

USC Philosophy Department Colloquium Series Presents:

Sarah McGrath
(Princeton University)

Friday, October 13th

Close-Hipp, 303

3:30-5 p.m

**Reception to follow in the Philosophy
Department, Close-Hipp, 5th floor**



“Are There Unknowable Moral Truths?”

Is there an epistemic access asymmetry between, on the one hand, facts about how we ought to live, and, on the other, facts in non-moral domains such as mathematics, history, and science, such that the former must be relatively accessible? There is nothing paradoxical about the thought that, say, the continuum hypothesis might lie beyond our cognitive grasp. But many find it strange to think that practical truths might similarly elude us. On anti-realist and subjectivist metaethical views, such an access asymmetry would be relatively easy to explain. But according to realists, moral facts are objective and mind-independent. This paper asks: if realism is true, then should we expect our access to moral reality to be any more secure than our access to reality in other domains, and if so, why? If there is an access asymmetry, then we need an explanation for the asymmetry that preserves the realist’s commitment to a substantive gap between thought and reality, given that it is a hallmark of anti-realism to attempt to narrow this gap. If there is no access asymmetry, then we need an explanation for why it has seemed to so many that morality is in some sense manifest. I argue that there is no epistemic access asymmetry, and offer an explanation of the sense that morality is manifest in terms of the idea of a “cognitive match.”