

Moral Injury and Moral Distress
PHIL 457D
Fall 2023
Meets W 1:10 - 4:10 in CW 329

Professor Lisa Tessman

Pronouns: usually *she*, but also fine to use *they*

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Office hours in person in LT 1215: Wed 11:45 AM-12:45 PM or by appointment.

Office hours by zoom: Tues 8:45-9:45 AM or by appointment.

Zoom link for office hours: <https://binghamton.zoom.us/j/99619382395>

Course Description:

Imagine you are a soldier who spots an “enemy” child who is about to throw an explosive at your camp; you know it is wrong to kill a child, but the alternative is to fail to protect members of your unit. You shoot and kill the child and are later praised for your action. But you don’t feel proud, even though you don’t think there was any better action you could have taken; instead, you have an anguished sense of responsibility for the child’s death. Or imagine you are a nurse who administers the wrong medication because of an error that someone else made on a patient’s chart; no one blames you, but you are haunted by your role in the patient’s subsequent death. In this course we will examine how people in such situations assess themselves and their actions, and we will ask whether these self-assessments are “fitting.” Does the anguished sense of responsibility that people tend to experience in these kinds of situations reveal a truth about how people are vulnerable to becoming morally responsible for failures that are beyond their control, and if so, should they (and we) accept this truth and learn to live with it? Or should moral injuries/moral distress be “treated” (e.g. as a mental health condition) with the aim of getting people to stop holding themselves responsible for anything beyond their control? What is the appropriate attitude to take toward our own unavoidable moral failures or other moral failures for which we are not straightforwardly blameworthy?

The term “moral residue” is the general (philosophical) term used to refer to the emotions one experiences in situations in which one holds oneself morally responsible for something for which others could not rightly hold one responsible. In the military, the phenomenon that gives rise to moral residue is usually referred to as “moral injury,” In the health care context, the feelings of moral residue are usually referred to as a feeling of “moral distress.” Situations in both contexts raise the same kinds of philosophical questions about moral responsibility. We will be reading philosophical work that will provide us with a range of philosophical concepts and tools that will be useful for understanding, analyzing, and theorizing about moral residue, including both “moral injury” and “moral distress.” Everyone in the class will read the assigned philosophical work. Each student will also choose whether to focus on the military context or the health care context. There are separate readings—including both non-fictional narratives and empirical work—assigned for each of these contexts, and each student will read only the narrative/empirical texts for the context that they have chosen to focus on.

In addition to discussions, this course will include regular writing workshops.

There is a strict prerequisite of two prior philosophy courses.

Course Objectives:

The course objectives are for students to:

- study interdisciplinary work on the phenomena of moral injury and moral distress and study philosophical work that may provide tools for analyzing these phenomena.
- develop their own original, critical thinking; more specifically, develop their own analyses of moral injury/moral distress that make use of the philosophical tools presented in the philosophical material studied.
- learn and practice thinking and writing skills.

This course satisfies the Humanities (“H”) General Education Requirement.

Learning Outcomes: Students in H courses will demonstrate an understanding of human experience through the study of literature or philosophy.

This course satisfies the Composition (“C”) General Education Requirement.

Learning Outcomes: Students in C courses will demonstrate

1. The ability to write effectively and coherently, in ways appropriate to the discipline and the level of the course.
2. The ability to revise and improve their writing in both form and content.

Course Requirements:

This course is a 4-credit course, which means that in addition to attending and participating in class meetings, students are expected to do at least 9.5 hours of course-related work *outside of class* each week during the semester. This includes time spent completing assigned readings, taking notes and reflecting on the readings, and completing all writing assignments.

Texts:

If you choose to focus on the military context, there is one book to buy:

David Wood (2016) *What Have We Done? The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars*.

ISBN-13: 978-0316264150

Please acquire the book by the end of the first week of classes.

You may also have to pay for access to watch one assigned film.

All other materials are available as PDFs on Brightspace (in the weekly folders under “content”) or through a provided link.

Office hours offer an opportunity for students to meet individually. Please make use of this time to ask questions or engage in further discussion of the course material. You don’t need a specific reason to come to office hours – feel free to come to chat!

Class participation:

Students are expected to attend class unless you are ill. Please do *not* come to class if you are ill. You do not need medical documentation for missing class, but you do need to email me before class time to let me know if you must miss class, and your email must tell me your reason for missing class. Please get notes from another student if you miss class; make arrangements with me to complete any missed writing workshop on time (unless I give you an extension). Three or more missed classes without an acceptable reason will result in failure of the class.

Do give serious attention to the *quality*—not just the quantity—of your participation in discussions. If you find it difficult to speak in class discussions, please talk to me about this *during the first week or two of the semester* and we will devise a plan for you to practice this kind of speaking and for me to grade your participation appropriately. Otherwise, please volunteer regularly to speak.

If I, or your classmates, are pronouncing your name wrong, using the wrong pronouns for you, etc., please correct us! Also please let me know if there is anything I can do to facilitate your learning or accommodate your particular learning style.

