

PH 214: CHOICE, CHANCE, LUCK, and FATE

SYLLABUS

Spring Term 2018
T Th 1:10 p.m. – 2:25 p.m.

Prof. Daniel R. DeNicola
Gettysburg College

Everywhere the human soul stands between a hemisphere of light and another of darkness; on the confines of the two everlasting empires, necessity and free will.

--Thomas Carlyle

To what extent can we distinguish between what is up to the world and what is up to us, when assessing human life? To what extent must we insist on finding these distinctions, if we are to go on praising as we praise?

-- Martha C. Nussbaum

You can't change the past. You can't even change the future, in the sense that you can only change the present one moment at a time, stubbornly, until the future unwinds itself into the stories of our lives.

--Larry Wall

You can do what you decide to do — but you cannot decide what you will decide to do.

--Sam Harris

We gallop through our lives like circus performers balancing on two speeding side-by-side horses--one foot is on the horse called "fate," the other on the horse called "free will." And the question you have to ask every day is--which horse is which? Which horse do I need to stop worrying about because it's not under my control, and which do I need to steer with concentrated effort?

--Elizabeth Gilbert

1. COURSE DESCRIPTION

An examination of a central issue of metaphysics: free will and the factors that may constrain or deny it. The affirmation that human beings may choose their actions, which provides the basis for moral responsibility, is set against the deterministic view that all changes in behavior, all “choices” are caused. The course considers various theories—libertarianism, compatibilism, and “hard” and “soft” determinism; in addition, attention is given to interpretations of chance, randomness, luck, and fate as affecting human possibilities.

2. COURSE ARGUMENT

How much of the future is shaped by the past? And what forces are in play in this shaping? Many scientists, theologians, and philosophers have argued that the future is fully constrained by the past, that the necessity of causal links determines all that will ever (and could ever) happen. All events are bound by the laws of nature or by God’s foreordination—even if we humans cannot

compute or predict their course. There is, on this view, but one path ahead.

Nonetheless, we like to think that our own choices play an important role, and that we grow into making decisions autonomously, “of our own free will.” Reasons matter, not just causes. Indeed, the very notion of moral responsibility and the ascription of praise and blame seem to rest on such moral agency. But we are not gods that can command the future; we are not even kings that command others’ choices. It seems that chance, luck, and fate are also in play. The most radical response is, of course, to claim that randomness ultimately rules, that the future is not bound by either agency or causality, and important events may occur spontaneously and without explanation. Can rational choice protect us from both “ruthless” inevitability and “blind” chance?

Whether there are genuine, multiple possibilities for our lives; whether we can have more than the illusion of rational choice and moral responsibility; whether the world offers or commands; whether our lives are fated—these issues take us to the intersection of metaphysics and ethics.

3. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Although much that is learned in any course is unplanned and highly individual, this course does have specific learning goals that should be made transparent—so, everyone who engages fully in this course should expect to:

1. Develop a rich understanding of the key concepts of the course: free will, determinism, chance, luck, fate, locus of control, etc.
2. Articulate and defend a considered position on central philosophical issues of the course, including the status and range of free will, the validity and impact of such notions as luck and fate; the challenges to free will presented by science and theology; etc.
3. Gain an understanding of the relationship between certain metaphysical and ethical issues.
4. Practice and refine skills of philosophical analysis, evaluation, and argumentation, in oral and written forms.

4. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Academic credit and course grade in PH 214 are based on the quality of your work in the following assignments:

A.	Focus papers (4 @ 10% each)	40% of grade
B.	Mid-term examination	20%
C.	Final examination	30%
D.	Participation	10%

- A. **Focus Papers:** These are four essays of 500-800 words written in response to questions prompted by issues in the reading. Typically, there will be a short list of such questions from

which to select. Opportunities to individualize the questions may increase during the term in response to earlier performance. More detailed instructions will be provided; deadlines are given in the *Conspectus* below. The essays are written outside of class and will be submitted through a Drop Box on Moodle.

