Instructor: Prof. Selim Berker  
Email: sberker@fas.harvard.edu  
Office location: Emerson 208  
Office hours: 1:00–3:00 p.m., or by appointment

Teaching Fellow: Zach Gabor  
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Office hours: TBD

Description:  
Long ago, the Greek philosopher Democritus proclaimed that all that exists in the world are “atoms and the void”: no values, no colors, no tastes, but only collections of tiny, indivisible particles moving around and interacting with one another in empty space. Since then our conception of the most basic physical constituents of the universe has changed, but Democritus’ general picture remains a pervasive one. However, this raises a problem: how do we find a place for the subject matter of ethics in this stark, physicalist worldview? How do collections of quarks acquire duties and commitments? How do we group protons, neutrons, and electrons together to get obligations, rights, values, needs?

In this course, we will focus on a family of philosophical positions that respond to this *prima facie* tension between ethics and the scientific worldview by attempting to get rid of, or in some way deflate, the ethics portion of the conflict. The three most widely discussed positions in this camp are *moral nihilism* (roughly: the view that there is no such thing as morality), *moral relativism* (roughly: the view that moral claims are true only relative to the conventions or standards of a given group), and *moral expressivism* (roughly: the view that moral claims do not assert anything about the world, but only serve to express the speaker’s feelings). Our main task will be to closely examine these three positions by reading several prominent defenders of each, as well as some of their more penetrating critics.

Time and Place:  
*Lectures*: Tue., Thu., 12:00–1:15 p.m., Emerson 101  
*Section*: TBD

In addition to the regular discussion sections led by the teaching fellow, there will be a discussion section for philosophy PhD students (as well as other graduate students in GSAS) led by the instructor. Non-GSAS graduate students will be assigned to the regular discussion sections.

Course URL: https://canvas.harvard.edu/courses/60223

The course website will contain all handouts and assignments, as well as the readings that are not included in the books available at the Coop. Note that you must login using either your HarvardKey or an XID (an external ID for people without a HarvardKey) to see all of the site’s content. To obtain an XID, please visit <https://xid.harvard.edu/xid-apps/> and then contact the instructor so that your XID can be added to the website guest list.

Prerequisites:  
None, but a previous course in philosophy will be helpful. Auditors are welcome to attend the lectures, but only if you have an official affiliation with Harvard University or at another academic institution in the area.
**Required Texts:**
The following books are available for purchase in the textbook section of the Coop:


A number of additional readings will be made available for downloading on the course website.

**Requirements:**
Reading, discussing, and writing about the assigned readings will be the central activities of the course. There is a reading assignment for each lecture. The readings are often fairly short, but tend to require close study. It is essential that you complete the assigned readings before each lecture, as many lectures will presuppose familiarity with the material in the texts. Also, lectures will introduce material not in the readings, so attendance at each and every lecture is crucial if you want to do well in the course.

The breakdown of grades will be as follows:

- **20% Attendance and participation in section and lecture.** Evaluation will be based on attendance, preparation, and contributions to discussion. If you don’t feel comfortable talking during section or lecture, coming in to discuss course material during either the instructor’s or the teaching fellow’s office hours may count toward your contributions to discussion.

- **60% Three 5-page papers.** Paper topics will be distributed in advance and will ask students to analyze and discuss material covered in class. *The first paper must be rewritten in light of your teaching fellow’s comments and resubmitted. Your final grade for this paper will be an average of your grades for the two versions. (Note that revised papers are held to a higher standard.)*

- **20% Final exam.** You will be required to take a 3-hour final exam on the material covered throughout the term. The final exam will be approximately 2/3rds essay format, and the essay questions will be selected from a list distributed at the beginning of reading period. The exam will be closed-notes and closed-books. (Graduate PhD students taking the course for credit will be given a take-home version of the final exam.)

Late work will be penalized 1/3rd of a letter grade per day (e.g. from a B+ to a B). Extensions will be granted only under exceptional circumstances, and only if an extension is requested before the due date of the assignment.

**Laptop Use:**
The use of laptops, tablets, cell phones, etc. during lectures and section meetings is strictly prohibited (except in cases of medical necessity, in which case follow the guidelines given below for students with disabilities).
Accommodations for Students with Disabilities:
Students needing academic adjustments or accommodations because of a documented disability must present the instructor with a Faculty Letter from the Accessibility Education Office (AEO) by the end of the second complete week of term, namely Fri., Sept. 20. Failure to do so may result in our inability to respond in a timely manner. All discussions will remain confidential.

Academic Integrity Policy – Collaboration Permitted in Written Work:
Discussion and the exchange of ideas are essential to academic work. For assignments in this course, you are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers or course instructional staff (TF/TAs, course assistants, faculty), particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices in this discipline and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work. If you received any help with your writing (feedback on drafts etc. from peers or course instructional staff), you must also acknowledge this assistance. Plagiarism will not be tolerated in this course.

Department Writing Fellow: Chandler Hatch
Email: chatch@fas.harvard.edu
Website: https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/phil-dwf
Office location: Emerson 006

The Department Writing Fellow (DWF) is a resource for undergraduates enrolled in Philosophy Department courses who would like help with their writing. Whether you need help starting a paper, formulating an argument, editing a draft, or figuring out the conventions of philosophical writing, the DWF can help. To learn more about one-on-one consultations or workshops on philosophical writing, please visit the above URL.

At a date and time to be determined, the DWF will be giving a one-hour lecture on the nuts and bolts of writing a philosophy paper. All are welcome to attend.
Assignment and Lecture Schedule:

NOTE: Readings followed by ‘(*)’ can be downloaded from the course website.

