

Free Will and Responsibility
PHI 26 TR 2:20-3:45 Library 303a crn#24111
Spring 2014

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Overview

When you do good things you are proud of yourself. We think you deserve praise (even if no one actually does praise you). When you do bad things you are ashamed of yourself; we think you deserve blame. When you do what you think is right, you are proud because you made the decision to do the right thing, and because you made it happen. But suppose what you did “just happened”. Suppose what you did is the product of forces not in your control, like your upbringing, like fate, like market forces . . . Was it you who did it, then? A decision was made, but it was the product of your past, not your current appreciation of the value of your act. The right thing was made to happen, but if your life just floats on the river of time, that’s about the same as saying the river carried you past the place where that good thing happened. But now: your life *is* the product of forces not in your control. Where is your pride, then? Do you merit praise for what you did?

The problem of free will occurs at the junction between metaphysics, the philosophy of mind, and ethics. There are compelling reasons stemming from our basic conception of how the world works (that is, from metaphysics) and from our conception of what we, thinking creatures, are (that is, from the philosophy of mind) which seem to show that we are not free, that we are not in control of our own actions, that what happens isn’t really up to us. But our moral judgements and our moral practices depend on facts about when thinking creatures are responsible for what they do. Metaphysics and the philosophy of mind thus seem to erode the possibility of morality. The urgent importance of the problem stems from the consequences for morality.

Our goals in this class are to get clear on what exactly the problem of free will is, and to see whether there are any good solutions. We’ll start the semester by looking at several recent developments in science (neuroscience and psychology) that have been claimed to show that we have no free will. We will then investigate the basic conceptual landscape for the problem (various “isms” like: determinism, indeterminism, compatibilism, incompatibilism; also the question of whether freedom requires a special sort of “being”, like a soul, or an “agent”). We’ll then look at several recent articles in the philosophical literature that lay out and discuss aspects of the landscape.

Texts

- Griffith, M. (2013). *Free Will: The Basics*. Routledge, New York.
- Mele, A. (2014). *A Dialogue on Free Will and Science*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Pereboom, D., editor (2009). *Free Will*. Hackett, Indianapolis, second edition.
- Dardis, Anthony. Logic Handout.

Requirements

- (1) 6 short papers, 2-3pp; see “Paper Topics” sheet, each worth 14% of your final grade.
- (2) You must lead the classroom discussion at least once. (See below.) 10% of your final grade will depend on your presentation.

(3) You must attend 2 talks or similar University events. (Suggestion and example: Dr Anjan Chatterjee will talk on February 5 about his new book *The Aesthetic Brain* at 5pm at the Cultural Center Theatre.) For proof of attendance, write me a paragraph about what you got out of the event. Each event counts for 3% of your grade, for a maximum of 6%.

Class structure

Our class sessions will consist in presentation of the readings and critical evaluation of the readings. Some of the time I will take primary responsibility for the class presentation, and some of the time you will.

I will divide the class into pairs. Each pair will be assigned to a day and a reading. Each pair should meet to discuss the reading beforehand and decide what you plan to do with it. It would be a good idea to meet with me as well.

There are three phases to what you want your presentation to do.

1. Describe the “bottom line” or “take away” conclusion of the reading. This is the main idea or ideas that the author wants us to come to believe.
2. Describe the reasons that the author gives for believing that conclusion.
3. Evaluate the argument. This is the most important phase of the presentation. The Dardis handout on logic is a guide to how to think about this. You will want to have some idea of what *kind* of argument you are discussing), and what the standards for that kind of argument are. The key to evaluation is to ask, “should I believe this? what are the alternatives?” Be skeptical; be imaginative.

And there are two things you **really don’t** want to do:

1. **Don’t read a presentation!** It’s a very good idea to work out what you are going to say beforehand, in writing. But it’s generally a very bad idea to read from a prepared text.
2. **Don’t look at the text!** You must digest the reading and present it from your own point of view. You *do not* want to attempt to present the author’s arguments *from the text*. Your goal isn’t to summarize everything the author says. Your goal is to critically evaluate the overall argument that the author makes. Give yourself plenty of time: you and your partner may well want to consult with me before your presentation, and so you should schedule your time with that in mind.

