

PHIL 240

Introduction to Political Philosophy

Tuesday / Thursday, 11:35 – 12:55

EDUC 129

INSTRUCTOR

Frédéric Armstrong, Dept. of Philosophy, McGill University.

Email: frederick.armstrong@mcgill.ca

Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday from 2pm to 3pm (or by appointment). location: LEA932

TEACHING ASSISTANT

Thomas Colbourne, Dept. of Philosophy, McGill University. Email:

thomas.colbourne@mail.mcgill.ca,

Office Hours: 15:00-17:00. October 3, 4, 25. November 7, 8, 29. December 5, 6.

Location: LEA934

Appointment Requests:

To request an appointment with the instructor or with the TA, please follow this procedure: send an email with the phrase “Appointment request” in the subject line. Follow the “email etiquette” described below. In addition, the email should contain at least **three time-slots** convenient for you. We will respond to confirm which time-slot works better for me. Please **confirm your appointment** after receiving an answer.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- Introducing students to historical and contemporary reflections on major themes and issues related to politics, broadly speaking: political authority and justification for obedience, individual freedom and autonomy, struggles for equality and social justice, distributive justice, feminism and multiculturalism.
- Introducing students to some of the philosophical problems around the study of “politics” and the “political”. Problematizing the notions of “politics” and the “political world” as objects of scientific knowledge. Questioning the role of political philosophy and its relationship with morality and ethics.
- Giving students some of the tools necessary to assess current political views with careful philosophical analysis, arguments and critical thought and, in turn, to defend their own views carefully and systematically.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Political philosophy is a strange area of philosophy. It is often described as fundamentally normative, just like ethics. The aim of political philosophy, some would say, is not to merely *describe* political orders, but to *prescribe* how political orders *ought to be*. It asks, in other words, what a *good* or *just* political order consists in. This leads to an inquiry into the most fundamental questions that concern our political lives: Should we join others to form a political community in the first place? If yes, what should the order of this community be? Can we do without a coercive state (as anarchists and some indigenous theorists claim)? If we need a state, how can we justify the rule of some people over others? What is the best state? How should goods be distributed? Is it right that we own certain things privately? Is it right that some people own more than others? How should socially created goods be distributed? Are there things the State simply cannot do? Are individual rights absolute? Are there limits to human freedom? These issues have not yet been settled. While there is no shortage of answers, they remain contested. Political philosophy is this ongoing debate.

But political philosophy can also be understood as a practice. When we engage in political philosophy, we engage in a political act. Political discourses are used to justify many things one might find objectionable. An analysis of these discourses often leads to the deconstruction of certain assumptions of political life and to propositions for alternatives. On this line of thought, the role of the political philosopher is not necessarily to draw the contours of the best possible political order, but to highlight the contradictions and tensions within the far-from-ideal existing orders. These, in turn, can force philosophers to make prescriptions about how we should change political institutions.

Political philosophy also strives to clarify just how we can and should study political behavior and political orders. Should we treat institutions like the State, the government, unions, firms, etc., as independent entities that act in the world or should we rather understand their actions as the accumulation of the actions of different individuals? Given what we know about human psychology, should the government seek to organize its institutions to promote the welfare of individuals, without their consent? These questions are particularly relevant for political science and other social sciences, but they are also important for philosophy in general. Indeed, determining just what kind of objects “society”, “states”, “governments”, “citizens” are and how we can and should study them has important implications for metaphysics and epistemology.

Finally, like all philosophy, political philosophy helps us improve our capacity to detect fallacies, contradictions and tensions in political and social discourse. Learning about politics and the political world, from a philosophical perspective, allows us to think for ourselves and to be better citizens.

This means that political philosophy is not just an abstract, theoretical exercise. Clarifying our views on the normative foundations of the political order also allows us to critically assess existing political orders in light of these norms. Moreover, if we live in a society in which we actually have political power, at least in principle, we can contribute to shaping the political order on the basis of the norms we have come to endorse.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

(25% * 2) 2 Short essays of 750-850 words (give and take 10%), due on **Monday, October 9 and November 13**. Essay questions will be announced and briefly discussed on September 28 and November 2, respectively.

