

PH3C1-15 Freedom, Blame and Moral Responsibility: Contemporary Problems and Perspectives

26/27

Department

Philosophy

Level

Undergraduate Level 3

Module leader

Nadine Elzein

Credit value

15

Module duration

10 weeks

Assessment

Multiple

Study location

University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

This module explores a range of contemporary problems relating to free will, moral responsibility, and retributive blame.

Module aims

Questions about free will and moral responsibility have been debated within philosophy for centuries, and it constitutes a key puzzle within philosophical debates, with implications for metaphysics, ethics, action theory, and the philosophy of mind. But the last century has seen a number of significant shifts within the debate, including challenges from the neurosciences, questions about how we reconcile indeterminism with freedom, the development of emergentist accounts of free will, challenges to the ethics of retributivism, and various new ways of thinking about ability and possibility. In taking this module, students will learn to navigate some central issues within the contemporary debate and will develop a clear understanding of how our approach to these issues bears on other questions within philosophy and beyond.

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

Week 1: Determinism & the Ability to do Otherwise

A great deal of the contemporary debate on freedom and responsibility began with van Inwagen's consequence argument and a dispute about whether determinism rules out the ability to do otherwise. Philosophers have since then proposed a range of ways of analysing 'able to' claims, where rival analyses seem to have a direct bearing on the compatibility of the alternative possibilities with determinism.

Week 2: Frankfurt-Style Counterexamples and the Relevance of Alternative Possibilities

Prior to Frankfurt's famous article, it was typically taken for granted by all sides that alternative possibilities are a necessary condition for both free will and moral responsibility. However, Frankfurt's argument challenges this assumption by arguing that alternative possibilities are irrelevant to moral responsibility, a point he aims to establish by appeal to a famous and much disputed example, which continues to be subject to lively dispute.

Week 3: Actual and Alternative Sequences

Inspired by Harry Frankfurt's argument, many philosophers suppose that moral responsibility depends solely on features of the 'actual sequence' of events leading to the agent's action and does not depend on either the possibility or the nature of any 'alternative sequence' of events. These include views that appeal to higher order volitions or to fundamental values or the 'true self', as well as views that rest on 'reasons-responsiveness' or sensitivity to value.

Week 4: Freedom as an Emergent Phenomenon

What is the relationship between what is possible at the level of fundamental physics and what is possible at the level of agency? The level of agency may be said to 'supervene' on the level of physics. This means that agential phenomena may be 'multiply realisable'. Drawing on this, List argues that we may have alternative possibilities at the level of agency even if the universe is deterministic at the level of physics. Does this view give us a novel approach to reconciling alternative possibilities with determinism? We may also wonder whether the atemporal nature of microphysics gives us reason to question the usual directions of causal asymmetries at a macro level, where such causal asymmetry seems crucial to our reasons for supposing that determinism is a threat to freedom.

Week 5: Determinism, 'Ought' Implies 'Can' and Duty.

Some philosophers think that determinism rules out the ability to do otherwise. Another popular claim is that 'ought' implies 'can': If an agent is unable to do something, then that agent cannot be obligated to do it. If we accept both, and we accept that the same sense of 'can' is being invoked by both claims, then it seems that determinism would restrict what we can be obligated to do. This has been used in different ways by different philosophers. Some use this as a basis to say that regardless of whether determinism has any bearing on free will, it directly rules out all obligations. Others argue that we are unable to take this implication seriously, and use this as the basis for a 'transcendental argument' for the denial of determinism: Since we are practically committed to normative reasons, they suppose that that we are practically committed to supposing that determinism is false, and that we are free to do otherwise, in the traditional libertarian sense.

Week 6:

Reading Week

Week 7: Indeterminism and Luck Problems

While debates about free will have traditionally focused on the potential threat of determinism, recent work tends to give just as much focus to the threat indeterminism. If our choices are not causally determined, aren't they just random occurrences? And how can anyone be held responsible for something that simply happens at random. There are various versions of this worry, but all throw into doubt whether freedom and moral responsibility could be rendered consistent with indeterminism. This has led some philosophers to suggest that determinism is required for moral responsibility and others to suggest that neither determinism nor indeterminism are consistent with moral responsibility. The task for those who suppose that indeterminism is consistent with or required for moral responsibility is to sketch out an account of freedom and control that can make sense of how an agent might have control with respect to something that results partially just from chance.

