

# Syllabus for Moral Responsibility

Philosophy Seminar, Fall 2020

Professor Francey Russell

In this upper level philosophy course, we will study the topic of moral responsibility, and will look closely at concepts of blame, apology and regret, and forgiveness. We will be concerned with both conceptual and normative questions, such as: what is the concept moral responsibility, and are human beings actually morally responsible for what they do? what is blame, what are our blaming practices, and is it good to blame? who benefits from blaming, or from forgiving? what does it mean for something to be unforgivable? We will read figures in the history of philosophy as well as contemporary philosophers, and we will also look at works of art and events in the news as test cases for our theories.

## Technical Requirements:



Stable internet connection



Laptop or computer



Working microphone



Working webcam

## Website

This course has a Canvas site. Please should check it regularly, as the syllabus, supplementary readings, and other resources will be posted on the site, as will updates and announcements.

## Course Requirements:

1. Attendance, participation: 10%
2. Reading Responses (3, approx. 300-400 words each): 25%
3. Group activities (2 short group responses, less than 1 page each): 15%
4. First paper (approx. 1000 words): 20%
5. Final project (approx. 1200 words): 30%

\*\*Note: I will generally expect you to come to class, on time, to participate, and to complete your work time. will also help structure your time and work).

However we are in difficult and unpredictable times: there is a pandemic, a fraught presidential election, climate change, and relentless structural racism, and we have all been put in the deeply strange position of teaching, learning, and interacting online. None of this is normal, none of this is easy. All of this will affect our time together.

I want to be as flexible as I possibly can. If you foresee that you will not be able to attend class or that it will be difficult to hand in on the due date, just write me and we will pick another date. I have

no interest in unnecessarily penalizing students. All I ask is that you reach out sooner rather than later.

### **1) Attendance, Participation:**

This class will be run like a combo lecture/seminar, and there will be various opportunities to participate: asking questions, responding to questions, responding to your peers' questions, making observations, doing group work, doing the extra credit work.

Philosophical thinking requires discussion, and discussion depends on preparation, which involves careful reading and coming to class with questions, comments, objections, etc. Here are a handful of activities that count as "participation" (and there are more): helpful contributions to discussion, active listening, asking questions, articulating confusion, respectful interaction, being intellectually curious about readings and conversation, coming to talk to me, talking to your friends outside of class, supporting one another, etc. Participation should aim to foster a lively and fruitful conversation. This requires mutual respect and cooperation. If you find it a bit challenging to speak up in class (as many of us do) let me know and we can talk about it.

- Material IRL notebook with IRL pen or pencil
  - Give your eyes a break from the screen
  - The screen will already be crowded with me, my slides, your peers
  - Studies show more absorption with handwritten notes
  - More room for creative notetaking
- Speaking up, responding to me, responding to each other, offering your own reflections
- Listening, following what I'm saying, following what your peers are saying, asking yourself what you think about what everyone is saying and writing your own thoughts down

You must come to class on time. 3 late arrivals (more than 10 minutes) counts as an absence. You will be allowed two absences from class no questions asked; any additional unexcused absences will cost you 1/3 of a letter grade on your final grade. Missing classes will affect your participation grade. If you are sick or cannot come to class, let me know.

### **2) Reading Responses:**

This is a reading intensive class, and I will expect you to complete all the reading for each class beforehand, and come ready for discussion.

There will be three short (300-400) word reading responses due throughout the course. In the first half of each response, you should present the argument from the text, in your own words. In the second half, you should articulate your own response: a critique, a further development, a question, a connection to something else (another philosopher, something in the news, something from another course, from your life, etc.). These are meant to be low stakes, creative, fun (!), and they will allow me to see how you are all doing in terms of your ability to understand and explain these texts.

### **3) Group Work:**

There will be two group assignments:

- *Discussion response*: in groups of two, you will take turns submitting a one-page response to class discussion. This is not meant to be a general summary. Rather you are being asked to pay attention to topics, patterns of discussion, un-answered questions, and your own interests. You will have to meet at least once outside of class time with your partners (ideally, the day or the day after the class) in order to decide together what you want to focus on in your response.
- *Break-out group development*: in groups of three or four, you will continue to the discussion of an in-class breakout group, and write up your collective response to the question.

