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Metaethics (I do not have an engaging title yet)

I propose that we engage more intensively with metaethics this year. I will discuss the details later, but first I would like to briefly describe what metaethics is concerned with and why I believe it would be a suitable topic for the conference.

What is metaethics?

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) defines it as follows: "Metaethics is the attempt to understand the metaphysical, epistemological, semantic, and psychological, presuppositions and commitments of moral thought, talk, and practice" (Sayre-McCord 2023).

This definition immediately shows how diverse the field is, and how directly it connects with several other areas of philosophy. Unlike normative ethics, metaethics is not primarily concerned with what constitutes right action, but with the nature of morality itself.

Why metaethics?

Below are several reasons why I believe metaethics would be the ideal topic for our conference.

1. The topic appeals to a broad range of interests. It offers engaging questions both to those interested in technical philosophy (e.g. philosophy of language) and to students with a more practical orientation.

2. The topic continues to be widely discussed and is the subject of active research.

3. Europe is home to many leading philosophers working in this field (see the possible keynote speakers below).

4. The topic is also a good introduction for new forum members with little prior knowledge of analytic philosophy. The fundamental questions are relatively accessible and intuitive, and participants can at the same time learn how analytic philosophy goes about answering such questions. It is therefore less intimidating than some other areas of philosophy, where even understanding the initial questions can be a significant challenge.

I propose that we address the following four broad categories within metaethics, directly following the SEP definition.

1. Metaphysics

This section would deal with the question of what moral facts are, and whether there are any at all. It covers the classic debate between moral realism and anti-realism in its various forms, such as non-naturalism, naturalism, constructivism, relativism and error theory.

2. Epistemology

This section covers the role of intuitions, reflective equilibrium, moral disagreement, evolutionary debunking arguments and moral testimony. In general, it deals with the question of how we could know what is right or wrong.

3. Semantics

This section would deal with the broad question of what we mean when we say that something is "wrong." It is by far the most technical category and has obvious links to the philosophy of language. Examples include cognitivism versus non-cognitivism, expressivism and quasi-realism, the famous Frege–Geach problem, and semantic challenges to realism such as Moral Twin Earth.

4. Psychology

This is the most "practical" category. It concerns questions such as why moral judgments move us to act (motivational internalism versus externalism), the Humean theory of motivation, the role of emotions, and what ordinary people believe about morality. This also connects directly to last year's topic, metaphilosophy.

As a point of clarification: this four-part division is of course open to change. It simply seemed to me a useful way of distinguishing between different areas of metaethics, though there are naturally strong links and overlaps between them. If the topic of metaethics is too broad, it is also no problem to focus on certain parts and leave others out.

Literature

Introduction (sessions 1–2)

The first two sessions could serve as an orientation, where we read two introductory texts on the general topic of metaethics to then go into further detail.

Papers

- Rachel Handley (2021), "Marge and Homer's Ice Cream Argument, or Why Metaethics Matters."
- Tristram McPherson & David Plunkett (2018a), "The Nature and Explanatory Ambitions of Metaethics."

Books

- Matthew Chrisman (2023), *What Is This Thing Called Metaethics?*, 2nd ed.
- Mark van Roojen (2026), *Metaethics: A Contemporary Introduction*, 2nd ed.
- Alexander Miller (2013), *Contemporary Metaethics: An Introduction*, 2nd ed.

In addition, McPherson & Plunkett (2018b) contains a short introductory chapter on each of the main positions:

- David Enoch (2018), "Non-Naturalistic Realism in Metaethics"
- Peter Railton (2018), "Naturalistic Realism in Metaethics"
- Jonas Olson (2018), "Error Theory in Metaethics"
- Richard Joyce (2018), "Fictionalism in Metaethics"
- Elisabeth Camp (2018), "Metaethical Expressivism"
- Alex Silk (2018), "Metaethical Contextualism"
- Isidora Stojanović (2018), "Metaethical Relativism"

Now to the more detailed literature suggestions for each category.

Metaphysics

Papers

- Sharon Street (2010), "What Is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?"
- Tristram McPherson (2012), "Ethical Non-Naturalism and the Metaphysics of Supervenience"
- Terence Cuneo & Russ Shafer-Landau (2014), "The Moral Fixed Points: New Directions for Moral Nonnaturalism."
- Bart Streumer (2013), "Can We Believe the Error Theory?"

