

PHIL S160 (CRN: 30228): Free Will and Moral Responsibility

Yale Summer Session 2025, Semester A, MWF 9:00-11:15

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Office hours: I usually attend lunch in the Dining Hall after class.

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The question of free will matters because it seems fair to hold people morally responsible for what they do only if they act of their own free will. But do human beings have free will? If so, what is it, and how is it related to moral and legal responsibility? If we don't have free will, how can we justify our ordinary moral responses: judgments of praise and blame, morally laden emotions like pride, indignation, shame and guilt, and practices of reward and punishment?

Even if much of our behavior is a matter of free choice, there are times when people are excused for wrongful acts or even exempted from moral responsibility altogether. How do excuses and exemptions function? Are we becoming a society that diminishes the value of personal responsibility by accepting too many excuses? Or are we more enlightened and humane when we appreciate how limited personal responsibility is in the face of biological and environmental "givens" and historical and social circumstances that move people to behave as they do?

We shall pay special attention to the phenomenon of complicity in the wake of social pressure to comply with wrongdoing: focusing on support for slavery and opposition to interracial marriage, Hannah Arendt's account of the trial of Nazi bureaucrat Adolf Eichmann, the Milgram and Zimbardo experiments that supposedly supported Arendt's "banality of evil" thesis, and the willingness of so many of Donald Trump's associates to go along with "the Big Lie" that the 2020 election was "stolen."

Texts

1. **All readings** will be available in a packet you must order immediately from TYCO at 296 Elm Street (across from the Yale Co-op). Each day's assignment has a cover page with questions for thought and discussion along with suggested essay topics (if you choose to "post" for that day). These cover pages are also available on Canvas. I'll distribute readings in class for the first week. But all readings from Monday, 6/2 on will be contained in your packet. So please order your packet from TYCO now. You must bring this to class so that we are working from the material in common.
2. Assigned **videos** will be available through links provided in the published syllabus.

Course Requirements

(% of grade for each requirement is indicated in **red**)

1. **Careful preparation, class attendance, and participation** in our discussions. **(15%)**
 - a. As Socrates knew, philosophical ideas improve when we test them out in dialogue with others. I expect everyone to contribute to our discussions. A pattern of helpful participation in class will benefit your grade.
 - b. Because we only have 15 meetings, any one absence is equivalent to missing an entire week during a regular, 15-week semester. Each unexcused absence will reduce your grade by one level, e.g., from 'A' to 'A-.'

2. Written work will consist of three posts, a detailed outline of your final essay, and the final essay itself:

- a. Three approximately 800-word **reading responses**, one for each of the first three parts of the course. You may choose which day to write a response, and the response will be on the reading (or viewing) assignment for that day. I'll provide a number of "prompts" for each day, helping you with the structure of an argument. Your response is due by midnight before class. **(45%, 15% apiece)**

Use our course website on **Canvas** for the purpose of reading responses.

- i. Start by creating a file of your response on your desktop.
- ii. Next, upload it to the "Assignments" page on Canvas, and press "Submit."
- iii. I will receive it and you'll be provided with comments and a grade as soon as possible.

In the event of difficulties with Canvas, you can always send your posts as an attachment directly to me via e-mail. Be sure to put your name on the title line of your post!

- b. A detailed outline of your **final essay** with your central question, thesis, an outline of steps in the argument, and a bibliography of sources is due on Canvas: Sunday, 6/22 at noon. We'll have time to discuss the outline for your final paper in class on Monday, 6/23. **(10%)**
- c. You must post your **final essay** (approximately 2,000, carefully edited words) on Canvas by 8:30 A.M. on our last day: Friday, 6/27. **(30%)**
 - o In our last class, on 6/27, you should be prepared to make an 5-minute **oral presentation** outlining the central question, thesis and argument of your final paper. I see this as a "philosophical party," where we have a chance to celebrate what we've done during our brief semester.

What do I expect from your READING RESPONSES?

Posts will help you prepare well for our class discussions and warm you up for your longer final essay. A straightforward philosophical argument has **4 steps**:

- 1.** Identify a **thesis** that you agree with.
- 2.** Explain the **reasons** supporting this thesis.
- 3.** Raise an **objection** to the thesis.
- 4.** Explain why you **disagree** with this objection.