- B. **Mid-Term Examination:** This examination has two parts: (1) a test taken in class, and (2) an essay written outside of class. The in-class, closed-book, portion is designed to test your knowledge of basic concepts and arguments in the readings. The out-of-class, open-book, essay portion requires you to develop your own position on an important philosophical issue of the course. Detailed instructions and a short list of essay questions will be provided in advance. Both portions will be completed by Thursday, March 8.
- C. **Final Examination:** The final examination will be structured like the mid-term: (1) a test taken in class, and (2) an essay written outside of class. The same sorts of parameters and purposes will apply; however, the essay will be more extensive. Instructions and questions will be provided well in advance. The in-class portion will be taken at the scheduled examination period: Friday, May 11, at 1:30 pm; the essay will also be due at that time, and will be submitted through Moodle.
- D. **Participation:** This is a composite category that includes the quality of engagement in all class activities: attendance (and promptness), attentiveness in class, engagement with the readings and the ideas of others, contributions to class discussions, performance as “primary respondents,” usage of the Moodle site, and participation in other course activities. Many class sessions will have two or three students designated as “primary respondents,” who will be called upon first to respond to questions that will initiate the class discussion. More information will be provided in class on the role of the primary respondent. (See also *Course Policies and Expectations* below.)

5. REQUIRED TEXTS

- A. *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will*, by Robert Kane. Oxford (2005). ISBN-13: 978-0195149708.
- B. *Free Will (Hackett Readings in Philosophy)*, 2nd edition, edited by Derk Pereboom. Hackett Publishing Company (2009). ISBN-13: 978-1603841290. {Abbrev: *FW*}
- C. *Luck: The Brilliant Randomness of Everyday Life*, by Nicholas Rescher. University of Pittsburgh Press (2001). ISBN-13: 978-0822957553.
- D. *Why Me? A Philosophical Inquiry into Fate*, by Michael Gelven. Northern Illinois University Press (1991). ISBN-13: 978-0875801643.

6. CONSPECTUS

Note: This conspectus provides a course calendar, listing the general topic for each class, required reading assignments, and some important assignment dates. **The reading should be completed prior to the class session corresponding.** Bring your copy of the day's readings to class, because we will often work directly from them.

#1 T Jan. 23 **Thinking about What Lies Ahead (with Appropriate Irony)**

#2 Th Jan. 25 **Choice and the Voluntary: the Will, Freedom, and Free Will**

- Kane, Chapter 1, pp. 1-11.
 - *FW* §1: Aristotle, pp. 1-4.
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#3 T Jan. 30 **Considering Compatibilism**

- Kane, Chapter 2, pp. 12-22.
- *FW* §8: Hume, pp. 87-104
- *FW* §12: Ayer, pp. 139-147.

#4 Th Feb. 1 **Incompatibilism**

- Kane, Chapter 3, pp. 23-31.
 - *FW* §17: van Inwagen, pp. 213-228.
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#5 T Feb. 6 **Libertarianism and Indeterminism**

- Kane, Chapter 4, pp. 32-39.
- *FW* §3: Lucretius, pp. 17-18.
- "Where and When is Randomness Located?" in *The Information Philosopher*:
<http://www.informationphilosopher.com/freedom/location.html>
- **Focus Paper #1 due before midnight.**

#6 Th Feb. 8 **Kant's Transcendental Freedom**

- Kane, Chapter 5 (§§1-2 only), pp. 40-44.
 - *FW* §§9-10: Kant, pp. 105-129.
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#7 T Feb. 13 **Agent-Causation**

- Kane, Chapter 5 (§§ 3-5), pp. 44-52.
- *FW* §11: Reid, pp. 130-138.
- *FW* §14: Chisholm, pp. 172-184.

- #8 Th Feb. 15 **Actions, Reasons, Causes**
- Kane, Chapter 6, pp. 53-66.
 - *FW* §23: Clarke, pp. 338-365.
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- #9 T Feb. 20 **Hard Determinism**
- Kane, Chapter 7, pp. 67-79.
 - *FW* §22: Pereboom, pp. 307-337.
 - **Focus Paper #2 due before midnight.**

- #10 Th Feb. 22 **Moral Responsibility**
- Kane, Chapter 8, pp. 80-92.
 - *FW* §15: Frankfurt, pp. 185-196.

