

## ***Blame: A Beginner's Guide***

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Instructor: Zoë A. Johnson King, zoe@usc.edu

Class meetings: Tues 2:00-4:20pm, MHP 102. Office Hours: by appointment, MHP 105F.

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

Imagine that I arrange to meet with you in the courtyard, and you make the trek to campus, but I never show up. Imagine also that you later learn that I had no good reason for not showing up – I just couldn't be bothered, so I stayed in my favorite coffee shop and prepped for class instead. In this situation, you may be inclined to *blame* me for not showing up to our meeting. But what, exactly, is the attitude of blame? And what renders it appropriate?

This course is an introduction to the gargantuan philosophical literature on blame. We will consider cognitive, conative, and affective accounts of the nature of blame, as well as some distinctions between varieties of moral appraisal that are all moderately blame-like. We will examine the traditional conditions on blameworthiness – the control condition and the epistemic condition – and consider some approaches that relax one or both of these conditions. We will take a look at some alleged conditions on the standing to blame: anti-hypocrisy and anti-complicity conditions and the so-called “business” condition. We will end by considering the nature of forgiveness and the norms governing it. No prior knowledge is assumed; the point of the course is to give students an overview of the main issues and positions in philosophical debates about blame, accessible to newbies but still challenging for the seasoned moral psychologists among us.

We will be joined by two other USC faculty, each for one class, part-way through the semester. The first is the illustrious Gary Watson; Gary is one of the most influential figures in the literature on blame, and has kindly offered to briefly emerge from retirement to discuss some of his work with us. The second is the equally illustrious Steve Finlay; Steve is back from Australia in the second half of the semester and will be popping in to discuss connections between the literature on blame and broader issues in metaethics.

### COURSE GOALS

By the end of this class, all students will have developed the following understanding and skills:

- An in-depth understanding of some contemporary philosophical debates about the nature of blame and the conditions under which it is (in)appropriate.
- The ability to summarize the state of the literature, articulate and defend a philosophical view, and anticipate and respond to objections, on some of these issues.
- The ability to identify thought-provoking questions that spark discussion about a paper.
- The ability to write a clear, concise, compelling abstract, suitable for conference submission.
- The ability to provide formative feedback on a peer's work-in-progress.

## COURSE COMPONENTS

This course has six components: discussion questions (10%), in-class presentations (20%), short papers (30%), an abstract (5%), peer review of three abstracts (10%), and a final paper (25%).

*Do every required reading and submit questions for discussion in advance of every class (10%)*

This is a reading-based class. We are inheriting a rich intellectual history that rewards sustained attention. You will be much better-prepared to contribute to class discussion, and you will remember the readings much better – not only during the semester, but in future – if you take notes on the readings and identify some issues that you would like to talk about in advance of class. To that end, I ask all students to submit two (or more!) questions for discussion in advance of each class. Each “question” should be a paragraph long. We will discuss some examples of good genres of question in the first class.

*Present on two of the readings (20%)*

Presenting skills are just as important in Philosophy as writing skills. We are going to practice presenting by each introducing two of the required readings in a formal presentation at the start of class; presentations should be primarily expository, summarizing the texts’ main points and the main moves made to defend those points, but should also include your discussion questions – and you may (but need not) pose more than two discussion questions for texts on which you are presenting. Presentations should be accompanied by a handout that is around two pages long.

*Submit a conference-submission-style abstract (5%) and assess three other students’ abstracts (10%)*

I think that one of the secrets to success in grad school is to go to a *lot* of conferences. But conferences often ask for submissions in the form of abstracts, rather than full papers. So we are going to talk explicitly about how to write good abstracts, have a go at writing one, and then evaluate each other’s abstracts. There is a peer assessment component here because it is much easier to appreciate a set of standards when you have tried using them to evaluate others’ work.

*Submit three solo-authored papers, or one solo-authored paper and one co-authored one (30%)*

It’s a good idea to write multiple short papers before your final paper, so as to test your understanding of a wider range of topics from the class. So I ask students to submit three short papers – no more than 2,000 words – over the course of the semester. You may (but need not) write your short papers on the readings on which you presented, developing the line of thought in one of your discussion questions. You may (but need not) choose to replace two of your 2,000-word solo-authored papers with a 3,000-word co-authored paper if there’s a topic on which you and another enrolled student are excited about working together.