EDIT your entry before you post it!!!! Each reading response is due by midnight before the class for which you post. Late reading responses may not be accepted as I need time to read them before class.

I'd be glad to discuss your progress any time, especially when we meet to talk over plans for your final paper.

What do I expect from your FINAL ESSAY?

You can find detailed instructions in the FILES tab on Canvas. Your final essay should build on the same structure as your reading responses: identify a thesis or philosophical claim that that you endorse, explain the reasons that support it, subject it to critical examination, and conclude by answering the objections. In your 2,000-word final essay you'll have more room to develop your argument than you did in your reading responses.

Announcements

Communications with the class as a whole will happen by way of the Announcement function on Canvas. It is "on" by default. Please keep it that way! If you turn this function "off" on Canvas, you will not receive announcements!

Your Commitment to Academic Integrity: On Plagiarism and the Use of AI

On a personal note, let me put it this way. Suppose you heard a moving speech at a friend's wedding, only to discover that the speaker had plugged in relevant information and let AI formulate the speech of behalf of their friend. My hunch is that this performance would make you feel "used" because you assumed that a testimonial should express the personality and effort of the speaker. I feel the same way reading posts or essays that have been plagiarized or that used generative AI in violation of the principles of academic integrity enunciated below.

Writing in your own voice should be difficult, but that's part of the fun of thinking for yourself and doing philosophy! As they say in sports, "No pain, no gain." And for me, it's a way of getting to know you.

On a more formal note, academic integrity is a core university value that ensures respect for the academic reputation of the University, its students, faculty and staff, and the degrees it confers. The University expects that students will conduct themselves in an honest and ethical manner and respect the intellectual work of others. Please ask about my expectations regarding permissible or encouraged forms of student collaboration if they are unclear.

Any work that you submit at any stage of the writing process— thesis, outline, draft, bibliography, final submission, presentations, blog posts, and more—must be your own; in addition, any words, ideas, or data that you borrow from other people and include in your work must be properly documented, including work produced by generative AI. Failure to do either of these things is plagiarism. I seek to protect the rights and intellectual property of all students, writers, and scholars by insisting that individual students act with integrity.

Academic integrity requires that students at Yale acknowledge all of the sources that inform their coursework. Most commonly, this means (a) citing the sources of any text or data that you include in papers and projects, and (b) only collaborating with other students or using tools such as generative AI in ways that are explicitly endorsed by the assignment. Yale's dedication to academic integrity flows from our two primary commitments: supporting research and educating students to contribute to ongoing scholarship. A safe and ethical climate for research demands that previous authors and artists receive credit for their work. And learning requires that you do your own work. Ultimately, it is your responsibility to act with integrity, and the burden is on you to ask questions if anything about course policies is unclear.

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging

I will do what I can to ensure that students from diverse backgrounds and perspectives feel welcome in our seminar. I see the diversity that students bring to our conversation as a

resource, strength and benefit. Together, our goal is to create a safe environment that fosters open and honest dialogue in the spirit of respect for all members of the class. This leaves no room for prejudice based on race, ethnicity and national origins, gender and gender identity, sexuality, class and religion. Disagreement is expected and healthy in philosophy so long as it is pursued without personal attack, and with the aim of not only articulating one's own perspective but also listening to and learning from others. If issues arise, please let me know ways to improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally or for other students or student groups.

Diversity and Disability

As part of Yale's commitment to fostering a climate of mutual respect and full participation, we seek to create learning environments that are usable, equitable, inclusive and welcoming. If there are aspects of the instruction or design of this course that result in barriers to your inclusion or accurate assessment or achievement, please notify me as soon as possible. Disabled students are also welcome to contact [Student Accessibility Services](#) to discuss a range of options to removing barriers in the course, including accommodations.

