

Philosophy 334: Moral Epistemology

Mount Holyoke College

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About the course. This course will focus on a handful of epistemic challenges to morality. We will consider questions such as: Can we gain moral knowledge from testimony? What are the implications of the prevalence of moral disagreement? Do our evolutionary origins pose a challenge to our moral beliefs?

Meetings. Th 1:15-4:05 in Skinner 210

Readings. On the course website.

Requirements.

- Participation & Attendance: 10%
- Reading Responses: 10%
- First Paper & Rewrite: 30%
- Second Paper: 50%

* The **first paper** should be 1500 words long. It counts for **30%** of your final grade. You will be required to substantially rewrite this paper. This is not a mere revision—you must start a new document *from scratch*. Every sentence, every paragraph, every way you have presented the material in the original paper is guilty until proven innocent. *Think of it as writing a brand new paper.* (**So really, there are three papers due in this class.**) The final grade on the first paper will be a **weighted average** of the two, with the rewrite counting for 60% and the original for 40%.

* The **final paper** should be 3000 words long, and will count for **50%** of the final grade. You may choose to expand your shorter paper or to write on a new topic. There will be a paper exchange after you submit this paper and you will have the opportunity to rewrite it in light of peer comments.

Due dates.

- Reading Responses: Wednesdays at 10 am - submit online.
- Paper 1: Friday February 22nd at 5 pm - submit online.
- Rewrite: Thursday March 7th at 1 pm - submit online and in class.
- Paper 2 first draft: Thursday April 25rd at 1 pm - submit online and in class.
- Paper 2 final draft: Sunday April 28th at 5 pm. - submit online.

Submissions. Please format your assignments in a clean, consistent, and professional way. I recommend at least the following: a standard Times New Roman type font, double spacing, page numbers, name, date, and class. Electronic copies should be submitted as PDFs - not Word documents. PDFs give you control over how your work is presented. They allow you to ensure that your file will look the way its supposed to when the recipient opens it. Converting docs to PDFs is easy, especially if you have a Mac. Just Google it, and if you have any trouble, ask the Help Desk (x2600).

Reading assignments. You are expected to do the assigned reading before class, and actively participate in class discussions. Most weeks, you will submit a short response to some aspect of the reading for that

week. These reading assignments will be graded pass/fail. I won't always return them, but I will always read them carefully. So *you should take the same care with these short, less formal assignments as you would with your papers*. These assignments help me gauge your understanding of and engagement with the material.

Participation. Philosophy is a communal activity. Much of it is about asking simple, clarificatory questions. I'll expect you to do at least that much regularly. I realize that participation is more difficult for some of us. But writing papers, understanding the readings—these too are more difficult for some of us. Class will consist largely of discussion, and everyone is expected to participate. If you have trouble speaking in class, please see me and we will work on it together.

Writing. A major goal of this class is to improve your writing skills. Chances are that you haven't done this sort of writing before—at least not at the level at which we will do it—so you will need to practice. (At the same time, you will see, it is a much more natural and intuitive way of writing than what you may have been taught in the past.) I hope you will emerge as stronger writers capable of producing clear, concise, and convincing argumentative essays. Like any skill, this one requires practice and patience. Acquiring it will be difficult: you will have to do a lot of writing and rewriting. I am committed to helping you get there because I know that the ability to think critically and express those thoughts in clear, crisp prose will stand you out of the crowd and serve you well wherever you go from here.

Writing expectations: David Foster Wallace said it best in his own syllabus.

If you want to improve your academic writing and are willing to put extra time and effort into it, I am a good teacher to have. But if you're used to whipping off papers the night before they're due, running them quickly through the computer's Spellchecker, handing them in full of high-school errors and sentences that make no sense, and having the professor accept them "because the ideas are good" or something, please be informed that I draw no distinction between the quality of one's ideas and the quality of those ideas' verbal expression, and that I will not accept sloppy, rough-draftish, or semiliterate college writing. Again, I am absolutely not kidding. If you won't or can't devote significant time and attention to your written work, I urge you to drop... and save us both a lot of grief."¹

Late Assignments. Late reading responses will not be accepted. Late papers will be penalized by 1/3 of a grade for every day late. If you foresee any potential difficulty completing an assignment on time, contact me as soon as possible. Extensions may be given if requested sufficiently in advance.