Book chapters

- Jonas Olson (2014), *Moral Error Theory*, Part II on Mackie's queerness arguments.
- David Enoch (2011), *Taking Morality Seriously*, chs. 1–3. This is the standard robust-realist defence.

Further reading

- David Enoch (2010b), "How Objectivity Matters"
- Ragnar Francén Olinder (2016), "Some Varieties of Metaethical Relativism"
- Tristram McPherson (2011), "Against Quietist Normative Realism"; Daniel Wodak (2017), "Why Realists Must Reject Normative Quietism"
- Stephanie Leary (2022), "What Is Non-Naturalism?" (technical)

- Paul Bloomfield & David Copp (2023), *The Oxford Handbook of Moral Realism* (single chapters)
- John Bengson, Terence Cuneo & Russ Shafer-Landau (2024), *The Moral Universe*

Epistemology

Papers

- Katia Vavova (2015), "Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism"
- David Enoch (2010a), "The Epistemological Challenge to Metanormative Realism: How Best to Understand It, and How to Cope with It."
- John Bengson, Terence Cuneo & Russ Shafer-Landau (2020), "Trusting Moral Intuitions"
- Alison Hills (2013), "Moral Testimony"
- David Enoch (2014), "A Defense of Moral Deference"

Book chapters

- Sarah McGrath (2019), *Moral Knowledge*, chs. 1–2
- Rach Cosker-Rowland (2021), *Moral Disagreement*, Introduction and Part 1 (chs. 1–4)

Further reading

- Guy Kahane (2011), "Evolutionary Debunking Arguments"
- Justin Clarke-Doane (2012), "Morality and Mathematics: The Evolutionary Challenge"
- Katia Vavova (2014), "Debunking Evolutionary Debunking"
- Daniel Korman (2019), "Debunking Arguments"
- Claus Beisbart, Gregor Betz & Georg Brun (2021), "Making Reflective Equilibrium Precise: A Formal Model" (technical)
- Elizabeth Tropman (2018), "Intuitionism in Moral Epistemology"; Karen Jones & François Schroeter (2018), "Moral Expertise"

Semantics

Papers

- Dorit Bar-On & James Sias (2013), "Varieties of Expressivism"
- David Plunkett & Tim Sundell (2013), "Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms"
- Tristram McPherson (2013), "Semantic Challenges to Normative Realism."

Book chapters

- Matthew S. Bedke (2018), "Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism"
- Jack Woods (2018), "The Frege-Geach Problem"
- Mark Schroeder (2010), *Noncognitivism in Ethics*, chs. 3, 6 and 7 on the Frege–Geach problem
- Terence Cuneo (2018), "Quasi-realism"
- Teemu Toppinen (2018), "Hybrid Accounts of Ethical Thought and Talk."
- Michael Ridge (2014), *Impassioned Belief*, ch. 1.

Further reading

- Matthew Simpson (2018), "Solving the Problem of Creeping Minimalism"
- Billy Dunaway & Tristram McPherson (2016), "Reference Magnetism as a Solution to the Moral Twin Earth Problem"
- J. Robert G. Williams (2018), "Normative Reference Magnets"
- Debbie Roberts (2018), "Thick Concepts"
- Matthew Chrisman (2018), "Conceptual Role Accounts of Meaning in Metaethics"

Psychology

Papers

- Fredrik Björklund, Gunnar Björnsson, John Eriksson, Ragnar Francén Olinder & Caj Strandberg (2012), "Recent Work on Motivational Internalism."
- Caj Strandberg & Fredrik Björklund (2013), "Is Moral Internalism Supported by Folk Intuitions?"
- Gunnar Björnsson & Ragnar Francén Olinder (2013), "Internalists Beware—We Might All Be Amoralists!"
- Joshua May (2014), "Does Disgust Influence Moral Judgment?"

Book chapters

- David Faraci & Tristram McPherson (2018), "Ethical Judgment and Motivation."
- Neil Sinhababu (2017), *Humean Nature*, ch. 1, "The Return of the Humean Theory."
- Joshua May (2018), *Regard for Reason in the Moral Mind*, chs. 7–8.

Further reading

- Gunnar Björnsson et al. (2015a), "Motivational Internalism and Folk Intuitions."
- Gunnar Björnsson et al., eds. (2015b), *Motivational Internalism*: the introduction and the chapters by Jesse Prinz and Nick Zangwill.

