

**Moral Responsibility**  
**PHIL 605A**  
Spring 2024  
Meets Wed 1:10-4:10 in CW330

**Professor Lisa Tessman**

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

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Office: Library Tower 1215

Office hours: Wed 12:00-1:00 & Thur 1:00-2:00 or by appointment.

Office hours are in person unless a Zoom meeting is requested.

Zoom link for meeting by request: <https://binghamton.zoom.us/j/99619382395>

**Course description:**

This course will focus on how we hold other people responsible and how we hold ourselves responsible. We will begin with P. F. Strawson's claim that we naturally have "reactive attitudes" such as resentment, indignation, and guilt that serve to hold people responsible, and that without our practices of holding each other responsible, we couldn't have any relationships as we know them. But this theory raises as many questions as it answers, so we will address some of these normative and metaethical questions: What makes someone capable of responsibility? Are the attitudes through which we hold people responsible sometimes fitting and sometimes unfitting? Do we have responsibilities because it is natural for people to hold each other responsible, or do we hold people responsible because it is an independently existing moral fact that they have certain responsibilities? We will also see which theories of responsibility might shed light on specific phenomena such as moral repair and forgiveness, collective or shared responsibility, practices of responsibility imbedded in social change movements, impaired agency, and the asymmetry of situations in which people hold themselves responsible even though others cannot rightly hold them responsible.

**Course objectives:**

- To familiarize students with some contemporary work on moral responsibility.
- To have students develop their own original, critical thinking about the topic.
- To have students learn and practice philosophical skills; these skills include understanding difficult texts; analyzing and responding critically to arguments; developing and defending their own positions both verbally and in writing; thinking in complex and original, but still disciplined, ways.
- To advance students in their ability to write papers that will be accepted for philosophical conferences and/or publication. Students in this course will get practice in writing either a conference-length or a publication-length paper.

**Course readings:**

All course readings are available for free.

The following books are available as ebooks through the BU library (and are available for optional purchase in hard copy):

- Pamela Hieronymi (2020). *Freedom, Resentment, and the Metaphysics of Morals*. Princeton University Press.
- Gary Watson (2004). *Agency and Answerability: Selected Essays*. Oxford University Press.
- Cheshire Calhoun (2016). *Moral Aims: Essays on the Importance of Getting It Right and Practicing Morality with Others*. Oxford University Press.
- Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2023). *Rational Sentimentalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Margaret Urban Walker (2006). *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing*. Cambridge University Press.
- David Shoemaker (2015). *Responsibility from the Margins*. Oxford University Press.
- Michelle Ciurria (2019). *An Intersectional Feminist Theory of Moral Responsibility*. Routledge.

All other readings (articles, and book chapters from books not listed above) are available in pdf form. They are in two folders—one for required readings and one for optional readings—under Contents on Brightspace.

### **Course requirements:**

**Class preparation and participation:** Students are expected to prepare for, attend and participate thoughtfully in ALL seminar meetings. Please avoid scheduling travel (other than for academic conferences), appointments, etc., to conflict with class time. Please do not come to class if you are ill; instead, email me before class time to let me know, and be sure to get notes from another student.

Come to class prepared to:

- 1) explain the day's reading; and
- 2) say something that is relevant to the day's material and that you think extends the discussion in a philosophically interesting and original way.

Each student may have one day on which you come unprepared. Tell me at the beginning of class if it is your unprepared day. You are not allowed to speak in class on your unprepared day, but you may benefit from listening to others. You are expected to speak in class on all other days. Obviously, it is much better to *not* be unprepared, but do take your one day if you need it.

**Weekly writing assignments** are due on Tuesday evenings by 5:00 PM; please submit them as an Assignment on Brightspace. You may skip the weekly assignment for the week on which you are presenting, and you may skip it one other time (of your choosing). Late submissions will not be accepted unless I have given an extension in advance. I use anonymous grading for these assignments. Each assignment has two parts:

- 1) Write a 150-200 word paragraph summarizing the main idea/argument/position in that week's reading (if we read more than one author, tie as many of the readings as you can together thematically, and leave out whatever cannot be tied in). This should be a formal, polished piece of writing. Imagine that you were writing a paper for publication in which, as background, you had to briefly convey to the reader the main points of the text.

