

Name of Course: Foundations of Political Philosophy

Lecturer: Zoltan Miklosi

2 credits and 4 ECTS credits

Fall Semester, 2010/11

No pre-requisites

Course Level – introductory

Introduction

The course deals with a few of the most fundamental problems of contemporary political philosophy, regarding the ground and scope of the authority of the state to make and enforce rules that bind its citizens. Most people would agree that governments indeed have such authority, and that citizens are usually under a moral obligation to comply with the rules made by the government. However, there are deep disagreements concerning the source of this authority as well as about its proper limits: what are the goals that the government may or must rightfully pursue and by what means? Under what circumstances are its citizens exempt from the obligation to obey its laws? These are among the questions that will be examined in this course. First, we will discuss different theories of political obligation, i.e. theories about the moral basis of our obligation, if any, to comply with laws. The theories discussed will include consent theories, justice-based theories, and reciprocity-based theories. Second, we will attend to the problem of distributive justice: are material inequalities between citizens unjust, and if so, under what circumstances? Is the state required to pursue some profile of distribution of goods in society, and if so, what characterizes that profile? We will discuss utilitarian, egalitarian, and libertarian accounts of justice. Third, is the state permitted to endorse, encourage or enforce any particular conception of the good life, i.e. of how its citizens should lead their lives, what ideals they should pursue, etc.? Is it permitted, in particular, to enforce the ethical or cultural preferences and beliefs of the majority or of the dominant historical tradition? What rights individuals have to pursue their own conception of a worthy, fulfilling life? In this context, we will discuss liberal individualism, perfectionism, and communitarianism.

Goals

The goals of the course are to introduce to students the most important problems and theoretical approaches that preoccupy contemporary political philosophy, to enable them to understand, present and criticize philosophical arguments regarding the problems discussed, and to help them relate such arguments to real-life problems and situations.

Learning outcomes

Improving analytical skills, enhancing the ability to reason logically about normative problems, to identify, characterize and evaluate different theoretical positions and arguments, to construct normative arguments of one's own.

Weekly schedule and readings

I. Political Obligation

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

Readings:

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

Week 2: Consent-based theories

Readings:

- John A. Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligation*, Ch 3, 57-74 – mandatory.

Week 3: Reciprocity-based theories

- Simmons, Chapter 5, 101-36.

Week 4: Justice-based theories

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

II. Distributive Justice

Week 5: Overview of the problem

Readings:

- Hampton, Ch 4, *Political Philosophy* – mandatory.

Week 6: Utilitarianism

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

Week 7: Midterm exam

Week 8: Egalitarianism

Readings:

- Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 57-60, 70-87 – mandatory.
- John Rawls, *TJ* (§§1-4, 11-12)
- Thomas Nagel, “Equality” in Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: CUP, c1979), 106-127 – suggested.

Week 9: Libertarianism

Readings:

- Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 149-182 – mandatory.
- Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 95-159– suggested.

III. Individualism, Perfectionism, Communitarianism

Week 10: Liberal Individualism

- Kymlicka, "Liberal Individualism and Liberal Neutrality" *Ethics* 99 (1989), 883-905 – mandatory.
- Dworkin, "Liberalism" in *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, c1985), 181-204 – suggested.
- Gerald Gaus, "The Moral Foundations of Liberal Neutrality," Christiano and Chritsman (eds.), *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy* (Blackwell, 2009), 81-98 – suggested.
- Stephen Wall, "Perfectionism in Politics: A Defense," *Contemporary Debates*, 99-120.

Week 11: The Communitarian Challenge

Readings:

- Charles Taylor, "Atomism" in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, Ch 8, 187-210

Week 12: Liberal Responses

Readings:

- Dworkin, "Liberal Community," Ch 5 in *Sovereign Virtue* – mandatory.
- Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 208-273 – suggested.
- Waldron, "Particular Values and Critical Morality," in *Liberal Rights*, 168-202 – suggested.

Teaching format: lecture with seminar discussion

Assessment

The final grade is based upon a term-paper (40% of the overall assessment), a midterm exam (20%), participation (10%), and two short position papers to be written in two of the three main topics of the course (15% each).