

PHL 265: Social and Political Philosophy

Course Description

Most contemporary democracies are, or aspire to be, *liberal* societies. In other words, they (at least in theory) prioritize freedom and equality. But governments and social forces always restrict our freedom in some ways. How can this restriction be justified? And what does our commitment to equality require? Social and political philosophy attempts to find reasonable answers to questions like these.

In this course, we will trace contemporary lines of thought about these issues. We will start by examining a central question of justice: how should we distribute (or redistribute) wealth and power in society? We will then turn to related questions that bedevil liberal societies: should we focus exclusively on individual rights, or can minority groups have special rights? Does democracy justify governmental power? Do our ideals of liberty and equality conflict, and if they do, which is more important?

My upper division courses typically end with a unit going in depth into a particular recent thinker or problem; which thinker or problem we cover changes each time the course is offered. This time, we will finish the course with a unit on law and judicial interpretation, trying to determine how judges can figure out what the law is when it seems unclear.

Course Goals

By taking this course, you will **learn**:

- About the ideals that are expressed in our political systems
- How recent philosophers have contributed to our understanding of freedom, equality, democracy, and other important ideas
- The basic lines of thought in contemporary debate about these ideas

By taking this course, you will **be better able to**:

- Understand contemporary political debates
- Make and evaluate arguments
- Write precisely, reasonably, and persuasively
- Carefully assess real-world political systems and policies

By taking this course, you will **become**:

- A more informed citizen
- Someone who has engaged in a great tradition of conversation about how humans should live together

Texts

Robert Goodin and Phillip Pettit, eds, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*

H.L.A. Hart, *The Concept of Law*

Ronald Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously*

Occasional PDFs from the instructor

Assignments and Grades

Quizzes (20% of course grade)

We will have a closed-book quiz most days at the start of class. (We won't have quizzes any days when you are not assigned a reading. I may elect to forgo a quiz other days as well.) This is a much better idea than it may sound: it will improve your learning and your grades significantly.

Each quiz will have 2 questions. One question will be about the reading assigned for the day, and one will be about material covered in class the previous class day. You will be able to drop your lowest 2 quiz grades. You will also do some quizzes in small groups, sharing a grade for the day with your group.

Tests (30% of course grade)

We will have two tests. Each will involve essay writing and short answer questions, and perhaps some author identification, matching, and fill in the blanks.

Reflection Paper (10% of course grade)

You will write a short paper applying something you have read for class to the “real world.” You might write about how some theorist would evaluate an action taken by a public figure, or write about how some principle in our reading was expressed or rejected by a group you are a part of. More details about this will come as the class gets started.

Research Paper (30% of course grade)

You will write a 6-8 page final paper, due near the end of the semester. We will spend some time before then (in and out of class) on assignments designed to help you do a good job on this paper.

Class Participation (10% of course grade)

You will be expected to attend class regularly and engage with what goes on there. I understand that not everyone is equally comfortable speaking in a large group; you will have opportunities to show your class engagement through small group discussion and some in class writing.

Working In Community: Or, We’re Here to Help

Doing philosophy well is hard. Fortunately, you have a large community available to help you find your way. You will do your best work when you get help, so get your tuition’s worth and make use of these resources!

Your Instructor:

Please come by during my office hours some time (or make an appointment). I am happy to help you work through your thoughts, or to explain something you didn’t understand in class or a reading. **Please know that this classroom respects and welcomes students of all backgrounds and abilities, and that I invite you to talk with me about any concern or situation that affects your ability to complete your academic work successfully.**

[Other resources—such as librarians and tutoring services from the College—are institution-dependent and so have been kept out of this version of the syllabus.]

Tentative List of Readings

Pt. 1 Liberal Ideas of Justice

Rawls, "Justice as Fairness"

Nozick, "Distributive Justice"

Barry, "Chance, Choice, and Justice"

Okin, "Toward a Humanist Justice"

Sandel, "The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self"

Young, "Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship"

Waldron, "Superseding Historic Injustice"

Pt. 2 Challenges to Liberal Individualism

Kymlicka, "Justice and Minority Rights"

Okin, "'Mistresses of Their Own Destiny': Group Rights, Gender, and Realistic Rights of Exit"

Pt. 3 Liberal Democracy

Sunstein, "Preferences and Politics"

Elster, "The Market and the Forum"

Philips, "Dealing with Difference"

Pt. 4 Liberty and Equality

Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty"

Skinner, "A Third Concept of Liberty"

Galston, "Liberal Pluralism and Constitutional Democracy: The Case of Freedom of Conscience"

Cohen, "Are Freedom and Equality Compatible?"

Sen, "Equality of What?"

Minow, "Justice Engendered"

Pt. 5 Law and Judicial Interpretation

Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Chapters 4, 5, 8, and 9)

Dworkin, *Taking Rights Seriously* (Chapters 1-5)