- 2) Write a one or two sentence thesis statement for a potential seminar paper – a paper that you could write if you were going to write a paper that engages with the week’s readings (you may also tie in earlier readings, but the emphasis should be on the current week’s readings).

**Presentation:** Each student will do one presentation. Please look over all the course readings before the second week of class and consider which readings you would like to present on. On Jan 24, I will ask for your ranked preferences for presentation dates.

You are encouraged to consult with me as you are preparing your presentation. Plan on speaking for 15-20 minutes, with or without accompanying slides. Please practice the presentation ahead of time in order to time it; you may also wish to video your practice presentation so that you can watch the video to determine what needs improvement before presenting in class. The presentation should consist of your own critique of or constructive engagement with the material that we have read for that week (but may also tie back to earlier readings); it should not include any summary of the material that we have read. Be creative with your presentation, but please do not draw on any material that has not been assigned. After your presentation, please solicit responses (questions, comments, responses to a question that you have posed) to your presentation from the rest of the class.

**Seminar paper:** Seminar papers are expected to arise directly out of the course material (you may use one of the thesis statements that you wrote as part of the weekly assignments, but you are not required to). Please choose to write *either* a short paper with a 3,000 word limit intended for conference presentation (i.e. with a 20-minute presentation time), or a 6,000-8,000 word paper aimed at publication. The word counts are strict; please include a word count. I encourage each of you to consult with me throughout the writing process to whatever extent this is helpful to you.

**Grading:**

Weekly assignments: 30%  
Presentation: 20%  
Seminar paper: 50%

The final grade may be adjusted upward or downward based on class participation. Do give serious attention to the *quality*—not just the quantity—of your participation in discussions.

The use of generative AI is both foolish and forbidden in this class; use of it will constitute academic dishonesty. Academic dishonesty in any form, including plagiarism, will result in failure of the class and possible further action, including severance from the SPEL program.

*No incompletes will be given under “normal” circumstances.*

## Schedule

### Wed., Jan. 17

I will be away at the APA Eastern Division meetings.

Please come to class anyway, and together watch my recorded talk, “Holding Ourselves Responsible: When What Rightly Matters Doesn’t Really Matter” (you will find it in a folder under Contents on Brightspace or can access it [here](#) or under Panopto Recordings for this course on Brightspace) and then discuss the talk amongst yourselves. (If you already heard me give this practice talk in December, you can join the class an hour late, after the recorded talk but in time to participate in the discussion). Over the course of the semester, we will be reading some of the texts that I engage with in this talk.

Please also read the whole syllabus and email any questions to me.

### Wed., Jan. 24 (writing assignment 1 due 5:00 PM Tues Jan 23)

Optional background reading:

Austin, J.L. (1956-57). “A Plea for Excuses.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* New Series Vol 57: 1-30.

P.F. Strawson (1962). “Freedom and Resentment.” *Proceedings of the British Academy*. London: Oxford University Press: 187-211.

### Wed., Jan. 31 (writing assignment 2 due 5:00 PM Tues Jan 30)

Pamela Hieronymi (2020). *Freedom, Resentment, and the Metaphysics of Morals*.

### Wed., Feb. 7 (writing assignment 3 due 5:00 PM Tues Feb 6)

Optional background reading:

Gary Watson (1975). “Free Agency.” Reprinted in Gary Watson, *Agency and Answerability*.

Gary Watson (1987). “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil: Variations on a Strawsonian Theme.” Reprinted in Gary Watson, *Agency and Answerability*.

Cheshire Calhoun (1989). “Responsibility and Reproach.” Reprinted in Cheshire Calhoun, *Moral Aims*.

Gary Watson (1996). “Two Faces of Responsibility.” Reprinted in Gary Watson, *Agency and Answerability*.

Optional additional reading:

Elinor Mason (2018). “Respecting Each Other and Taking Responsibility for Our Biases.” In *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*.

