

## **Introduction to Contemporary Political Philosophy**

### **Instructor: Zoltán Miklósi**

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, as well as their feminist critiques. 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.

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 Obligations*, 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 Obligations*, Chapter 6, 143-156.

- Jeremy Waldron, "Special Ties and Natural Duties" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1993): 3-30

## II. Distributive Justice

Week 4: Overview plus Utilitarianism

Readings:

- Hampton, Ch 4, *PP*
- Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 10-48

Week 5: Liberal Egalitarianism

Readings:

- Rawls, *TJ* (§§1-4, 11-12)
- Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 57-87

Week 6: Libertarian Critique of Liberal Equality;

Readings:

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

Week 7: Egalitarian Critique of Liberal Equality; Midterm Exam

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: Feminist and Other Critiques of Liberal Egalitarianism

Readings:

- Elisabeth Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics* 109 (1999), 287-337
- Kymlicka, "Feminism" *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 377-420.

## II. Individualism, Communitarianism

Week 9: Liberal Individualism

Readings:

- 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
- Alasdair MacIntyre: *Is Patriotism a Virtue?* In R. Arneson (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