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

September-December 2021

Tuesday 3:30-5:20, SSC 4112

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Office Hours: Wednesday 3:00-4:30 and by appointment

This course examines some central problems in political theory: political authority, distributive justice, and freedom. 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) Describe the modern problem of distributive justice (‘who should get what?’) and the pros and cons of the most influential recent work on the problem,
(3) Critically evaluate the debate between liberty and paternalism.

Texts


How Your Final Mark is Determined

30%: Participation
20%: 2,000 word (5-6 page) *Short Essay* (Due before noon Wednesday October 13th)
50%: 4,000-4,500 word (12-15 page) *Long Essay* (Due before noon on Monday December 13th)
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. **Students will be provided with a list of questions to discuss and will be expected to attend with pre-written answers, ready to talk about their answers.**

Students 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 before noon on Wednesday October 13th)*
**Critically discuss the best arguments for and against political obligation.**

The Short Essay (due Wednesday October 13, to be submitted electronically before 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 before noon on Monday December 13th)*
**Write an essay on one of the following topics:**

1. Outline and evaluate Sen’s case for taking a comparative approach to justice.

2. Comparatively evaluate the central claims and arguments in John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty* and Sarah Conly’s *Against Autonomy.***

The Long Essay, due Monday December 13, to be submitted electronically before 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 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. In addition to the pre-written answers mentioned above, students are encouraged to contribute their own questions and comments.
September 14: Introduction: Overview of the course

September 21: Political Obligation and Authority 1

A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, Introduction, Chapters I & II, 3-56.

Plato, *Crito*, [https://www.pitt.edu/~mthompso/readings/crito.pdf](https://www.pitt.edu/~mthompso/readings/crito.pdf)

September 28: Political Obligation and Authority 2


October 5: Political Obligation and Authority 3


October 12: Justice 1


October 13: First Essay due today

October 19: Justice 2

October 26: Justice 3


November 2: Reading Week: No Class Today

November 9: Justice 4


November 16: Freedom 1


November 23: Freedom 2


November 30: Freedom 3


December 7: Freedom 4

Sarah Conly, *Against Autonomy*, Chapters 4-7, 100-194.