Writing workshops:

We will normally spend the second half of class time doing writing exercises. Please bring an electronic device to class on which you can do the writing exercises and access Brightspace (speak to me at the beginning of the semester if you don't have a device that you can bring). The writing exercises will often be shared in class, either in pairs or small groups or as presentations to the whole class. I will be available for consultation and to give feedback during the workshops. Depending on the exercise, I may either grade the exercise without feedback, give feedback in writing, or discuss the exercise individually with students. In general, it will not be possible to complete the exercise unless you have done the reading carefully. No credit will be given for work that is submitted late, unless I have given you an extension in advance; if you must miss class and have contacted me at least an hour before class time, we will work out an arrangement for you to complete the workshop. Students who need extra help on writing are encouraged to visit the [Critical Thinking Lab](#) regularly throughout the semester.

The introduction of [ChatGPT](#) and other generative artificial intelligence (AI) into our world (with more advanced technologies coming soon) has made it evident that AI can do some (but not much) of what I will ask you to do in the writing workshops and on your seminar paper. (However, do note that with ChatGPT's current abilities, the writing that it will produce in response to the sorts of prompts in some of the writing workshops would probably earn grades ranging from about F to C). This complicates my assessment of your work, but more importantly, it can complicate your learning if you make use of AI. We will discuss this. For instance, if AI can do certain things, is there any reason for humans to continue to learn how to do those things? I think the answer is: yes, there is still great value in understanding the philosophical ideas that previous thinkers have developed, even if AI can exhibit or appear to exhibit such understanding. Furthermore, there are things that AI cannot do and that humans who study philosophy can learn to do—like think original philosophical thoughts from the particular subjective perspective that you and only you occupy—but you cannot leapfrog over the task of understanding philosophical ideas (the task that you might be tempted to outsource to AI) and expect to then be able to engage in original ways with these ideas.

In some of the writing for this course, you will be forbidden to use AI, and in some, you will be asked to explore ways that AI could assist us in our learning, rather than hinder our learning or offer a tempting way to avoid having to learn something. For instance, some assignments will ask you to show that you are “better than the bot,” namely to make use of ChatGPT but then correct and improve upon the answers that ChatGPT gives. On any assignment (including the seminar paper) for which you are not specifically asked to use

generative AI, the use of it is forbidden, and students who do make use of it will be charged with a violation of the Academic Honesty code.

Grading of work completed during writing workshops:

0 = did not complete the assignment (on time), or showed little or no understanding of the reading, or very poorly written, etc.

1 = showed at least some understanding of the reading and at least moderate success at carrying out the writing task.

2 = showed excellent understanding of the reading and a high level of success at carrying out the writing task.

Total points on writing workshops

19 or 20	=	A
18	=	A-
16-17	=	B+
14-15	=	B
13	=	B-
11-12	=	C+
9-10	=	C
8	=	C-
6-7	=	D
5 or below	=	F

Seminar paper:

A 3,000 word (plus or minus 25 words) seminar paper is required. The paper will be due in stages, with revision required, as indicated on the syllabus. Students will receive verbal feedback (privately) on a preliminary draft before completing the final version; some students will also be required to visit the [Critical Thinking Lab](#) to improve the seminar paper. All students will do an oral presentation of the seminar paper at the end of the semester. More information about the seminar paper will be distributed part way through the semester. The seminar paper will be given a letter grade.

Grading:

50% Writing workshops

50% Final paper

The final grade may be raised or lowered by a plus or minus (e.g. from a B- to a B, from an A- to a B+, etc) depending on the quality of class participation.

Disability-related equal access accommodations:

I am happy to make accommodations (e.g. extended time) for any student with a documented need for it. Students needing accommodations to ensure their equitable access and participation in this course should register with Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) office as soon as they're aware of their need for such arrangements. [Visit the SSD website](#) or call 607-777-2686 for more detailed information. Students who are registered with SSD and who wish to make use of their accommodations should discuss with me the details of how the accommodations can best be implemented in this class.

Academic Honesty:

I follow the Philosophy Department guidelines on academic honesty (below). Students are responsible for being familiar with, and abiding by, the [Academic Honesty Code](#).

Philosophy Department Guidelines on Academic Honesty

The Philosophy Department considers plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty to be serious breaches of the code of ethics governing academic life. They are also violations of Harpur College and Binghamton University policies.

In order to contribute to a culture of Academic Honesty within both the Department and the University, the Philosophy Department has agreed on the following guidelines:

- 1) Instructors will include a statement describing their policy regarding Academic Honesty on all course syllabi.
- 2) When a student commits an act of academic dishonesty, the instructor will formally bring the violation to the attention of the Harpur College Academic Honesty Committee by either:
 - a. submitting an Admission of Dishonesty Form that has been signed by the student,
 - or*
 - b. initiating a hearing before the Harpur College Academic Honesty Committee.
- 3) When a student commits an act of academic dishonesty, the instructor for the course will not give the student credit for the assignment, whether or not the student re-submits honest work.
- 4) Instructors will decide what further grade consequences are appropriate in response to the dishonesty at their own discretion; the typical consequence is a grade of 'F' for the course.