Week 8: Reactive Attitudes and Blame

P F Strawson's argument for a broadly compatibilist account of moral responsibility has been enormously influential. He argued that responsibility attributions are closely tied to the 'reactive attitudes' – attitudes we have in response to the quality of a person's will, such as resentment, forgiveness, indignation, remorse, and gratitude. From a practical perspective, Strawson was doubtful that considerations relating to anything as abstract as the truth or falsity of determinism could undermine our reasons for holding one another responsible, since these attitudes are at the heart of our responsibility judgements and these are thoroughly and essentially embedded in our social lives. Philosophers continue to explore Strawson's picture of responsibility and the role of reactive attitudes in relation to our desert-entailing practices.

Week 9: Punishment and Retribution

What is the basis for retributive punishment? Do our penal practices rest crucially on assumed moral responsibility? Is the harm inflicted by our desert-entailing practices morally justifiable? Most legal systems use a combination of backward-looking retributive considerations and forward-looking more consequential considerations. While we might hope that various positive goals are served by our penal system (deterrence, public protection, reform), it is undoubtedly true that there are also serious harms

Week 10: Neuroscience, 'Willusionist' Arguments & Moral Responsibility

Advances in neuroscience have often been thought to pose serious challenges to our way of thinking about freedom and moral responsibility. Libet famously found that our awareness of consciously making a choice is usually preceded by an unconscious earlier neural event (a readiness potential). Some theorists have suggested that studies into the unconscious neural precursors of conscious choices show that free will is an illusion. Moreover, as neuroscientific evidence starts to be used in legal contexts, questions arise about how neuroscientific evidence should be taken to bear on legal and moral responsibility.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Clearly understand and articulate a range of contemporary theories and ideas relating to

freedom and moral responsibility.

- Analyse different approaches and explore potential criticisms and defences.
- Identify key points on which disputes on this topic hinge and think independently about how we resolve these disputes and weigh up different viewpoints.
- Engage effectively and critically with the literature, understanding and analysing texts, and practicing good scholarship.

Indicative reading list

[Reading lists can be found in Talis](#)

[Specific reading list for the module](#)

Research element

The student will be expected to write essays, which will usually include some of their own research.

Interdisciplinary

While the key topics fall squarely within philosophy, elements of this course will also require engaging with work in psychology and jurisprudence, and much of the discussion borders on other fields.

Subject specific skills

A comprehensive understanding of relevant theories and literature.

An ability to navigate arguments and theories relating to freedom and moral responsibility.

An ability to engage with relevant literature and to structure and formulate independent discussions.

Transferable skills

Reading and comprehension of difficult and complex texts and ideas.

Time management.

Coherently organising and structuring thoughts and arguments.

Research and scholarship skills.

Communicating ideas and arguments effectively both verbally and in written work.

Skills of logical reasoning and analysis.

Study

Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	18 sessions of 1 hour (12%)
Seminars	8 sessions of 1 hour (5%)
Private study	124 hours (83%)
Total	150 hours

Private study description

The students will be required to do essential reading in preparation of the seminars and to complete essays as coursework for the project.

Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

Assessment

You must pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Students can register for this module without taking any assessment.

Assessment group A2

	Weighting	Study time	Eligible for self-certification
Short Essay Assessment 1000 word essay	20%		Yes (extension)
Long Essay Assessment 2500 word essay	80%		Yes (extension)

Assessment group R1

	Weighting	Study time	Eligible for self-certification
3000 word essay	100%		Yes (extension)

Feedback on assessment

Feedback would be provided via Tabula as is standard.

Availability

Courses

This module is Core optional for:

- Year 3 of UPHA-VQ52 Undergraduate Philosophy, Literature and Classics

This module is Optional for:

