



DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY, LINGUISTICS AND THEORY OF SCIENCE

NFPF301 Instrumentalism about Moral Responsibility, 7.5 credits

Instrumentalism om Moraliska Ansvar, 7,5 högskolepoäng

Third-cycle level / Forskarnivå

Confirmation

This syllabus was confirmed by the Department of Philosophy, Linguistics and Theory of Science on 2021-06-30, and is valid from Autumn semester 2021.

Responsible Department

Department of Philosophy, Linguistics and Theory of Science, Faculty of Humanities

Entry requirements

General and specific entry requirements for third-cycle education according to Admissions Regulations and the general syllabus [allmän studieplan] for Practical Philosophy.

Learning outcomes

After completion of the course, the doctoral student is expected to be able to:

Knowledge and understanding

- Demonstrate enhanced knowledge and understanding of the subject area of the course,
- discuss in detail key theories and issues in one or more of the subject areas of the course.

Competence and skills

- Offer a detailed analysis of issues, lines of argument, or methods from the literature,
- select and define issues, lines of argument, or methods from the literature that are suitable for a short critical essay or conference paper.

Judgement and approach

- Critically discuss, orally or in writing, questions, lines of argument, or methods that are used in the literature,
- critically assess the validity of the studied lines argument.

Course content

Summary: Theories of moral responsibility try to explain what it takes for an agent to be morally responsible for their behaviour and when it's appropriate to hold them responsible for their behaviour. Instrumentalist or forward-looking theories try to justify our responsibility practices, especially blame, as means to other valuable ends. For example, one might defend the practice of blaming agents for their offenses by arguing that doing so encourages them to act better (individual level) or that doing so promotes social cooperation (social level). The aim of this course is to examine and evaluate instrumentalist theories of moral responsibility, from its early proponents in the mid-20th century to the recent resurgence of interest in these theories during the last decade.

This course will cover:

- Early instrumentalist theories: early instrumentalist claims and arguments; the motivation for these accounts in the context of philosophical debates about free will and moral responsibility; and normative ethical frameworks often deployed by instrumentalists. Key readings: Moritz Schlick (1939) and J.J.C. Smart (1961).
- Objections to instrumentalism: prominent critiques of instrumentalism, both its normative ethical commitments and as a way of understanding moral responsibility. Key readings: P.F. Strawson (1962), R. Jay Wallace (1994), and T.M. Scanlon (1998).
- Recent instrumentalist theories: the motivation to rehabilitate instrumentalist accounts in light of recent developments in debates about moral responsibility and the ethics of blame; the parallel development of background normative ethical frameworks. Key readings: Richard Arneson (2003), Manuel Vargas (2013), and Victoria McGeer (2015).
- Competitors: a brief survey of prominent alternatives to instrumentalism, including reasons-responsiveness, normative competence, and self-expression theories; the structure of instrumentalist and non-instrumentalist theories.
- Applications: contemporary challenges to moral responsibility and the justification of blame (e.g. cognitive bias, implicit bias, ignorance, and difficulty); possible instrumentalist responses to these challenges; possible applications of instrumentalist theories to questions in applied ethics of responsibility (e.g. medical decision-making, criminal law, and psychiatric care).

Required readings:

1. Schlick, M. (1939). Problems of Ethics (chapter 7).
2. Smart, J.J.C. (1961). "Freewill, Praise, and Blame."
3. Strawson, P.F. (1962). "Freedom and Resentment."
4. Wallace, R.J. (1994). Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments (chapter 3).
5. Scanlon, T.M. (1998). What We Owe to Each Other (chapter 6).
6. Arneson, R.J. (2003). "The Smart Theory of Responsibility and Desert."
7. Barrett, J. (forthcoming). "Optimism about Moral Responsibility"
8. Vargas, M. (2013). Building Better Beings (chapter 6).
9. McGeer, V. (2015). "Building a Better Theory of Responsibility."
10. McGeer, V. and P. Pettit. 2015. "The Hard Problem of Responsibility."

11. Jefferson, A. 2019. "Instrumentalism About Moral Responsibility Revisited."
12. Miller, D.E. 2014. "Reactive Attitudes and the Hare-Williams Debate: Towards a New Consequentialist Moral Psychology."
13. McCormick, K.A. 2017. "Anchoring a Revisionist Account of Moral Responsibility."

Recommended readings:

14. Talbert, M. 2019. "Moral Responsibility" in the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy [good introduction to the responsibility debate]
15. Vargas, M. 2013. Building Better Beings (chapters 5, 7, and 8) [a closer look at Vargas' theory]

Types of instruction

Short lectures or reading assignments, meant to provide relevant background for discussion, together with seminar-style meetings mostly focused on discussion.

Language of instruction

The course is given in English.

Grades

The grade Pass (G) or Fail (U) is given in this course.

The grading scale is Pass (G) or Fail (U)

Types of assessment

Students will write a roughly 3000 word article-like text, which must engage critically with the course material.

Course evaluation

The course is evaluated by way of a written questionnaire or oral feedback.