

PHL 341: Freedom, Responsibility and Human Action

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Course description

From an ordinary, common sense perspective, we consider ourselves free in our choices. Our actions are our own, as we say. This subjective perception is threatened, however, by considering how greatly we are influenced by the world around us and before us: by our immediate environment, by the pressures of society, by our past, by our genetic inheritance, and so on. Conjoin these effects and the room for free will quickly diminishes.

The philosophical problems of free will and determinism sharpen this intuitive threat. If present actions are determined or entailed by past events and laws of nature, then any present action, by necessity, must occur. If any present action of mine *must* occur, then I cannot choose to do an alternative action. And if I cannot choose one action over some alternative action, then I do not act freely. Thus determinism, on the face of it, is incompatible with free will.

This is no mere philosophical puzzle. Free will matters to us because responsibility matters to us. In order to praise or blame a person for an action—most especially when that action bears moral consequences—that person must be responsible for that action. But if determinism is true *and* incompatible with free will, then persons lack responsibility for actions. The practices of moral praise and blame are thus rendered unjustified, if not nonsensical.

This course centres around contemporary analyses of two compatibilities: the (in)compatibility between determinism and free will and the (in)compatibility between determinism and moral responsibility. Most of these analyses target the metaphysics of free will, but issues in ethics, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind will also be covered along the way.

Texts

Watson, Gary (2003), *Free Will (Oxford Readings in Philosophy)*, 2nd Ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press

Additional readings available in hard copy and electronic copy.

Assignments/Requirements:

10% Attendance/discussion/participation
25% Short paper 1
25% Short paper 2

40% Final exam

The short papers might also be thought of as take-home exams. You will be given a short list of questions, from which you will choose and respond to one. The questions will be distributed in class (Wednesday), and the papers are to be submitted the following week at the start of (Monday) class. Your responses should be concise and to the point, and should be approximately 750-1250 words.

The final exam will be comprehensive and essay-style, but like the short papers, you will have choices between questions.

Assignment/Exam dates

Short paper 1:

Short paper 2:

Final exam: TBA

General

This is a writing intensive course. All of the work/examinations will be written. Your papers will be graded not only on content, but also on grammar, writing mechanics, style, etc.

All paper/exam dates are listed on this syllabus. Therefore, late work/exams are allowed only if arranged at least one week prior to the scheduled due date/exam date. Unexcused late work will be penalized accordingly.

If you require special test-taking or note-taking accommodations, please see me.

Reading and discussion schedule

(w) in Watson text

(@) available on course website

(e) electronic copy available

Week 1 *Introduction*

Week 2 *Determinism and Indeterminism*

(@) Russell, B. 'On the notion of cause, with applications to the Free-Will Problem' in F. Herbert and M. Brodbeck (eds) *Readings in Philosophy of Science*, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts (1953)

(@) Bishop, R. 'Chaos, Indeterminism, and Free Will' in R. Kane (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, Oxford: OUP (2002)

Week 3 *Arguments for Incompatibilism*

(w) Van Inwagen, P. 'An argument for incompatibilism'

(e) Vihvelin, K. 'Arguments for Incompatibilism' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/incompatibilism-arguments/>

Week 4 ***Classical and "Near" Classical Compatibilism***

(@) Ayer, A.J. 'Freedom and Necessity' in his *Philosophical Essays*, New York: St. Martin's Press (1954)

(@) Austin, J.L. 'Ifs and Cans' *Philosophical Papers*, London: Oxford University Press (1961)

Week 5 (w) Watson, G. 'Free Agency'

(w) Lewis, D. 'Are we free to break the laws?'

Week 6 ***Moral Responsibility and Alternative Possibilities***

(@) Dennett, D. excerpts from *Elbow Room* (1984)

(w) Frankfurt, H. 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility'

Week 7 (@) Fischer, J.M. 'Frankfurt-Type Examples and Semi-Compatibilism' in R. Kane (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, Oxford: OUP (2002) p. 281-91 only

Week 8 (@) Fischer, J.M. and M. Ravizza, 'Moral Responsibility for Actions: Weak Reasons-Responsiveness' Ch. 2 of Fischer and Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1998)

(w) Strawson, P.F. 'Freedom and Resentment'

Week 9 ***Libertarianism and Indeterminism***

(w) Kane, R. 'Responsibility, Luck, and Chance: Reflections on Free Will and Indeterminism'

Week 10 ***Determinist responses to Compatibilism and Libertarianism***

(w) Strawson, G. 'The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility'

Week 11 ***Freedom of thought***

(e) Bennett, J. 'Why is belief involuntary?' *Analysis* 50 (1990) 87-107.

(w) Petit, P. and M. Smith, 'Freedom in Belief and Desire'

Week 12 ***Moral luck***

(@) Nagel, T. 'Moral luck' in Nagel, T., *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1979)

Resources:

For an introductory text to free will, try Robert Kane's *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will*, Oxford University Press (2003); for a more comprehensive and sophisticated survey resource, see Kane's *Oxford Handbook of Free Will*, Oxford University Press (2002)

For general philosophy resources, I suggest both *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, (1999) ed. Audi, R. and *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, (1994) ed. Blackburn, S. Online, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy is very useful: <http://plato.stanford.edu/>