### Wed., Feb. 14 (writing assignment 4 due 5:00 PM Tues Feb 13)

Pamela Hieronymi (2019). “I’ll Bet You Think This Blame is About You.” *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility* Vol. 5: Themes from the Philosophy of Gary Watson.

Pamela Hieronymi (2021 draft), “Introduction: Minds that Matter.” Available on her website as a work in progress: <https://hieronymi.humspace.ucla.edu/in-progress/>

David Shoemaker (2022), "Response-Dependent Theories of Responsibility," *The Oxford Handbook of Moral Responsibility*: 304-324.

Optional additional reading: David Shoemaker (2017). "Response-Dependent Responsibility: or, a Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Blame." *Philosophical Review* 126 (4): 481-527.

**Wed., Feb. 21 (writing assignment 5 due 5:00 PM Tues Feb 20)**

Optional background reading: Wlodek Robinowicz and Toni Rønnow-Rasmussen (2004). "The Strike of the Demon: On Fitting Pro-attitudes and Value." *Ethics* 114 (3): 391-423.

Pamela Hieronymi (2005). "The Wrong Kind of Reason." *The Journal of Philosophy* CII (9): 437-457.

Justin D'Arms and Daniel Jacobson (2023), *Rational Sentimentalism*, Part III (chapters 8 & 9).

**Wed., Feb 28 (writing assignment 6 due 5:00 PM Tues Feb 27)**

Michelle Mason (2014). "Reactivity and Refuge." *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility* Vol. 2: 'Freedom and Resentment' at 50.

Krista Thomason (2016). "Guilt and Child Soldiers." *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (19): 115-127.

Hanna Pickard (2017). "Responsibility without Blame for Addiction." *Neuroethics* (10): 169-180.

Julie Tannenbaum (2018). "Moral Responsibility without Wrongdoing or Blame." *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics* (8): 124-148.

Alycia LaGuardia-LoBianco (2020). "Trauma and Compassionate Blame." *Ergo* (7) 18: 511-536.

Optional additional reading: Hanna Pickard (2019). "Stop Telling Me What to Feel! A Clinical Theory of Emotions and What's Wrong with the Moralization of Feelings." *Philosophical Topics* (47) 2: 1-25.

**Wed., March 6 – no class**

**Wed., March 13 (writing assignment 7 due 5:00 PM Tues March 12)**

Cheshire Calhoun (1992). "Changing One's Heart." Reprinted in Cheshire Calhoun, *Moral Aims*.

Margaret Urban Walker (2006). *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing*, chapters 1-3.

**Wed., March 20 (writing assignment 8 due 5:00 PM Tues March 19)**

Margaret Urban Walker (2006). *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing*, chapters 4-6.

Optional additional reading: Miranda Fricker (2022). "How Is Forgiveness Always a Gift?" *Proceedings and Addresses of the APA* (96): 21-53.

**Wed., March 27 (writing assignment 9 due 5:00 PM Tues March 26)**

David Shoemaker (2015). *Responsibility from the Margins*, Introduction & Part I (chapters 1-3).

**Wed., April 3 (writing assignment 10 due 5:00 PM Tues April 2)**

David Shoemaker (2015). *Responsibility from the Margins*, Part II (chapters 4-7) & Conclusion.

David Shoemaker (2022). "Disordered, Disabled, Disregarded, Dismissed: The Moral Costs of Exemptions from Accountability," In *Agency in Mental Disorder: Philosophical Dimensions*. Ed. Matt King & Joshua May: 33-62.

**Wed., April 10 (writing assignment 11 due 5:00 PM Tues April 9)**

Michelle Ciurria (2019), *An Intersectional Feminist Theory of Moral Responsibility*, Introduction – chapter 5.

**Wed., April 17 (writing assignment 12 due 5:00 PM Tues April 16)**

Michelle Ciurria (2019), *An Intersectional Feminist Theory of Moral Responsibility*, chapter 6 – conclusion.

**Wed., April 24 — no class**

**Wed., May 1**

Papers due at noon.

We will watch and discuss: *Incendies* (2 hours and 10 minutes), directed by Denis Villeneuve.