PHIL 472 Seminar in Ethics

Spring 2017

John Dreher

Syllabus: Reasons, Realism and Objectivity[[1]](#footnote-1)

This seminar is an exploration of reasons, objectivity and realism in ethics. In philosophy of science and philosophy of mathematics we distinguish between objectivity and realism. All agree that the standards of investigation in natural science and mathematics are objective, which is to say that they yield justified true beliefs about nature. Many, but not all, argue that the standards of research in mathematics and natural science are objective because there is a mind independent reality that those methods successfully access. The study of ethics is not as fortunate. Many argue that there really aren’t established methods of investigation in ethics that yield justified belief, and hence that ethics is not *objective*. Some argue that the lack of objectivity in ethics is due to the fact that there really isn’t a mind-independent reality for ethics to describe. Consequently, some argue that the putative statements of ethics are really just *expressions* (following expressivists like Ayer.) Others argue that although the language of ethics certainly suggests that we can form reasonable ethical beliefs, those beliefs must all be false because there aren’t any ethical facts for ethics to represent (following anti-realists like Mackie).

Against expressivist and anti-realist lines of thought we find several responses that suggest that ethical belief can be *objective* because we can distinguish *between good and bad reasons* for our moral beliefs and for the decisions that we take. Indeed, even some who take an expressivist view of ethical discourse believe that an expressivist reading can be given to certain apparently realist theories like utilitarianism (e.g., R.M. Hare). Others think that the principles of ethics are encoded in the language of ethics, which grounds certain ethical platitudes that in turn constitute a coherent, objective ethical theory (e.g. Michael Smith). Still others think that the fact that we can distinguish between good and bad reasons for ethical belief shows that the very rational standards that we use to distinguish between good and bad reasons explain the objectivity of ethical belief (e.g. people writing from a Kantian point of view like Christine Korsgaard and Thomas Scanlon).

The seminar begins with review of relevant background literature form Moore, Prichard, Ayer, Anscombe, Foot, Rawls, Hare and Mackie. There follows an intensive examination of Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem*; Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity,* and Thomas Scanlon: *What We Owe Each Other* (ch. 1,8) and *Being Realistic About Reasons*.)

**MATERIALS:**

**Cahn and Haber, *20th Century Ethical Theory*, New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1995.**

**Hare, *Moral Thinking***

**Mackie*, Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong (purchase or borrow a used copy)***

**Smith, *The Moral Problem***

**Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity***

**Scanlon, *What We Owe Each Other***

**Scanlon, *Being Realistic About Reasons***

**REQUIREMENTS:**

* **attendance,**
* **participation in discussion**

**in-class presentation of an abstract of your term paper (15 minute presentation/25 minute discussion); week of Mar the 28th**

* **first draft of term paper, Due Monday Apr the 17th**
* **term paper (7000-13000 words). Due Tuesday May the 2nd**

**SCHEDULE**

**Week of Jan 9th Background and Review**

**Moore**, *Principia Ethica*, ch. 1. (in Cahn and Haber, henceforth CH, pp. 12 – 31))

**Prichard**, “Does Moral Philosophy Resent on a Mistake?” (in CH, 37 - 47))

**Week of Jan 16th M.L. King Jr. Day**

**Ayer**, *Language Truth and Logic* (in CH pp, 108 – 115)

**Anscombe**, “Modern Moral Philosophy” (in CH, pp. 351 - 64)

**Week of Jan 23th Background and Review**

**Foot,** “Moral Beliefs” (in CH, pp. 365 - 377)

“Virtues and Vices” (in CH, pp. 583 - 93)

**Wee of Jan 30th Background and Review**

**Rawls,** “Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics,” pp. 212 – 224.

**Hare,** *Moral Thinking*, ch 1,4,5

**Mackie,** *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, ch. 1 – 5

**Week of Feb 6th Michael Smith**, *The Moral Problem* ch. 1,2

**Week of Feb 13th Michael Smith,** *The Moral Prob*lem ch. 3 – 5

**Week of Feb 20th Presidents’ Day,** *The Moral Problem*, ch. 6

**Week of Feb 27th Christine Korsgaard,** *Sources of Normativity* ch. 1.

**Week of Mar 6th Christine Korsgaard,** *Sources of Normativity* ch. 2.

**Week of Mar 13th Spring Break**

**Week of Mar 20th**

**Please note that classes will NOT be held on the Monday and Wednesday after Spring break. We shall arrange a two hour session to make up for the two classes missed. (We’ll**

**find a time convenient for all, but it could turn out to be a time in the early evening.) During this time students will informally present their ideas for their term papers.**

**Week of Mar 27th Christine Korsgaard**, *Sources of Normativity*, ch. 3,4,5

**Week of April 3rd Thomas Scanlon,** *What We Owe Each Other*, ch. 1

**Week of Apr 10th Thomas Scanlon**, *What We Owe Each Other*, ch. 8

**Week of Apr 17th Thomas Scanlon**, *Being Realistic About Reasons,* ch 1- 3

**First draft of term paper due**

**Apr 24th Thomas Scanlon**, *Being Realistic About Reasons*, ch 4 -5.

**May 2nd Term Paper due**

1. ***This syllabus is subject to revision until the end of the first week of classes, although no revisions are anticipated***. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)