

PHIL 167-20: POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Summer 2015 - Syllabus

Instructor: Daniel Threet

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Office Hours: By appointment, most days after class

Note on email: I'll aim to respond to emails within 48 hours, but when class deadlines are approaching, response times may slow—plan ahead and email sooner than later.

Meetings: MTWR 3:15-5:15, White-Gravenor 411

Course Description:

Political debate—whether over foundational principles or fine-grained policy details—is shaped by implicit value commitments and an inherited, often unexamined, normative language. Political philosophy, as an academic discipline, aims to clarify our commitments, evaluate the best arguments for designing our societies in one way rather than another, and make sense of the concepts we rely on in political debate. This course provides an introduction to the field by way of some historically important works of political philosophy and some recent developments. Students will read Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Mill, as well as a selection of contemporary papers. The course pays special attention to competing interpretations of central, highly debated political values—liberty, democracy, and equality. Students will be assessed on the basis of three medium-length formal papers (5-pages, double-spaced), regular informal reflection papers (roughly 300-400 words each), and class participation.

Course Goals:

- Read fundamental texts of political philosophy and gain an understanding of the social contractarian legacy.
- Learn to analyze and formulate philosophical arguments, in class discussion and through formal and informal writing.
- Refine skills for critical and cogent argumentative writing.

Required Texts:

Steven M. Cahn, ed., *Classics of Political and Moral Philosophy*, second edition

0199791155, Oxford University Press

Available in bookstore and online (if buying from Amazon, make sure you get correct edition)

Honor Code:

You are expected and required to uphold standards of academic honesty in this course. You should be familiar with the Standards of Conduct outlined in the Georgetown Honor System and on the Honor Council website

(<http://gervaseprograms.georgetown.edu/honor/>). I am committed to academic integrity and obliged to uphold the Honor System. I will report all suspected cases of academic dishonesty.

Components of Class Grade:

- Class participation: 15% (see below for details)
- 4 informal reflection papers: 10%
- First formal paper: 15%
- Second formal paper: 25%
- Third formal paper: 35%

Late Policy:

Assignments submitted after the deadline will be subject to a half-grade late penalty for each day they are late. (An 'A' paper turned in 24 hours late will be docked to an A-, within 48 hours will be docked to a B+, etc.).

Contact me in advance of the deadline if there are extenuating circumstances, so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

Grade Appeals:

If you believe you deserved a grade different from what you received on an assignment, you may request reconsideration of the grade, if you submit a written request within one (1) week of receiving the grade. The request should include a full explanation of why you think the work deserves reconsideration. Most appeals will not result in a change to the grade. Be aware that reconsideration could result in a higher or lower grade.

Basic Grading Standards:

(This is most pertinent for the formal papers. The language here is borrowed from Professor Kate Withy. Feel free to ask me for more information about the elements of good papers.)

An 'A' paper displays a sophisticated understanding of the arguments under discussion and their immediate and distant implications; it makes an original or interesting contribution (not obvious from the reading or lectures) and provides compelling reasons for agreeing with it; it is elegantly written, and it is clearly and logically structured. 'A' papers are extraordinary and rare.

A 'B' paper displays a solid grasp of, and thoughtful engagement with, the arguments and positions under discussion, and it begins to explore their implications; it includes the student's own interpretive contribution, along with good reasons for agreeing with it; it is clearly organized, coherently argued, on-topic and well-written. 'B' papers are good papers.

A 'C' paper is relevant; shows familiarity and engagement with the material; it may misunderstand or misrepresent key ideas in the texts; it may have few of the student's own ideas or interpretations, or insufficiently explained reasons in support of these; it may have some reasoning problems or gaps; it may have some stylistic or structural problems; or it may be a little dogmatic (i.e., offering unargued claims). A 'C' paper indicates that the student should work on reasoning skills, writing clearly, and/or thinking through the material more deeply.

A 'D' paper may exhibit any of the following: it is off-topic; it displays a weak or spotty grasp of the material; it has little original content; it provides few (if any) reasons for agreeing with the positions argued for, or consists mainly in summary; it is unclearly written or organized; it may be dogmatic; and it may be too short or too long. A 'D' paper indicates that the student should seek assistance with academic writing (see the Resources section of the syllabus).

An 'F' paper is plagiarized (either in whole or in part), or it does not engage with the material, or it is well short of (or well over) the suggested page length, or it cannot be understood.