*Submit a final paper (25%)*

At the end of the course, you should pick one of your short papers (which may be the co-authored one, if you chose to co-author) and develop it into a longer paper – somewhere between 4,000 and 5,000 words. I highly recommend writing your abstract about your final paper, so that your peer feedback on the abstract can help you to develop the ideas in the paper. You will notice that the final paper is not actually worth all that much of your final grade; this is to make writing it a less daunting prospect.

## COURSE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

### COURSE WEBSITE

There is a course website site for this course, which can be accessed via Blackboard. All course documents (syllabus, assignments, readings, and some documents with helpful tips for reading and writing Philosophy papers) can be accessed via this site. Please check the site regularly for announcements – when I want to send a message to all students, I will do so by posting an announcement on the course website.

### ELECTRONICS IN THE CLASSROOM

I strongly discourage students from using electronics in this class – including laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc. A lot of research indicates that the use of electronics in the classroom prevents you and people sitting around you from learning. If you have a special reason to need electronic equipment for note-taking, that's a different matter; in this case, just be enkratic and don't open any apps besides your notes app.

### EMAILS

When emailing me about this class, please write "Phil 540" in the subject line. I will endeavor to reply to all emails within 48 hours. If I do not manage to do this, it is okay to email again to remind me – but please wait 48 hours first. I receive a *lot* of emails every day.

### PLAGIARISM

You are responsible for making sure that none of your work is plagiarized. You must cite any work that you draw from in your papers, both direct quotations and paraphrased ideas. You are strongly encouraged to discuss the course material, including assignments, with your classmates, but all written work that you submit must be your own. For more information, see my "Plagiarism" handout on our course website. You should also be familiar with the academic integrity policies of the College of Arts and Sciences, which are available [here](#); I will respond to all cases of possible plagiarism in accordance with sections 2 and 3 of these policies. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable, so please familiarize yourself with the [university's policies on academic misconduct](#).

### INCOMPLETES

All work is expected to be completed and turned in on time. "Incomplete" work is defined by the university as work that could not be completed due to documented illness or another emergency occurring after the 12<sup>th</sup> week of the semester. Arrangements for an IN and its removal should be initiated by the student and agreed to by the instructor prior to the end of the semester.

### DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS

If you think that you need accommodation for a disability, please let me know at your earliest convenience; many aspects of the course can be modified to suit your needs. Students requesting accommodation for a disability are required to register with Disability Services and Programs (DSP) each semester and to obtain a letter of verification for approved accommodations. DSP can be reached at 213-740-0776 or at [this link](#). Any information that you choose to provide is confidential and will be treated as such.

## REPORTING SEXUAL MISCONDUCT

If you become aware of any incident of sexual misconduct, including sexual assault, please contact one of the following departments immediately:

Relationship & Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP), 213-740-4900. RSVP are open 24/7 for free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Department of Public Safety, 213-740-6000 or [this link](#) and 213-740-4321 for 24/7 emergency assistance.

## REPORTING ISSUES OF PROTECTED CLASS

USC's Office of Equity, Equal Opportunity and Title IX can be reached at 213-821-8298 or [this link](#). This office works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class.

## STUDENT RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

College is stressful and challenges to one's mental health can affect academic performance. Seeking support is smart and effective. If you or someone you know is feeling anxious, overwhelmed, depressed, or in need of support, lots of services are available. Check these out:

Counseling and Mental Health Services (CMH), 213-740-9355 or [this link](#).

CMH provides 24/7 free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

Campus Support & Intervention, 213-740-0411 or [this link](#).

Campus Support assists students and families in resolving complex issues that adversely affect their success as a student, including personal, financial, and academic issues.

Asian Pacific American Student Services (APASS), 213-740-4999 or [this link](#).

APASS advocates for all members of the Asian, Pacific Islander, and Desi American community through active participation, dialogue, and community-building.

Center for Black Cultural and Student Affairs (CBCSA), 213-740-8257 or [this link](#).

The CBCSA aims to create an Afrocentric, holistic learning environment, for academic, social, and professional development and civic engagement for all members of the USC community.

First Generation Plus Success Center (FG+SC), [this link](#).

The FG+SC provides support for students who identify as first generation, undocumented, former foster youths, and transfer students, seeking to create a culture of belonging and inclusion.

