Moral Luck, Fall 2020

Professor

Jordan MacKenzie

Email

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Office Location

Zoom

Office Hours

Monday 4:00 pm-5:00 pm and by appointment on Zoom

# Course Overview

This is a special topics seminar on moral responsibility and moral luck. In this class, we will basically be asking questions like: in what sense, if any, can we be morally responsible for things we’re not responsible for? When are guilt, shame, and remorse justified moral reactions? Can we blame other people for consequences that were outside of their control? Can we have morality without luck?

Here are my aims for you in this course:

1. A reasonable mastery of a large, but manageable, and contemporary literature.

2. A *lot* of practice formulating arguments and raising objection.

3. Familiarity with some common forms of philosophical communication (e.g. the 3,000-5,000 word conference paper, the commentary, the comment sheet).

4. Experience developing philosophical research questions, and conducting secondary research.

Basically, this is a *skills* course as much as it is a special topics seminar. It is writing-intensive, but I promise to give useful and timely feedback.

# Required Text

None. All readings will be posted on Canvas.

# Class Expectations and Policies

1. **Class Discussions:** Philosophy classes are only as good as the discussions that happen in them. In graduate seminars, you are expected to attend every class unless you have a *very* compelling reason not to. You must complete the readings in advance of class.
2. **Accessibility**: I am committed to making this course accessible to everyone. If there is something that I can do to make this course more accessible for you, please come and speak to me. If you need disability-related accommodations, please contact VT’s Services for Students with Disabilities (<https://www.ssd.vt.edu/index.html>). Note, however, that you **do not need** to have an officially recognized or diagnosed disability to seek accommodations: you just have to come speak with me.
3. **Changes to the Syllabus**: I intend this seminar to evolve as our discussions evolve. Expect some changes to the reading list—I’ll give you advance warning when this happens.
4. **COVID-19**: Any student who feels ill should not attend class in person. I will Zoom you in, and we can set up a time to meet separately about the material. All students should be wearing masks and practicing social distancing during class meetings. Class meetings will be outside (under the trees nearest Major Williams Hall) in good weather, and on Zoom in bad weather. **Note: I will make the final call re: whether class is held outside or on Zoom by 10:00 am. Check your emails!**

# Grading Policies

1. **Assignment Submission:** All assignments are due by 11:59 on CANVAS unless otherwise specified. Due dates for assignments are firm, and I will dock 5% of the assignment grade for every 24-hour period it is overdue. I am, however, **very generous about granting extensions** so long as you request them at least 24 hours in advance of the deadline. In fact, I am willing to grant a *no questions asked* 24-hour extension on *any* assignment so long as you request it at least 24 hours in advance of the due date.
2. **Academic Integrity**: You are required to abide by the Honor Code at all times in this class. This means, among other things, that plagiarism is strictly prohibited. You are expected to know how to cite sources appropriately in all written assignments. If you are unclear about what this involves, you must talk to me in advance of assignment deadlines. For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit <http://honorsystem.vt.edu/> .

# Assignments

1. **Participation: 5% total**
   1. Do the readings, show up for class, and be an active, thoughtful, and respectful participant in class discussions.
2. **Comment Sheets (6 total—you choose when to submit them): 30% total**
   1. Throughout the semester, you will be required to hand in six comment sheets on the assigned course readings. These comment sheets must be submitted on Canvas *before* the beginning of the class to which they pertain. You cannot write a comment sheet on a reading that has already been covered in class.
   2. Comment sheets should not be more than two pages in length, double-spaced. A successful comment sheet will be narrow in scope. Don’t summarize the whole article. Instead, select some component of the article (an argument, a definition, an assumption etc.), reconstruct it briefly, and critically evaluate it. Usually this will involve raising an objection, outlining an ambiguity, critiquing an assumption, applying the concept/argument to a novel case etc., and (ideally) considering a response on behalf of the author.
3. **Long Abstract and Conference Submission Assignment: 15% total, due October 1st** 
   1. This assignment has several parts
      1. **First,** you must set up a meeting with me to discuss potential term paper topics. Although these meetings will take place early in the semester, I want you to treat the entire syllabus as fair game.
      2. Come prepared to this meeting with several potential paper topics. Ideally, you want to be selecting a paper topic that:
         1. Plays to your strengths and interests. If you’re an epistemologist, consider writing on the epistemology of moral luck. If you like the history of philosophy, look at what historical figures have said about moral luck (hint: Adam Smith has a *great* discussion). If you’re interested in bioethics, think about the role that luck plays in medical practice.
            1. Use the syllabus as a jumping off point for topic ideas—but I encourage you to go beyond it.
         2. Raises a philosophically interesting question or puzzle. You are not writing a book report—you’re producing a piece of independent philosophical research. To do this, you need a *hook*—some philosophical issue that you aim to resolve in your paper. We’ll talk more about how to do this throughout the course.
      3. **Second**, you must produce a *long abstract* outlining the main moves you anticipate making in your paper. We’ll talk about how to write long abstracts in class.
      4. Your long abstract should also include a list of several conferences to which you anticipate being able to submit your final paper. You can find a list of conferences at <http://philevents.org> . You should also check out the American Philosophical Association’s websites for submission dates to their three conferences. Make sure to include information about submission deadlines and submission requirements.
         1. Each entry should be formatted something like this: Random Conferences (link to Call For Papers on philevents.org). Submission Deadline: October 34th. Submission Requirements: 4,000 word paper and 100-word abstract.)
4. **Draft Term Paper (3,000-5,000 words): 5%, graded for completion, due October 27th** 
   1. Based on feedback that you receive for your long abstract, you’ll then write a draft term paper. Even though this is a draft, you should take it seriously—I want full sentences, citations, and reasonable formatting.
5. **Commentary on peer’s term paper: 10% total, due November 10th**
   1. Write a short (approx. 1000 word) commentary on one of your peers’ drafts. This commentary should address stylistic issues (e.g. unclear writing, structural issues etc.), and should also raise more substantive issues and challenges.
6. **Final Term Paper (3,000-5,000 words): 30% total, due December 14th** 
   1. Your final paper must show appreciable growth from the draft paper (given that you’ve been given at least two sources of feedback on it—from me and your commentator).
   2. Final papers must be double spaced, nicely formatted, in Times New Roman (or equivalent) 12 point font, with proper citations.