(40%) Final essay of 2000-2500 words (give and take 10%), due on **Tuesday, December 12**. On November 28, students will again be given around 5 final essay questions. The questions will draw on topics and readings included in the final sections of the course. These questions will be more ambitious than those provided for the short essay, in that they will require students to cover more material, and to make a distinct argument of their own. Usually they will require explanations for at least two positions/arguments, a “compare and contrast” and a statement of position from the student.

Students will be required to answer their chosen essay question in light of the readings **and** lectures associated with each topic. These are not research papers and should not require additional sources. Our goal is to assess your understanding of the course material and your work will be assessed on this basis only. Using external sources usually requires some explanation of the source. This will take invaluable space *away* from the actual object of the question (750 words is *short*). Use of external sources is not prohibited but not encouraged either. Do so at your own risk. A bibliography *is not* required, but abbreviated citations for course material and full citations for any external source are **mandatory**.

All assignments must be submitted electronically as a **Word document** (not pdf) via MyCourses. The essay should be submitted at the latest at **11:59pm on the due date**. To account for unforeseen “technical delays” and clogs in Internet’s series of tubes, a period of grace of 30 minutes will be granted. After 12:30am, papers will be penalized by 3% per day (weekends included).

To ensure unbiased assessment of your work, please submit all work **anonymously**. Name your first document “PHIL240_Assignment 1_Student No.” and include the same information in the documents themselves.

(10%) Quizzes: In addition to the essays, students must take 3 quizzes during the semester, on week 3, 9 and 13. These will be a mix of multiple choice questions and definitions for technical terms and concepts studied during the course and in the readings. These will cover all the courses topics and should be answerable in one or two full sentences. Answers to will be graded with .5 increments. This exercise will be done on MyCourses. You will have 1 hour to do the quiz. You can choose when you take the quiz.

Submitting *each* of these exercises is required to pass the course.

Extensions or exceptions for written exercises and final paper.

Extensions will be granted only in exceptional circumstances like serious illness or family emergency and documentation will be required. To apply for an extension, see me or contact me by email. Extensions will be granted in an email and this email **must be attached** to your paper when it is submitted (via screen-capture).

Evaluation

Essays will be graded according to these criteria: (i) clarity, (ii) accuracy, (iii) relevance to the chosen question, (iv) critical distance from the arguments of the discussed authors (i.e. assess the arguments personally and refrain from saying that such and such is correct because this author says so), (v) demonstration of familiarity with the relevant readings, (vi) structure, (vii) respect for methodological rules and guidelines.

Our questions are designed to be answerable in the given amount of words. Even if adding information seems to make the text more complete, it is costly in terms of accuracy. Identifying what is important and focusing only on what is important is a skill you need to develop. Essays should answer the question directly and explicitly. The paper should follow a clear structure that the reader can easily follow. If there are two question marks in the essay topic, this means that we expect answers for *at least* two separate questions. The structure of the questions also gives clues as to how you should structure your own paper. For example, if a question asks you to explain a concept and to apply it to a certain situation, we expect your paper to follow the following structure: Introduction – Explanation of the concept – application to a situation. An answer that merely states an author’s positions or arguments will not be fully satisfactory. We require *explanations*. This means that arguments and positions should be *clarified*, *contextualized* and *put in relation with one another*. (*Ceci était une explication.*)

When asked to provide his or her opinion on an issue, the student should clearly and explicitly spell out his or her position on the issue. This position statement should be clearly distinguishable from the expository part of the essay. Opinions should be backed by careful philosophical analysis of the arguments under study. Personal anecdotes and other anecdotal evidence are *not* constitutive of careful philosophical analysis. Use them at your own risk.

We’re not expecting nor demanding originality, but we are expecting careful philosophical *analysis*. This means attending to the arguments, assessing their plausibility and consistency and providing nuanced critique. This also means that we are not looking for knock-out arguments. Remember: a carefully nuanced argument that makes a small but cogent point is much stronger than a strongly worded argument that is easily trumped by counter-examples. Proceed according to the principles of philosophical charity: assume the arguments have a rational basis and consider them according to their best possible interpretation. Even if you passionately disagree with a position, saying it is absurd will not work. If I assigned it, it is because it is *not* absurd. That does not mean it’s right, though.

COURSE MATERIALS

Copies of Harry Frankfurt’s *On Bullshit* will be available at Paragraph on McGill College street in around 2-3 weeks. The book is also available at the McLennan library and you can “borrow” an electronic copy for 14 days through McGill’s Library website. There are 30 digital copies.

