Politics 9503A/Philosophy 9128A: Central Problems in Political Theory

September-December 2020

Tuesday Zoom meetings 3:30-5:20

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Zoom Office Hours: Wednesdays 1:30-3:00 & by appointment

This course examines some central problems in political theory: political authority, property and the market, distributive justice and equality, liberty, and democracy. We will study both classic works and recent scholarship on these issues. By the end of the course, students will be able to:

(1) Describe the problem of political authority and explain (and evaluate) the main arguments in its favour,
(2) Assess the case for and against private property rights,
(3) Explain the pros and cons of markets in goods and services as a means of organizing an economy,
(4) Describe the problem of distributive justice (‘who should get what?’) and explain the relative merits of competing approaches to this problem,
(5) Evaluate the value of equality and sufficiency as competing goals of just distribution,
(6) Explain the arguments on both sides of the debate between distributive egalitarians and relational egalitarians in their answers to the question, ‘What is the point of equality?’,
(7) Identify the competing conceptions of liberty in the history of political theory and adjudicate between them,
(8) Evaluate the case for and against ‘libertarian paternalism’ as an approach to public policy,
and
(9) Outline the most important arguments against and for democracy as a form of public and private decision-making.

Texts

How Your Final Mark is Determined
30%: Participation
20%: 2,000 word (5-6 page) Short Essay (Due Wednesday October 14 between 10 am and noon)
50%: 4,000-4,500 word (12-15 page) Long Essay (Due Monday December 14 between 10 am and noon)
**Participation: 30%**

To be eligible for this portion of the final grade, students must attend all classes except when there are medical or compassionate reasons, and, **by 4 pm on the Monday before each class, submit a response to the readings (maximum one page in length).** [*Note: you may miss one weeks’ written response without penalty; each further missed response will result in a two-mark deduction from the participation grade.*] This maximum one page, single-spaced response should perform two tasks: (1) succinctly state what you take to be the main point and argument of each reading, and then (2) state what issue or issues the readings pose for discussion. The responses will be assessed on a pass/fail basis.

Students who meet this requirement will receive a mark that reflects their **contributions to seminar discussion** – average contributions will receive marks that translate into the B range, excellent contributions will receive marks that translate into the A or A+ range. I expect that all students will contribute to every class, or at least will not fail to contribute to two classes in a row.

**Short Essay: 2,000 words (5-6 pages) 20% (Due Wednesday October 14)**

Critically discuss the best arguments for and against the duty to obey the law.

The **Short Essay** (due Wednesday October 14, to be submitted electronically between 10 am and noon) is based on our course readings on the topic of political authority. It should be 2,000 words (roughly 5-6 pages, double-spaced). Late essays are subject to a penalty of 2% per day.

**Long Essay: 4,000-4,500 words (12-15 pages) 50% (Due Monday December 14)**

Write an essay on one of the following topics:

1. Defend a considered position on the question of property rights.
2. Critically discuss the arguments for and against markets.
3. Outline and evaluate Rawls’s case for his favoured principles of distributive justice.
5. Critically discuss the following claim: ‘Liberty is the most important political value’.
6. What is democracy and what can be said for and against it?

The **Long Essay**, due Monday December 14, to be submitted electronically between 10 am and noon, is worth 50% of your course grade. The essay should draw on our required readings plus additional readings as appropriate. The essay should be 4,000-4,500 words (roughly 12-15 pages, double-spaced). Late essays are subject to a penalty of 2% per day.
**Weekly Zoom Meetings**

At each meeting, I will begin by offering some background to a few of the issues covered in the day’s assigned readings. This will *not* be a lecture on the readings themselves. Students will be expected to do this reading *before* the meeting. After my background comments, we will have an open discussion of the readings, focusing on their content, plausibility, and implications. Students are encouraged to contribute their own questions and comments.

**September 15:** Introduction: Overview of the course

**September 22: Political Authority I**
Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651, Chapter 13, ‘Of the natural condition of mankind as concerning their felicity and misery’,
http://www2.econ.iastate.edu/classes/econ362/hallam/Readings/LeviathanXiiiXv.pdf


**September 29: Political Authority II**


October 6: Property
John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 1689, Chapter 5,
https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7370/7370-h/7370-h.htm#CHAPTER_V


October 13: The Market

Adam Smith, ‘Of the Expences of the Sovereign or Commonwealth’, from *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776, Book V, Chapter I, Parts I, II, and III (Articles 1 and 2), and Conclusion, excerpt.


Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, 1867, excerpt on appearance and reality.


October 20: Distributive Justice I


October 27: Distributive Justice II


November 3: Reading Week: No Class Today

November 10: Equality


November 17: Liberty I


November 24: Liberty II


December 1: Democracy I
Plato, *Republic*, excerpt.


December 8: Democracy II

Monday December 14: Long Essay to be submitted electronically between 10 am and noon.

Further Reading by Topic

Political Authority
Huemer, Michael, The Problem of Political Authority.
Simmons, A. John, Political Philosophy, OUP, 2008, Chapter 3: Obligations.

Property

The Market
Anomaly, Jonathan, in Jonathan Anomaly et al. (eds.), Philosophy, Politics, and Economics.
Heath, Joseph, Filthy Lucre.

Distributive Justice
Simmons, A. John, Political Philosophy, OUP, 2008, Chapter 4: Justice.
Van Parijs, Philippe, on universal basic income, in Zwolinski (ed.)

Equality

Liberty
Thaler, Richard, and Cass Sunstein, Nudge.

Democracy