# Grading Scale

A grade in the ‘A’ range (90-93=A-, 94-96=A, 97-100=A+) demonstrates an impressive mastery of and insightful engagement with the course material. In written work, the A student is able to reconstruct philosophical arguments with precision and accuracy, develop criticisms that are original, persuasive, and well-developed. In class, the A student attends all or almost all classes having completed the readings, and always or almost always makes exceptionally thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

A grade in the ‘B’ range (80-83=B-, 84-86=B, 87-89=B+) denotes competent mastery of and reasonable insight into the course material. The B student is able to reconstruct philosophical arguments accurately and develop criticisms that are reasonably persuasive and well-developed. In class, the B student attends all or almost all classes, typically completes the readings, and often makes thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

A grade in the ‘C’ range (70-73=C-, 74-76=C, 77-79=C+) denotes adequate comprehension and engagement with the course material. The C student is able to reconstruct philosophical arguments with some errors and develop criticisms that are generally relevant to the course material, if not convincing. In class, the C student attends the majority of classes, regularly does the readings, and sometimes makes thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

A grade in the ‘D’ range (60-63=D-, 64-66=D, 67-69) denotes a lack of comprehension of and engagement with the course material. The ‘D’ student is unable to accurately reconstruct philosophical positions or develop critiques relevant to the course material. In class, the D student struggles with attendance, shows little evidence of having completed the readings, and rarely makes thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

# Course Schedule

**Unit 1: What is moral luck?**

*August 25th and 27th:* Bernard Williams, “Moral Luck”*,* Nagel, “Moral Luck”

*August 27th:* Thomas Nagel, “Moral Luck”

**Unit 2: Accepting Moral Luck**

***The Value and Virtue of Moral Luck***

*September 1st*: Susan Wolf, “The Moral of Moral Luck”

*September 2nd*: Carla Bagnoli, “Value in the Guise of Regret”

***If We Accept Moral Luck, Do We Have to Revise Our Moral Concepts Practices? Yes***

*September 8th*: Michael Zimmerman, “Taking Luck Seriously”

*September 10th*: Galen Strawson, “The Impossibility of Responsibility”

***If We Accept Moral Luck, Do We Have to Revise Our Moral Practices? No***

*September 15th*: Mike Zhao, “Blame Without Moral Responsibility”

*September 17th*: Robert Merrihew Adams, “Involuntary Sins”

*September 22nd*: David Sussman, “Is Agent-Regret Rational?”

***Do Attributions of Responsibility Track the Control Principle?***

*September 24th:* P.F. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment”

*September 29th:* David Enoch, “Being Responsible, Taking Responsibility, and Penumbral Agency”

*October 1st*: Victoria McGeer, “Scaffolding Agency: A Proleptic Account of the Reactive Attitudes”

**Unit 3: Can’t We Just Deny Moral Luck?**

*October 6st:* David Enoch and Andrei Marmor “The Case Against Moral Luck”

*October 8th:* Brian Rosebury, “Moral Responsibility and ‘Moral Luck’”

**Unit 4: Luck, Punishment and the Law**

*October 13th*: David Enoch, “Between Morality, Law, and Justice”

*October 15th:* Joel Feinberg, “Equal Punishment for Failed Attempts”

**Unit 5: Luck and Transformative Experiences**

*October 20th*: L.A. Paul, “What You Can’t Expect When You’re Expecting”

*October 22nd*: R. Jay Wallace, “Justification, Regret, and Moral Complaint: Looking Forward and Looking Backward on (and in) Human Life”

**Unit 6: Luck Egalitarianism, Reparations, Oppression**

*October 27th:* G.A. Cohen “On the Currency of Egalitarian Justice”

*October 29th:* Elizabeth Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality?”

*November 3rd*: TBD

*November 5th*: TBD

*November 10th*: Claudia Card, “Gender and Moral Luck”

*November 12th*: Mike Zhao and Jordan MacKenzie, “Survivor’s Guilt and Solidarity”

**Unit 7: Luck in Medical Ethics**

*November 17th*: Fritz Alhoff, “Medical Error and Moral Luck” AND Daniel Tigard, 2018, “Taking the Blame: Appropriate Responses to Medical Error,” *Journal of Medical Ethics*: 1-5.

*November 19th*: Seanna Schiffrin, “Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm”

*November 24th*: TBD—Something on Addiction and Responsibility

**Unit 8: TBD**

*December 1st*: TBD

*December 3rd*: TBD

**Unit 9: Luck and Psychology**

*December 8th:* Victor Kumar, “An Empirical Vindication of Moral Luck” (Note: Victor is Zooming in), optional: Markus Kneer and Eduard Machery, “No Luck for Moral Luck”