

Course codes: BBN-FIL18-240.05, BMA-FILD-240.05, BMA-FILD-402.303, BMI-FILD17-240.05, BMI-FILD-402.X

Course title: **Freedom and responsibility in ancient philosophy**

Instructor: László Bene, Associate professor

Thursday, 10.00-11.30 (Building i, 1st floor, Room 123)

**General aim and content of the course:**

This course provides a glimpse into ancient debates concerning moral responsibility. We will discuss some key philosophical texts bearing on this issue from the Classical and Hellenistic periods, but the focus will be on the philosophy of late antiquity. On the one hand, we will be concerned with the main positions and arguments advanced in this debate. On the other hand, we will also examine over a large timescale how the concepts in which responsible human action was articulated have changed.

Plato addressed the question of responsibility mostly in mythical form. The accounts in the *Republic* and in the *Laws* emphasize that the soul is capable of autonomous choice, and it is an original source of its own decisions. Aristotle developed the first systematic account of responsible action and a theory of deliberation and choice. It was, however, only in the Hellenistic period that the issue of responsibility took centre stage. The Stoics set up a deterministic cosmological-metaphysical framework and argued that determinism is compatible with autonomous action and does not render moral evaluation pointless. Their Platonist and Peripatetic opponents criticized the causal framework underlying the Stoic account of responsibility. In this debate, the criteria of responsible action were also reinterpreted: whereas in Classic and Hellenistic theories moral responsibility was based merely on the agent's causal role, some Post-Hellenistic philosophers introduced some kind of libertarian decision-making faculty (others, however, insisted on more conservative accounts). In late antiquity, the concept of the will gains prominence, and it receives various interpretations in various pagan and Christian thinkers.

**Requirements:**

- Students are expected to **attend the sessions (3 absences at most)**, to prepare the readings for the classes, and to actively participate in the discussion;
- to turn in **four short papers** on the source texts which are discussed in the classes (**4-500 words each**) during the semester;
- to turn in a **paper (1500-2000 words)** that makes use of an article or book chapter of their choice from the secondary literature by the end of May (the choice must be agreed with the instructor in advance);

Grading will be based on home-works (40% + 40%) and on in-class activity (20%).

Mandatory readings and schedule (the sources texts have been uploaded to the Files of our Teams group):

1 (15 February) – Aristotle on responsibility (Reading: *Nicomachean ethics* III.1-5)

2 (22 February) – Aristotle on responsibility (Reading: *Nicomachean ethics* III.1-5)

3 (29 February) – Plato on responsibility: pre-natal choice, self-moving souls and divine providence (Reading: **Republic 614a-621d; Laws X, 891a-905c**)

4 (7 March) – Stoic determinism and its opponents: Epicurus and Carneades (Reading: **Cicero, On Fate**)

5 (14 March) – Stoic determinism and its opponents: Alexander of Aphrodisias (Reading: **Alexander of Aphrodisias, On Fate, ch. 6, ch. 10-14, and ch. 30**)

6 (21 March) – The ideal of freedom: Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics (Reading: **Epictetus, Discourses I.1 and IV.1**)

[28 March Spring break]

7 (4 April) – Plotinus on human autonomy (Reading: **Plotinus, On the Voluntary and on the Free Will of the One, Ennead VI.8, ch. 1-6**)

8 (11 April) – Plotinus on divine freedom (Reading: **Plotinus, On the Voluntary and on the Free Will of the One, Ennead VI.8, ch. 7-21**)

9 (18 April) – The dangers of self-determination: Plotinus on the fall of the soul (Reading: **Plotinus, On the Descent of the Soul into Bodies, Ennead IV.8; Plotinus, On the Three Primary Hypostases, Ennead V.1, ch. 1**)

[25 April – cancelled]

10 (2 May) – The dangers of self-determination: Augustine on the original sin (Reading: **Augustine, On the City of God, Book XIV, ch. 1-16**)

11 (9 May) – Foreknowledge and free will in Boethius (Reading: **Boethius, On the Consolation of Philosophy IV.5-7 and V**)

12 (16 May) – Foreknowledge and free will in Boethius (Reading: **Boethius, On the Consolation of Philosophy IV.5-7 and V**)

### **Recommended readings:**

Suzanne Bobzien, *Determinism and Freedom in Stoic Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

Suzanne Bobzien, „The Inadvertent Conception and Late Birth of the Free Will Problem”, *Phronesis* 43 (2) 1998, 133-175.

Ursula Coope, *Freedom and Responsibility in Neoplatonist Thought*, Oxford University Press, 2020.

Paul Destrée, Riccardo Salles, Marco Zingano (eds.), *What is Up to Us?* Akademia Verlag, 2014.

Albrecht Dihle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity*, University of California Press, 1982.

Bernard Collette-Dučić, „Plotinus on Founding Freedom in *Ennead* VI.8[39]”, in: Svetla Slaveva-Griffin – Pauliina Remes (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism*, Routledge, 2014, 421–436.

Michael Frede, *A Free Will: Origins of the Notion in Ancient Thought*, University of California Press, 2011.

John Marenbon, „The *Consolation*, V.3–6: Divine Prescience, Contingency, Eternity”, in id. *Boethius*, Oxford University Press, 225–245.

Robert Sharples, „Fate, Prescience and Free Will”. In: Marenbon J (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, Cambridge University Press, 2009, 207–227.

Suzanne Stern-Gillet, „Plotinus on Metaphysics and Morality”, in: Svetla Slaveva-Griffin – Pauliina Remes (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Neoplatonism*, Routledge, 2014, 396–420.

James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue*, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

James Wetzel, *Augustine. A Guide for the Perplexed*, Continuum, 2010 (esp. ch. 2, „Sin and the Invention of the Will”, and ch. 3, „Sex and the Infancy of Desire”).