

Political philosophy

Todd Karhu

(11 Weeks)

Course Summary

Some political questions can only be answered empirically. (Why isn't Turkey an EU member? How do negative ads affect voter turnout?) But other questions seem less suited to the empirical methods of political science. (Do citizens have an obligation to obey the law? Does the state have the right to tax its richer citizens in order to give to the worse off? What causes can justify going to war?) These are the kinds of question political philosophers ask. This course aims to give students a sense of some of these and other central questions in political philosophy, and introduce them to some of the most important contemporary attempts to answer them. The course is structured around four broad themes:

I. *Obligation and Authority*. Why should governments should command our allegiance? What are the limits to their legitimate coercive authority? Should state policies be neutral among their citizens' values and preferences, or should it promote some values over others?

II. *Economic Justice*. What is the just distribution of resources or wealth within a society? How can an unowned resource become a person's property? And when may governments legitimately redistribute from some to others to achieve justice?

III. *Social Justice*. How, if at all, should the members of groups who have perpetrated injustices make up for them? What does justice demand regarding the role of women in the family? How should political societies respond to the challenges associated with ethnic, national, and religious differences?

IV. *Justice Beyond the State*. What, if anything could justify national borders? What can justify declaring war on another nation, and what is the relationship between the justification of a war and its combatants' rights to kill one another? Do rich states have a moral obligation to give some of their wealth to poorer states? Who is responsible for addressing climate change, and what responsibilities do they have?

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will

1. Have a working knowledge of the state of the debate of contemporary political philosophy.
2. Be able to articulate arguments succinctly and clearly in an essay format.
3. Be better able to think clearly about political topics and evaluate political arguments.

Assessment

There are two pieces of assessment for this course.

- Take-home exam (1,000 to 2,000 words) (35%)¹
- Final essay (maximum 2500 words) (65%)

For the take-home examination, you will select two prompts from a set of prompts inspired by the course readings up to that point and write a 500–1,000-word responses on each. You will have four days to complete the take-home exam.

For your final paper, you will also receive prompts from me, from which you are to select one to write about. Students who wish to write their final papers on matters not covered in the prompts provided may seek my permission to do so sufficiently in advance.

Reading Philosophy

Most of the works we will read are very difficult. You should not feel discouraged if you find them hard going, because even professional philosophers report needing to read a paper twice before they have a solid command of its arguments.

An instructive guide for how to read and take notes on philosophy papers can be found here:

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>

Strong familiarity with the assigned readings should be sufficient for you to do well in the course. Still, I urge students, especially those who lack previous philosophical training, to avail themselves of the many excellent external resources available. Chief among these is:

- *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which has high-quality entries related to most of the topics we will cover.

¹ For those unfamiliar with this format of assessment, you might think of it as something between an exam and an essay. It is like an exam in that you need not read widely and can achieve a high grade with well-argued but succinct responses. It is like an essay in that you have time to think carefully about the issues and refer to the literature as you see fit.

Students would also benefit from consulting any of the following excellent surveys of contemporary political thought:

- C. Fabre, *Justice in a Changing World* (2007)
- W. Kymlicka *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (2nd ed, 2001)
- A. J. Simmons *Political Philosophy* (2007)
- A. Swift *Political Philosophy: A Beginners' Guide for Students and Politicians* (2nd ed, 2006)
- J. Wolff *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (2nd ed, 2006)
- The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which has high-quality entries related to most of the topics we will cover. Beware, however, that this source will not serve well as a substitute for the assigned readings.

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Schedule of Topics and Readings

I. OBLIGATION AND AUTHORITY

Week 1: Why Obey the Law (If at All)?

- Nozick, Robert (1974) *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 90–95.
- Wolff, Robert Paul (1970) *In Defense of Anarchism*. Chapter 1 ('The Conflict Between Authority and Autonomy').
- Raz, Joseph (1986) *The Morality of Freedom*. Chapter 1 ('The Bounds of Authority').

Further Reading:

- Klosko, George (1987) 'Presumptive Benefit, Fairness, and Political Obligation,' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 16 (3): 241–259.
- Wellman, Christopher (1996) 'Liberalism, Samaritanism, and Political Legitimacy,' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (3): 211–237.
- Stiliz, Anna (2006) 'Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism*.' In J. Levy (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Classics in Contemporary Political Theory*.

Week 2: Impartiality and Neutrality

- Quong, Jonathan (2010) *Liberalism Without Perfection*. Chapter 3.
- Mulhall, Stephen and Adam Swift (1996) *Liberals and Communitarians* (2nd ed.), pp. 25–35, chapter 5, pp. 218–221, and pp. 249–58.

Further Reading:

- Rawls, John (1993) *Political Liberalism*, Lectures I and IV.
- Sher, George (1997) *Beyond Neutrality: Perfectionism and Politics*. Chapters 2 and 3.
- Dworkin, Ronald (2002) *Sovereign Virtue*. Chapter 6 ('Equality and the Good Life').

II. ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Week 3: Rawls's Original Position and the Difference Principle

- Rawls (1999) *A Theory of Justice, Revised Edition*:
 - On Reflective Equilibrium and the Original Position, read: §§3–4; §9; §11; §20; §22; §§24–5; §87.
 - On the Difference Principle, read: Rawls §§11–13 (you may safely ignore the more technical bits in smaller print); §§15–17; §21; §26–29; §§48–49.

