

Introduction to Contemporary Political Philosophy

Instructor: Zoltán Miklósi

This course is designed to introduce students into some of the central themes in contemporary political philosophy. The discussion and readings will be structured thematically, with very little focus on the history of political thought. Rather than offering a survey of a wide array of subjects, the course is intended to provide a more in-depth analysis of a few selected issues of primary importance about the ground and scope of the authority of the state. These issues are the following: First, what, if any, are the moral grounds of our obligation to obey the state? In this context, we will take a look into various contemporary theories of political obligation, such as consent theories, natural duty theories, and associative theories. Second, we take up the issue of distributive justice. After taking a look at the once dominant theory of utilitarianism, we discuss several questions related to liberal egalitarianism: when, and to what extent, is inequality between individuals unjust? When does the state treat its citizens as equals? What is the “metric” of egalitarian justice? We will examine Rawls’ Difference Principle and some libertarian and egalitarian challenges to it. Third, we discuss some issues related to the “neutrality” of the state: is it morally permissible for the state to endorse, encourage, or enforce any particular conception of the good life, or some other ideal? Is it permissible for it to enforce the conventional morality and traditions of the community when doing so would infringe the rights of individuals?

Requirements: students are required to read carefully all assigned readings and to actively participate in class discussions. Each student will present one assigned reading in class (max. 15 minutes). There will be a midterm examination and a final paper.

Evaluation: Final paper (50%), midterm exam (25%), participation and presentation (25%)

I. Political Obligation

Week 1: Introduction and a survey of premodern and early modern theories of political authority; consent-based theories

Readings:

- Jean Hampton, Chapter 1-2, *Political Philosophy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998).
- John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, Chapter 2 – suggested.

Week 2: Contemporary theories of political obligation: consent-theories and fairness-based theories

Readings:

- John A. Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligation*, Ch 3, 57-74
- Simmons, Chapter 5, 101-136.

Week 3: Theories of political obligation cont.: justice-based theories

Readings:

- John Rawls, *Theory of Justice* §§19, 51, (Cambridge, Mass.: HUP, 1971)
- Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligation*, Chapter 6, 143-156.
- Jeremy Waldron, “Special Ties and Natural Duties” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1993): 3-30

Week 4: Political obligation plus overview of Distributive Justice

Readings:

- Simmons, “Associative Political Obligations” *Ethics* 106 (1996), 247-273
- Hampton, Ch 4, *PP*

II. Distributive Justice

Week 5: Utilitarianism

Readings:

- Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 10-48

Week 6: Rawls’ Difference Principle and its Libertarian Critique;

Readings:

- Rawls, *TJ* (§§1-4, 11-12)
- Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 149-231
- Nagel, “Libertarianism Without Foundations” *Yale Law Journal* 85:1 (Nov., 1975), pp. 136-149

Week 7: An Egalitarian Critique of the Difference Principle;

Readings:

- G.A. Cohen, “Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 26 (1997): 3-30.

Midterm Exam

Week 8: Conceptions of Equality

Readings:

- Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 57-60, 70-87
- Elisabeth Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality?” *Ethics* 109 (1999), 287-337

III. Individualism, Communitarianism

Week 9: Liberal Individualism

Readings:

- Hampton, Ch 5, *PP*
- Kymlicka, “Liberal Individualism and Liberal Neutrality” *Ethics* 99 (1989), 883-905
- Dworkin, “Liberalism” in *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, c1985), 181-204

Week 10: The Communitarian Challenge

Readings:

- Charles Taylor, “Atomism” in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, Ch 8, 187-210
- Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), 15-65.
- Alaisdar MacIntyre: *Is Patriotism a Virtue?* In R.Arnson (ed.): *Liberalism*, Vol. III, pp. 246-263.

Week 11: Cont.

Readings:

- Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 208-244; Kymlicka, 244-273

Week 12: Liberal Responses

Readings:

- Dworkin, “Liberal Community,” Ch 5 in *Sovereign Virtue*
- Waldron, “Particular Values and Critical Morality,” in *Liberal Rights*, 168-202