All other texts will be made available on MyCourses for download.

McGill Policy Statements

Language of Submission:

“In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives.”

« Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l’un des objets est la maîtrise d’une langue). »

Academic Integrity:

“McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures” (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).

« L’université McGill attache une haute importance à l’honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l’on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l’étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/).»

Nota Bene : I have at my disposal the near-infinite power of *Google*TM. If you have found and copied a sentence without proper citation, chances are a simple input in the search engine will lead *directly* to the source – this is possible even if you took the sentence from a physical book. Copying a sentence without proper citation (that includes not putting “” around the citation) is plagiarism *even* if you write the reference.

Extraordinary circumstances:

“In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.”

DETAILED SYLLABUS

Week 1:

September 5: INTRODUCTORY CLASS SESSION

I – THE NATURE OF JUSTICE AND POLITICAL POWER

September 7:

- (1) Plato, Excerpts from Book I of the *Republic*
- (2) Aristotle, Book 1 of the *Politics*, Parts I, II, III, VII, XII and XIII
- (3) Locke, John. “Of Political Power”, in *Two Treatises of Governement*
- (4) Rawls, John. Sections 1-3 of *A Theory of Justice*.
- (5) Weber, Max. Excerpt from *Politics as Vocation*
- (6) Suchon, Gabrielle. Excerpts from *Treatise on Ethics and Politics, Divided into Three Parts*

Week 2:

II – JUSTIFYING THE STATE

LEGITIMATIZING THE STATE: THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

September 12:

- (1) Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, Book I, Book II (ch. 1-6)
- (2) Locke, John, Chapter VIII, IX, XIX (Excerpts) of *Two Treatises of Civil Government*

LEGITIMATIZING THE STATE: UTILITARIANISM

September 14:

- (1) Hume, David. Excerpts from *A Treatise of Human Nature* and *On the Social Contract*
- (2) Mill, John Stuart. “Introduction”, *On Liberty*
- ~~(3) Excerpts from Sidgwick, Henry, *The Methods of Ethics*, “Laws and Promises”~~

Week 3:

IN DEFENSE OF ANARCHY

September 19:

- (1) Wolff, Robert Paul. 1998. *In Defense of Anarchism*. Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press. Chapter 1 and 2

III – PHILOSOPHICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS

NATURAL RIGHTS

September 21:

- (1) Natural Rights: excerpts from Hobbes, ~~Rousseau~~ and Locke
- (2) Hart, H. L. A. 1955. “Are There Any Natural Rights?” *Philosophical Review* 64 (2): 175–191.

Week 4:

PROPERTY RIGHTS AS NATURAL RIGHTS

September 26:

- (1) Locke, John. “On Property”, in *Two Treatises of Government*
- (2) Nozick, Robert. Excerpt from *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, pp.169-171

CRITIQUES OF NATURAL RIGHTS

September 28:

- (1) Bentham, Jeremy. Excerpts from *Anarchical Fallacies*
- (2) Marx, Karl. Excerpts from *On the Jewish Question*

Week 5:

ON RIGHTS – A CONTEMPORARY ANALYTICAL APPROACH

October 3:

- (1) Joel Feinberg, “The Nature and Value of Rights” in, *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1970, pp. 243-260.

IV – MARXISM AND SOCIALISM

MARXIST POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

October 5:

- (1) Marx, Karl. Excerpts from 1844 Manuscripts.
- (2) Marx, Karl. Excerpts from *The Communist Manifesto*

Week 6:

October 10:

HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AND SOME CRITIQUES

- (1) Marx, Karl. “Critique of the Gotha Program”
- (2) Wright, Erik Olin. 2010. “Thinking About Alternatives to Capitalism”, Chapter 4 in *Envisioning Real Utopias*. London; New York: Verso. 89-109
- (3) Hayek, Friedrich. “Introduction” and excerpt from Chapter 5, in *The Fatal Conceit*

AN ALTERNATIVE TO BOURGEOIS/LIBERAL SOCIAL ONTOLOGY – MARXIST SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

October 12:

- ~~(1) Wright, Erik Olin. 2015. “From Grand Paradigm Battles to Pragmatist Realism: Towards and Integrated Class Analysis”, in *Understanding Class*.~~

V – LIBERTY AND AUTONOMY

Week 7:

INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY AND THE HARM PRINCIPLE

October 17:

- (1) Christman, John. 2015. “Autonomy in Moral and Political Philosophy.” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2015. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.
- (2) Dworkin, Gerald. 1972. “Paternalism.” *The Monist* 56 (1): 64–84. doi:10.2307/27902250.