Week 4: Harsanyi's Critique of Rawls

- Harsanyi, John (1975) 'Can the Maximin Principle Serve as a Basis for Morality? A Critique of John Rawls's Theory'
- Gaertner, Wulf (2009) *A Primer in Social Choice Theory*. Chapter 7. ('Distributive Justice: Rawlsian and Utilitarian Rules')

Further Reading:

- Resnik, Michael (1987) *Choices: An Introduction to Decision Theory*. §6.4 ('Utilitarianism').
- Peterson, Martin (2009) *An Introduction to Decision Theory*, §13.4: ('Harsanyi's Utilitarian Theorems')
- Hausman, Daniel (1995) 'The Impossibility of Interpersonal Utility Comparisons.' *Mind* 104 (415): 473–490.

Week 5: Nozick Against Redistribution

- Nozick, Robert (1974) *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 149–64, 167–74, 262–8, and 290–2 ('Tale of the Slave').
- Cohen, G. A. (1977) 'Robert Nozick and Wilt Chamberlain: How Patterns Preserve Liberty' *Erkenntnis* 11 (1): 5–23.

Further Reading:

- Vallentyne, Peter (2012) 'Left-Libertarianism' in D. Estlund (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook to Political Philosophy*.
- Cohen, G. A. (1995) *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality*. Chapters 3 and 4.

III. SOCIAL JUSTICE

Week 6: Repairing Injustice

- Nozick, Robert (1974) *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, pp. 152–3, 57–8, and 230–1 (read from the beginning of the second paragraph of p. 230).
- Boxill, Bernard (2003) 'A Lockean Argument for Black Reparations.' *The Journal of Ethics* 7 (1): 63–91.
- Thompson, Janna (2008) 'Apology, Justice, and Respect: A Critical Defense of Political Apology.' In M. Gibney, R. Howard-Hassmann, J. Coicaud, and N. Steiner (eds.) *The Age of Apology: Facing Up to the Past*: 31–44.

Further Reading:

- Sher, George (2005) 'Transgenerational Compensation.' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 33 (2): 181–200.
- Herstein, Ori (2009). 'Historic injustice, group membership and Harm to Individuals.' *Harvard Journal of Racial and Ethnic Justice* 25: 229–276.

Week 7: Gender and Justice

- Okin, Susan Moller (1994). Political Liberalism, Justice, and Gender. *Ethics* 105 (1): 23–43.
- MacKinnon, Catharine. *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*. Chapter 10.

Further reading:

- Mill, J. S. "The Subjection of Women." In A. Cudd and R. Andreasen, (eds.) *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*.
- Anderson, Elizabeth (1990) 'Is Woman's Labor a Commodity?' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 19(1): 71–92.

Week 8: Multiculturalism

- Miller, David (2002) 'Liberalism, Equal Opportunities and Cultural Commitments.' In P. Kelly (ed.) *Multicultural Reconsidered: Culture and Equality and Its Critics*. 45–61.
- Scheffler, Samuel (2007) 'Immigration and the Significance of Culture.' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 35 (2): 93–125.

Further reading:

- Okin, Susan Moller (1997) 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?' *Boston Review*. Available at <http://www.bostonreview.net/BR22.5/okin.html>

- Kymlicka, Will (1989) *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*. Chapter 7 ('Liberalism in Culturally Plural Societies').

IV. JUSTICE BEYOND THE STATE

Week 9: What, If Anything, Justifies Borders?

- Carens, Joseph (2013) *The Ethics of Immigration*. Chapter 11 ('The Case for Open Borders').
- Wellman, Christopher (2015) 'In Defense of the Right to Exclude.' In C. Wellman and P. Cole (eds.) *Debating the Ethics of Immigration: Is There a Right to Exclude?*

Further Reading:

- Abizadeh, Arash (2008). 'Democratic Theory and Border Coercion.' *Political Theory* 36 (1): 37–65.

Week 10: War

- McMahan, Jeff (2004) 'The Ethics of Killing in War.' *Ethics* 114 (4): 693–733.
- Fabre, Cecile (2012) *Cosmopolitan War*. Chapter 2 ('Collective Self-Defence').

Further Reading:

- Kamm, F. M. (2004). 'Failures of Just War Theory: Terror, Harm, and Justice.' *Ethics* 114 (4): 650–692.
- Lazar, Seth (2010). 'The Responsibility Dilemma for Killing in War: A Review Essay.' *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 38 (2): 180–213.
- Rodin, David (2014) 'The Myth of National Self-Defense.' In C. Fabre and S. Lazar (eds.) *The Morality of Defensive War*.

Week 11: Climate Change

- Caney, Simon (forthcoming). 'Distributive Justice and Climate Change.' In S. Olsaretti (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of Distributive Justice*.
- Glover, Jonathan (1975) 'It Makes no Difference Whether or Not I Do It.' *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 49 (1): 171–209.

Further Reading:

- Parfit, Derek (2010) 'Energy Policy and the Further Future.' In S. Gardiner, S. Caney, D. Jamieson, and H. Shue (eds.) *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*.
- Barry, Brian (1997) 'Sustainability and Intergenerational Justice.' *Theoria* 44 (89): 43–64.