Film #1: Session begins at 12:15 pm (pizza provided)

- #11 T Feb. 27 **Second Order Desires**
- Kane, Chapter 9, pp. 93-106.
 - *FW* §16: Frankfurt, pp. 196-212.
 - *FW* §18: Wolf, pp. 228-242.

- #12 Th Mar. 1 **Reactive Attitude Theories**
- Kane, Chapter 10, pp. 107-119.
 - *FW* §13: P. F. Strawson, pp. 148-171.
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- #13 T Mar. 6 **Ultimate Responsibility**
- Kane, Chapter 11, pp. 120-131.
 - *FW* §20: Kane, pp. 268-288.

- #14 Th Mar. 8 **Modern Science and the Fabric of Events**
- Kane, Chapter 12, pp. 132-146.
 - **Mid-Term Examination**
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SPRING RECESS

- #15 T Mar. 20 **Luck and the Human Condition**
- Rescher, Introduction and Chapter 1, pp. 3-40,

#16 Th Mar. 22 **Chance, Accident, Probability, and Unpredictability**

- Rescher, Chapters 2 and 3, pp. 41-86.
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#17 T Mar. 27 **Good and Bad Luck: Philosophy and Gambling**

- Rescher, Chapters 4 - 6, pp. 87-139.

#18 Th Mar. 29 **Moral Luck**

- Rescher, Chapter 7, pp. 140-171.
 - Nelkin, "Moral Luck" in *SEP*, §1 only:
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-luck/>
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#19 T Apr. 3 **"The Natural Lottery" and Impact of Luck**

- Rescher, Chapters 8 and 9, pp. 172-209.
- **Focus Paper #3 due before midnight.**

#20 Th Apr. 5 **Foreknowledge, Predestination, and What is Meant to Be**

- Kane, Chapter 13, pp. 147-162.
 - *FW* §4: Augustine, pp. 19-33.
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#21 T Apr. 9 **Fate and Fatalism as Chance**

- Robert C. Solomon, "On Fate and Fatalism." [*Electronic Reserves*]

#22 Th Apr. 11 **Fate as Chance Destiny or Fortune**

- Gelven, Prologue and Chapters 1 and 2, pp. 5-48.

Mahan Lecture: Lisa Tessman (SC 200 at 7:00 PM)

Film #2: Session begins at 12:15 pm (lunch provided)

#23 T Apr. 17 **Fate as Destiny or Fortune**

- Gelven, Chapters 3 and 4, pp. 49-88.
- **Focus Paper #4 due before midnight.**

#24 Th Apr. 19 **Fate as Inevitability Abandonment**

- Gelven, Chapters 5 and 6, pp. 89-117.
- *FW* §2: The Stoics, pp. 5-16.

#25 T Apr. 24 **Fate as Abandonment**

- Gelven, Chapters 7 and 8, pp. 121-150

#26 Th Apr. 26 **Justification and Illumination**

- Gelven, Chapters 9 and 10, pp. 151-183.
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#27 T May 1 **The Openness of Life**

- William James, “The Dilemma of Determinism”:
http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/blattnew/intro/james_dilemma_of_determinism.pdf

#28 Th May 3 **“Like Shooting Stars”: the Myth of Er**

- Gelven, Chapters 11 and 12, pp. 184-199.
 - Plato, *Republic*, X, 614b-621d: [*Electronic Reserves*]
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F May 11 **Final Examination (in class: 1:30-4:30 PM)**

Essays due by 1:30 pm

7. COURSE POLICIES

Classroom Climate: Our classroom is a “safe space,” but that is not the same as your “comfort zone.” We welcome and encourage all participants to articulate their questions and their opinions in an atmosphere of mutual respect; we also seek to transform questions and opinions into reasoned arguments. Engaging in philosophy requires not only critical thinking, but opening your thoughts to critique by others. Such critiques may be sharp, but not personal (*ad hominem*). If I or your classmates mispronounce your name or use the wrong pronoun for you, *please correct us*.

“Primary Respondents” are designated for most class meetings. They are expected to be “first responders” to the readings assigned that day, and—when called upon—to identify major points, summarize arguments, ask and answer salient questions, and offer critical points. Everyone should be prepared to respond to questions about the reading every day, however. If you have difficulty speaking up in class, talk to me privately *in the first or second week of class*—and I will devise a plan for your participation.