COURSE READING SCHEDULE

7/6 M	Introduction, no assigned reading
7/7 T	Hobbes - Cahn 373-430
7/8 W	Hobbes - Cahn 373-430
7/9 R	Locke - Cahn 446-517
7/13 M	Locke - Cahn 446-517
7/14 T	Hume and review - Cahn 640-649
7/15 W	Rousseau - Cahn 542-595
7/16 R	Rousseau - Cahn 542-595
7/20 M	Kant - Cahn 760-825
7/21 T	Kant - Cahn 760-825
7/22 W	Mill - Cahn 924-957
7/23 R	Mill - Cahn 958-985, 995-1005
7/27 M	Liberty - articles on Blackboard
7/28 T	Liberty - articles on Blackboard
7/29 W	Democracy - articles on Blackboard
7/30 R	Democracy - articles on Blackboard
8/3 M	Equality - articles on Blackboard
8/4 T	Equality - articles on Blackboard
8/5 W	Equality - articles on Blackboard
8/6 R	Review

ASSIGNMENT SCHEDULE

Paper 1: Due 7/16

Paper 2: Due 7/27

Paper 3: Due 8/6

Informal reflections: At your choosing, any day except 7/6 or 8/6

PARTICIPATION

Active participation in class discussions is absolutely essential to doing well in the course. In our class discussions, we will not simply be studying philosophy, we will be “doing philosophy”—the conversations themselves are where a lot of the substantive work of the course is done. Class participation will account for 20% of your overall grade. What kind of class participation is expected in a philosophy classroom? The following are ways of making yourself an active and helpful contributor:

(1) Read the assigned material at least once before class. Outline the argument, and paraphrase for yourself what you think the author’s conclusion is and how she argues for that conclusion. Write down three or four questions about the article. Those questions can be about the definition of terms or ambiguities in the writing. More substantively, they can be questions about confusions you had when you tried to understand the argument, or places you felt unconvinced by what you read. Imagine what kinds of questions other philosophers we’ve read would ask of this author, and write down those questions as well. Have those questions ready when you come to class.

(2) In class itself, in addition to asking your prepared questions, be ready and willing to raise new questions about things that come up as others speak. It can be helpful to everyone involved if you express confusion when you don’t understand what’s been said. I may ask the class as a whole to consider questions that didn’t occur to you when you were reading, and it’s important that you’re willing to talk even when you aren’t fully confident about what you have to say. Good participation is not simply about demonstrating preparedness and your own knowledge; just as often it is about being willing to experiment and think aloud with others. An ‘A’ grade in participation does not require that everything you say is brilliant.

(3) Be a respectful collaborator in the classroom. A respectful collaborator gives others a chance to speak, remembers what others has said and credits their contributions, and helps others by asking follow-up questions of other students’ comments. Respectful disagreement is also possible. Just as you would tell a good friend when you think they are wrong, because you want to help, think of your classmates as partners. In fact, if we treat the authors we read in the same manner, we are likely to develop more charitable, sophisticated understandings of the material.

(4) Speaking up is essential, but it’s not the only way to participate. Some of us are shyer or less comfortable talking in front of large groups. To some degree, that’s something that has to be overcome in the philosophy classroom, as you have to be willing to talk to do well as a participator. You can make additional contributions, however, by emailing me questions in advance of class or by asking your class partners and friends to raise questions. Coming to talk with me in office hours is also a good way to try out ideas in a smaller environment before introducing them in class discussion.

How will you know how you're doing? There will be one formal opportunity to see your participation grade, at the mid-way point of the semester, as I will send everyone a short note with their current participation grade and a description of how they could improve, if needed. The participation grade is a holistic and qualitative assessment, though, so the halves of the semester are not weighted in any formulaic manner. You can also get a better sense of this at any time by coming to speak with me in office hours.

RESOURCES

Academic Resource Center

<http://academicsupport.georgetown.edu/academic/about-us>

Writing Center

<http://www.library.georgetown.edu/writing-center>

Lauinger 217A

Academic Integrity Guidelines

<http://honorcouncil.georgetown.edu/system/useful-information>

Counseling and Psychiatric Services

<http://studenthealth.georgetown.edu/mental-health/>

Rear of Darnall Hall

202-687-6985

Health Education Services

<http://studenthealth.georgetown.edu/health-promotion>

Poulton Hall, Suite 101

Student Health Center

<http://studenthealth.georgetown.edu/medical-care>

Ground Floor, Darnall Hall

202-687-2200

PHIL 167: POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY INFORMAL REFLECTION PAPERS

You are asked to submit four (4) informal reflection papers throughout the semester, on any day in which we have substantive reading assigned—that is, any day except 7/6 or 8/6. You may submit only one reflection paper per day. Reflection papers should be between 300 and 400 words in length. Submit these reflection papers via email, before the class in which the reading is assigned.

In these papers, you should attempt to raise one or at most two questions about the reading for that day. The reason for limiting you to raising only one or two questions is that I want you to explain in a little depth what you mean by the question, why you think it is an important question to ask, and how you think the author could respond. You may also use the reflection paper to explain something you find confusing, passages that gave you trouble on first reading, or connections between the reading and things you've learned from other classes or between the reading and issues in the news. With all of these, try to limit the reflection paper to a single focus (drawing out a connection, raising a question, flagging an issue as particularly confusing), so that you give yourself enough room to explain what you mean.

The reflection papers are graded for effort and completion. They will be returned to you only if I think the paper does not demonstrate considered thought, or if comments might improve future reflection papers.