October 19:

LIBERTARIAN PATERNALISM

- (1) Sunstein, Cass R., and Richard H. Thaler. 2003. “Libertarian Paternalism Is Not an Oxymoron.” *The University of Chicago Law Review* 70 (4): 1159–1202. doi:10.2307/1600573. **(Skip Part IV and V)**
- (2) Thaler, Richard H., and Cass R. Sunstein. 2003. “Libertarian Paternalism.” *The American Economic Review* 93 (2): 175–79. doi:10.2307/3132220.

Week 8:

TWO CONCEPTS OF LIBERTY

October 24:

- (1) Berlin, Isaiah. “Two Concepts of Liberty” (excerpts)
- (2) Swift, Adam. *Political Philosophy*, Chapter 2, pp. 57-73, 82-94.

October 26:

TAYLOR'S CRITIQUE OF BERLIN

- (1) Taylor, Charles. "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty"

VI – EQUALITY AND DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE

Week 9:

October 31:

RAWLS' THEORY OF JUSTICE

- (1) Rawls, John. 1985. "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14 (3): 223–51.
(2) Kymlicka, Will. 2002. "Liberal Equality", chap. 3 (excerpts), in *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (2nd edition).

November 2:

SPECIAL THEME FOR MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF THE CITY

- (1) Young, Iris Marion. 2011. "City Life and Difference." In *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 226–56. Princeton University Press.

Week 10:

November 7:

A FEMINIST RESPONSE TO RAWLS

- (1) Okin, Susan Moller. 1987. "Justice and Gender." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 16 (1): 42–72. doi:10.2307/2265205.

November 9:

EQUALITY IS NOT WHAT MATTERS

- (1) Frankfurt, Harry. 1987. "Equality as a Moral Ideal." *Ethics*, 21–43.
(2) Vonnegut, Kurt Jr., 1961, "Harrison Bergeron"

Week 11:

VII – RADICAL CRITIQUES AND POST-COLONIALISM

November 14:

MICHEL FOUCAULT: DISCOURSE, POWER, TRUTH

- (1) Foucault, Michel. Excerpts from the introduction of *History of Sexuality*, Vol.1

(2) Foucault, Michel. "What is Critique?"

November 16:

POST-COLONIAL CRITIQUES

- (1) Said, Edward. Excerpts from *Orientalism*
- (2) Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1985. "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1): 243–61. doi:10.2307/1343469

Week 12:

VIII – MULTICULTURALISM, RECOGNITION AND DIFFERENCE

November 21:

KYMLICKA'S LIBERAL MULTICULTURALISM

- (1) Kymlicka, Will. 1995. *Multicultural Citizenship*, Selected Excerpts.
- (2) Joppke, Christian. 2017. "Multiculturalism: Not One but Many Things", chapter 2, in *Is Multiculturalism Dead?: Crisis and Persistence in the Constitutional State*. John Wiley & Sons, pp.7-19

November 23:

AN INDIGENOUS RESPONSE TO KYMLICKA

- (1) Turner, Dale. 2006. "Liberalism's Last Stand: Minority Rights and the (Mis)recognition of Aboriginal Sovereignty", in *This Is Not a Peace Pipe*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- (2) (OPTIONAL): Song, Sarah. 2008. "The Subject of Multiculturalism: Culture, Religion, Language, Ethnicity, Nationality, and Race?" in *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, B. de Bruin and C. Zurn (eds.), New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Week 13:

IX – POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: ON BULLSHIT AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

November 28:

- (1) Frankfurt, Harry G. 2005. *On Bullshit*. 1 edition. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

November 30:

- (1) Scanlon, T., 1972. "A Theory of Freedom of Expression," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1(2): 204–226.
- (2) Mill, David van. 2017. "Freedom of Speech." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2017. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/freedom-speech/>.

