

Political Science 206  
University of Chicago  
Winter 2001

Professor Patchen Markell  
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## ACTION AND RESPONSIBILITY

Tu, Th 10:30–11:50 am  
Foster 505

Action inserts us into a web of events and consequences not wholly under our control. Conceptions and practices of responsibility render us accountable for some of the consequences of our actions while insulating us from accountability for others. In this course, we will study some of the features and conditions of action, especially political action, that make responsibility important and that also render responsibility problematic. The course will include readings from Aristotle, Sophocles, Kant, Nietzsche, Weber, Arendt, and others. Our themes will include causality and voluntariness; revenge and the will; pluralism; dilemmas; “dirty hands”; collective and historical responsibility; apologies, reparations, and forgiveness. We address with these themes partly through careful readings of philosophy and political theory, and partly by considering contemporary political themes such as punishment and racism.

### WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:

1. 5–6 page paper due Tuesday, January 30
2. 8–10 page paper due Monday March 12

Late papers: Except in documented cases of serious illness or family emergencies, late papers will be penalized 1/3 of a grade per day of lateness; e.g., an A- paper two days late becomes a B.

### GRADING

The first paper will count for roughly 30% of your grade; the second paper for 50%; and your participation in class discussions for 20%.

### READINGS

The following books are available for purchase at the Seminary Co-op. All material will also be on reserve at Harper Library.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Martin Ostwald  
Sophocles, *Three Tragedies*, ed. Grene and Lattimore, 2nd ed.  
Kant, *Grounding of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Ellington.  
Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann  
Arendt, *The Human Condition*  
May, *Sharing Responsibility*

WEEKLY MEETINGS AND READING ASSIGNMENTS:

1 Th Jan 4: Introduction (no reading)

2 Tu Jan 9: Responsibility for one's actions, I

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book 3, chaps. 1–5 [pp. 52–68].

3 Th Jan 11: Responsibility for one's actions, II

Feinberg, "Problematic Responsibility in Law and Morals"  
Nagel, "Moral Luck"

4 Tu Jan 16: Responsibility and fate

Sophocles, "Oedipus the King," in *Three Tragedies*, pp. 11–76  
Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* book 1, chap. 10 [pp. 23–26].

5 Th Jan 18: Responsibility and freedom, I

Kant, *Grounding*, sections 1–2

6 Tu Jan 23: Responsibility and freedom, II

Kant, *Grounding*, section 3  
Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, pp. 97–107  
Kant, "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History"

7 Th Jan 25: A genealogy of responsibility, I

Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, essay 2 (introduction and essay 1 recommended)

8 Tu Jan 30: A genealogy of responsibility, II

Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, essay 3  
Shklar, "Misfortune and Injustice"

9 Th Feb 1: Pluralism, conflict, dilemmas

Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal"  
Lukes, "Making Sense of Moral Conflict"  
DuBois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings"

10 Tu Feb 6: Politics and “dirty hands”

Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”

Walzer, “Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands”

11 Th Feb 8: Collective and historical responsibility, I

Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 481–530

12 Tu Feb 13: Collective and historical responsibility, II

Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 553–56

May, *Sharing Responsibility*, chaps. 1, 8 [pp. 15–27; 33–35; 146–62]

13 Th Feb 15: Collective and historical responsibility, III

Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 175–207, 230–47

Arendt, “Collective Responsibility”

14 Tu Feb 20: Punishment and responsibility, I

Kant, “Metaphysics of Morals,” pp. 154–60

Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, pp. 158–73

15 Th Feb 22: Punishment and responsibility, II

Jacoby, selections from *Wild Justice*

Sarat, “Doing Death”

Davis, “Race and Criminalization”

16 Tu Feb 27: Race and responsibility

May, *Sharing Responsibility*, chap. 2

Mills, “The Racial Polity”

Loury, “Black Dignity and the Common Good”

17 Th Mar 1: Reparations, apologies, forgiveness

Minow, “Reparations”

Trouillot, “Abortive Rituals”

18 Tu Mar 6: Concluding discussion

Reading, if any, to be announced.