ethical Non-Naturalism" (55-80)  
 F 2/2 More non-naturalism. No new readings.
- W 2/7 "Supervenience and Causation" (80-117)  
 F 2/9 More supervenience and causation. No new readings.
- W 2/14 "Motivational Humeanism" (119-142)  
 F 2/16 "Motivational Judgement Internalism" (142-163)
- W 2/21 "Reasons Internalism" (165-190)  
 F 2/23 Possible guest speaker.
- W 2/28 "Moral Rationalism" (190-215)  
 F 3/2 More reasons internalism or moral rationalism. No new readings.
- W 3/7 "Rationality and Disagreement" (215-229); Huemer, "Disagreement and Error"  
 F 3/9 More disagreement. No new readings.
- W 3/14 "Moral Scepticism" (231-247)  
 F 3/16 "The Justification of Moral Principles" (247-267)
- W 3/21 "The Justification of Verdictive Beliefs" (267-322)  
 F 3/23 Catch-up day. No new readings.
- W 3/28, F 3/30 – NO CLASS – SPRING BREAK
- W 4/4 Possible guest speaker. Kagan, "Against Ordinary Morality" (1-47)  
 F 4/6 Possible guest speaker.
- W 4/11 "The Structure of Ordinary Morality" (47-83)  
 F 4/13 Russ Shafer-Landau visits.
- W 4/18 "Doing Harm" (83-128)  
 F 4/20 More on doing harm. No new readings.
- W 4/25 "Intending Harm" (128-183)  
 F 4/27 More on intending harm. No new readings.
- W 5/2 "Without Constraints" (183-204); "Avoiding the Appeal" (204-231),  
 F 5/4 "Extraordinary Morality" (386-415)