#### 4) Papers and final project:

In the first paper (800 words or so) your task will be to reconstruct an argument that I will select from the readings. Here you are not asked to evaluate or critique it, but present it in the clearest possible light, in a way that demonstrates your understanding of it. To do this, you will need to present the argument in your words, without quotations (though you may cite the relevant page of text in parentheses).

In the final project (1000-1200 words) you will either write a second paper OR something else.

- If a paper: you will spend most of the time reconstructing the argument, but in the final page or so, you will formulate a response. This could be: a well-developed question (that you would not need to answer), a critique of some idea or argument, a further development of some idea or argument, a counter-example, a real-world application, etc. The point here is to bring your voice to the fore and say something about what you've read. The point is *not* to "disprove" the author's argument or simply say they are wrong.
- You will also have the option to write in a different format for the final project: an op-ed, a play, a short story, etc. You'll need to email and discuss with me ahead of time. You can also collaborate with someone else for this.

I will give more details about the papers, including advice about how to approach preparing for and writing a philosophy paper.

Here is something to consult:

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Since I cannot read drafts of papers for everyone, I will not read drafts of papers for anyone, but I encourage you to come chat with me during your preparation.

"I write to discover what I know."

"I write because I don't know what I think until I read what I say."

— Flannery O'Connor

#### Grade Guide:

A	94-100	[Absolutely excellent work, almost unimprovable]
A-	90-93	[Excellent work with some minor flaws]
B+	87-89	[Very Good work]
B	84-86	[Good work]
B-	80-83	[Competent work]
C+	77-79	[Acceptable work+]

C	74-76	[Acceptable work]
C-	70-73	[Barely acceptable work]
D	60-69	[Unacceptable work]
F	25	[No assignment turned in]

### **Online seminar structure**

We will be meeting as a group twice a week for roughly classes around one hour and twenty minutes. That's a lot of time online. To keep things lively, each meeting will include a mix of lecture, collective discussion, small break-out room discussions, guest interlocutors, broken up by a short 5-minute break to stretch or get coffee at the halfway point. Session meetings will be recorded and stored in Canvas for the duration of the course and only for the benefit of seminar participants. At the end of the course, all recordings will be deleted.

### **Technology for the course**

All participants will minimally need access to (1) a computer with (2) a working video/audio camera, (3) a sufficiently high-speed internet connection, and (4) a quiet space with few distractions for seminar meetings. If you anticipate having difficulty meeting these needs, contact the instructor, and we'll figure out a solution together.

### **Ground rules for online sociality**

1. When the professor, fellow students, or a guest are offering a formal presentation, please mute your Zoom profile.
2. When we are having a seminar discussion, it may be helpful to unmute your mic. The ability to respectfully interject is a key move within most seminar discussions.
3. Generally speaking, raise your hand when you want to contribute. There are two ways to "raise your hand" in Zoom: either by raising your actual hand in such a way that everyone can see it, or by clicking the "raise hand" feature and letting an icon do the work for you.
4. Always keep your video on during class, and please don't leave your seat at the virtual table unless it's absolutely necessary.
5. Be responsive when others are speaking. If you agree with a comment, a "thumbs up" or a nod of the head or a smile can provide useful reinforcement. Such visible cues are a key means of emphasizing co-presence and class solidarity.
6. Be present. That means no checking email or other social media platforms during class—*this is difficult to do, so please note the knee-jerk impulse to distract yourselves*. I will spontaneously call on students to respond so please be ready (this doesn't mean having an answer, often we don't).

### **Academic Honesty:**

Plagiarism tends to be quite obvious, and it isn't tolerated. If you look at a website, or another author, etc., and you use these ideas in your own work, you must credit the source. Temptations to plagiarize often arise from stress or anxiety about work. If you are stressed or anxious about work, write or talk to me.

You are expected to abide by the Barnard College and Columbia University honor codes. Students who violate the honor code will be immediately reported to the dean and risk failing the class. If

your discussions of class topics with your friends, parents, etc., are helpful, cite them. Credit all sources appropriately, even (especially) Wikipedia and Google discoveries.

