

PHILOSOPHY 397: MEANING AND MORALITY (FALL 2026)

Professor Eric Swanson

Office hours: Mondays and Wednesdays, 11:45–12:45 in 2259 Angell Hall, and by appointment.

When we say what someone *should* do, or call an action *wrong*, what are we doing? Are we describing the world, expressing an attitude, or something else entirely? How do some evaluative words — ‘just,’ ‘courageous,’ ‘wise’ — manage to say something about how things are and how they ought to be at the same time? Poetry, fiction, and film seem to resemble these evaluative words in some ways: they affect us, motivate us, move us, and sometimes convince us, but that’s not all they do. Somehow, we expect them to get things *right*, and we’re (rightly) disappointed when they don’t.

Puzzling questions like these have motivated a range of possible answers in metaethics, which we’ll examine early in the semester. We’ll ask whether moral claims are the sorts of things that can be true or false, whether moral disagreement is genuine or just apparent, and whether we should think of ourselves as projecting a moral sensibility onto the world. And we’ll ask some more pointed questions too: with Elizabeth Anscombe and Flannery O’Connor, whether apparent laws are empty without a legislator; with Ronald Dworkin and Philip Larkin, where moral objectivity *could* come from; with Christine Korsgaard and Franz Kafka, what could make moral claims binding, even if they are true.

Then we’ll shift to questions from the philosophy of language — about meaning, rule-following, and interpretation — that suggest that distinctions between descriptive and evaluative language are blurrier than they might appear to be. That will lead us to reconsider our questions about ‘should,’ ‘wrong,’ and other words that can look wholly evaluative. Perhaps those words are a linguistic overlay that helps us generalize about more particular ways we relate to each other and to the world.

Suppose that’s right. Then new questions open up: Does the overlay flatten and obscure those more particular ways of relating? If so, what stance should we take toward the overlay? Should we just dispense with it? Or does it earn its keep by helping us live together tolerably well? Do we even have a choice? Could the overlay simply be part of our form of life? Finally, and optimistically: Could the sense in which the overlay is meaningful help make our *lives* more meaningful?

CLASS, WEBSITE, READINGS, KEEPING IN TOUCH

Mondays and Wednesdays, 10–11:18, G168 AH. Please attend! But if you’re sick, watch on [Lecture Capture](#).

Canvas Phil 397-001 (<https://umich.instructure.com/courses/879384>) is our web site. All readings and viewings will be available there. However, screens, including phones, will not be allowed in class without an explicit accommodation approved by SSD.

I will print the readings and distribute the readings for the next class at the end of each class. Mark up your readings! For more, see GRADING, below.

Discussions (on the Canvas site: https://umich.instructure.com/courses/879384/discussion_topics) is the online place to ask course-related questions and to start course-related chats.

Email me (ericsw@umich.edu) with ‘Phil 397’ in the subject line for questions that are specific to you.

My office hours are 11:45–12:45 on Mondays and Wednesdays, in 2259 Angell Hall. You don’t need to make an appointment to drop by at these times!

GRADING

20%: Midterm exam: in class on October 21; no notes.

20%: Oral exam: pass/not pass, up to three tries before December 11; no notes.

The oral exam is 20 minutes, pass/not pass. You may try up to three times.

30%: Final exam: 10:30–12:30 on December 17; no notes.

Missed exams can be made up only with appropriate documentation. No phones or laptops during exams.

15%: In-class work: discussion, reading aloud, group participation, occasional written reflections.

If only a handful of people are talking, I will call on others. If you're consistently quiet I will call on you. You don't *have* to volunteer to talk: a relevant, thoughtful answer when I call on you is enough. But it's easier on both of us if you volunteer when you have something to say. If I call on you, you can always pass. If you never talk, you get no credit for discussion.

We'll often work in small groups.

We'll occasionally do short written reflections in class, so *be sure* to bring something to write with.

15%: Marked readings.

I'll print the readings. Bring the readings for that class to class, marked, every day. I will collect them in class on some days, without notice, and return them at our next meeting. Your markings will be graded pass/not pass. Necessary for a 'pass': your name on the notes—again, be sure to bring something to write with!—and signs of really reading *each* piece for that day. Sufficient for a 'not pass': blank, highlighter only, or a summary with empty margins. I'll probably collect around twelve or so of these, and doing a good job with around ten or so of them will be sufficient for full credit on this portion of your grade. But this is a plan, not a promise: I might have to make changes.

EXPECTATIONS

Things may change. It is your responsibility to pay attention to announcements in class and on Canvas.

Keep up with the readings and viewings, and do them *before* class. They demand careful, patient thought and attention. If you fall behind you'll miss much of what's going on for the rest of the semester.

We'll be discussing controversial issues in this course, and challenging our beliefs throughout. Be polite, respectful, and generous in discussion with your classmates and teachers.

If you might need an accommodation for a disability, please let me know right away.