Workload and “Fourth Hour” Expectations: PHIL 214 has been designed with the standard expectations for workload: a typical student will need two hours of focused preparation for each class hour. Understanding the readings is, of course, only the first step in preparation; philosophy requires critical reflections on the material. In addition, the fourth hour of credit is met by the

out-of-class composition of the four focus papers, the mid-term and final exam essays, the film and guest lecture assignments, as well as the special preparation to be “primary respondent.”

Class Preparation: The working assumption of the class is that each participant will have *read and studied* the assignment prior to that class. If you are not prepared for class, you should attend anyway—learning happens! —though you may need to acknowledge your unpreparedness. You should be prepared to follow up on your critical responses in class.

Attendance: Philosophy is not simply something you study: it is something you do. Philosophizing is a form of active learning. It requires consistent attendance and participation; therefore, *all students are expected to attend all classes*. Avoid scheduling travel and appointments in conflict with class time. Some absences may be unavoidable; these should be explained in advance, if possible, and may be excused by the instructor. *More than two unexcused absences*—the equivalent of one week of the term—will undoubtedly lower your participation grade. Excessive absence will result in failure for the course. Beyond simply attending class, however, *every student should be prepared to participate in class and to be called on during every class meeting*.

Late and Missing Work: *Work submitted late is not accepted for credit without prior approval*. All major assignments must be completed to receive credit for the course.

Electronic Etiquette: Avoid embarrassment: during class, please turn off all phones, cameras, iPods, and other personal electronics. Please do not engage in electronic messaging or web-surfing during class. You will be called out for it. *If you must use a laptop during class, please sit in the back row, so as not to distract others*. If you have special need to keep a pager on during class or are awaiting an important phone call, please consult with me.

Academic Integrity: Adherence to the principle of academic integrity as expressed in the Gettysburg College Honor Code is expected, of course, for all in this class. That includes proper citation of sources for all intellectual work, compliance with the announced conditions of assignments, and the offering of a forthright expression of your own views. We will discuss at the outset the importance of academic integrity and specific expectations for assignments. Please include the Honor Pledge on all written work and consult with me if you are uncertain about how to maintain academic integrity in a specific assignment.

Course Moodle site: This course will make extensive use of its Moodle website. Communications on our site are official for all purposes, so *you should consult the site frequently*. Important announcements, course documents, assignments, discussions, and a variety of learning resources will be posted there, and you will submit your assignments, including tests, via Moodle. *Please be sure you are fully familiar with Moodle*.

Films and Special Events: We will view two films and attend one lecture outside of normal class hours; they will be part of the course material for subsequent tests and essays. We may also take advantage of any special and relevant learning opportunities on campus; these may also be

included in the purview of the course. Your attendance is expected, but it is quite likely that unfortunate conflicts will arise. If you must miss a scheduled event, please notify me in advance, and I will explain what you need to do.

Learning Disabilities: If you have a diagnosed learning disability, please inform me. Be prepared to present your College IEAP form for our consultation. This will enable us together to determine appropriate accommodations within the context of this course.

Consultation: I have listed my regular hours for academic advising and consultation below. Barring an emergency, I will be available in my office at these times. You may simply drop in; you do not need to make an appointment—though please do understand that I may need to consult with others during the period as well. If these times do not work for you, you may arrange an appointment. If you are having difficulty in the course, please let me know; we can map out a strategy for academic success.

8. INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Prof. DeNicola's Office	Weidensall Hall 306
Office Phone	(717-337-) 6784
Campus Mail Box	404
Office Hours	T Th: 2:30 – 3:30 p.m. W: 1:00 – 4:00 pm; and by appointment at other times
E-mail	ddenicol@gettysburg.edu
Admin. Assistant, Dept. of Philosophy	Tara Bowman
Department Office Phone	(337-) 6780

Note: The instructor reserves the right to change the information presented in this syllabus, within the basic parameters of the course description. Unforeseen events and responsive teaching may require adjustments. The instructor will confirm any changes in writing as far in advance as possible.