

Philosophy 2420: Social and Political Philosophy
Fall 2025
Course Syllabus

This course examines the works of four major figures in modern (1600s–1700s) social contract theory and political philosophy more generally: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and David Hume. All four have shaped contemporary philosophy and political theory and continue to exert a profound influence on many aspects of culture. In addition to considering standard issues in political philosophy such as the legitimacy of the state, political obligation, the nature and demands of justice, equality, liberty, and autonomy, we will address issues of property rights, toleration, and the status of religion. This will be a reading-intensive course.

Instructor: Cole Mitchell
Phone: (607) 255–3687
E-mail: scm244@cornell.edu
Office: Goldwin Smith G67
Office hours: **To be determined**

Class time: Mondays/Wednesdays 2:55PM – 4:10PM
Classroom: Rockefeller 231
Course website: Canvas and <https://colemitchell.github.io/PHIL2420/>

Required work: A total of 100 points is possible:

- (1) One short essay (4–6 pages/10 points)
Friday, October 10 (due via Canvas)
- (2) Final exam (20 points): date / time / location TBA
- (3) Triweekly work: as an approximation, each lecture will have four students assigned to have completed extra work on that day's reading material (25 points)
- (4) Attendance and in-class work (30 points)
- (5) Semiweekly quizzes on Canvas (10 points)
- (6) Logic module on Canvas (5 points)

Texts: Hackett editions of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Rousseau's *Basic Political Writings* (2nd edition), and Hume's *Political Writings*; Cambridge edition of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*. (ISBNs: 9780872201774, 9781603846738, 9780872201606, 9780521357302)

Reference texts: I will occasionally provide additional texts on the course website. The most important reference is the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (plato.stanford.edu). It features many helpful articles on 17th and 18th century philosophy, as well as links to other resources.

Email policy: I will check email at least twice a week. If I haven't yet responded to your email, you are strongly encouraged to send follow-up emails—I will not be offended!

Topics and Main Readings:

A. Hobbes

Aug. 25 – Sep. 3: *Leviathan*, Part I

Sep. 8 – Sep. 17: *Leviathan*, Part II

B. Locke

Sep. 22 – Oct. 15: *Second Treatise of Government*

October 10: Essay Due Date

C. Rousseau

Oct. 20 – Oct. 27: *Social Contract*, Books I–II

Oct. 29 – Nov. 10: *Social Contract*, Books III–IV

D. Hume

Nov. 12 – Dec. 1: *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book III, Part II

Dec. 3 – Dec. 8: “Of the Original Contract”, “Of Passive Obedience”,
“Of Superstition and Enthusiasm”

NOTE: The information contained in the course syllabus, other than the grade and absence policies, may be subject to change with reasonable advance notice, as deemed appropriate by the instructor.