Attendance. Most of the action happens in class—it is where I give away all the answers. Seriously. I guarantee that if you're not in class when I explain the assignment, you won't be able to complete it successfully. If you absolutely must miss class, let me know *as soon as possible*. We will sort something out.

Gadgets. Turn them off or leave them at home. Laptops too.

Readings. Most of the readings we will look at are short, but quite tricky. Give yourself time to digest them. I recommend a two step approach: first, skim, and then carefully read each piece before we discuss it in class. Use the reading assignments to help focus your attention on what is most important. Jot down questions and confusions and raise them in lecture. Second, skim the reading again after we've discussed it. It should be much easier to understand at this point. If you're still unclear about something, get help: email me, come by my office hours, ask a classmate, etc.

¹ <http://alosophia.blogspot.com/2008/09/david-foster-wallaces-syllabus.html>

Academic Honesty. Upon entering Mount Holyoke College, you each signed a pledge to uphold the honor code. It is your responsibility “to read *A Guide to the Uses and Acknowledgment of Sources* and the Student Handbook, which define the standards adopted by the College; to observe the established procedures in preparing assignments and writing papers and examinations, and to submit as [your] own only that work that [you have] originated.”² I expect you will all honor the pledge you signed. Therefore, everything you turn in should be *your own work* and *in your own words*. If your discussions of class topics with your friends, dogs, parents, etc., are helpful, cite them. Credit all sources appropriately, even (especially) Wikipedia and your Googling bounty. Each one of you should take the plagiarism tutorial at: <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/lits/ris/Plagiarism/>. Consider it a requirement of the class that I will trust you have completed. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty and to avoid it. Accidental plagiarism should not be possible. If in doubt, cite it. In short, do not plagiarize. I *will* fail you.

Assistance. Besides myself, you have a number of resources available to help you succeed in this class.

- * You can go to the **SAW center** for help on your assignments. Well-trained peers are there to look over your drafts, help you plan your arguments, etc.³
- * There may be a **SAW mentor** in this course. If there is, *go to her*. She is there to read drafts (I don’t do that), help you organize your thoughts, and so forth.
- * In order to receive reasonable accommodations for a disability, you must register with the **Office of AccessAbility Services**. This office will provide a letter describing the appropriate accommodations. Once you have this letter, set up an appointment with me and submit it.⁴

Grading. Here is what the Mount Holyoke College student handbook says about grades:

A = excellent	<i>Consider: ‘B’ means ‘good’. The obvious question is: what does ‘good’ mean? I take ‘good’ to mean good. Therefore, if you do a good job on a paper, you will get a B. This means you have done a good job, and should be happy. ‘A’ means ‘excellent’. This does not mean you have to write a publishable paper or be God’s gift to philosophy to get an A. It does mean that you have to demonstrate some real understanding and aptitude for doing philosophy.</i>
B = good	
C = satisfactory	
D = minimally passing	
F = failing.” ⁵	

Your paper will be evaluated along three main dimensions:

1. The clarity and soundness of the *argument* for your *thesis*.
2. Your demonstrated understanding of readings and material covered in class.
3. Your insight and creativity in engaging the issues.

An A paper is excellent along all of these dimensions.

A B paper is excellent along the first and second or good along all three.

A C paper is good along the first and second or satisfactory along all three.

This class will thus require you to develop and use your critical thinking, arguing, and writing skills. Assignments will be brief but demanding, and will require your full attention and generous time.

N.B. Do not panic if your first paper receives a low, or even failing grade. It is likely that you will get the worst grade you have ever received on the first assignment in this class. This is not cause for panic; it is cause for reflection and working harder. Fewer than 10% of students are able to write above the B- level in their initial attempts at philosophical writing. Don’t let this discourage you. Writing is hard. But it is a skill

² https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student_handbook

³ <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/saw/peer/center>

⁴ <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/accessability>

⁵ https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student_handbook

you can learn. People who make a *serious* effort often write B or A papers by the end of term. A failure to improve over the course of the assignments is more cause for concern. Even if you submit an A paper, I will expect you to do better on your next assignment. If you aren't improving, wherever you start from, I'm not doing my job well. *This applies for you even if you have taken a philosophy class before.*

Schedule. This is tentative. I value depth over breadth, as well as the flexibility to adjust the pace and readings to suit the particular needs and interests of the class.

