

# Free will

DAMIEN STOREY | 2018

Document version 1.1

WHERE AND WHEN:

Tuesday: 16.00–17.00 5012

Wednesday: 10.00–11.00 3051

MY OFFICE: Arts 5008 (behind Sarah's office, 5009)

MY OFFICE HOURS: Friday 11–1

EMAIL: dstorey@tcd.ie

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

Free will, and whether or not we have it, has engendered some of the liveliest debates in philosophy. The central question is whether free will is compatible with physical determinism: can our actions be free if all events—including our actions—are determined by the events that preceded them and the fixed laws of nature? Can they be free if, as this appears to entail, we could never have acted otherwise? We will examine a variety of opposing answers to these questions, and assess the assumptions made by the questions themselves. We will also look at a number of other apparent threats to free will—divine foreknowledge, psychological or biological necessities (“our brains are just wired like that”), and factors that shape our characters beyond our control, like our parents’ decisions or where we grew up—and consider the moral implications of these debates: can we be held responsible for our actions if we were not free to do otherwise?

At the end of this course, you’ll be able to:

- Demonstrate a clear understanding of the basic concepts and positions: free will, determinism, libertarianism, fatalism, and so forth.
- Understand and critically engage with the arguments for the major positions in free will debates, including those concerning free will and moral responsibility.

## GENERAL READING

The central texts will be:

1. Robert Kane *Free Will: A Contemporary Introduction* (OUP: Oxford, 2005)
2. Gary Watson (ed.) *Free Will*, 2nd edition (OUP: Oxford, 2003)

## COURSE OUTLINE

The following is course outline by *topic* rather than by lecture: many topics (such as 2, 3, and 6) will run over a number of lectures. Be sure to get the latest version of this document to keep up with reading recommendations.

### 1. Introduction

1. Robert Kane, *op. cit.*, chapter 1

### 2. Classical compatibilism

1. Robert Kane, chapter 2
2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 3 III, sections 1, 2, and 5
3. A.J. Ayer, 'Freedom and Necessity' in Ayer, *Philosophical Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1954), pp. 271–284
4. Hillary Bok, 'Freedom and Practical Reason' in Watson (ed.), *op. cit.*

### 3. Indeterminism and Libertarianism

1. Robert Kane, chapters 3 and 4
2. Robert Kane 'Responsibility, Luck, and Chance: Reflections on Free Will and Indeterminism' in Watson (ed.)

You might also read:

3. Robert Kane, chapters 5 and 6
4. Any of the articles defending forms of agent-causation in Watson

### 4. Frankfurt cases

1. Robert Kane, chapter 8
2. Harry G. Frankfurt 'Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility' in Watson (ed.)

You might also read:

3. John M. Fisher 'Frankfurt-Style Compatibilism' in Watson (ed.)

### 5. Strawson's Basic Argument

1. Robert Kane, chapter 11
2. Galen Strawson 'The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility' in Watson (ed.)

## 6. Free will and personhood: modern compatibilism

1. Robert Kane, chapter 9
2. Harry G. Frankfurt 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person' in Watson (ed.)
3. Gary Watson 'Free Agency' in Watson (ed.)
4. Susan Woolf 'Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility' in Watson (ed.)

## 7. Free will and the sciences

1. Robert Kane, chapter 12
2. Hillary Bok, 'The Implications of Advances in Neuroscience for Freedom of the Will' *Neurotherapeutics* 4 (2007) 555–559

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Note that the suggested readings are suggestions—you might well want to take the essay in a direction other than the one they suggest and you are encouraged to show evidence of independent research.

### **1. Is a person morally responsible for doing something at a certain time only if she could have done otherwise at that time?**

1. Start with the reading for weeks 2 and 4
2. You might also read J.M. Fisher, 'Free Will and Moral Responsibility' in David Copp (ed) *Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory* (OUP: Oxford, 2006)

### **2. 'Philosophical problems concerning free will can only be solved once we have a clear account of personhood.' Discuss.**

1. Start with the reading for topic 6
2. You might also read Philip Pettit and Micheal Smith 'Freedom in Belief and Desire' in Watson (ed.)

