

PHIL 4/5300: Realism, Anti-Realism and Non-Realism in Metaethics & Metaphilosophy (2020-21)

Instructor: Prof. Gordon Davis (Gordon.davis@carleton.ca)

'Office hours': by appt. & *esp. encouraged Oct. 13-16 (no class Oct. 12)*. The course will be mostly *synchronous*: with two-hour classes every Monday at 11:35 + individ. (*req'd*) sessions at times that suit individual schedules.

Though grounded in some general themes in ethical theory, this course will cover a cross-section of various areas in philosophy, in some cases guided by students' research interests. It will do so (a) in terms of issues concerning the nature of normativity, and (b) in terms of some parallels between reflection on normativity and reflection on the nature of philosophical argument. A central theme will be the realism/anti-realism debate; we will also consider whether it makes sense to speak of a so-called third option, e.g. 'non-realism'. It is arguably a central issue in philosophy whether *any* normative claims can sustain a realist interpretation (not just ethical ones); this course may thus be of interest to some students with more interest in metaphysics and epistemology than in ethics.

Roughly the first half of the course will focus on this issue, mainly as it applies to ethics and the general theory of value. In the second half, students will have an opportunity to draw connections between the metaethical context and other relevant areas in philosophy that may interest them (e.g. logic, epistemology, aesthetics, or – for those willing to experiment – meta-philosophy).

Discussions of realism and anti-realism often distinguish soft targets, such as aesthetics and religion (where anti-realist exposure of their alleged lack of objectivity is common), from cases touching on the 'hard' sciences, for example the claims of theoretical physics (where certainty might be hard to come by, but where some realists seek the highest degree of objectivity nonetheless). Philosophers in the British tradition, such as Berkeley and Hume, developed anti-realist accounts of our talk of the external world, causation and the reality of the past; and philosophers in the German and Indian traditions have sometimes rejected realism about anything and everything non-mental. Physicalists like Quine have inverted this, directing anti-realism at much of our customary talk of mental phenomena (like the concept of a 'content of belief'), but retaining a realist account of scientific discourse about the physical world.

We will pay special attention, though, to concepts and claims that seem both routine and universal (at least in human discourse): '*possibilia*' (what might be or might have been), '*abstract objects*' (with a role in our talk about types rather than tokens), '*mathematical truths*' (which are apparently about abstract objects such as numbers), '*epistemic justification*' (e.g. the property of being a *reasonable* inference) and the *self* (that which seems to sustain individual identity over time). Most people *and* most philosophers seem implicitly to be realists about at least some of these things. A major question in contemporary philosophy has been whether claims about what has *value* (be it moral, personal, practical, cultural, etc.) have more in common with discourse where realism is least contentious or with claims, like those of aesthetics, where anti-realism is most tempting. The field that has done the most to explore these comparisons and contrasts is metaethics, so most of our initial readings will be in that area.

READINGS:

Geoff Sayre-McCord, "Moral Realism" (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-realism/>)

Terence Cuneo, *The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism* (OUP, 2007, **etext**)

Derek Parfit, *On What Matters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011), excerpts tba from Volume II

Russ Shafer-Landau, excerpts from *Moral Realism: A Defence* (OUP 2003, **etext**: see below)

- Cuneo, Shafer-Landau and Parfit all available online at Carleton Library Catalogue

Sartre & Plato's *Theaetetus*, avail @ library (esp. for those opting for meta-philosophy sub-unit)

S.E.P. (tba): 'Realism' (Alexander Miller); 'Moral Anti-Realism' (Richard Joyce); 'Reasons for Action' (x 3); 'Value of Knowledge' (Pritchard&T.); **SEP = Stanford Encyclopedia (online)**

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE AND READINGS :

(NOTE to those wishing to build up some background prior to our first meeting on Sept. 14: casual online searches could seek discussions of: (a) Hume's worries about 'is' vs. 'ought'; (b) G.E. Moore's worries about the 'naturalistic fallacy'; or (c) J.L. Mackie's 'subjectivism' (as defended in his 1977 book *Ethics*.)