Latinx Chicanx Center for Advocacy and Student Affairs (La CASA), 213-740-1480 or [this link](#).

La CASA offers programs and services that focus on intersectionality, educating those on campus about the diversity represented within the Latinx community and providing community-building for students.

LGBTQ+ Student Center, 213-740-7619 or [this link](#).

The LGBTQ+SC provides support, education, advocacy, and community for undergraduate and graduate students, welcoming students from across the gender and sexual identity spectra.

## SCHEDULE & READINGS

Required readings are required; optional readings are optional. The optional readings are there for students who are particularly interested in a topic to begin to explore it further.

Class 1 (Jan 11) – INTRODUCTION

- Optional: Tognazzini and Coates, “[Blame](#)”

Class 2 (Jan 18) – CLASSICS YOU SHOULD KNOW

- Required: Frankfurt, “[Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility](#)”
- Required: Strawson, “[Freedom and Resentment](#)”
- Optional: Wolf, “[Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility](#)”

Class 3 (Jan 25) – WHAT IS BLAME? I

- Required: Scanlon, ch.5 of *Moral Dimensions*
- Optional: Hieronymi, “[The Force and Fairness of Blame](#)”

Class 4 (Feb 1) – WHAT IS BLAME? II

- Required: Wolf, “[Blame, Italian Style](#)”
- Optional: Wallace, “[Dispassionate Opprobrium](#)”

Class 5 (Feb 8) – WHAT IS BLAME? III

- Required: Macnamara, “[Reactive Attitudes as Communicative Entities](#)”
- Required: McKenna, ch.4 of *Conversation and Responsibility*
- Optional: Shoemaker, “[Moral Address, Moral Responsibility, and the Boundaries of the Moral Community](#)”

Class 6 (Feb 15) – **GARY WEEK**

- Required: Watson, “[Responsibility and the Limits of Evil](#)”
- Required: Watson, “[Two Faces of Responsibility](#)”

Class 7 (Feb 22) – THE CONTROL CONDITION

- Required: A. Smith, “[Responsibility for Attitudes](#)”
- Required: Moody-Adams, “[Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance](#)”
- Optional: Adams, “[Involuntary Sins](#)”

Class 8 (March 1) – THE CONTROL CONDITION AND THE EPISTEMIC CONDITION

- Required: Vargas, “[The Trouble with Tracing](#)”
- Required: Fischer and Tognazzini, “[The Truth About Tracing](#)”
- Optional: H. Smith, “[Non-Tracing Cases of Culpable Ignorance](#)”

Class 9 (March 8) – THE EPISTEMIC CONDITION

- Required: Rosen, “[Skepticism about Moral Responsibility](#)”
- Required: Harman, “[Does Moral Ignorance Exculpate?](#)”
- Optional: FitzPatrick, “[Moral Responsibility and Normative Ignorance](#)”

Class 10 (March 22) – **STEVE WEEK**

- Readings TBD

Class 11 (March 29) – STANDING I

- Required: Wallace, “[Hypocrisy, Moral Address, and the Equal Standing of Persons](#)”
- Optional: Dover, “[The Walk and The Talk](#)”

Class 12 (April 7) – STANDING II

- Required: Cohen, “[Casting The First Stone](#)”
- Required: Radzik, “[On the Virtue of Minding your Own Business](#)”
- Optional: Todd, “[A Unified Account of the Moral Standing to Blame](#)”

Class 13 (April 19) – STANDING III

- Required: Bell, “[The Standing to Blame: A Critique](#)”
- Required: King, “[Skepticism about the Standing to Blame](#)”
- Optional: A. Smith, “[On Being Responsible and Holding Responsible](#)”

Class 14 (April 26) – MOVING ON FROM BLAME I

- Required: Hieronymi, “[Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness](#)”
- Required: Preston-Roedder, “[Faith In Humanity](#)”
- Optional: Wonderly, “[Forgiving, Committing, Un-Forgiving](#)”

Class 15 (Date TBD) – MOVING ON FROM BLAME II

- Required: Srinivasan, “[The Aptness of Anger](#)”
- Required: Marusic, “[Accommodation to Injustice](#)”
- Optional: Howard, “Forever Fitting Feelings” (email me to get the latest draft from Chris)

Done! 😊