

Topics in Social and Political Philosophy

QUARTER YEAR

Instructor information

Instructor: Laurenz Ramsauer
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Course description

In this course, we will discuss some of the most fundamental concepts of social and political philosophy – what is equality? what is justice? and what is freedom? – as well as some of the most complex questions of concrete political life where these concepts find application: when are transactions fair? What are just working conditions? Are closed borders defensible? How far should an open society protect cultural minorities? By introducing students to the central concepts of social and political philosophy, this course will encourage them to reshape and broaden their understanding of their own social and political life. The course will also offer a helpful background for advanced work in social and political philosophy, and provides useful theoretical frameworks for work in political and social sciences.

Texts

All texts will be made available online.

Course requirements

- Thoughtful participation in discussion: 20%
- A 10 minute in-class presentation: 30%
- Final 10–15-pages essay: 50% (due Month/Day)

Assessment

Thoughtful participation in discussion means that you regularly attend class and come prepared to each meeting ready to discuss the material. This not merely involves articulating your own point of view but also the ability to take in what others are saying and to genuinely engage with it. An excellent in-class presentation conveys the content of the reading concisely without overly simplifying, is presented clearly, raises interesting questions and/or criticism, and connects the reading with previous course material. You can find a short guide on how to write a good philosophy paper [here](#), and you can find the rubrics for the assessment of your oral presentation and essay [here](#) and [here](#) respectively. You can also find a brief guide on using AI tools in philosophy papers [here](#).

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities

If you need accommodation, please inform me as soon as possible. All discussions will remain confidential.

Schedule

Week 1: The ideal of equality

Month/Day. Why equality?

Brian Leiter, 'The Death of God and the Death of Morality'

Month/Day. Multiple ideals of equality?

Bernard Williams, 'The idea of equality'

Week 2: Equality of what?

Month/Day. Equality and sufficiency

Harry Frankfurt, 'Equality of Sufficiency?'

Month/Day. Equality and respect

Elizabeth Anderson, 'What is the Point of Equality?'

Optional: T. M. Scanlon, 'The Diversity of Objections to Inequality'

Week 3: What's justice about?

Month/Day. Justice and the 'basic structures' of society

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (chapter 1)

Month/Day. Justice and oppression

Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (chapters 1-2)

Week 4: What is freedom?

Month/Day. 'Negative' and 'positive' freedom

Isaiah Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty'

Optional: Jeremy Waldron, 'Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom'

Month/Day. What's the measure of freedom?

Charles Taylor, 'What's Wrong with Negative Liberty'

Matthew Kramer, *The Quality of Freedom* (excerpts)

Week 5: What makes exchange fair?

Month/Day. Aristotle's puzzle about fair exchange

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* bk. V

Month/Day. Marx's answer

Marx, *Capital* (excerpts)

Week 6: Justice and the workplace

Month/Day. Employment and domination

Elizabeth Anderson, *Private Government* (chapters 1-2)

Optional: Rahel Jaeggi, 'Pathologies of Work'

Month/Day. A right to strike?

Alex Gourevitch, 'The Right to Strike: A Radical View'

Agnes Callard, 'Persuade or Be Persuaded'

Week 7: Race, ideology and intersectionality

Month/Day. Race and ideology

Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (introduction and chapter 1)

Barbara Jeanne Fields, 'Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States'

Month/Day. Privileges and Intersectionality

Combahee River Collective, 'A Black Feminist Statement'

Peggy McIntosh, 'White Privilege and Male Privilege'

Week 8: Is there a right to privacy?

Month/Day. Against privacy

Judith Jarvis Thomson, 'The Right to Privacy'

Optional: T. M. Scanlon, 'Thomson on Privacy'

Month/Day. The private and the political

Carol Hanish, 'The Personal Is Political'

Catharine MacKinnon, 'Abortion: On Public and Private'

Week 9: Communities and Individuals

Month/Day. Immigration and self-determination

Christopher Wellman, 'Immigration and Freedom of Association'

Sarah Fine, 'Freedom of Association Is Not the Answer'

Month/Day. Feminist perspectives on multiculturalism

Susan Moller Okin, 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?'

Martha Nussbaum, 'A Plea for Difficulty'

Week 10: Can there be utopian thought?

Month/Day. For 'ideal-theory'

G.A. Cohen, 'Facts and Principles'

Month/Day. For 'non-ideal theory'

Charles Mills, 'Ideal Theory as Ideology'

Academic Integrity

Academic work is an author's original contribution and properly cites all sources used (such as articles, books, interviews, films, podcasts etc.). This matters for both epistemic and moral reasons. For epistemic reasons, it is crucial that academic work can be double-checked by academic peers, so readers must be able to easily identify all sources an author relied on. For moral reasons, it is crucial that other authors receive the credit they deserve.* Feel free to consult with me before completing your assignments if you should have any concerns about the correct way to reference the work of others. The consequence of plagiarism will be a failing grade. In the unfortunate event that a student is suspected of plagiarism, I also have to follow the university's official guidelines for responding to academic misconduct.

Climate and Inclusion

Philosophy involves the ability to formulate your own and carefully attending to others' arguments, both in writing and in conversation. Even when philosophers disagree, this is not an adversarial activity: philosophy can only be done well as a collective activity with the shared end of furthering our mutual understanding. This requires that all of us be prepared to listen carefully and seriously to what others have to say, no matter how strongly we may disagree. Creating such an inclusive environment matters not merely for moral reasons, but for epistemic reasons too. If some groups are left feeling unwelcome and their perspectives left unheard, we seriously impair our collective ability to make progress in knowledge. It is therefore my goal as an instructor to create an environment where everyone feels respected and welcome. I encourage you to reach out to me if you have suggestions for promoting a welcoming and open academic environment, and I will give them serious consideration. If there are any circumstances that make you feel uncomfortable in our classroom, please let me know. All discussion will remain confidential.

* For instance, these academic integrity and climate statements are modelled after Tyler Zimmer's syllabus on Philosophy of Economics (2022).