Day	Date			Reading
1	Th 1/24	Introduction		<i>Suggested background reading for the semester:</i> Joyce, R. "Moral Anti-Realism" in the <i>Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy</i> (henceforth <i>SEP</i>). Campbell, R. "Moral Epistemology" in <i>SEP</i> . Sinnott-Armstrong, W. "Moral Skepticism" in the <i>SEP</i> .
2	Th 1/31	Realism		Moore, G. E. "The Subject Matter of Ethics" in <i>Principia Ethica</i> , 1903. Sayre-McCord, J. "Moral Realism" in <i>SEP</i> . <i>Optional:</i> Finlay, S. "Four Faces of Realism" in <i>Philosophy Compass</i> .
3	Th 2/7	Anti-Realism		Mackie, J.L. [1977] <i>Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong</i> , Penguin: New York, Chapter 1. Harman, G. "Ethics and Observation" in <i>The Nature of Morality</i> , Oxford University Press, 1997.
4	Th 2/14	Expertise & Testimony		McGrath, S. "Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise" <i>Optional:</i> Singer, P. "Moral Expertise"
5	Th 2/21	No Class		No Class
	T 2/26			Paper topics assigned.
6	Th 2/28	Expertise & Testimony		McGrath, S. "Skepticism about Moral Expertise as a Puzzle for Moral Realism" in <i>Journal of Philosophy</i> , Vol. 108, Issue 3, 2011 <i>Optional:</i> McGrath, S. "The Puzzle of Pure Moral Deference" <i>Philosophical Perspectives</i> , Vol. 23, Issue 1, pp. 321–344, 2009.
7	Th 3/7	Expertise & Testimony		Sliwa, P. "In defense of moral testimony" in <i>Philosophical Studies</i> , 158(2): 175-195 (2012).
	F 3/8			Paper 1 due by 5 pm. Submit online.
8	Th 3/14			Rewrite due at 1pm. Submit online and bring a copy to class. Special event in class - attendance especially required.
	W 3/20			Paper 1 due by 5 pm. Submit online.
	Th 3/21		Spring Break	

Day	Date			Reading
9	Th 3/28	Moral Knowledge		Guest Speaker: Sophie Horowitz (MIT) on formal epistemology. No reading.
10	Th 4/4	Debunking Deontology		Singer, P. [2005] "Ethics and Intuitions" in <i>the Journal of Ethics</i> , 9(3-4): 331-352. Greene, J. [2008] "The Secret Joke of Kant's Soul" in W. Sinnott-Armstrong (ed.) <i>Moral Psychology</i> , Vol. 3 *pp. 35-46, 66-77. Greene, J. [2003] "From neural 'is' to moral 'ought': what are the moral implications of neuroscientific moral psychology?" in <i>Nature Reviews</i> , v. 4. Radiolab: http://www.radiolab.org/2007/aug/13/
11	Th 4/11	Debunking Moral Realism		Guest Speaker: Eliot Michaelson (UCLA) on Nietzsche and Naturalism. Selections from Nietzsche's <i>Daybreak</i> . Street, S. [ms.] "Does Anything Really Matter or Did We Just Evolve to Think So?" Street, S. [2006] "A Darwinian Dilemma For Realist Theories of Value" in <i>Philosophical Studies</i> , 127(1): 109-166.
	F 4/12			Paper topic initial proposals due.
	M 4/15			Paper topic proposals: final version due.
12	Th 4/18	Against Debunking Arguments		Kahane, G. [2011] "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments" in <i>Nous</i> 14(1): 103-125.
13	Th 4/25			1st draft of paper 2 due: Submit online and bring a copy to class. Paper exchange in class - attendance especially required.
	Sun 4/28			Final draft of final paper due by 5 pm. Submit online