

Philosophy 591: Responsibility and Rationality

UMass, Amherst

Spring 2015

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About the course. Some think that a kind of coherence (among action, will, and values) suffices for moral responsibility. This seems implausible when applied to the indoctrinated son of an evil dictator. He is coherent and yet plausibly less blameworthy for his murders than we might be for ours. An analogous worry arises for those who take coherence to be sufficient for rationality. Some ideally coherent characters, such as the evidence twisting conspiracy theorist, seem less than fully rational. What is the difference, if there is one, between "normal" agents like us and these coherent eccentrics? We'll consider the ethical and epistemological issues in parallel to see if they could be mutually illuminating.

Meetings. Wednesdays at 1:15-3:30 in Bartlett 374.

Readings. There is no textbook for this class. Readings will be made available online.

Requirements.

- Presentations: 10%
- Reading Responses: 15%
- First Paper: 30%
- Second Paper: 45%

Tentative Dates:

- Presentation 1: Wednesday, March 11, 1:15 pm. **Submit handout to Moodle & bring copies to class.*
- Paper 1: Friday, March 27, 1:15 pm. **Submit to Moodle.*
- Final Reading Response due before: Tuesday, March 15, 1:15 pm. **Submit to Moodle.*
- Presentation 2: Tuesday, November 25, 1:15 pm. **Handout to Moodle & copies to class.*
- Paper 2: Tuesday, December 9th, 1:15 pm. **Submit to Moodle.*

Papers. The first paper should be 1500-2500 words (roughly 6-10 pages). The second paper should be 3500-5000 words (roughly 14-20 pages). For the second paper, you may chose to expand your shorter paper or to write on a new topic. You will chose your topics ahead of time, and will use the presentations as opportunities to revise and refine your topic.

Peer Feedback. More on this soon.

Presentations. In preparation for each paper, you will present for 5 minutes on a topic of your choosing. Presentations will be followed by a brief discussion with questions and suggestions from the class. Prepare a handout, including a bibliography, which answers the following questions:

1. What central question do you aim to answer?
2. What greater debate does this question fit into?
3. What are some possible answers?
4. Briefly criticize one of those answers—even if it's the one you think is right.

Your handout should be no longer than one page, double sided, double spaced, including the bibliography. It should be an outline of what you will say, and not a script.

Reading responses. Answer the following questions for four of the assigned readings.

Important: submit answers *before* the day on which we discuss the reading.

1. What is the main thesis? (*One sentence answer.*)
2. What is the main argument for the thesis? (*No more than 150 words. List the premises and intermediate and final conclusions. Show the reasoning—i.e., what follows from what. N.B. I *love* three-line arguments.*)
3. What do you think of the argument? (*No more than 250 words. Pick a premise to consider or present a counterexample to.*)

N.B. Complete the reading responses early in the semester. Your workload will be more even and you will be more closely acquainted with the readings when the time comes to chose a topic for your papers. Specifically, all reading responses should be submitted by March 15th. N.B. There are only 7 sessions before March 15th, for which we will be doing readings, so plan appropriately.

Tentative Schedule.

Week	Date		Notes	Reading
1	1/21	Day 1.		Class Canceled.
2	1/28	Introduction.		
3	2/4	Two perspectives.		Tomas Nagel, "Freedom" Optional: Hilary Bok, "Freedom and Practical Reason"
4	2/11	Compatibilism.		Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person"
5	2/18	Compatibilism cont.		Susan Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility" Optional: Wolf, "Asymmetric Freedom"
6	2/25	Compatibilism and Crazy Characters.		P. F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment"
7	3/4	Crazy Characters.		Gary Watson, "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil"
8	3/11		Presentations	
9	3/18	Spring Break		No Class.
10.	3/25	Thinking day.		Catch up and revisit Nagel.
..10	F 3/27	Paper 1 Due		
11	4/1	Ignorance and Responsibility.		Gideon Rosen, "Skepticism about Moral Responsibility"

Week	Date		Notes	Reading
12	4/8	Higher Order Evidence and Rational Belief Revision.		David Christensen, "Disagreement, Question-Begging, and Epistemic Self-Criticism"
13	4/15	Conceptual schemes.	All Reading Responses should be in by 1pm today.	Donald Davidson, "On the very idea of a conceptual scheme"
14	4/22	Thinking day.		Catch up.
15	4/29	TBD		
16	5/6	Paper 2 Due		