- Joshua May (2018), ch. 2, "The Limits of Emotion"
- Thomas Pölzler & Jennifer Cole Wright (2019), "Empirical Research on Folk Moral Objectivism"
- Thomas Pölzler & Jennifer Cole Wright (2023), "An Empirical Argument against Moral Non-Cognitivism"

I know that these are way too many texts and that we will not even come close to covering all of them. Still, I thought it would be better to list a large selection so that if we decide to narrow things down to a specific topic, we will still have plenty of material to choose from. Many of these texts can also be skipped, either because they are introductory overviews or because they deal with very niche, technical debates. My thought was that, based on the interests of the individual participants and over the course of the two semesters, certain themes will naturally emerge that we can focus more on. Additions are, of course, more than welcome. I am definitely less knowledgeable about metaethics than many others, so recommendations as well as advice are always appreciated.

Possible keynote speakers

Prof. David Enoch (Oxford). Professor of Philosophy of Law at the University of Oxford
Profile: https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/people/david-enoch Email: David.Enoch@law.ox.ac.uk

Prof. Gunnar Björnsson (Stockholm). Professor of Practical Philosophy and Head of Department at Stockholm University
Profile: https://www.su.se/profiles/g/gbjorn Email: gunnar.bjornsson@philosophy.su.se

Prof. Jonas Olson (Stockholm). Professor of practical philosophy at Stockholm
Profile: https://www.su.se/profiles/jolso Email: jonas.olson@philosophy.su.se

Prof. Bart Streumer (Groningen). Professor of Philosophy at Groningen
Profile: https://www.rug.nl/staff/b.streumer/ Email: b.streumer@rug.nl

Dr Rach Cosker-Rowland (Leeds). Associate Professor at Leeds
Profile: https://ahc.leeds.ac.uk/staff/6089/rach-cosker-rowland Email: R.Cosker-Rowland@leeds.ac.uk

Prof. Dr. Georg Brun (Bern). Tenured lecturer at the Institute of Philosophy, University of Bern
Profile: https://georgbrun.ch Email: georg.brun@unibe.ch

Prof. Matthew Chrisman (Edinburgh). Professor of Ethics and Epistemology
Profile: https://edwebprofiles.ed.ac.uk/profile/matthew-chrisman Email: matthew.chrisman@ed.ac.uk

Dr Thomas Pölzler (Graz). Researcher and lecturer
Email: thomas.poelzler@uni-graz.at

Prof. Michael Ridge (Edinburgh). Professor at Edinburgh
Profile: https://edwebprofiles.ed.ac.uk/profile/michael-ridge Email: M.Ridge@ed.ac.uk

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Beisbart, Claus, Gregor Betz, and Georg Brun. 2021. "Making Reflective Equilibrium Precise: A Formal Model." *Ergo* 8 (15): 441–472.

Bengson, John, Terence Cuneo, and Russ Shafer-Landau. 2020. "Trusting Moral Intuitions." *Noûs* 54 (4): 956–984.

Bengson, John, Terence Cuneo, and Russ Shafer-Landau. 2024. *The Moral Universe*. Oxford University Press.

Björklund, Fredrik, Gunnar Björnsson, John Eriksson, Ragnar Francén Olinder, and Caj Strandberg. 2012. "Recent Work on Motivational Internalism." *Analysis* 72 (1): 124–137.

Björnsson, Gunnar, John Eriksson, Caj Strandberg, Ragnar Francén Olinder, and Fredrik Björklund. 2015a. "Motivational Internalism and Folk Intuitions." *Philosophical Psychology* 28 (5): 715–734.

Björnsson, Gunnar, and Ragnar Francén Olinder. 2013. "Internalists Beware—We Might All Be Amoralists!" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 91 (1): 1–14.

Björnsson, Gunnar, Caj Strandberg, Ragnar Francén Olinder, John Eriksson, and Fredrik Björklund, eds. 2015b. *Motivational Internalism*. Oxford University Press.

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Clarke-Doane, Justin. 2012. "Morality and Mathematics: The Evolutionary Challenge." *Ethics* 122 (2): 313–340.

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Jones, Karen, and François Schroeter. 2018. "Moral Expertise." In McPherson and Plunkett 2018b, 459–471.

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Korman, Daniel Z. 2019. "Debunking Arguments." *Philosophy Compass* 14 (12): e12638.

Leary, Stephanie. 2022. "What Is Non-Naturalism?" *Ergo* 8 (52): 787–814.

May, Joshua. 2014. "Does Disgust Influence Moral Judgment?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 92 (1): 125–141.

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