- UPHA-L1CA Undergraduate Economics, Psychology and Philosophy
 - Year 2 of L1CA Economics, Psychology and Philosophy
 - Year 2 of L1CC Economics, Psychology and Philosophy (Behavioural Economics Pathway)
 - Year 2 of L1CD Economics, Psychology and Philosophy (Economics with Philosophy Pathway)
 - Year 2 of L1CE Economics, Psychology and Philosophy (Philosophy and Psychology Pathway)
 - Year 3 of L1CA Economics, Psychology and Philosophy
 - Year 3 of L1CC Economics, Psychology and Philosophy (Behavioural Economics Pathway)
 - Year 3 of L1CD Economics, Psychology and Philosophy (Economics with Philosophy Pathway)
 - Year 3 of L1CE Economics, Psychology and Philosophy (Philosophy and Psychology Pathway)
- UPHA-L1CB Undergraduate Economics, Psychology and Philosophy (with Intercalated Year)
 - Year 4 of L1CG Economics, Psychology and Philosophy (Behavioural Economics Pathway) (with Intercalated Year)
 - Year 4 of L1CH Economics, Psychology and Philosophy (Economics with Philosophy Pathway) (with Intercalated Year)
 - Year 4 of L1CJ Economics, Psychology and Philosophy (Philosophy and Psychology Pathway) (with Intercalated Year)
 - Year 4 of L1CB Economics, Psychology and Philosophy (with Intercalated Year)
- UPHA-V700 Undergraduate Philosophy
 - Year 2 of V700 Philosophy
 - Year 3 of V700 Philosophy
- Year 4 of UPHA-V701 Undergraduate Philosophy (with Intercalated year)
- Year 4 of UPHA-V702 Undergraduate Philosophy (with Work Placement)
- Year 2 of UPHA-V5L2 Undergraduate Philosophy and Politics
- Year 4 of UPHA-VL80 Undergraduate Philosophy with Psychology (with Work Placement)
- Year 2 of UPHA-V7ML Undergraduate Philosophy, Politics and Economics
- UPHA-V7MW Undergraduate Politics, Philosophy and Law
 - Year 2 of V7MW Politics, Philosophy and Law
 - Year 3 of V7MW Politics, Philosophy and Law
- Year 4 of UPHA-V7MX Undergraduate Politics, Philosophy and Law (with Intercalated Year)

This module is Core option list A for:

- Year 3 of UMAA-GV17 Undergraduate Mathematics and Philosophy
- Year 3 of UMAA-GV19 Undergraduate Mathematics and Philosophy with Specialism in Logic and Foundations

This module is Core option list B for:

- Year 2 of UMAA-GV17 Undergraduate Mathematics and Philosophy
- Year 2 of UMAA-GV19 Undergraduate Mathematics and Philosophy with Specialism in Logic and Foundations

This module is Core option list C for:

- Year 4 of UMAA-GV19 Undergraduate Mathematics and Philosophy with Specialism in Logic and Foundations

This module is Option list A for:

- UPHA-VL78 BA in Philosophy with Psychology
 - Year 2 of VL78 Philosophy with Psychology
 - Year 3 of VL78 Philosophy with Psychology
- Year 4 of UPHA-VL79 BA in Philosophy with Psychology (with Intercalated year)

This module is Option list B for:

- UPHA-VQ72 Undergraduate Philosophy and Literature
 - Year 2 of VQ72 Philosophy and Literature
 - Year 3 of VQ72 Philosophy and Literature
- Year 2 of UPHA-VQ52 Undergraduate Philosophy, Literature and Classics
- Year 2 of UPHA-V7ML Undergraduate Philosophy, Politics and Economics

This module is Option list C for:

- UPHA-V7ML Undergraduate Philosophy, Politics and Economics
 - Year 3 of V7MP Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Bipartite)
 - Year 3 of V7ML Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Tripartite)
- UPHA-V7MM Undergraduate Philosophy, Politics and Economics (with Intercalated year)
 - Year 4 of V7MS Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Bipartite with Economics Major) (with Intercalated Year)
 - Year 4 of V7MQ Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Bipartite) with Intercalated Year
 - Year 4 of V7MM Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Tripartite) (with Intercalated year)

This module is Option list D for:

- UHIA-V1V5 Undergraduate History and Philosophy
 - Year 2 of V1V5 History and Philosophy
 - Year 3 of V1V5 History and Philosophy
- Year 4 of UHIA-V1V9 Undergraduate History and Philosophy (with Intercalated Year)
- Year 4 of UHIA-V1V6 Undergraduate History and Philosophy (with Year Abroad)
- Year 2 of UHIA-V1V7 Undergraduate History and Philosophy (with a term in Venice)

- UPHA-V7ML Undergraduate Philosophy, Politics and Economics
 - Year 2 of V7MR Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Bipartite with Economics Major)
 - Year 3 of V7MR Philosophy, Politics and Economics (Bipartite with Economics Major)