THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
"Contemporary Meta-Ethics"
Philosophy 449 Lec 01

Winter, 2010

INSTRUCTOR:

Dr. John A. Baker Office: SS 1222

Phone: 220 3167 (either I will answer or you can leave a message on the voice mail)

Email (a very efficient and reliable way of getting hold of me): baker@ucalgary.ca

TIME: Monday and Wednesday, 3.00pm-4.15pm

OFFICE HOURS:

I will be in my office for the hour before class. I am also almost always available after class. Outside those times, for a variety of reasons, it is not a good idea just to "drop in", hoping to catch me in the office: it is much better to phone or email me for an appointment. I am happy to make such appointments, so do not hesitate to make them.

TOPICS:

The following description of the topics which the course is meant to address is meant more to *locate* the questions and theories which I will address in the field than to list the issues and theories which will be examined in detail, for clearly I cannot discuss in detail *all* of the items I will review below in a thirteen week course. However, I will be able to provide the concepts and tools needed to appreciate some of the work being done in contemporary meta-ethical.

It would be best to think of the discipline "meta-ethics" as being addressed to four kinds of questions:

1. **Semantic questions**, that is, questions about the *analysis* of what have usually been thought to be morally central concepts. I will discuss at various stages *both* so-called "thin concepts" like those expressed by words and phrases like "…is good", "… is

intrinsically valuable", "… has a right to do …", "… has an obligation to ….", "… has a duty to …", and "… ought to …" *and* so-called "thick concepts" like those expressed by words and phrases like "… is a *just* distribution of benefits and burdens", "… is a *loyal* employee", "… is *worthy of respect*", etc. Such analyses are addressed both to questions about the *meanings* of the terms used in expressing these concepts and questions about the conditions (if any) under which claims made with such claims can be *true* and/or *acceptable* [see further 3 below].

2. **Metaphysical questions**, that is, questions about the ontological status of moral facts and moral "entities" like rights, duties, obligations, values, and so on. For example, do such facts/entities *exist* and, if so, what does a claim that they exist come to, and, if not, what does that mean for morality's authority? And so on.

3. **Epistemological questions**, that is, questions about how, if at all, we can validate, warrant, establish [one of the issues here is the question *which* of these (and other) terms is the appropriate one] moral claims as true, as acceptable, as rational, as reasonable, etc. [again one of the issues here is the question which of *these* (and other) terms is the appropriate one].

4. **Logical questions** about the nature of sound or valid moral reasoning — *if* such is possible, of course.

Meta-ethical *theories* are theories about how systematically to answer such questions and these theories can be very roughly (and provisionally) be classified as either "moral realist" (objectivist) or "moral anti-realist":

(a) *Moral realist/objectivist theories* postulate moral entities (rights, obligations, values, etc.) and claim that such entities *both* exist independently of human beliefs about them or attitudes towards them *and* (yet) give reasons to people to act or abstain from acting *or even* (though must less plausibly) have the power to cause people to behave in certain ways;

(b) *Moral anti-realist theories* deny that such entities exist in the above sense.

The *moral realist theories* which will be considered include both *naturalistic* and *non-naturalist* variants. Naturalistic theories examined will include both classic "natural law" and modern

evolutionary ethical variants. Non-naturalist theories examined will include both classic 'intuitionist' theories and some modern variants. *Moral anti-realist* theories examined will include both irrationalist emotivist/expressivist theories and various theories (for example prescriptivist and constructivist theories) which attempt in various ways to 'recover' the rationality of morality.

It is worth noting even here, firstly, that the above classification of theories is far from ideal (and in the class they will be subjected to critical examination); secondly, that, in illustration of this point, some philosophers argue that to recover the rationality of morality is all that is possible and all that is needed if we are establish morality as existing 'objectively' in the only intelligible sense of that adverb.

Please note:
  (i)   that *each* of the metaethical theories to be examined has semantic, metaphysical, epistemological and logical components;
  (ii)   that these theories will be examined with varying degrees of detail, and some of them will be treated more as illustrations of certain kinds of error than anything else,
  (iii) that particular attention will be paid to the evidential status of so-called "commonsense" moral beliefs in the development of such meta-ethical theories, to the role of rationality, and to the facts of cultural diversity and the possibility of pluralism and
  (iv)   that early in the course we will give close examination of some modern variants and refinements of three different arguments which some philosophers have felt are fundamental in structuring any discussion of such theories, specifically Moore's *Open Question Argument*, *Hume's Guillotine*, and *Hume's Motivating Influence Argument*.

