

Philosophy 115: Methods Seminar for Majors
Situationism and Psychopathology: Two Puzzles About Responsibility
Fall 2011, T/Th 9:30-10:50
Syllabus--draft 8/1/11

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Course Description: The primary purpose of this course is for majors to learn how to understand, construct, evaluate, present, and discuss philosophical arguments and to write about them in a clear and rigorous way. The small seminar setting will provide lots of practice in all of the above, or, in other words, lots of opportunity to hone your skills as a philosopher. The format of each class will be discussion of the views and arguments expressed in the readings assigned for that day, and everyone will be expected to come to class prepared to contribute to class discussion. We will use the rich and evolving literature on responsibility and certain conclusions drawn from two areas of psychological research as our starting point.

We will begin with a set of influential experimental results, part of a body of work known as the “situationist” literature, which has been thought to pose a puzzling challenge to the basic assumption that people are generally responsible for their actions. A variety of well-known experiments (including Milgram’s electric shock experiments and Zimbardo’s Stanford Prison experiments) have been read as supporting the conclusion that our actions are better explained by situational factors than by traditional personality traits. A common reaction to the sometimes shocking results (no pun intended!) of these experiments is that they show that people are not really free and responsible agents. This issue arose recently in the public sphere in connection with American soldiers’ behavior at Abu Ghraib, which bore an uncanny similarity to that of the participants in the Stanford Prison experiments. What does it take to be morally responsible for our actions? Do the experimental results really undermine our responsibility judgments? What do they show about the extent to which we are responsible agents, and can they shed light on the nature of responsibility? We will make it our task to answer these questions, as well.

We will then turn to the recently growing philosophical literature on psychopathology, which poses a different puzzle concerning the nature of responsibility. On the one hand, psychopaths are often taken to be the paradigms of evil and blameworthiness, responsible in the deepest way for their actions. Yet much research suggests that psychopaths suffer from certain deficits, including an inability to feel certain moral emotions, that have often been thought to be excusing conditions. It seems we must reject at least one of these widely accepted theses. Are psychopaths responsible for their actions or not? Answering this question will require us to commit to a particular account of what it takes to be a morally responsible agent.

Course Readings and Schedule:

Sources:

- A number of articles and book excerpts available for copying in the department library, or available from links in the syllabus to the library's databases.

Schedule and Readings:

Please note: Because of the nature of the course, there are many excellent articles and books that do not appear on the reading list. Please feel free to ask me for further recommendations whenever you find topics that interest you. Finally, follow "footnote trails" and use the Philosopher's Index, PsychInfo, and other databases to find additional readings.

RESPONSIBILITY

9/22: Introduction

9/27: Introduction to Theories of Responsibility

- Watson, "Free Action and Free Will"

9/29: Responsibility (continued)

- Frankfurt, "Freedom and the Concept of a Person"
- Wolf, *Freedom Within Reason*, chapter 4

10/4: Responsibility (continued)

- Kane, "Responsibility, Luck and Chance: Reflections on Free Will, Luck and Indeterminism"
- Pereboom, [manipulation argument]

RESPONSIBILITY AND SITUATIONISM

10/6: Situationism

- [Milgram, "Behavioral Studies of Obedience"](#)
- Darley and Batson, "From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behaviors"
- [Haney, Bank, and Zimbardo, "Interpersonal Dynamics in a Simulated Prison"](#)
- Nisbett and Wilson *The Person and the Situation* (excerpts)

10/11: Situationism (continued)

Readings:

- Doris, *Lack of Character*, chapters 2 and 3

10/13: Implications of Situationism for Responsibility

- Doris, *Lack of Character* chapter 7

10/18: Situationism and Responsibility

- Nelkin, "Freedom, Responsibility, and the Challenge of Situationism"

10/20: Situationism and Responsibility for War Crimes

- Doris and Murphy, "From My Lai to Abu Ghraib: The Moral Psychology of Atrocity"

10/25: Situationism and Responsibility for War Crimes

- Talbert, "Situationism, Normative Competence, and Responsibility for Wartime Behavior"

RESPONSIBILITY AND THE PSYCHOPATH

10/27: Introduction to the Problem

- Litton, "Psychopathy and Responsibility Theory"
- Fischer and Ravizza, *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral Responsibility*, excerpt

11/1: Psychopathology

- Blair, Mitchell, and Blair, *The Psychopath: Emotion and the Brain*, excerpt

11/3: Psychopathology and Blameworthiness

- Talbert, "Blame and Responsiveness to Moral Reasons: Are Psychopaths Blameworthy?"

11/8: Psychopathology and Blameworthiness

- Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, and Blame*, excerpt

11/10: Psychopathology and Blameworthiness

- Watson, "The Trouble With Psychopaths"

11/15: Psychopathology and Blameworthiness

- Russell, "Responsibility and the Condition of Moral Sense"

11/17: Psychopathology and Blameworthiness

- Levy, "The Responsibility of the Psychopath Revisited"

11/22: Psychopathology and Blameworthiness

- Vargas and Nichols, "Psychopaths and Moral Knowledge" and Vargas and Nichols, "How to Be Fair to Psychopaths"

11/29: Psychopathology and Autism, A puzzle

- Kennett, "Autism, Empathy, and Moral Agency"

12/1. Concluding Thoughts

- No new readings

Course Requirements:

- (1) 5 short 2-3 page papers responding to the readings. For the first three, you will be given specific prompts to respond to. (30%)
- (2) 1 term paper (about 10-15 pages), preceded by a prospectus that includes the main ideas and a bibliography (1-2 pages). (35%) Prospectus due: November 22, start of class; Term paper due: December 8, 5 pm.
- (3) By 9 am on the morning of each class, an e-mail consisting of 1 question regarding the readings. (10%)
- (4) Attendance and participation. (15%)
- (5) 1-2 presentations, depending on enrollment. (10%)

Additional Notes:

- Students with disabilities: If accommodations are needed for a disability, please notify me just after the first class period or as soon as possible.
- The readings and policies described above are subject to minor change.