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| Sept. 14 | Intro to Realism, Anti-Realism, Truth (...if time, will compare a, b & c above) |
| Sept. 21 | Distinctions in Ethics (Sayre-McCord "Moral Realism" @ SEP + Cuneo, Intro) |
| Sept. 28 | T. Cuneo (ebook @ library): <i>The Normative Web</i> (w/ Presentation 1 , see below) |
| Oct. 5 | Cuneo, up to chapter 4 (epistemic reasons) + excerpts from other SEP entries |
| Oct. 12 | NO CLASS (Thanksgiving) |
| Oct. 19 | Shafer-Landau's <i>Moral Realism</i> (2003): meta-philosophy (pp. 110-20 & 220-30) |
| Oct. 26 | NO CLASS (Reading week) |

OCT. 31 - SEND ESSAY # 1 (to Gordon.davis@carleton.ca)

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| Nov. 2 | Forms of irrealism: Reductive naturalism, relativism, etc. (SEP entries TBA) |
| Nov. 9 | Presentation 2 : discussion of individual proposals for Essay 2 (+ reading TBA) |
| Nov. 16 | Comparison of philosophical methods: Cuneo, Plato (<i>Theaetetus</i>) and J.P. Sartre |
| Nov. 23 | 'Non-realism' a form of cognitivism? (Parfit, <i>OWM</i> exc-tba & Plato, <i>Theaetetus</i>) |
| Nov. 30 | Inter alia: consultations on final paper topics (optional: Sartre & Plato continued) |
| Dec. 7 | Concluding reflections (+ date(s) TBA: suitable time(s) to make up for Oct. 12) |

EVALUATION

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| Presentation 1: each to discuss short Cuneo passage on 'epistemic facts' (5 mins. max) | 10% |
| Presentation 2: one-on-one, at arranged time(s), to discuss Essay 2 proposal(s) | 10% |
| Essay 1 (6-10 pages, i.e. 2500 word max, on 'companions-in-guilt', eg Cuneo) | 40% |
| (Final) Essay 2 (10-15 pp, on meta-ethics or meta-philosophy, open to own topics) | 40%(date TBA) |

Guidelines for essays and presentations will be provided in connection with each assignment. In general, the main criteria for evaluating essays include: clarity of writing, effective essay structure, handling of possible objections and replies (or where appropriate, actual objections in the current literature), use of course readings and other sources (including fairness of interpretation and appropriate methods of citation), quality of argumentative strategies, explicitness and quality of reasoning, critical distance from sources (including those that support your position), originality, creativity, and imagination (e.g. in the use of illustrations, examples, counterexamples).

Late papers lose 5 % per day (*including weekend days*), unless a documented reason is given - *given on or within a few days of the deadline* (or at least w/ email noting the problem *emailed within days of deadline*, along with a timeline for documentation).

Papers should be sent via email, and will be due at 11:59 PM on the due date.

Page specifications assume 12-point font and double-spacing. So, the first (midterm) should be between 1500 and 2500 words. The final paper should be between 2500 and 4000 words. If a paper is clearly under-length, the mark will suffer; and if a paper is far too long, I would ask you to edit and resubmit. In the latter case, given deadlines (especially in December), you would have very little time to do this. It is therefore the responsibility of anyone who feels they have no choice but to submit an over-length paper to be checking email regularly, both the day after submitting and every subsequent day, in order to see how much time there is for such editing – i.e. to see my initial response.

Department of Philosophy and Carleton University Policies (Fall/Winter 2020-21)

Assignments:

Please follow your professor's instructions on how assignments will be handled electronically. There will be NO hard copies placed in the essay box this coming year.

Evaluation:

Standing in a course is determined by the course instructor subject to the approval of the Faculty Dean. This means that grades submitted by the instructor may be subject to revision. No grades are final until they have been approved by the Dean.

Deferrals for Term Work:

If students are unable to complete term work because of illness or other circumstances beyond their control, they should contact their course instructor no later than *three working days* of the due date. Normally, any deferred term work will be completed by the last day of the term. Term work cannot be deferred by the Registrar.

Deferrals for Final Exams:

Students are expected to be available for the duration of a course including the examination period. Occasionally, students encounter circumstances beyond their control where they may not be able to write a final examination or submit a take-home examination. Examples of this would be a serious illness or the death of a family member. If you miss a final examination and/or fail to submit a take-home examination by the due date, you may apply for a deferral no later than *three working days* after the original due date (as per the University Regulations in [Section 4.3 of the Undergraduate Calendar](#)). Visit the [Registrar's Office](#) for further information.