By far the deepest questions in meta-ethical theory are questions about how one can argue for or against the kinds of meta-ethical theories just outlined. Three "methods of meta-ethics", as I will call them, i.e., methods by which these deeper methodological questions can be addressed will be developed and discussed — the following names are not standard in the literature, but are, I think, useful:
  (i) what I will call "the method of analysis": according to this method one begins from careful analysis of the concepts

('thin' and 'thick) used in moral talking and reasoning and from those analyses one develops both an account of the so-called 'logic of moral reasoning' and at least schematic answers to the ontological, epistemological questions which meta-ethical theories are meant to answer — famous exponents of this approach included the classic emotivists, the English philosopher Richard Hare, and most recently the Australian philosopher Frank Jackson;

(ii) what I will call "the method of rational reconstruction": according to this method (a) one begins from the reflective judgments (what some have called 'intuitions') of mature moral agents *both* on *substantive* moral issues *and* on the issue of what is *relevant* in decisions about what one ought to do, about what things are of moral value, and so on, and (b) one then tries to find a meta-ethical theory which can be brought into "reflective equilibrium" with these two classes of reflective judgments, the theory offering at least schematic answers to the four classes of questions (listed above) which meta-ethical theories are meant to address. Since the reflective judgments of the two classes are given epistemic privilege, it is clear that this method of meta-ethics is designed to *reconstruct* the morality/moralities of the mature moral agents; and since the judgments of the two kinds are 'reflective' and since being "reflective" involves in some sense being subject to rational (and typically empirical) assessment designed to root out superstitions and erroneous metaphysical, empirical and logical mistakes, it is felt appropriate to refer to it as "*rational*" reconstruction. Famous examples of exponents of this method include the British 'intuitionists', W.D. Ross and H.A. Prichard, and the Americans, John Rawls, D.A. Richards, and Norman Daniels.

(iii) what I will call "the method of rational replacement": according to this method (a) one develops firstly an account of rational choice useable in interpersonal situations, situations moreover in which cooperation may enable those involved in the situation to benefit more than they would benefit without cooperation, and then (b) one uses this account of rational to evaluate various principles and modes of cooperation, (c) accepting those principles and modes of cooperation which

survive such assessment. It is important that in developing the account of rationality in (a) one does not in anyway rely on views (reflective judgments) about what a correct morality might say on anything: in this the method of rational replacement differs radically from the method of rational reconstruction — hence it is not unreasonable to call the method a method of "rational replacement". This said, however, the account of rational choice can, according to the method of radical replacement, serve as a tool by which we can assess principles and modes of interaction which common moralities (the moralities found accepted in various societies) have espoused: the idea is not only that we can call the principles and modes of interaction which survive the assessment rational, but also that we can call it a "rational morality" because it does address issues *any* morality is meant to address, that is, issues about how people "ought" or "rationally" to relate to one another. Famous examples of exponents of this method include the English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (in his *Utilitarianism* though not in some of his other writings) and more recently the Canadian David Gauthier and the American John Harsanyi.

I will be concerned to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of these three "method of meta-ethics".

TEXTS:

The basic structuring of the examination of the issues in the course will be provided by selections from my *Lectures in Metaethics*. These selections will be posted in one for or another on Blackboard as we go along.

The other readings for the course will consist of journal articles available through the University Library on-line or book chapters also available online.

Note that often in class we will be engaged in careful, line by line, examination of arguments found in the readings. As we go along, I will post on-line (in Blackboard) an announcement about *which* article/chapters we will be discussing in class. Students should ensure that they bring to class copies of the article/chapter to be

discussed. Feel free in class to use an electronic copy on your laptop if you wish: otherwise bring a hard copy.

ASSIGNMENTS AND EXAMINATIONS:

1. Weekly reading assignments will be set. Except in the weeks when essays are actually due to be submitted (see 3 below), I will on the average set about two articles/chapters per week. ***Sometimes I will simply assume that an article or chapter has been read*** and the class will proceed on that assumption. It is the duty of any students who miss classes to find out what readings have been set.
2. In the earlier part of the term students will be asked to prepare a brief (point form) analysis and critique of two articles. What an "analysis" involves will be posted on Blackboard and explained in class. Deadlines and other details will be announced in class and posted on Blackboard.
3. Two shortish (about 1500 words each) essays will be set. The readings for the essays will significantly overlap with, or be identical to, the readings mentioned in 1 and 2. Details and deadline will be announced in class and posted on Blackboard.
4. There will be a two hour registrar scheduled Final Examination. This examination will cover the material studied throughout the course: a set of *possible* essay questions will be posted on Blackboard fairly early in the term. The final class in the term will be devoted to a review of the course material.

GRADING:

1. *Ceteris paribus*, the first analysis (see 2 above) will be worth 5% of the final grade and the second analysis worth 10%.
2. *Ceteris paribus*, the first short essay mentioned in 3 above will be worth 20% and the second worth 25% of the final grade.
3. *Ceteris paribus* the registrar scheduled final examination will be worth 40% of the final grade.
4. Except in very exceptional circumstances, and at the discretion of the instructor, a passing grade in the course will be received only if (a) each of the two analyses, each of the two short essays, and the final examination are submitted ***and*** (b) the final examination receives a passing grade.
5. Later virtue will be allowed to redeem earlier sin.

