

## **Philosophy 350: Freedom and Responsibility**

Mount Holyoke College

Fall 2014

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**About the course.** If all our actions are causally determined, is free will possible? Might we be justified in blaming, praising, rewarding, or punishing people even if their actions are not free? Abstract metaphysical questions about freedom intersect in important ways with everyday problems we face in our relationships with others and our attitudes toward moral ignorance and madness. This course will examine these issues side by side in the hope of improving our understanding of freedom and responsibility.

**Meetings.** Tuesdays at 1:15-4:05 in Skinner 102.

**Readings.** There is no textbook for this class. Readings are available on the course website.

### **Requirements.**

- Presentations: 8%
- Reading Responses: 12%
- First Paper: 35%
- Second Paper: 45%

### **Tentative Due Dates:**

- Presentation 1: Tuesday, October 7th, 1:00 pm. **\*Submit handout to Moodle & bring copies to class.\***
- Paper 1: Tuesday, October 21st, 1:00 pm. **\*Submit to Moodle & bring hard copy to class.\***
- Fourth Reading Response: Tuesday, November 18th, 1:00 pm. **\*Submit to Moodle only.\***
- Presentation 2: Tuesday, November 25th, 1:00 pm. **\*Submit handout to Moodle & bring copies to class.\***
- Paper 2: Tuesday, December 9th, 1:00 pm. **\*Submit to Moodle & bring hard copy to class.\***

**Papers.** The first paper should be 1500 words long. The second paper should be 3000 words long. For the second paper, you may choose to expand your shorter paper or to write on a new topic. You will choose your topics ahead of time, and will use the presentations as opportunities to revise and refine your topic. There will be a paper exchange after you submit each paper and you will have the opportunity to rewrite it in light of peer comments. Rewrites will be due five days after the original due date.

**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. Relatedly, what are some possible answers?

Your handout should be no longer than one page, double sided, double spaced, including the bibliography.

**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 thesis? (*One sentence answer.*)
2. What is the 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.*)
3. What do you think of the argument? (*No more than 150 words. Pick a premise to consider or present a counterexample.*)

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 choose a topic for your papers. Specifically, all reading responses should be submitted by November 15th.

### **Tentative Schedule.**

Day	Date		Notes	Reading
1	9/9	Introduction.		Galen Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility"
2	9/16	Incompatibilism.		Peter Van Inwagen, "An Argument for Incompatibilism". Fischer et. al., "A brief introduction..."
3	9/23	Against Incompatibilism.		David Lewis, "Are we free to break the laws?"
4	10/1	Compatibilism v 1.0		Hilary Bok, "Freedom and Practical Reason"
5	10/7	<b>Presentations</b>		<b>Submit handout to Moodle &amp; bring copies for everyone to class.</b>
6	10/21	<b>Paper 1 due.</b>		<b>Submit to Moodle &amp; bring one hard copy to class.</b>
7	10/28	Compatibilism v 2.0		Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility" and "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person"
8	11/4	Compatibilism v 3.0		Susan Wolf, "Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility" and "Asymmetrical Freedom"
9	11/11	Psychopaths & Killers.		P.F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment" (optional) Gary Watson, "Responsibility and the limits of evil"
10	11/18	Addiction.	Final reading response due.	R. Jay Wallace, "Addiction as a defect of the will"
11	11/25	<b>Presentations</b>		<b>Submit handout to Moodle &amp; bring copies for everyone to class.</b>
12	12/2	Problems, again.		Thomas Nagel, "Freedom"

Day	Date		Notes	Reading
13	12/9	Paper 2 due.		Submit to Moodle & bring one hard copy to class.

**Participation.** Philosophy is a communal activity. Much of it is about asking simple, clarificatory questions. I'll expect you to do at least that much regularly. You are expected to do the assigned readings before class, and actively participate in class discussion. (Notice, it follows from this that attendance is required.) I realize that participation is more difficult for some of us than others. But writing papers, understanding the readings—these too are more difficult for some of us than others. Class will consist largely of discussion, and everyone is expected to participate. If you have trouble speaking in class, please see me and we will work on it together.

**Writing.** A major goal of this class is to improve your writing skills. Chances are that you haven't done this sort of writing before—at least not at the level at which we will do it—so you will need to practice. (At the same time, you will see, it is a much more natural and intuitive way of writing than what you may have been taught in the past.) I hope you will emerge as stronger writers capable of producing clear, concise, and convincing prose. Like any skill, this one requires practice and patience. Acquiring it will be difficult: you will have to do a lot of writing and rewriting. I am committed to helping you get there because I know that the ability to think critically and express your ideas in clear, crisp prose will serve you well wherever you go from here.