Students must understand the [College of LSA's standards of academic integrity](#) if you need help understanding them contact me. Findings of cheating or plagiarism result in a zero for that assignment and disciplinary action by the University. Although all work you turn in must be your own, please discuss the material with your classmates!

SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND VIEWINGS

Mon, Aug 31	Introduction. Some themes of the class, some background.
Wed, Sep 2	What can we say? How? If things were different, what <i>couldn't</i> we say? Ursula Le Guin, "She Unnames Them" G. E. Moore, <i>Principia Ethica</i> , chapter 1, §§1–13 (pages 53–69)
Wed, Sep 9	Projectivism David Hume, <i>An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals</i> , Appendix 1 Emily Dickinson, "There's a certain Slant of light"
Mon, Sep 14	Emotivism W. H. Auden, "September 1, 1939" A. J. Ayer, <i>Language, Truth, and Logic</i> , chapter 6
Wed, Sep 16	Error theories Franz Kafka, "The Problem of Our Laws" John Mackie, <i>Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong</i> , chapter 1
Mon, Sep 21	Does law need a legislator? Flannery O'Connor, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" Elizabeth Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy" (skip pages 10–13)
Wed, Sep 23	Moral fictionalism Richard Joyce, "Moral Fictionalism" Jorge Luis Borges, "The Circular Ruins"
Mon, Sep 28	Moral relativism Bertolt Brecht, "To Those Born Later" Bernard Williams, "The Truth in Relativism"
Wed, Sep 30	Is there an Archimedean point? Czesław Miłosz, "Incantation" Ronald Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth," pages 87–112
Mon, Oct 5	Objectivity from within Philip Larkin, "Church Going" Ronald Dworkin, "Objectivity and Truth," pages 112–139
Wed, Oct 7	The normative question Christine Korsgaard, <i>The Sources of Normativity</i> , Tanner Lecture I, pages 21–26 (stop at "Voluntarism") and pages 43–49 (from "Now I'd like..." through Lecture I Conclusion) Franz Kafka, "The Problem of Our Laws" (reread)
Mon, Oct 12	Practical identities Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays" Christine Korsgaard, <i>The Sources of Normativity</i> , Tanner Lecture III, pages 77–88 (Introduction through "The Solution"; stop at "Moral Obligation")
Wed, Oct 14	Obligating one another Wisława Szymborska, "In Praise of Self-Deprecation" Christine Korsgaard, <i>The Sources of Normativity</i> , Tanner Lecture III, pages 88–101 ("Moral Obligation" through "Obligating One Another")
Wed, Oct 21	Midterm, in class

Mon, Oct 26	'Is,' 'ought,' and 'good' Philippa Foot, "Moral Arguments" P. T. Geach, "Good and Evil"
Wed, Oct 28	Thick concepts Bernard Williams, <i>Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy</i> , chapter 8, "Knowledge, Science, Convergence" (skim pages 132–140; we'll focus on pages 140–152) Wilfred Owen, "Dulce et Decorum Est"
Mon, Nov 2	Social dependence, without relativism Seamus Heaney, "Digging" Joseph Raz, <i>The Practice of Value</i> , Lecture I, §§1–3
Wed, Nov 4	Secondary qualities Elizabeth Bishop, "The Fish" John McDowell, "Values and Secondary Qualities" (skip pages 134–140)
Mon, Nov 9	This is how we do it Ludwig Wittgenstein, <i>Philosophical Investigations</i> , §§185–242 (especially: §§185–190, 198–202, 217–219, 241–242) Robert Frost, "Mending Wall"
Wed, Nov 11	Second nature John McDowell, "Virtue and Reason," §§1–4, (optional: §§5–6,) §§7–8 <i>Saturday Night Live</i> , "Duolingo for Kids"
Mon, Nov 16	Vision and attention Anna Akhmatova, "Lot's Wife" Iris Murdoch, "The Idea of Perfection," pages 16–42
Wed, Nov 18	Resonance Hartmut Rosa, "Being in and to the World" (https://youtu.be/hwyW-wMXdqI) — ~1h7m
Mon, Nov 23	Losing concepts Cora Diamond, "Losing Your Concepts" Wisława Szymborska, "The End and the Beginning"
Mon, Nov 30	Seeing another, seeing what's due (note: class will be on https://zoom.us/my/e.swanson) <i>Roman Holiday</i> , directed by William Wyler — 1h58m
Wed, Dec 2	Couldn't see, or wouldn't see? Michele Moody-Adams, "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance" W. H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts"
Mon, Dec 7	Motivation and morality Kwame Anthony Appiah, <i>The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen</i> , chapter 5 Claude McKay, "If We Must Die"
Wed, Dec 9	Reassessing Christine Korsgaard, "Realism and Constructivism in 20th-Century Moral Philosophy" Ursula Le Guin, "She Unnames Them" (reread)
Thu, Dec 17 10:30–12:30	Final exam