### **Barnard Honor Code:**

*“We, the students of Barnard College, resolve to uphold the honor of the College by engaging with integrity in all of our academic pursuits. We affirm that academic integrity is the honorable creation and presentation of our own work. We acknowledge that it is our responsibility to seek clarification of proper forms of collaboration and use of academic resources in all assignments or exams. We consider academic integrity to include the proper use and care for all print, electronic, or other academic resources. We will respect the rights of others to engage in pursuit of learning in order to uphold our commitment to honor. We pledge to do all that is in our power to create a spirit of honesty and honor for its own sake.”*

### **Wellness**

It is important for all of us to recognize and identify the different pressures, burdens, and stressors we may be facing—whether personal, emotional, physical, financial, mental, or academic—particularly during times of global crisis. Health, sanity, and wellness must always be our priorities. Sleep, exercise, and eating well can all be a part of a healthy regimen to cope with stress. Resources exist to support you in several sectors of your life, and I encourage you to make use of them. Should you have any questions about navigating these resources, please visit these sites:

<http://barnard.edu/primarycare>

<http://barnard.edu/counseling>

<http://barnard.edu/wellwoman/about>

### **Students with disabilities:**

If you are a student with a documented disability and require academic accommodations, please contact CARDS for assistance. Students requesting eligible accommodations in their courses will need to first meet with a CARDS staff member for an intake meeting. Once registered, students are required to visit CARDS each semester to set up new accommodations and learn how to notify faculty. Accommodations are not retroactive, so it is best to register with CARDS early each semester to access your accommodations. If you are registered with CARDS, please see me to schedule a meeting outside of class to review your faculty notification letter and discuss your accommodations for the seminar. Students are not eligible to use their accommodations in this course until they have met with me. CARDS can be reached by email at [cards@barnard.edu](mailto:cards@barnard.edu) and by phone at (212) 854-4634.

~Finally, *I am here to help you thrive* in this class, so please get in touch!

### **TENTATIVE Reading Schedule (likely will change a bit)**

## Introduction to the topic

### Week 1

1. Sept 8. Introductory remarks
1. Sept. 10. XX. Selections from Aristotle. Kant “What is Enlightenment?”

### Week 2

2. Sept. 15. Harry Frankfurt. “Freedom of the Will and the Concept of the Person.”
3. Sept. 17. Susan Wolf. “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Free Will.”

## Moral Responsibility, Reactive Attitudes, Blame

### Week 3

4. Sept. 22. P.F Strawson “Freedom and Resentment.”
5. Sept. 24. P.F Strawson “Freedom and Resentment.”
  - a. Recommended: XX

### Week 4

6. Sept. 29 1. R. Jay Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*, Ch. 3
7. Oct. 1. Gary Watson. “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil.”

### Week 5

8. Oct. 6. Bernard Williams. “Moral Luck.”; Claudia Card. “Responsibility and Moral Luck.”
9. Oct. 8. George Sher. *In Praise of Blame*, Ch. 2 & 3.

### Week 6

10. Oct. 13. Angela Smith “Moral Blame and Moral Protest.”
11. Oct. 15. *Boston Review* Forum on Blame

## Criticisms of Moral Responsibility and Reactive Attitudes

### Week 7

12. Oct. 20. Tamler Sommers. “The Objective Attitude.”
13. Oct. 22. Erin Kelly. “What is an Excuse?”; movie *Moonlight*.

### Week 8

14. Oct. 27. Critique of individual responsibility XX
15. Oct. 29. *No class*

## Responsibilities Under Oppression

### Week 9

16. Nov. 3. *Election Day No Class*
17. Nov. 5. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience,” “Letter from a Birmingham Jail; Thoreau “Civil Disobedience.”

### Week 10

18. Nov. 10. Robin Celikates, “Civil Disobedience as Practice of Civic Freedom”
19. Nov. 12. Avia Pasternak. “Political Rioting: A Moral Assessment.”
  - a. Optional. *American Society for Aesthetics Conference Online*.

### Week 11

- 20. Nov. 17. Critique of civil disobedience TBD
- 21. Nov. 19. Critique TBD

Week 12

- 22. Nov. 24. Collective discussion
- 23. Nov. 26. *Thanksgiving No class*

Week 12

- 24. Dec. 1. Bernard R. Boxill. "The Responsibility of the Oppressed to Resist Their Own Oppression"
- 25. Dec. 3. Thomas E. Hill, Jr. "Moral Responsibilities of Bystanders"  
Optional: Sarah Buss. "Reflections on the Responsibility to Resist Oppression, with Comments on Essays by Boxill, Harvey, and Hill."

Week 13

- 26. Dec. 8. Cheshire Calhoun. "Responsibility and Reproach."
- 27. Dec. 10. Alison Jaggar "Love and knowledge."

Week 14

- 28. Dec. 15. TBD
- 29. Dec. 17 TBD