Plagiarism:

It is the responsibility of each student to understand the meaning of 'plagiarism' as defined in the Undergraduate or Graduate Calendars, and to avoid both committing plagiarism and aiding or abetting plagiarism by other students. ([Section 10.1 of the Undergraduate Calendar Academic Regulations](#))

Academic Accommodation:

You may need special arrangements to meet your academic obligations during the term:

- *Pregnancy or religious obligation:* write to your professor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist. For more details visit the [EDC](#) website.
- *Academic accommodations for students with disabilities:* The [Paul Menton Centre](#) for Students with Disabilities (PMC) provides services to students with Learning Disabilities (LD), psychiatric/mental health disabilities, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), chronic medical conditions, and impairments in mobility, hearing, and vision. If you have a disability requiring academic accommodations in this course, please contact PMC at 613-520-6608 or pmc@carleton.ca for a formal evaluation. If you are already registered with the PMC, contact your PMC coordinator to send your Letter of Accommodation at the beginning of the term, and no later than two weeks before the first in-class test or exam requiring accommodation. After requesting accommodation from PMC, meet with your professor to ensure accommodation arrangements are made.
- *Survivors of Sexual Violence:* As a community, Carleton University is committed to maintaining a positive learning, working and living environment where sexual violence will not be tolerated, and where survivors are supported through academic accommodations as per [Carleton's Sexual Violence Policy](#).
- *Accommodation for [Student Activities](#):* Carleton University recognizes the substantial benefits, both to the individual student and for the university, that result from a student participating in activities beyond the classroom experience. Reasonable accommodation must be provided to students who compete or perform at the national or international level. Please contact your instructor with any requests for academic accommodation during the first two weeks of class, or as soon as possible after the need for accommodation is known to exist.

Important Dates:

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| Sept. 9 | Classes start. |
| Sept. 23 | Last day for registration and course changes for fall term and fall/winter (two-term) courses. |
| Sept. 30 | Last day for entire fee adjustment when withdrawing from fall term or two-term courses. Withdrawals after this date will result in a permanent notation of WDN on the official transcript. |
| Oct. 12 | Statutory holiday. University closed. |
| Oct. 26-30 | Fall Break – no classes. |
| Nov. 27 | Last day for summative tests or examinations, or formative tests or examinations totaling more than 15% of the final grade, before the official examination period. |
| Dec. 11 | Last day of fall term classes. <i>Classes follow a Monday schedule.</i> Last day for academic withdrawal from fall term courses. Last day for handing in term work and the last day that can be specified by a course instructor as a due date for term work for a fall term course. |
| Dec. 12-23 | Final examinations for fall term courses and mid-term examinations in two-term courses. Examinations are normally held all seven days of the week. |
| Dec. 23 | All take-home examinations are due. |
| Jan. 6 | Classes begin. |
| Jan. 20 | Last day for registration and course changes in the winter term. |
| Jan. 31 | Last day for a full fee adjustment when withdrawing from winter term courses or from the winter portion of two-term courses. Withdrawals after this date will result in a permanent notation of WDN on the official transcript. |
| Feb. 15 | Statutory holiday. University closed. |
| Feb. 15-19 | Winter Break – no classes. |
| Mar. 26 | Last day for summative tests or examinations, or formative tests or examinations totaling more than 15% of the final grade, in winter term or fall/winter courses before the official examination period. |
| Apr. 2 | Statutory holiday. University closed. |
| Apr. 9 | Last day of two-term and winter term classes. Last day for academic withdrawal from fall/winter and winter courses. Last day for handing in term work and the last day that can be specified by a course instructor as a due date for two-term and for winter term courses. |
| Apr. 10 | No classes or examinations take place. |
| Apr. 11-23 | Final examinations for winter term and two-term courses. Examinations are normally held all seven days of the week. |
| Apr. 23 | All take-home examinations are due. |

Addresses:

Department of Philosophy:
www.carleton.ca/philosophy
 520-2110

Registrar's Office:
www.carleton.ca/registrar
 520-3500

Academic Advising Centre:
www.carleton.ca/academicadvising
 520-7850

Writing Services:
<http://www.carleton.ca/csas/writing-services/>
 520-3822

MacOdrum Library
<http://www.library.carleton.ca/>
 520-2735