As for **my expectations**, David Foster Wallace said it best in his own syllabus:

If you want to improve your academic writing and are willing to put extra time and effort into it, I am a good teacher to have. But if you're used to whipping off papers the night before they're due, running them quickly through the computer's Spellchecker, handing them in full of high-school errors and sentences that make no sense, and having the professor accept them "because the ideas are good" or something, please be informed that I draw no distinction between the quality of one's ideas and the quality of those ideas' verbal expression, and that I will not accept sloppy, rough-draftish, or semiliterate college writing. Again, I am absolutely not kidding. If you won't or can't devote significant time and attention to your written work, I urge you to drop... and save us both a lot of grief.<sup>1</sup>

I too am absolutely not kidding.

**Presenting and Formatting.** Presenting your assignments in a professional manner is important. It demonstrates respect for yourself and for your audience. Don't waste your reader's time with easy to fix mistakes, like typos, and don't distract them with crazy fonts or weird formatting. Please use the following guidelines.

- *Word count* at end of paper (exclude bibliography, etc. when calculating).
- *Double space* (except block quotes which should be single spaced and indented).
- *Standard margins* (1 inch), font size (12pt), style (Times New Roman), etc.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://alasophia.blogspot.com/2008/09/david-foster-wallaces-syllabus.html>

- *Cite sources* in a clear, consistent way. MLA, Chicago Style, I don't care. Just be consistent.<sup>2</sup>
- *Electronic copies* should be in **PDF** format and named as follows: *assignment\_MMDDYY.pdf* for example: *paper01\_022814.pdf*
  - Why PDFs? PDFs are more professional than docs and allow you to control how your work looks to your audience. If you don't know how to convert a document into PDF format, figure it out: ask Google, the help desk, or your email buddies. I am not tech support.
- **Important:** I use Moodle's blind-grading option. **Do not put your name anywhere in or on your assignment**—not in the filename and not in the document—as it will compromise anonymity.

**Very Important.** For Tuesday, September 16th, do the following.

*The assigned readings, in this order:*

1. Vavova, The Syllabus. All of it. Seriously.
2. Van Inwagen, "An argument for Incompatibilism"
3. Fischer et. al., "Introduction..."

*Assignment:*

1. Write down at least three questions you have about the readings (at least one about the syllabus and one about the Van Inwagen).
2. Copy the following statement, inserting your name: "I, <insert name here>, have read the entirety of the syllabus for Philosophy 350 and agree to follow its dictates while enrolled in the course."
3. Explain what the "M&M clause" was and what it was meant to accomplish. Google it, if you don't know.

Format this according to the guidelines above (except the one about anonymity) and bring a hard copy to class.

**Late Policy.** Papers will be penalized by one letter grade for every day late. Of course, things happen. Hence: **THE GET OUT OF JAIL FREE POLICY.** You get one Get Out of Jail Free card. It isn't a real card, but you really can use it. It is good for a three-day extension (from the original due date). The only constraints are: (1) you must submit the card on or before the assignment due date, (2) the extension cannot go past the end of the exam period, and (3) the card cannot be used on presentations. *To use the card:* log into Moodle. Find the assignment you'd like to use the card on. Open it as if you're going to submit it. Write "JAILCARD" in the submission box. That's it!

Note: It is unwise to use the jailcard for the first draft of your paper—the one we will exchange in class. If you do that, you miss the only opportunity for feedback on your paper, before the final grade is assigned. Therefore, I strongly recommend using the card only for the final, post-paper exchange version of either paper.

**Communication.** Important announcements and assignments will be communicated to you via email or in class. It is your responsibility to make sure you are up to date with the latest news. So check your email often and don't miss class. If you do, check with your email buddies: three people in the class whose emails you've acquired for this purpose. Write their names and contact information here:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Of course, you are always welcome to email me. But please keep in mind:

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<sup>2</sup> E.g., [http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html).

- I do not answer emails outside of business hours (9-5 Monday - Friday).
- I respond as promptly as I can, but not always on the same day.
- I do not answer questions that are clearly answered by the syllabus or assignment instructions. If you're not hearing back from me, that may be a hint to double check the relevant materials. That said, after you've carefully examined the assignment *and* checked with your email buddies, you shouldn't hesitate to ask me to clarify anything.

