

# Freedom (Phil 140)

Fall 2015

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## Course Description

Freedom is an extremely elusive concept. We often take ourselves and others to be capable of acting freely. In fact, our whole system of criminal justice is based on the idea that persons who commit crimes are capable of self-control. But we also know that person's choices are, in large part, a product of their beliefs, desires, and values. How can we square these beliefs? Do we really believe that a kleptomaniac can choose not to steal?

We also *value* freedom, such that we take freedom to be something worth fighting for. According to Malcolm X, "[i]f you are not ready to die for it, [you should] put the word "freedom" out of your vocabulary." Does it make sense to risk one's life for freedom? Is it morally permissible to kill innocent people in order to obtain freedom for yourself and others?

In this course, we will think critically about both personal and political freedom. My view is that these concepts are intimately connected and the structure of the course reflects this belief. In the first section, we will explore the classic problem of free will. In the second section, we will consider the idea that free action cannot be distinguished from moral action. And, in the final section, we will discuss the ethics of liberation.

## Course Requirements and Grading

Student grades will be based on **three 5-7 page papers**, and class participation. These elements will be weighted as follows:

70% Three 5-7 page papers  
30% Class participation

The class participation grade will be largely based on participation in weekly group discussions, which will take place each Friday. Each week I will select 3 or 4 students to develop group discussion questions. These students will lead small group discussions and turn in their questions at the end of each Friday class meeting. I realize that not all students are comfortable sharing their ideas in a lecture setting. The group discussions are designed to encourage students to discuss the weekly readings in a less intimidating environment.

The paper assignment will be assessed based on three criterion: 1) accuracy: how well you understand and present the material contained in the course readings, 2) clarity of writing, and 3)

content: the strength of the analysis and critique of the views you take issue with, and the quality of the argument(s) used to support any positive views presented in the paper.

Make sure to read "Guidelines on Reading a Philosophy Paper":

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>

And "Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper":

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

### **Statement on Americans with Disabilities Procedures:**

Howard University is committed to providing an educational environment that is accessible to all students. In accordance with this policy, students in need of accommodations due to a disability should contact the Office of the Dean for Special Services for verification and determination of reasonable accommodations as soon as possible after admission to the University or at the beginning of each semester. The Dean of the Office of Special Student Services can be reached at (202) 238-2420.

### **Plagiarism and cheating:**

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Evidence of dishonesty will be pursued, and confirmation will result in an "F" for the course. Students are responsible for knowing which actions constitute plagiarism. Please refer to the Howard University Student Handbook, p.114.

### **Texts:**

All reading will be posted to Blackboard.

Note that I may alter the reading schedule.

### **Course Schedule:**

#### **Section 1: The Classic Free-Will Problem**

##### **Week 1: Hard Determinism**

Reading: **Paul Holbach**, The Illusion of Free Will, **Van Inwagen**, The Incompatibility of Free Will and Determinism

##### **Week 2: Libertarianism**

Reading: **Roderick Chisholm**, Human Freedom and the Self, **Carol Ginet**, Freedom, Responsibility, and Agency, **JJC Smart**, Free Will, Praise and Blame

##### **Week 3: Compatibilism**

Reading: **David Lewis**, Are We Free to Break the Laws?, **Harry Frankfurt**, Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person

Week 4: Compatibilism, continued.

Reading: **Susan Wolf**, Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility, **P.F. Strawson**, Freedom and Resentment

**(First paper topics distributed)**

Week 5: Freedom as Authenticity

Reading: **Jean Paul Sartre**, Existentialism is a Humanism, **Frantz Fanon**, *Black Skin, White Masks*, chapter 8, By Way of Conclusion

Section 2: Freedom as Morality: Kant and Hegel

Week 6: Kant

Reading: **Immanuel Kant**, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, section II and III

**(First paper due)**

Week 7: Hegel

Reading: **Lottenbach and Tennenbaum**, Hegel's Critique of Kant in the Philosophy of Right.

Week 8: Hegel

Reading: **G.W.F. Hegel**, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Independent and Dependent Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage, **Robert Pippin**, What is the Question For Which Hegel's Theory of Recognition is the Answer?

Week 9: Hegel, cont.

Reading: **Hegel**, *The Philosophy of Right*, Third Part: Ethical Life, **Robert Brandom**, Autonomy, Community, and Freedom

**(Second paper topics distributed)**

Week 10: Catch up

Section 3: The Ethics of Liberation

Week 11: Philosophy and Liberation

Reading: **Eduardo Bonilla-Silva**, Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation, **Angela Davis**, The Meaning of Freedom, **Charles Mills**, "Ideal Theory" as Ideology

**(Second paper due)**

Week 12: Violence

Reading: **Frantz Fanon**, *Black Skin, White Masks*, chapter 7: The Black Man and Hegel, *The Wretched of the Earth*, chapter 1: On Violence, **Malcolm X**: The Ballot or the Bullet, **Stokely Carmichael**, Toward Black Liberation

Week 13: Violence, continued. Civil Disobedience

Reading: **Lionel McPherson**, Is Terrorism Distinctively Wrong? **Martin Luther King**, Letter from a Birmingham Jail, **John Rawls**, *A Theory of Justice*, section 57: The Justification of Civil Disobedience

Week 14: Pessimism About Freedom

Reading: **Derrick Bell**, Racial Realism, **Ta- Nehisi Coates**, Letter to My Son

**(Third paper topics distributed)**

Week 15: TBA

**(Third paper will be due at the end of the exam period)**