Week 14:

December 5: Conclusion

EMAIL ETIQUETTE

Email is a wonderful communication medium. It is fast, convenient, and accessible. Students are expected and encouraged to use email for their inquiries. However, responding to emails is a lot of work. To make this work as efficient and pleasant as possible, I ask that you follow these simple rules.

1. *Before* writing the email, **check the syllabus** and other course material. Most questions are already addressed in these resources.
2. Use your McGill address.
3. Start with a new message (i.e. do not reply to a past email to ask a new question).
4. Include the course number in the subject line as well as a short description of the object of the email.
5. I personally don't think excessive formality is necessary for human communications. However, a minimal level of formality is necessary to convey respect and courtesy – politeness is very important for human communications. Please begin your message with something like “Dear Frédéric,…” , “Hello Thomas,…” , or simply with “Frédéric,…” .
 - a. **General rule:** it is always better to err on the side of formality than to err on the side of impoliteness.
 - b. **Be advised: some people think formalities are more important than I do (see rule 5.a).**
6. Contextualize your question. An email with something like : “I don't understand the question.”, when there are in fact 5 questions, will not receive an answer.
7. Sign the message with your full name and add the usual niceties (e.g. “Best wishes”, “Best regards”, “Best”, “Cordially”, etc.
8. Some issues are not properly discussed over email. If you do not understand the grading, are unhappy with your grade, etc., you should request an appointment with your TA and explain the object of the appointment or simply attend office hours to discuss the issue.
9. Allow a reasonable delay for response. Short questions and appointment requests should not take more than a week to be answered. However, do not expect an answer outside of working hours (after 5pm and on weekends). Remember: answering emails is actual *work*. This means that a request for an appointment on Monday sent on Friday after 5pm will not work.
10. It is *possible* that we forget to answer some emails. If this happens, you can send a polite reminder after a reasonable delay (as per rule 9).

A note on the use of computers and other electronic devices:

Numerous studies show that the use of mobile computers in classrooms is detrimental to the students who use them *and* to those around them.ⁱ Student should *actively* listen to the lecture and this is very difficult to do when computers give you the illusion you can multitask effectively – unfortunately, human beings are *really* bad at multitasking... For these reasons, it would be legitimate to ban the use of computers in the lecture hall...

This being said, this measure would be paternalistic – it would interfere with a person’s actions, without his or her consent, for his or her “own good” – and such measures are highly controversial in political philosophy. Also, given that most readings are transmitted in the form of pdfs, I would effectively force you to print out the readings. This *would be a good* idea, but I can’t legitimately force this onto you. Those who think they can succeed with their laptop can use it.

In the interest of your peers, those who decide to use a computer will be kindly asked to sit on the **left side** of the lecture hall (i.e. to my right-hand side).

A note on Wikipedia and other sources:

Wikipedia is an extraordinary project and resource. It is truly amazing! Having said that, one should be very careful about using it as a resource for academic work. It’s not especially unreliable on most issues. It is, however, unreliable on contentious and politically charged issues. It is also dynamic and in constant flux. The page you cite today maybe different tomorrow, when I read your paper. As a teaching team, the task of instructor and TAs is to keep track of the student’s learning. To do this, we need to accurately trace the source of your reasoning in order to assess your understanding. If the source you cite change, we have no way of doing that. Therefore, while Wikipedia is a good place to start, it should only be a stepping stone to other more “permanent” resources.

Do not quote from blog posts (e.g. angelfire.com, wordpress.com, etc.) and other unreliable and unreviewed sources. Again, remember that I have at my disposal the power of *Google*TM and I am not afraid of using it.

ⁱ cf. Hembrooke, Helene, and Geri Gay. 2003. “The Laptop and the Lecture: The Effects of Multitasking in Learning Environments.” *Journal of Computing in Higher Education* 15 (1): 46–64. doi:10.1007/BF02940852.; Sana, Faria, Tina Weston, and Nicholas J. Cepeda. 2013. “Laptop Multitasking Hinders Classroom Learning for Both Users and Nearby Peers.” *Computers & Education* 62 (March): 24–31. doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2012.10.003; Carter, Susan Payne, Kyle Greenberg, and Michael S. Walker. 2017. “The Impact of Computer Usage on Academic Performance: Evidence from a Randomized Trial at the United States Military Academy.” *Economics of Education Review* 56 (February): 118–32. doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2016.12.005.