

Political Obligation

Lecturer: János Kis

Course Description

States claim to have a right to issue binding directives to those who stay within their jurisdiction. This claim entails that the latter (the subjects) have a moral obligation to obey the directives which are made appropriately. The obligation to obey is said to be defeasible but general: it holds with regard to most directives, most subjects, on most occasions. This is the claim of political obligation. It needs to be justified. Can a justification be given to it? Anarchists and classical Marxists answer the question in the negative. Liberals, traditionally, defend a positive answer for a subclass of states (constitutionally limited democracies). The traditional justifications are, typically, voluntaristic in that they rely on the assumption of some voluntary act (consent, acceptance of benefits from a cooperative scheme, etc.) on the part of the subject. However, in the last couple of decades, an increasing number of liberal philosophers came to adopt a skeptical view on the possibility of justifying political obligation. In an attempt to meet the skeptical objection, more recent authors try build the justification on some moral duty that applies to the subjects without any intervention of a voluntary act of undertaking an obligation (associative duties, a natural duty of justice, etc.). This course will examine the directions in which justification was traditionally sought, the skeptical arguments against the traditional strategies, and the more recent attempts at meeting those arguments.

Course requirements and evaluation

This is a four-credit course for doctoral students in philosophy or Political Science. It has the format: two class-hours of lecture accompanied by two class-hours of seminar discussion. The grade will reflect class participation (50%) and a term paper (50%). Those dissatisfied with their seminar participation are encouraged to submit position papers.

Students are supposed to write a 10-15 page long (Times New Roman 12, double-spaced) final essay.

Expected learning outcomes

Cognitive skills:

Understanding the nature of arguments in political philosophy and of the way they differ from arguments made in institutional political theory.

Developing the ability to make such arguments.

Enhancing the capacity to reconstruct and analyze a position in political philosophy.

Communications skills:

Enabling critically to present a philosophical text.