**Attendance.** Most of the action happens in class—it is where I give away all the answers. Seriously. I guarantee that this is not one of those classes in which you can read by yourself and ace the assignments. So, you won't want to skip class. If you must miss class, proceed as follows:

1. Contact your email buddies for notes and updates.
2. Check Moodle for handouts and supplementary materials.
3. Do the readings, study your buddy's notes, and carefully examine the handouts.
4. Come to my office hours if you have any questions.

Finally, some good advice: never, ever ask your professors if you've "missed something important". Of course you have.

**Gadgets.** Turn them off or leave them at home. Laptops, phones, the lot of them. Come talk to me if you have concerns. Exceptions for laptop and other learning devices will be considered on a case by case basis.

**Readings.** Most of the readings we will look at are short, but quite tricky. Give yourself time to digest them. I recommend a two step approach: first, skim, and then carefully read each piece before we discuss it in class. Use the reading assignments to help focus your attention on what is most important. Jot down questions and confusions and raise them in lecture. Second, skim the reading again after we've discussed it. It should be much easier to understand at this point. If you're still unclear about something, get help: ask your email buddies, come by my office hours, etc.

**Academic Honesty.** Upon entering Mount Holyoke College, you each signed a pledge to uphold the honor code. It is your responsibility "to read *A Guide to the Uses and Acknowledgment of Sources* and the Student Handbook, which define the standards adopted by the College; to observe the established procedures in preparing assignments and writing papers and examinations, and to submit as [your] own only that work that [you have] originated."<sup>3</sup> I expect you will all honor the pledge you signed. Therefore, everything you turn in should be *your own work* and *in your own words*. If your discussions of class topics with your friends, dogs, parents, etc., are helpful, cite them. Credit all sources appropriately, even (especially) Wikipedia and your Googling bounty.

**Important.** It is a requirement of this class that you take the plagiarism tutorial: <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/lits/ris/Plagiarism/>. I will trust you have completed it. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty and to avoid it. Accidental plagiarism should not be possible. If in doubt, cite, cite, cite.

\*\*In short, do not plagiarize. I *will* fail you.\*\*

**Submitting.** All assignments should be submitted on Moodle. Advice: don't wait until five minutes before the due time. I won't accommodate Moodle-messed-up excuses. It's your responsibility to get your assignment in on time. Occasionally, I will also ask you to submit a hard copy of the assignment as well. In those instances, **your assignment is late until it has been submitted in both ways.**

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student\\_handbook](https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student_handbook)

**Feedback.** Grades are non-negotiable, but I'm always happy to talk about how you could improve. If you ever find yourself confused about the feedback you receive on your assignments, come see me as soon as possible. Feedback will be submitted to Moodle. Comments will be in comment box. Keep in mind: Moodle doesn't automatically notify you when assignments are graded.

**Assistance.** Besides myself, you have a number of resources available to help you succeed in this class.

\* You should go to the **SAW center** for help on your assignments. Well-trained peers are there to look over your drafts, help you plan your arguments, etc. There are drop-in hours, and you may go as many times as you want. This is a great resource. Use it.<sup>4</sup>

\* In order to receive reasonable accommodations for a disability, you must register with the **Office of AccessAbility Services**. This office will provide a letter describing the appropriate accommodations. Once you have this letter, set up an appointment with me and we will discuss it.<sup>5</sup>

**Grading.** Your paper will be evaluated along three dimensions of roughly equal weight:

1. The clarity and soundness of the *argument* for your *thesis*.
2. Your demonstrated understanding of readings and material covered in class.
3. Your insight and creativity in engaging the issues.

Here is what the Mount Holyoke College student handbook says about grades: "As a general guide to instructors, the faculty has agreed to the following equivalencies to letter grades:

A = excellent; B = good; C = satisfactory; D = minimally passing; F = failing." <sup>6</sup>

Consider: 'B' means 'good'. The obvious question is: what does 'good' mean? I take 'good' to mean good. Therefore, if you do a good job on a paper, you will get a B. This means you have done a good job, and should be happy. 'A' means 'excellent'. This does not mean you have to write a publishable paper or be the next Immanuel Kant to get an A. It does mean that you have to demonstrate some real understanding and aptitude for doing philosophy.

