

PHIL 2170: Moral Responsibility

Time: T/Th, 2:30-3:45pm

Location: 322 St. Paul's College

Dr. Eliza Wells, she/her

Office: 447 University College

Email: Eliza.Wells@umanitoba.ca

Student Hours: Tues 4-5pm and by appointment via calendly.com/elizawells

Course Description

Who should we blame? Does free will matter? What do we owe to animals and artificial intelligences?

This course explores questions like these about **moral responsibility**. Using perspectives and tools from moral and social philosophy, we will engage with topics including the impacts of determinism, coercion, ignorance, cognitive disability, and oppression on moral responsibility.

Moral responsibility features in a wide range of current debates in moral and social philosophy. These debates matter to questions ranging from law and medicine to social interactions and shopping. We rely on judgments about moral responsibility to determine what we owe to others, who to punish, when to apologize, whose rights to protect, and how to engage with unjust structures.

These topics are relevant for students of philosophy and any other field that requires ethical reasoning and critical analysis. In this course, you will gain and sharpen useful skills by reading modern analytic scholarship, reflecting on difficult ideas through writing, and taking part in discussion with your peers. These skills include thinking critically and systematically, interpreting complex texts, developing your own philosophical voice, and communicating your ideas about the world with others.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, you should be able to...

- Explain core philosophical concepts such as determinism, culpable ignorance, quality of will, structural injustice, social constitution, and moral agency in your own words
- Interpret modern philosophical writing and critically analyze how different writers engage with each other's ideas
- Apply philosophical concepts to real-world problems
- Communicate philosophical ideas clearly in written assignments and discussion with peers
- Critically reflect on your own processes of writing and thinking
- Develop and defend your own views on philosophical problems

Course Schedule

This schedule is subject to change based on the needs of the course. Any changes will be announced via email at least one week in advance.

Week	Topic	Date	Pre-Class Reading	Assignments
			In many cases, only selections from the specified paper are assigned. Please use the materials available on UM Learn for the most accurate information.	Online assignments are due before class begins (2:30pm) on the specified date.
1	Introduction	Sept 4	<i>No reading</i>	
2	Why Does Responsibility Matter?	Sept 9	Hannah Arendt, "Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship" (1964)	
		Sept 11	Corwin Aragon & Alison Jaggar, "Agency, Complicity, and the Responsibility to Resist Structural Injustice" (2018)	
3	Freedom	Sept 16	P.F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment" (1963) Harry Frankfurt, "Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility" in <i>The Importance of What We Care About</i> (1988)	
		Sept 18	Hilary Bok, "The Implications of Advances in Neuroscience for Freedom of the Will" (2007)	Connection Reflection #1 Writing Reflection #1 (in class)
4	What is Responsibility About?	Sept 23	Gary Watson, "Two Faces of Responsibility" (1996)	
		Sept 25	Katrina Hutchison, Catriona Mackenzie, and Marina Oshana, "Moral Responsibility in Contexts of Structural Injustice" in <i>Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility</i> (2018)	
5	Review	<i>No class Sept 30</i>	<i>Orange Shirt Day</i>	

		Oct 2	<i>No reading—class session on review and philosophical writing</i>	
6	Character	Oct 7	Thomas Nagel, “Moral Luck” (1979)	
		Oct 9	Nomy Arpaly, “Moral Worth” (2002)	Argument Reconstruction Writing Reflection #2 (in class)
7	Social Location	Oct 14	Natalie Stoljar, “Autonomy and Adaptive Preference Formation” (2014)	
		Oct 16	Manuel Vargas, “The Social Constitution of Agency and Responsibility: Oppression, Politics, and Moral Ecology” in <i>Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility</i> (2018)	
8	Causation	Oct 21	Carolina Sartorio, “Causation and Responsibility” (2007)	
		Oct 23	Gianfranco Pellegrino, “Robust Individual Responsibility for Climate Harms” (2018)	Connection Reflection #2
9	Knowledge	Oct 28	Gideon Rosen, “Culpability and Ignorance” (1998)	
		Oct 30	Michelle Moody-Adams, “Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance” (2004)	
10	Cognitive Disability	Nov 4	David Shoemaker, “Responsibility, Agency, and Cognitive Disability” in <i>Cognitive Disability and its Challenge to Moral Philosophy</i> (2010)	
		Nov 6	Eva Feder Kittay, “The Personal is Philosophical is Political: A Philosopher and Mother of a Cognitively Disabled Person Sends Notes from the Battlefield” in <i>Cognitive Disability and its Challenge to Moral Philosophy</i> (2010)	Final Paper Outline Writing Reflection #3 (in class)
<i>Fall break Nov 10-14</i>				