**Tue., Sept. 3:** Introduction

I. Moral Nihilism

**Thu., Sept. 5:** Mackie’s Argument from Queerness for Nihilism  
Mackie, “The Subjectivity of Values” (*)

**Tue., Sept. 10:** The Motivational Interpretation of Mackie’s Argument  
Brink, “Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness” (*)  
Brink, “Externalist Moral Realism” (*) [optional]

**Thu., Sept. 12:** Other Interpretations of Mackie’s Argument  
Mackie, “The Subjectivity of Values” (*) [reread]

**Tue., Sept. 17:** The Explanatory Argument for Nihilism  
Harman, “The Inference to the Best Explanation” (*) [optional]  
Harman, *The Nature of Morality*, chs. 1–2 (*)

**Thu., Sept. 19:** Sturgeon on the Explanatory Argument for Nihilism  
Sturgeon, “Moral Explanations” (*)

**Tue., Sept. 24:** Thomson on the Explanatory Argument for Nihilism  
Thomson, “Epistemological Arguments for Moral Scepticism” (ch. 6 of Harman & Thomson)

**Thu., Sept. 26:** The Evolutionary Argument for Nihilism  
Joyce, *The Myth of Morality*, ch. 6 (*)

**Tue., Oct. 1:** Can the Nihilist Live His or Her Nihilism?  
Williams, “The Amoralist” (*)  

**Wed., Oct. 2:** FIRST PAPER DUE BY 11:59 P.M.

**Thu., Oct. 3:** A New Kind of Nihilism: Moral Fictionalism  
Joyce, “Moral Fictionalism” (*)

II. Moral Relativism

**Tue., Oct. 8:** The Argument from Disagreement for Relativism  
Harman, “Moral Relativism” (ch. 1 of Harman & Thomson)  
Rachels, “The Challenge of Cultural Relativism” (in Moser & Carson)

**Thu., Oct. 10:** More on the Argument from Disagreement for Relativism  
Brandt, “Ethical Relativism” (in Moser & Carson)  
Moody-Adams, “The Empirical Underdetermination of Descriptive Cultural Relativism” (in Moser & Carson)  
Thomson, “Response to Harman’s Part I,” §10.6 (pp. 204–6) (in Harman & Thomson)  
Shafer-Landau, “Rationality and Disagreement” (*) [focus on p. 220]
Tue., Oct. 15: The Coherence of Relativism
Williams, “Interlude: Relativism” (*)
Lyons, “Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence” (in Moser & Carson) [skip or skim the section titled “Relativistic Justification”]

Thu., Oct. 17: The Motivational Argument for Relativism
Harman, “Is There a Single True Morality?” (in Moser & Carson)

Fri., Oct. 18: REWRITE OF FIRST PAPER BY 6 P.M.

Tue., Oct. 22: Harman’s Social Custom Relativism
Harman, “Moral Relativism Defended,” pp. 11–22 (*)
Harman, “Social Contracts” (ch. 2 of Harman & Thomson)
Thomson, “Response to Harman’s Part I,” §§10.1–10.3 (pp. 188–96) and §§10.8–10.9 (pp. 208–17) (in Harman & Thomson)

Thu., Oct. 24: Attempts at a Benign Version of Relativism (Part 1)
Foot, “Moral Relativism” (in Moser & Carson)
Foot, “Art and Morality” (*) [optional]

Tue., Oct. 29: Attempts at a Benign Version of Relativism (Part 2)
Scanlon, “Fear of Relativism” (in Moser & Carson)

III. Moral Expressivism

Thu., Oct. 31: Old-School Expressivism: Ayer’s Emotivism
Ayer, “Critique of Ethics and Theology” (*)
Geach, “Ascriptivism” (*)

Fri., Nov. 1: The Argument from Supervenience for Expressivism (OPTIONAL CLASS)
Blackburn, “Moral Realism,” §§I–II (*)
Blackburn, “Supervenience Revisited” (*)

Sun., Nov. 3: SECOND PAPER DUE BY 11:59 P.M.

Tue., Nov. 5: New-School Expressivism I: Blackburn’s Quasi-Realism
Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, ch. 5, §§1–6 (pp. 145–71), and ch. 6, §1 (pp. 181–89)

Thu., Nov. 7: More on Blackburn’s Quasi-Realism
Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, ch. 6, §§2–6 (pp. 189–220)

Tue., Nov. 12: Blackburn on the Frege-Geach Problem
Blackburn, *Spreading the Word*, ch. 6, §2 [reread]
Schueler, “Modus Ponens and Moral Realism” (*)
Blackburn, “Attitudes and Contents” (*) [skip or skim from top of p. 513 to bottom of p. 516]
Rosen, “Blackburn’s Essays in Quasi-Realism,” §§I–IV (*)

Thu., Nov. 14: Is Completed Quasi-Realism Still Expressivism?
Blackburn, “How to Be an Ethical Anti-Realist” (*) [skip or skim §II and Addendum]
Tue., Nov. 19: New-School Expressivism II: Gibbard’s Norm-Expressivism
   Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*, pp. 3–9 and ch. 3

Thu., Nov. 21: More on Gibbard’s Norm-Expressivism

Tue., Nov. 26: Expressivism and Normative Authority

IV. Interconnections

   Blackburn, “Relativism” (*) [optional]
   Lewis, “Quasi-Realism Is Fictionalism” (*)
   Boghossian, “The Maze of Moral Relativism” (*)
   THIRD PAPER DUE BY 11:59 P.M.

Final Exam on Thu., Dec. 19, at 9:00 a.m.