6. Fairness to those who submit their assignments on time demands that lateness in submission of assignments be penalised. Accordingly, assignments handed in after the stated deadline will receive at most B if submitted by 3.00 pm of the day after the due day and C if submitted by 3.00 pm of the day after that, and so on, unless, of course, some sort of university recognised ground for delay — e.g. some sort of evidence of illness — is submitted.

NOTE: If a student fails to submit her or his analysis of an article before I hand out *my* analysis of that article, then clearly the requirement set out in point 4 above can only reasonably be satisfied in relation to analyses if the student submits an analysis of some different article from that originally assigned. If this situation arises then the student will need to approach me for a replacement assignment. Note that point 6 will still apply.

INTELLECTUAL HONESTY:

The following statement about is posted on the University home page [c:

> Intellectual honesty is the cornerstone of the development and acquisition of knowledge. Knowledge is cumulative and further advances are predicated on the contributions of others. In the normal course of scholarship these contributions are apprehended, critically evaluated, and utilised as a foundation for further inquiry. Intellectual honesty demands that the contribution of others be acknowledged. To do less is to cheat. To pass off contributions and ideas of another as one's own is to deprive oneself of the opportunity and challenge to learn and to participate in the scholarly process of acquisition and development of knowledge. Not only will the cheater or intellectually dishonest individual be ultimately his/her own victim but also the general quality of scholarly activity will be seriously undermined. It is for these reasons that the University insists on intellectual honesty in scholarship. The control of intellectual dishonesty begins with the individual's recognition of standards of honesty expected generally and compliance with those expectations.

I would add the following guiding amplification of this comment:

Quoting Sources for Arguments, Analyses and Examples:[1] In examining the issues you will need (i) to find a way of structuring the issues facing you, (ii) you will need arguments for your claims, (iii) you will usually need to provide analyses of the concepts which are central to your claims, and (iv) you will often find it useful to give examples which illustrate some or all of above. There is some plausibility to the view that the ways of structuring issues, the arguments, the analyses, and the examples, together with the issues they are used to address form the subject matter and indeed the raw material of philosophy. Though I hope that on occasion you will develop your own ideas for (i)-(iv), it is expected that in many cases your ideas for (i)-(iv) will come from the articles and books which you read. It is perfectly acceptable for you to use the ways of structuring the issues, the arguments, the analyses, and the examples invented by other people, even to use them in a modified form, *provided that you do your best to clearly identify the source as far as you know it*. The clear identification of the sources serves several functions. Firstly, it enables your reader to review the original source, which may indeed be new to her or him and which she or he might find useful. Secondly, it can and often will serve as a point of credit to you that you saw the value of structuring the issues in your ways, that you saw the relevance and force of the argument, analysis or example in the context in which you have used it – after all the context may well be rather different from that in which the way of structuring the issues and the argument, analysis or example first appeared. Thirdly, if you have used the way of structuring the issues or the argument, analysis or example in a modified form, it allows your reader to see clearly whether and how your modified version is or is not an improvement over the original version – again any improvement in the way of structuring the issues or in the wording of the argument, analysis or example can be a source of significant credit to you. Fourthly, citing the source can serve, *for you*, as a way of remembering *other* discussions of the issues you addressed in your essay. Fifthly, of course, if the ideas for (i)-(iv) *were* taken from a

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[1] The basic ideas for following way of presenting my views about quoting sources and about plagiarism are drawn from the class handout for Philosophy 315.01, Winter Term, 1999, prepared by my colleague Professor J. J. Macintosh.

printed source, then, if the essay is for a professor, you may assume that there is a good chance that he or she will recognize the source. If you cite the source you can save him or her the time and irritation of the consequential sleuthing work he or she will feel obligated to embark on. Finally, citing the source can save you from moral sins of "claiming credit in written scholarly works for ideas, writing, research results, or methods taken from someone else" and "suppressing the publication of the work of another scholar"[2], a moral sin without benefit (given that if you cite the source you can get credit for apposite and intelligent use of such arguments, analyses or examples) and a moral sin with risks (see the University of Calgary Regulation quoted below).

Final comment: I have never found plagiarism to be a problem in my courses and I do not expect it to be a problem in this course, but apparently plagiarism is a problem in our university and for that reason we are required to inform you of the regulations governing it. See further the attached sheet.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATION:

The following is a university regulation which I am required to draw to your attention:

> It is the student's responsibility to request academic accommodation. If you are a student with a documented disability who may require academic accommodation and have not registered with the Disability Resource Centre, please contact their office at 220-8237. Students who have not registered with the Disability Resource Centre are not eligible for formal academic accommodation. You are also required to discuss your needs with your instructor no later than fourteen (14) days after the start of this course.

STUDENTS' UNION REPRESENTATIVE

The Humanities Representative this year is Britney Luimes, MSC 251, humanitiesrep@su.ucalgary.ca or 220-3913.

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[2] See the University of Calgary *Policies and Procedures: Integrity in Scholarly Activity* for these wordings. A copy of this is accessible from the University of Calgary home page.