Phil 285: Normative Uncertainty in Ethics and Epistemology   Th 1–4, H&SS 7077

Spring 2017   Website:

Jennifer Carr   Office Hours: T 4–6
j2carr@ucsd.edu   H&SS 8037

1   Course Objectives

The topic of this course is normative uncertainty in the contexts of ethics and epistemology. The basic questions under discussion will be: What should you do when you're uncertain about which moral theory is correct? What should you do when you're uncertain about what epistemic rationality requires? These questions are at the intersection of epistemology, metaethics, normative ethics, and decision theory.

This course will include a gentle introduction to bayesian epistemology and decision theory. These tools will allow us to precisely formulate questions like:

- What should you do if you think some moral theory T is almost certainly false, but you know that if T is true, then some (probably permissible) action you're considering—e.g., eating meat or having an abortion—is not just wrong but very, very wrong?

- If Shawn is undecided between two moral theories, and each says that either option A or option B is best but disagrees about which, can it be permissible for Shawn to choose option C? Could Shawn even be required to choose option C?

- If Kathleen has lots of evidence to support belief in P, but she's been (falsely) told that she only believes P because she's been drugged, should she reduce her confidence in P? Or if she's rational, will she *know* that she's rational and not change her belief in P?

2   Requirements

- (70%) *Noûs*-length final paper or two or three *Analysis*-length papers. *Phil. Review*-length papers are permitted. (I'm mainly concerned with you fleshing out at least one idea, but plan on writing at least 15 pages for the course.)

- (20%) Weekly participation: bring a question or two (or three or…) to every session of the class. Our discussion will be mainly organized around working through your questions. The more elementary (i.e. foundational!), the better.

- (10%) Short presentation: each student should give a short presentation (10–15 minutes) on one of the readings. This will also help us organize our discussion. These presentations can be expository, critical, or a mix, at the presenter's discretion.

- Students may take the class P/NP; then the requirements are weekly participation and one *Analysis*-length paper. Auditors are also enthusiastically welcomed!

3   Tentative Plan

This schedule is only partial and is subject to change. I'll update it and send announcements as we proceed.

Week	Topic	Reading
Week 1 Apr. 6	*Introduction to Bayesianism* Bayesian epistemology	
Week 2 TBA!	*Introduction to Bayesianism* Bayesian decision theory	Weatherson, Ch. 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9
Week 3 Apr. 20	*Moral Uncertainty* Intro to moral uncertainty	Ross, "Rejecting Ethical Deflationism" MacAskill, "The Infectiousness of Nihilism"
Week 4 Apr. 27	*Moral Uncertainty* Intertheoretic value comparisons	TBA MacAskill, "Normative Uncertainty as a Voting Problem"
Week 5 May 4	*Moral Uncertainty* Vicious regress	Harman Sepielli, "What to do when you don't know what to do when you don't know what to do…"
Week 6 May 11	*Moral Uncertainty* Noncognitivism	Sepielli Staffel
Week 7 May 18	*Epistemological Uncertainty* Higher-Order Evidence	Christensen Elga
Week 8 May 25	*Epistemological Uncertainty* Level-splitting	Weatherson, "Does Judgment Screen Evidence?" Lasonen-Aarnio, "Higher-Order Evidence and the Limit of defeat"
Week 9 Jun. 1	*Epistemological Uncertainty* Irrelevant Influences on Belief	White, "You Only Believe that Because…" Schoenfield,
Week 10 Jun. 8	*Epistemological Uncertainty* Higher-Order Evidence and Truth	Horowitz Schoenfield