### **2. To be responsible for my actions, must I be responsible for my character?**

1. This essay can be taken in more than one direction. Start with reading from topic 3 and/or 5
2. J. M. Fischer 'The Cards That Are Dealt You' *The Journal of Ethics* 10 (2006) 107–129 [Response to Strawson]

## SOME ESSAY ADVICE

Please pay close attention to the following advice, especially 1 and 2. They try to cater for the most common and most easily solved problems I find in students' essays. Please take them seriously.

1. *Explain*. In short: explain *everything*. It should be possible for an intelligent peer who hasn't studied philosophy to fully understand your essay without needing to read the authors you're writing about. So, for example: if you use a technical term or mention a concept that has particular significance for an author, make sure you clearly define/explain it. Similarly, for any argument or position you discuss, you must clearly explain it to your reader. This is partly because good academic writing should be explicit and easily understood, but this is not the only or even the main reason. Rather, your ability to explain the ideas you're discussing—clearly, precisely, and succinctly—is one of the principal things you're being assessed on. You might well know, say, what a categorical imperative is, but you need to *show* that you know it and how precisely you know it. Explaining even small, simple ideas well is a lot harder than you might think; don't underestimate how important it is, and how much work it takes.
2. *Justify*. Assume that for every claim you make, the reader is asking 'why should I believe that?' In a philosophy essay, there should always be an excellent answer to this question. You should consider this to be, above all else, your aim when writing an essay. The worst thing you can do is to make bold assertions without defending them, and the second worst is to make bold assertions and defend them weakly. Note that this includes interpretive claims: if you write 'Plato believes that p', you need to show your reader, perhaps by giving a supporting quote, that this is indeed something Plato believes.

*A bad essay:* 'p!'

*A good essay:* 'For reasons x, y, and z, it seems that p.'

*An excellent essay:* 'Reasons x, y, and z give us good grounds for thinking that p, although someone might offer an objection along the following lines ... However, I think there is a promising response to this objection ...'

3. *Use headings*. Before you start writing, sketch a structure for your essay. When writing, use headings that reflect this structure. A typical essay might have 2–4 headings.
4. *First understand, then assess*. Be careful not to rush into criticisms of what you read before you've fully understood it. Approach everything you read with charity. That is, assume (since it's likely) that the author has thought intelligently and carefully about what they've written, so is unlikely to have

made obvious mistakes. For example, if you notice a *prima facie* objection to something you're reading, read it again carefully to see if there's a way to understand it that avoids the objection or try to think of a plausible implicit assumption the author might have made that caters for the objection.

5. *Go from general to particular.* The topics we'll look at are broad. One could reasonably spend years writing hundreds of pages about them—you only have a few pages and a few weeks. This presents a challenge: on the one hand, you want to cover the whole topic, showing that you're familiar with all the major issues that arise; on the other hand, you want to do more than simply scratch the surface, never looking at anything in detail. This can be a difficult balance to achieve, but in general it is much better to *err on the side of detail*. A good approach might be to devote about the first third or half of your essay to a more general discussion and then use the last half or two-thirds to examine one or two smaller points in much greater detail—you might, for example, focus on one argument, premise, or objection that you think is especially important or interesting.
6. *Ensure your conclusions reflect your arguments.* You might have been taught that strong, persuasive prose requires confident assertions, rather than hesitant, qualified ones. This is not the case in philosophy: your assertions should reflect the actual degree of confidence that is warranted by the evidence you've provided. Decisive arguments are rare—even rarer are decisive arguments in just a few lines of a student's essay. So be very careful not to mistake considerations that give us a good reason for believing that *p* for an argument that shows conclusively that *p*. A good essay is likely to have a large range of (appropriate) qualifying phrases: 'this shows decisively that *p*'; 'this is a strong reason to believe that *p*'; 'this suggests that *p*'; 'this makes it less implausible that *p*'; and so forth. Be especially careful with strong 'success' verbs like *refute* or *prove*.
7. *Use quotes.* Especially in historical subjects, including quotes from the relevant primary texts can be an excellent way to illustrate, justify, and give some focus to your discussion. One way (of many ways) to use a quote would be the following: make a claim; present a quote that you think backs up the claim; and then explain and interpret the text of the quote in order to show that and why it backs up your claim. Two cautions: first, quotes from secondary sources are less useful; second, avoid using a quote as a way of *saying* something—rather, a quote should be presented as evidence *about which* you have something to say.