11	Artificial Agents	Nov 18	Filippo Santoni de Sio & Giulio Mecacci, “Four Responsibility Gaps with Artificial Intelligence: Why they Matter and How to Address Them” (2021)	
		Nov 20	Christian List, “Group Agency and Artificial Intelligence” (2021)	
12	Collective Responsibility	Nov 25	Tracy Isaacs, “Collective Responsibility and Collective Obligation” (2014)	
		Nov 27	Anna Stilz, “Are Citizens Culpable for State Action?” (2023)	Connection Reflection #3
13	Conclusion	Dec 2	<i>Optional reading:</i> Alexis Shotwell, “Consuming Suffering: Eating, Energy, and Embodied Ethics,” in <i>Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times</i> (2016)	
		Dec 4	<i>No reading</i>	
Dec 8 (last day of classes)			Final Paper due at 11:59pm	

What to Expect in this Course

This course teaches philosophy *as a skill*. The point is not simply to master content, but to be able to confidently use philosophical concepts and frameworks to approach questions that matter to you and others. For this reason, even in “lecture” sessions, we will spend time together on active learning activities such as small group discussion, in-class debate, and personal reflection exercises. We can’t do philosophy passively, and you will get the most out of sessions when you come ready to engage with your peers and course material.

Each session comes with pre-reading. Careful and active engagement with each session’s pre-reading will be more rewarding than passive skimming. I have selected articles that grapple with philosophical questions in rich and thoughtful ways—active reading will help you practice grappling with those questions yourself. Reading philosophy is also a skill that takes practice, and I will be providing tools throughout the course to help you get more out of the reading. Analyzing arguments in the philosophical context will prepare you to engage more productively with a variety of arguments outside the classroom.

Course Assessments

Throughout the course, you will engage with philosophical questions and arguments through writing assignments. While these assessments will allow me to gauge how well you have mastered course content, that is not their only purpose. We think *through* writing. As you work out how to explain someone else’s argument in your own words or lay out your own perspective in a clear and careful way, you will come to a better understanding of both. Additionally, the only way to make philosophical progress is to

communicate with others; these writing assignments prepare you to do that effectively. Assignments are scaffolded so that you practice different skills of philosophical thinking and writing as the course goes on.

- **In-Class Reading Responses (one per week) 10% total**

Purpose: This assignment asks you to engage actively with course readings so that they will stick with you and prepare you to participate in class discussion.

Task: At the beginning of class, write a question or reflection about the pre-reading.

- **Discussion Responses (50-100 words each, one per week) 10% total**

Purpose: This assignment is an opportunity to engage with the course as an ongoing conversation.

Task: Once each week, submit a question or reflection about something we discussed in class.

- **Connection Reflections (250-400 words each, three per semester) 5% each / 15% total**

Purpose: This course explores many different dimensions of moral responsibility. These reflections ask you to think critically and creatively about how those dimensions connect, build upon, or sit in tension with each other.

Task: Explain one way material from a previous week interacts with material discussed this week.

- **In-Class Writing Reflections (three per semester) 5% each / 15% total**

Purpose: An important part of skill development is *metacognition*: awareness of your own thought processes. This assignment prompts metacognition by guiding you through questions about your workflow and writing process.

Task: Fill out the distributed worksheet reflecting on your experience with the assignment.

- **Argument Reconstruction (500-750 words) 10%**

Purpose: When discussing moral issues, we eventually want to make our own arguments. This assignment prepares you to do this by practicing the skill of explaining different possible sides to a reader who is unfamiliar with the course material.

Task: Reconstruct one argument made in a paper we have read. An argument reconstruction is an explanation of the steps an author takes to reach their conclusion.

- **Final Paper Outline (500-1000 words) 10%**

Purpose: Philosophical thinking and writing benefit from repeat visits. This outline is an opportunity for you to work through your thoughts and receive feedback from me before you embark on the final paper.

Task: Submit an outline for your final paper (see description below).

- **Final Paper (1500-1750 words) 15%**

Purpose: The final paper is an opportunity for you to bring together the tools and perspectives from this course to engage with real-world problems.

Task: Choose a case study (options provided) and write a paper explaining a how philosophical problem arises in that case and defending a particular answer. Draw on work from at least two different weeks in the course.