

PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION

Philosophy 137

Fall 2008

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Dana Kay Nelkin

Office: HSS 8004

Office Hours: Friday 12-2 (Café Roma) and by appointment (HSS 8004)

Phone: (858) 822-0472

E-mail: dnelkin@ucsd.edu

Web site: <http://philosophyfaculty.ucsd.edu/faculty/dnelkin>

Course Description: In this course, we will explore two sets of related issues with direct implications both for ethics and for our self-conception. We will start with a challenge: contrary to our everyday assumptions, our actions can never be truly free. We will then examine a number of attempts to show that (and how) we can act freely. In the process, we will consider the relationship between free action and responsible action, the relationship between our emotional capacities and the possibility of responsible agency, and what implications new research in neuroscience has for the question of whether we are free and responsible agents.

We will then broaden our enquiry by turning to the problem of moral luck. The problem of moral luck arises because, on the one hand, we seem to be committed to the “Control Principle” which states that we are morally assessable only to the extent that what we are assessed for depends on factors under our control. On the other hand, when it comes to particular cases, we morally assess people for things that depend on factors that are not in their control. (If we were correct in doing so, then there would be moral luck.) For example, we tend to blame a drunk driver who has killed a person more than one who arrives home without mishap, even though the presence or absence of a victim in a crosswalk is something over which neither driver has control. And we tend to blame Nazi sympathizers in 1930’s Germany, even though their actions depended in large part on where and when they were born and raised, also factors not in their control. Even more troubling, a very natural line of reasoning suggests that it is impossible to morally assess anyone for anything if we adhere strictly to the Control Principle. In this course, we will examine and evaluate a variety of solutions to the problem of moral luck and their connections to theories of free and responsible action.

Requirements:

- 1 short paper (2-3 pages) (15%) Due: 10/13
- 1 midterm exam (20%) Date: 10/27
- 1 medium paper (6-7 pages) (25%) Due: 11/19
- 1 final exam (40%) Date: 12/9, 11:30-2:30

Note: A hard copy of each paper must be turned in, and an electronic copy uploaded to turnitin.com. (This is very easy to do, and I'll give you instructions and a password for doing so before each paper.)

Specific course topics and readings

Many readings may be found in *Free Will*, edited by Gary Watson (noted with a "W" below) and *Four Views on Free Will* by John Martin Fischer, Robert Kane, Derk Pereboom, and Manuel Vargas (noted with a "4"). All other readings may be found on library e-reserves (<http://reserves.ucsd.edu>). Library materials are noted with an "L".

PART I: FREE AND RESPONSIBLE ACTION

9/26: Introduction: Skeptical Challenges and Hard Cases

9/29: Skeptical Challenges Continued

G. Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility" (W)

10/ 1: Round One: Libertarianism

Chisolm, "Human Freedom and the Self" (W)

Van Inwagen, "An Argument for Incompatibilism" (W)

10/3: Influencability and Compatibilism

Smart, "Free Will, Praise, and Blame" (W)

10/6: Compatibilism

Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility" (W)

Pereboom, "Source Incompatibilism and Alternative Possibilities" (L)

10/8: Compatibilism

Frankfurt, "Free Will and the Concept of a Person" (W)

Watson, "Free Agency" (W)

10/10: Skepticism Revisited

Nagel, "Freedom" (W)

10/13: Libertarianism, Round 2 (***Paper Due***)

Kane, "Responsibility, Luck, and Chance: Reflections on Free Will and Indeterminism" (W)

10/15: Compatibilism, Round 2

Fischer, "Frankfurt-Style Compatibilism" (W)

10/17: Hard Incompatibilism

Pereboom, "Hard Incompatibilism" (4)

10/20: Revisionism

Vargas, “Revisionism” (4)

10/22: Agent Causation Views

Clarke, “Toward a Credible Agent-Causal Account of Free Will” (W)

10/24: Agent Causation Views

O’Connor, “Agent Causation” (W)

Markosian, “A Compatibilist Version of the Theory of Agent Causation” (L)

10/27: **Midterm Exam**

10/29: Agent Causation Views

O’Connor, “Agent Causation”

10/31: Agent Causation Views

No new reading

11/3: A Different Compatibilism

Markosian, “A Compatibilist Version of the Theory of Agent Causation” (L,
Course Web Site)

11/5: A Different Compatibilism

Wolf, “Freedom Within Reason” excerpt (L)

Wolf, “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility” (W) (optional)

11/7: Responsibility and the Reactive Attitudes

Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment” (W)

11/10: Responsibility and the Reactive Attitudes

Watson, “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil” (L)

11/12: Free Will and Neuroscience

[FILM: Stanford Prison Experiments]

11/14: Free Will and Neuroscience

Libet, “Unconscious Cerebral Initiative...” (L) [Guest Lecture: Professor Richard
Arneson]

PART II: MORAL LUCK

11/17: Free Will and Neuroscience

Mele, “Free Will and Luck” excerpt (L)

- 11/19: Moral Luck: The Problem
Williams, “Moral Luck” (L)
Nagel, “Moral Luck” (L)
- 11/21: Moral Luck: Solutions [*Paper Due*]
Richards, “Luck and Desert” (L)
- 11/24: Moral Luck: Solutions
Wolf, “The Moral of Moral Luck” (L)
- 11/26: Moral Luck: Solutions
Zimmerman, “Taking Luck Seriously” (L)
- 11/28: Thanksgiving Holiday
- 12/1: Moral Luck: Solutions
Moore, *Placing Blame* (excerpt) (L)
- 12/3: Moral Luck: Solutions
Adams, “Involuntary Sins” (L)
- 12/5: Moral Luck and Free Agency: Hard Cases and Social Psychology
Doris and Murphy, “War Crimes” (L)

Notes

- If accommodations are needed for a disability or for religious reasons, please notify me during the first class period or as soon as possible.
- The **Academic Honor Code** must be observed in this course.
- **Laptops and other electronic devices** may not be used in class except for taking notes on the lecture.
- Please note that the policies and readings described above are subject to minor change.