

Philosophy 285: Psychology in Action (Theory) and Ethics
Spring 2007

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HSS 8004

Office hours: W 10-12, F 1-2, and by appointment

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Course Description: In this seminar, we will examine two ways in which recently collected experimental results have been claimed to be relevant to central questions concerning intentional action and moral responsibility. The first way begins with attempts to test some of the so-called "armchair" claims of philosophers about what is intuitive concerning intentional actions and actions for which we are responsible. The results are sometimes surprising, and have been thought to undermine some of the major assumptions made by most philosophers working on these issues. For example, contrary to common opinion among philosophers on all sides of the debate about responsibility, some data points to the conclusion that people are not "natural" incompatibilists about responsibility (that is, it appears that we don't implicitly assume that determinism would preclude our being responsible for anything). We will evaluate the experiments and results for ourselves, and try to answer these questions: What can they tell us about our intuitions or our concepts or the nature of responsibility?

A second way that experimental results have been thought to have implications for responsibility is based on a body of literature collectively known as "situationist". A variety of well-known experiments (including Milgram's electric shock experiments and Zimbardo's Stanford Prison experiments) have been read as supporting the conclusion that our actions are better explained by situational factors than by traditional personality traits. A common reaction to the sometimes shocking results (no pun intended!) of these experiments is that they show that people are not really free and responsible agents. This issue arose recently in the public sphere in connection with American soldiers' behavior at Abu Ghraib, which bore an almost eerie similarity to that of the participants in the Stanford Prison experiments. Do the experimental results undermine our responsibility judgments? What do they show about the extent to which we are responsible agents, and can they shed light on the nature of responsibility? We'll make it our task to answer these questions, as well.

Course Readings and Schedule:

Background Readings: Reading at least some of the contemporary classics on free will and responsibility is essential, although we will not spend a great deal of time discussing it directly at the outset. *Four Views on Free Will* (by Fischer, Kane, Pereboom, and Vargas) is a new (soon-to-be published) book in an "essay and responses" form. It gives a very helpful overview of four prominent views on free will. This is on reserve in manuscript form in the department library. Other highly recommended resources include Oxford Readings in Free Will (edited by Watson, with an excellent introduction) and Free Will (edited by Pereboom).

Sources:

- A number of articles and book excerpts available for copying in the department library, or available for download from the library's databases.

Schedule and Readings:

Please note: Because of the nature of the course, there are many excellent articles and books that do not appear on the reading list. Please feel free to ask me for further recommendations whenever you find topics that interest you. Finally, follow "footnote trails" and use the Philosopher's Index, PsychInfo, and other databases to find additional readings.

I. RESPONSIBILITY AND SITUATIONISM

April 3: Zimbardo prison experiments: a film

April 10: Introduction to Theories of Responsibility and to Situationism

Readings:

- [Milgram, "Behavioral Studies of Obedience"](#)
- Darley and Batson, "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behaviors"
- [Haney, Bank, and Zimbardo. "Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison"](#)
- Nisbett and Wilson *The Person and the Situation* (excerpts)
- Also a great time to do some background reading (see above)

April 17: Situationism (continued)

Readings:

- Doris, *Lack of Character*, chapters 2 and 3
- Krueger and Funder, "Toward a Balanced Social Psychology: Causes, Consequences, and Cures..."
- Malle, *How the Mind Explains Behavior* (excerpts)

April 24: Situationism and Responsibility

Readings:

- Frankfurt, "Freedom and the Concept of a Person"
- Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, chapter 4
- Van Inwagen, "The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism"
- Doris, *Lack of Character* chapter 7

May 1: Situationism and Responsibility

Readings:

- Nelkin, "Freedom, Responsibility, and the Challenge of Situationism"
- TBA

May 8: Situationism, Revisionism, and War Crimes

Readings:

- Vargas, “Considerations, Contexts, and Control” (with reply by Miller)
- Doris and Murphy, “From My Lai to Abu Ghraib: The Moral Psychology of Atrocity” (with reply by Talbert)

II. INTENTIONAL ACTION AND RESPONSIBILITY: TESTING INTUITIONS

May 15: Intentional Action and Intuitions

Readings:

- Mele and Moser, “Intentional Action”
- Malle, “Intentionality, Morality, and their Relationship in Human Judgment”
- Knobe, “The Concept of Intentional Action” (and related papers and responses—see Knobe web site)

May 22: Responsibility and Determinism

Readings:

- Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, and Turner, “Surveying Freedom: Folk Intuitions about Free Will and Moral Responsibility”
- Woolfolk, Doris, and Darley, “Identification, situational constraint, and social cognition...”
- Nichols and Knobe, “Moral Responsibility and Determinism...”
- Nahmias, “Folk Fears about Freedom and Responsibility...”

May 29: Responsibility and Moral Status Asymmetries

Readings:

- Pizzaro, Uhlmann, and Salovey, P. “Asymmetry in judgments of moral blame and praise: The role of perceived metadesires”
- Knobe and Doris, “Strawsonian Variations: Folk Morality and the Search for a Unified Theory”

June 5: Responsibility and Intuitions

Readings:

- Nelkin, “Do We Have a Coherent Set of Intuitions about Moral Responsibility?”
- Vargas, “Philosophy and the Folk: On Some Implications Of Experimental Work For Philosophical Debates on Free Will”

Make-up session: TBA

Course Requirements:

- 4 short papers (approximately 2-3 pages). The papers will be based largely on the readings. The first one or two will be based on a prompt that might ask you to identify and/or evaluate a particular argument, distinguish various positions, adjudicate a dispute between authors. For later papers, you will be asked to discuss an issue of your own choosing). These papers will not receive letter grades, but I will provide feedback in the form of comments and overall assessments of either \checkmark , \checkmark^- , or \checkmark^+ . The purpose is to give you a chance to practice and hone your philosophical writing, think critically about the course material, and prepare for writing your term paper.
- 1 term paper preceded by a prospectus. The term paper should be on a topic of your choice that is directly related to the topics discussed in the seminar, and approved by me. I will make suggestions as to possible term paper topics as they come up during the term, but you should also feel free to ask me for suggestions or explore your own ideas with me at any time. More detail concerning the prospectus and term paper follow:
 - a) The prospectus (approximately 2-3 pages) should contain an outline of the main ideas and structure of the paper you will write (due on May 31). A bibliography of the main texts you will discuss should be attached. I will provide written comments on the prospectus, and you are encouraged to discuss your plans with me, as well.
 - b) 1 final term paper (approximately 12-15 pages) due on June 14 at 12 noon. Your final grade will be based on this paper. If the paper grade is a borderline grade (e.g., B+/A-), then the final grade will be determined by quality and improvement in the short papers and participation.

Additional Notes:

- Students with disabilities: If accommodations are needed for a disability, please notify me during the first class period or as soon as possible.
- The readings and policies described above are subject to minor change.