Institutional Support for Your Academic Work and Overall Wellness

Class Schedule of Topics and Readings/Viewings

- #1 Introductory Day
- #2 The Standard Positions on Free Will: Determinism, Indeterminism, and Compatibilism
 - 1. James Rachels, "The Debate over Free Will: A Review"
 - 2. Galen Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility"

I. "Deep-Self" Views of Free Will: Harry Frankfurt and His Respondents

- #3 Does Free Will Require Having Alternate Possibilities?: Harry Frankfurt vs. Susan Wolf
 - 1. Why Free Will Does Not Require Having Alternate Possibilities
 - Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility"
 - 2. Why Free Will May Require Having Alternate Possibilities
 - Wolf, "Asymmetrical Freedom"
- #4 Two "Deep-Self" View of Free Will: Harry Frankfurt vs. Susan Wolf
 - 1. A "Plain Deep-Self" View
 - Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person"
 - 2. A "Sane Deep-Self" View
 - Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility"
- #5 Replies to Susan Wolf: Cultural Context and the Assessment of Responsibility
 - 1. Cheshire Calhoun, "Responsibility and Reproach"
 - 2. Michele Moody-Adams, "Culture, Responsibility and Affected Ignorance"
 - 3. Jeannie Suk Gerson, "The Case against the Oath Keepers"
- #6 Racism and the Social Distribution of Moral Knowledge
 - 1. On Slavery: Should We Let Conscience Be Our Guide?
 - Jonathan Bennett, "The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn"
 - 2. On Interracial Marriage: *Loving v. Virginia* (1967)
 - For class, view the film, *Loving* (2016).
 - Brent Staples, "Loving v. Virginia and the Secret History of Race," *NYT*, 5/14/08.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/14/opinion/14wed4.html>
 - Brent Staples, "What If the Court in the *Loving* Case Had Declared Race a False Idea?," *NYT*, 3/6/17.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/opinion/what-if-the-court-in-the-loving-case-had-declared-race-a-false-idea.html>

II. The Importance of Free Will for Our Moral Attitudes: Peter Strawson and His Respondents

- #7 Peter Strawson's "Expressivist" Theory: "Reactive Attitudes" and the Practical Primacy of the Internal Point-of-View
1. Peter Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment"
 2. Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck"
- #8 Excuses and Exemptions: The Outer Boundaries of Moral Responsibility
1. Gary Watson, "Responsibility and the Limits of Evil: Variations on Strawsonian Theme."
 2. Alexander Capron, "Fetal Alcohol and Felony"
- #9 What's the Point of Blaming?
1. Bernard Williams, "Internal Reasons and the Obscurity of Blame"
 2. Miranda Fricker, "What's the Point of Blame?: A Paradigm-Based Explanation"

III. Social Pressure, Obedience to Authority, and Complicity: What is it Fair to Expect of "a Reasonable Person"?

- #10 "The Banality of Evil"?: Hannah Arendt's Eichmann in Jerusalem
1. "Judgment in Jerusalem:" A BBC documentary (1986, 50 minutes).
 2. "Eichmann's Final Plea."
 3. Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, "Postscript" and "Epilogue," pp. 274-298.
 4. Seyla Benhabib, "Who's on Trial?: Eichmann, or Arendt?," NYT Opinion, 9/21/2014
- #11 "Most People Would Have Done the Same Thing": So What?
1. "Obedience": A Film of Stanley Milgram's classic experiment at Yale.
 2. Stanley Milgram, "An Experiment in Autonomy."
 3. Philip Zimbardo, "The Psychology of Evil."
 4. Ferdinand Schoeman, "Statistical Norms and Moral Attributions."
- #12 Evil and Complicity
1. Ron Rosenbaum, "Degrees of Evil," The Atlantic, February 2002.
 2. Anne Applebaum, "History Will Judge the Complicit", The Atlantic, July/August 2020.
 3. Mark Leibovich, "Hypocrisy, Spinelessness and the Triumph of Donald Trump," The Atlantic, October 2024.
 4. Paul Bloom, "The Root of All Cruelty," The New Yorker, 11/20/2017.

IV. Our Last Week

- #13 An Open Day to Discuss with Classmates the Outline for your Final Essay
- #14 Guest Lecture: Should the Natural and Computer Sciences Change Our Thinking about Free Will?:
1. Neuroscience: Do Benjamin Libet's experiments prove that free will is an illusion?
 2. Robert Sapolsky's paradox: When you decide free will does not exist because you have weighed arguments for and against it, do you prove free will exists?
 3. Could AI systems one day be capable of free will? Is so, what would that require?
- #15 Farewell Day

EXTRAS

Connection between:

- 1) rationalization/motivated reasoning
- 2) whataboutism
 - a. Is turnaround necessarily fair play??