N.B. Do not assume that merely completing the assignment without making any mistakes suffices for an A. (More on this in a moment.) Also, do not panic if your first paper receives a low grade. Track record data suggests that you will get the worst grade you have ever received on the first assignment in this class. N.B. This paragraph applies for you even if you have taken a philosophy class before. Again, inductive evidence suggests that it applies to you even if you don't think it applies to you. Fewer than 10% of students are able to write above the B- level. Don't let this discourage you. Writing is hard, but it is a skill you can learn. People who make a serious effort often write B+ or A- papers by the end of term.

**A final note on grading.** Students are often puzzled by the grading standards for papers. Some ask, "If I answered the question competently without making any significant errors, why didn't I get an A?" Here is a guideline for how papers in this course are graded. (N.B.: these are the standards for papers prior to assigning late penalties.)

**B** is the baseline grade for good, competent, but not exceptional work; a solid paper, with some notable mistakes or obscurities, but no serious misunderstandings. At the very least, a B paper does the following:  
- addresses all parts of the paper topic

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/saw/peer/center>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/accessability>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student\\_handbook](https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student_handbook)

- offers consistent, coherent arguments for a clearly articulated position that makes sense
- considers a significant objection to that position
- replies to that objection
- makes relevant use of course readings and lectures, displaying a grasp of their content
- is generally well-written and well-organized
- does not contain significant misunderstandings

*Papers deserving a grade higher than a B meet all these criteria, but do something more.*

**B+** This is a well-written paper with nothing terribly wrong. It meets all the criteria for a B paper, but also shows more promise or originality. It may do this by working out ordinary ideas to a greater depth than usual, or develop relevant arguments that demonstrate real mastery of the course readings without merely replicating them. Alternatively, a B+ paper might present an unusually apt analogy that illuminates a previously obscure aspect of the problem; a clever counterexample to a seemingly persuasive claim; a sharp distinction that does real philosophical work; a subtle point drawn from a close reading of a text; a compelling illustration or application of a principle, and so forth. A B+ paper receives the beginnings of distinction, but its ideas need further development: it doesn't stand out like or operate at as advanced a level as an A- paper.

**A or A-** These grades are reserved for outstanding work that operates at an advanced level. A paper that just gives a straightforward or obvious response to some philosophical or interpretative problem would not merit an A or A-, even if it is clear. An A or A- paper does something extra—but not at the cost of a clear treatment of the problem. If there are any significant problems with the writing or the organization of the paper, then it won't merit even an A-: this is because good clear writing and organization are not separable from good thinking. An A or A- paper thus meets all the criteria for a B+ paper, but does something more. For example:

- working out the original, striking, or powerful idea, argument, or illustration/application fully and deeply, demonstrating a firm grasp of the underlying concepts, principles, facts, and argumentative strategy
- offering an unusually comprehensive survey of possible moves by both sides, and clearly and systematically evaluating them, to come to a closely reasoned conclusion. The survey is systematic, not scattershot: it develops the alternatives logically and to substantial depth.
- offering an unusually sophisticated, close and systematic reading of a text, paying attention to tensions and contradictions in the author's work, alternative interpretations of passages (offering persuasive arguments for preferring one interpretation to another), or interpretations that bring out philosophically significant points, especially if they offer fresh, unconventional readings

*Papers deserving a grade lower than a B fail to meet the criteria and demonstrate carelessness or confusion.*

**B-** This paper contains significant errors, omissions or misunderstandings, but still, there is an effort. The author has some understanding of the problem and of the relevant texts. She does offer some argument. A paper with no argument won't merit a B-. Some ways such a paper might go wrong include:

- the writing is distractingly unclear
- organization is poor: important points aren't logically ordered or signposted
- there are straightforward mistakes and misunderstandings about what the problem is, or about what other philosophers say
- the problem is presented clearly but not really addressed
- doesn't answer one part of the paper topic
- misunderstands a substantial philosophical point or confuses distinct positions

- doesn't articulate a consistent position
- doesn't consider objections to one's position
- wastes space on issues not pertinent to the paper topic
- offers a confused, sloppy, superficial, or erroneous interpretation of course readings or other cited texts

**C+** There are more serious problems. Either the writing is really hard to get through; or the paper has no discernible structure; or the author doesn't understand the text or the positions she is discussing; or the paper doesn't really attempt to offer any argument.

Papers with more problems will earn grades of **C or below**. Papers that plagiarize or don't make a serious effort will not pass.

Do keep in mind: a low grade on the first assignment is not cause for immediate concern. It's cause for reflection, learning, and working harder. A failure to improve over the course of the assignments is cause for concern. Even if you submit an A paper, I will expect you to do better on your next assignment. If you aren't improving, wherever you start from, neither of us is doing our jobs well.