Reading, writing and argument

As you read, you want to answer the following questions for yourself:

1. What is the conclusion of this argument: what is this author trying to convince us to believe?
2. What are the author’s reasons? Are the author’s reasons *true*, that is, do they say how the world really is?
3. How is the argument supposed to work? The main choices (see the Dardis handout on logic) are: (1) it’s supposed to be deductive (something like the “ $A = B; B = C; \text{therefore } A = C$ ” pattern); (2) it’s supposed to be inductive or statistical (“leading scientists have data showing . . .” or “the Quinnipiac poll shows that voters . . .” patterns); (3) it supposed to be an explanation (“if we assume that free will is self-controlled action, then we can see how free will is

possible in a law governed world”). There are different standards for how good an argument is, depending on what kind it is. What are the relevant standards? Does the argument meet the standards—does it support its conclusion well?

It’s worth keeping in mind, both for our class, for your other classes, and for your life outside the university, that argumentation is always relevant to what you are encountering. Authors, and people in general, think various things—about the world of her writing, in an author’s case, and about the world itself, for the rest of us. What do they think? why do they think that? (There’s always another way to do something [or something else to do], so why did the author do it *that way*?) Answering a “why” question is providing a reason, and once again we have an argument to think about. Second, *you* think various things about what you are reading and about the world around you. To make discoveries, and to persuade others that you are right, you have to provide reasons for what you think. There you have more arguments, and more arguments to evaluate.

Your papers will present your thinking about the texts. I will ask you either to write about specific arguments that are made in our readings, or on problems or puzzles that arise as we think about these readings. I want you to think hard about the argument or problem or puzzle, and to call on your imagination and insight to work out a thoughtful response to it. (I put more weight on insight and imagination than I do on exposition or “research”.) Getting started, the best strategy for writing a paper is to describe and evaluate an argument to a conclusion. Since philosophy is about thinking and reasoning about the big picture, most philosophical writing consists in giving reasons to believe some conclusion about the big picture, and showing the reader that they are good reasons. Most academic writing is very similar: it aims to persuade the reader to believe a conclusion, by producing the best set of reasons it can for that conclusion.

Good papers have three features: good mechanics (spelling, grammar); good understanding (accurate and insightful description of the subject matter, in our case, what goes on in a text); good thinking (interesting, insightful, accurate critical response to the text). *Good thinking is by far the most important*. It is easy to hide good thinking with bad writing.

Your papers **must** include at least one bibliographic reference, in the form of a footnote or an endnote. I do not have any preferences about the form of the reference. If you are comfortable with some standard reference format (MLA, APA), use that; if you don’t have one that you are comfortable with yet, pick one, Google it (use the Hofstra Library main web page links to citation style guides . . .), and learn it cold. Suggestion: use/get a good reference management system for your computer.¹ You should also include a reference if you find yourself using or discussing the ideas of others, for instance ideas that have come up in class from me or from your classmates.² Never assume that just because something seems well-known, that you shouldn’t provide a citation to it.

Policies

- All papers must be typed, using standard margins and standard typefaces and fonts. Hard copy only; no electronic submissions accepted.
- No late papers accepted.

¹Microsoft Word includes a reference manager. There are alternatives. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_reference_management_software describes them; some of them (for example, JabRef, which can work with Microsoft Word) are open-source—free—software. Zotero is a free plugin for the Firefox browser. You might also consider writing with the free typesetting program L^AT_EX, along with its reference management system, BibTeX. These are very stable, very solid, very powerful programs; they are available for Windows, Mac OS X, and Linux. This *Syllabus* was prepared using L^AT_EX. EndNote is a very good professional reference manager but rather expensive.

²I want to thank James Wilkerson for discussion of ideas about how to organize a syllabus.