Schedule

Week 1:

Wed, Aug. 23

Introduction.

In class (no need to look at these ahead of time):

Moral distress in a health care context:

Doctors without Borders (2022): "[Silent wounds: Exploring the moral and ethical challenges of COVID-19](#)"

Moral injury in a military context:

Ashley Gilbertson (2009): "[The life and lonely death of Noah Pierce.](#)" *The Utne Reader*.

Week 2:

Wed, Aug 30

Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency" (1973).

Read *either* the work on moral distress in a health care context *or* the work on moral injury in a military context – not both.

Moral distress in a health care context:

Sherri Fink, "The Deadly Choices at Memorial" *New York Times Magazine*, Aug 25, 2009.

Moral injury in a military context:

David Wood, *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars*, Prologue-Chapter 4.

Writing workshop 1.

Week 3:

Wed, Sept 6

Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck" (1981).

Read *either* the work on moral distress in a health care context *or* the work on moral injury in a military context – not both.

Moral distress in a health care context:

Silverman et al, "Moral distress in nurses caring for patients with Covid-19" (2021).
Christine Grady, "The Emotional and Moral Remnants of COVID-19: Burnout, Moral Distress, and Mental Health Concerns" (2022).

Moral injury in a military context:

Brett Litz, et al., "Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: a preliminary model and intervention strategy" (2009).

Writing workshop 2.

Week 4:

Wed, Sept 13

Margaret Urban Walker, “Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency” (1991).

Read *either* the work on moral distress in a health care context *or* the work on moral injury in a military context – not both.

Moral distress in a health care context:

Corley et al., “Development and evaluation of a moral distress scale” (2000).

Epstein and Hamric, “Moral Distress, Moral Residue, and the Crescendo Effect” (2009).

Moral injury in a military context:

David Wood, *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars*, Chapter 5-8.

Writing workshop 3.

Week 5:

Wed, Sept 20

Peter Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment” (1962).

Writing workshop 4.

Week 6:

Wed, Sept 27

Justin D’Arms and Daniel Jacobson, “The Moralistic Fallacy: On the ‘Appropriateness’ of Emotions” (2000).

Read *either* the work on moral distress in a health care context *or* the work on moral injury in a military context – not both.

Moral distress in a health care context:

Lamiani et al., “Moral Distress Trajectories of Physicians 1 year after the COVID-19 Outbreak: A Grounded Theory Study.” (2021).

Moral injury in a military context:

Johannes Lang and Robin May Schott, “The Moral Challenges of Moral Injury,” in *Moral Injury and the Humanities* (2023).

Writing workshop 5.

Week 7:

Wed, Oct 4

Read *either* the work on moral distress in a health care context *or* the work on moral injury in a military context – not both.

Moral distress in a health care context:

Stephen Campbell, Connie Ulrich, and Christine Grady, “A Broader Understanding of Moral Distress” (2016).

Moti Gorin, “The Role of Responsibility in Moral Distress” (2016).

Moral injury in a military context:

David Wood, *What Have We Done*, Chapters 9-15.

Writing workshop 6.

Week 8:

Wed, Oct 11

Pamela Hieronymi, “I’ll Bet You Think This Blame is About You” (2019).

Julie Tannenbaum, “Moral Responsibility without Wrongdoing or Blame” (2018).

Writing workshop 7.

Week 9:

Wed, Oct 18 – no class (fall break)

Week 10:

Wed, Oct 25

Krista Thomason, “Guilt and Child Soldiers” (2015).

Alycia LaGuardia-LoBianco, “Trauma and Compassionate Blame” (2020).

David Shoemaker, “Response-Dependent Theories of Responsibility” (2022).

Writing workshop 8.

Week 11:

Wed, Nov 1

Cullin Brown, “Two Levels of Response-Dependence about Responsibility” (draft).

Writing workshop 9.

Week 12:

Wed, Nov 8

Due before class time: 150-200 word abstract for the seminar paper.

Lisa Tessman, “Holding Ourselves Responsible: When What Rightly Matters Doesn’t Really Matter” (draft).

Writing workshop 10.

Week 13:

Wed, Nov 15

Due before class: 1,000 word “practice” draft of the seminar paper.

Watch one or the other of these two films before class (*The Children Act* is related to health care, and *Incendies* is related to military/war, but you may choose either film, regardless of which context you have been focusing on):

The Children Act (1 hour and 45 minutes), directed by Richard Eyre, based on a novel by Ian McEwan. This film is available at a small cost on Netflix, Apple TV, Amazon Prime Video, etc.

Incendies (2 hours and 10 minutes), directed by Denis Villeneuve. This film is available at a small cost on Apple TV, Amazon Prime Video, etc.

Week 14: no class (Thanksgiving)

Week 15:

Wed, Nov 29

Paper consultations by appointment in place of usual class meeting.

Week 16:

Wed, Dec 6

Due before class time: 3,000 word seminar paper.

Paper presentations in class.