- Any paper may be rewritten: a rewrite must be turned in by 2 weeks from the original due date.
- Excuse clause: stuff happens. If for some reason you are unable to hand in work, let me know as soon as possible, and be ready to provide documentation. Occasionally there may be a reason for you to email me a paper, but you **must** check with me first.
- A paper with no complete bibliographic reference will receive the grade of F.
- Turn off your phone or beeper before class.
- If you must leave class early, please inform me before class starts.
- If you cannot attend class, please inform me.
- Students with Disabilities: If you have any documented disability-related concerns that may have an impact upon your performance in this course, please meet with me within the first two weeks of the current semester, so that we can work out the appropriate accommodations on an individualized, as-needed basis after the needs, circumstances and documentation have been evaluated by Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD). SSD is located in 212 Memorial Hall and can be reached at 516-463-7075 or ssd@hofstra.edu.
- **Academic dishonesty.** If I have reason to believe that any kind of plagiarism whatsoever has occurred I will request a discussion of the work. (See the *Hofstra Writer's Guide* for a definition of plagiarism. If you are in any doubt, consult with me.) If plagiarism has occurred, I will ask for the work to be completely rewritten. If rewritten work contains plagiarism, I will award the grade of F **for the course**. If there is plagiarism in the final paper, I will award the grade of F for the course. I will always file an academic dishonesty form with the Dean of Students if I believe that plagiarism has occurred. (These policies are in accord with the University's Policy on Academic Honesty as stated in the Hofstra University Bulletin. Procedures for Handling Violations of Academic Honesty by Students at Hofstra University are detailed in Faculty Policy Series #11 (rev. 2004.) for undergraduates.)
- Attendance is required. I will take attendance. If you are absent more than 4 times you will receive the grade of F.
- You are welcome to use a computer (including things like iPads or smartphones) in class to take notes or for other *class-related* purposes. Two comments:
 1. There is data to show that for some purposes hand written notes are a better learning tool than computer notes: <https://psuf10.wordpress.com/2013/10/04/handwriting-vs-typing-when-taking-notes/>
 2. My goals for you in this class are these. You will: (1) learn what the debate about free will has been about; (2) think critically about the various arguments, including ones we see in our texts, and also ones that come up as we discuss the texts; (3) write clearly and critically about these philosophical arguments. I will not be testing you on the fine details of the readings; I am assuming, rather, that you are doing the reading and learning the concepts presented there. So please consider whether you think you will need detailed classroom notes for these purposes.

Schedule

We will discuss the following readings on the dates noted below. Do the reading before class.

Philosophy must be read **actively**. The aim of philosophical writing is to discover the truth—truth about something controversial and hard. **Read slowly**. Sentence by sentence, you must constantly question what you are reading, asking whether you think what the author says is true, and asking whether you think the author's conclusions follow. Figure out why, why not, take notes, write down what you think (and ask yourself: am I right?). Read with someone else, maybe out loud.

Date	Topic	Readings	Assignments
Jan 28	Introduction		
Jan 20	Mind/Brain identity (1)	Taylor Ch.2-4	
Feb 4	Mind/Brain identity (2)		
Feb 6	Kinds of free will	Mele 1-3	SP 1
Feb 11	Libet	Mele 4, 5	
Feb 13	Milgram, Stanford	Mele 6, 7	
Feb 18	Wegner, Psychology	Mele 8, 9	
Feb 20	Souls and agents	Mele 10	SP 2
Feb 25	Intro; the compatibility issue	Griffith 1, 2	
Feb 27	Moral responsibility and alternative possibilities	Griffith 3	
Mar 4	Some compatibilisms	Griffith 4	
Mar 6	Some incompatibilisms	Griffith 5	SP 3
Mar 11	Other positions	Griffith 6	
Mar 13	Reflecting on all this	Griffith 7, 8	
Mar 18, 20	(Spring Recess)		
Mar 25	Compatibilism	Ayer	
Mar 27	Freedom and resentment	Strawson	
Apr 1	Asymmetrical freedom	Wolf	
Apr 3	Incompatibilism	van Inwagen	SP 4
Apr 8			
Apr 10	Alternatives	Frankfurt	
Apr 15	(Class not in session)		
Apr 17	Indeterminism	Lucretius	SP 5
Apr 22	Indeterminism	Kane	
Apr 24	Causal theory of action	Davidson	
Apr 29	Agent Causation	Chisholm	
May 1	Agent Causation	Clarke	SP 6
May 6	Recap		
May 15			(Final, 1:30-3:30)

Learning goals and objectives

This course has the following learning goals and objectives (drawn from the HCLAS General Education Learning Goals, at http://www.hofstra.edu/Academics/Colleges/Hclas/hclas_goals.html):

Goal 1. Students will demonstrate the ability to think critically and creatively.

- 1a.** Clearly and accurately summarize and evaluate the facts, presumptions, viewpoints, values, and arguments presented in a text or creative work.
- 1b.** Gather and assess relevant information, and apply appropriate cognitive methods in solving problems or answering questions raised in a text or creative work.
- 1c.** Construct well-reasoned solutions or conclusions; test and defend conclusions against relevant criteria and standards.
- 1d.** Critically analyze one's own thinking by identifying one's presumptions, values, and viewpoints as well as problems, inconsistencies, and unanswered questions.
- 1e.** Conceive and defend alternative hypotheses and viewpoints; offer and explain reasons for provisionally rejecting or accepting them.

Goal 3. Students will demonstrate proficiency in written communication.

- 3e.** Write an effective argumentative essay.