

Politics 9503A/Philosophy 9128A: Central Problems in Political Theory

September-December 2021

Tuesday 3:30-5:20, SSC 4112

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Office Hours: Wednesday 3:00-4:30 and by appointment

This course examines some central problems in political theory: political authority, distributive justice, and freedom. We will study both classic works and recent scholarship on these issues. By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- (1) Describe the problem of political authority and explain (and evaluate) the main arguments in its favour,
- (2) Describe the modern problem of distributive justice ('who should get what?') and the pros and cons of the most influential recent work on the problem,
- (3) Critically evaluate the debate between liberty and paternalism.

Texts

A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009, available online at Weldon library.

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859.

Sarah Conly, *Against Autonomy: Justifying Coercive Paternalism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

How Your Final Mark is Determined

30%: Participation

20%: 2,000 word (5-6 page) *Short Essay* (Due before noon Wednesday October 13th)

50%: 4,000-4,500 word (12-15 page) *Long Essay* (Due before noon on Monday December 13th)

Participation: 30%

To be eligible for this portion of the final grade, students must attend all classes except when there are medical or compassionate reasons. **Students will be provided with a list of questions to discuss and will be expected to attend with pre-written answers, ready to talk about their answers.**

Students will receive a mark that reflects their **contributions to seminar discussion** – average contributions will receive marks that translate into the B range, excellent contributions will receive marks that translate into the A or A+ range. I expect that all students will contribute to every class, or at least will not fail to contribute to two classes in a row.

Short Essay: 2,000 words (5-6 pages) 20% (Due before noon on Wednesday October 13th)

Critically discuss the best arguments for and against political obligation.

The *Short Essay* (due Wednesday October 13, to be submitted electronically before noon) is based on our course readings on the topic of political authority. It should be 2,000 words (roughly 5-6 pages, double-spaced). Late essays are subject to a penalty of 2% per day.

Long Essay: 4,000-4,500 words (12-15 pages) 50% (Due before noon on Monday December 13th)

Write an essay on one of the following topics:

1. Outline and evaluate Sen's case for taking a comparative approach to justice.
2. Comparatively evaluate the central claims and arguments in John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* and Sarah Conly's *Against Autonomy*.

The *Long Essay*, due Monday December 13, to be submitted electronically before noon, is worth 50% of your course grade. The essay should draw on our required readings plus additional readings as appropriate. The essay should be 4,000-4,500 words (roughly 12-15 pages, double-spaced). Late essays are subject to a penalty of 2% per day.

Weekly Meetings

At each meeting, I will begin by offering some background to a few of the issues covered in the day's assigned readings. This will *not* be a lecture on the readings themselves. Students will be expected to do this reading *before* the meeting. After my background comments, we will have an open discussion of the readings, focusing on their content, plausibility, and implications. In addition to the pre-written answers mentioned above, students are encouraged to contribute their own questions and comments.

September 14: Introduction: Overview of the course

September 21: Political Obligation and Authority 1

A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, Introduction, Chapters I & II, 3-56.

Plato, *Crito*, <https://www.pitt.edu/~mthomps/readings/crito.pdf>

September 28: Political Obligation and Authority 2

A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, Chapters III-V, 57-142.

John Rawls, 'Legal Obligation and the Duty of Fair Play', in John Rawls, *Collected Papers*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999, 117-129.

October 5: Political Obligation and Authority 3

A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, Chapters VI-VIII, 143-201.

A. John Simmons, 'Associative Political Obligations', *Ethics* 106 (2), 1996, 247-273.

October 12: Justice 1

Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009, Part I: The Demands of Justice, vii-xix and 1-152.

October 13: First Essay due today

October 19: Justice 2

Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009, Part II: Forms of Reasoning, 155-221.

October 26: Justice 3

Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009, Part III: The Materials of Justice, 225-317.

November 2: Reading Week: No Class Today

November 9: Justice 4

Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009, Part IV: Public Reasoning and Democracy, 321-415.

November 16: Freedom 1

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Chapters I & II.

November 23: Freedom 2

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, Chapters III-V.

November 30: Freedom 3

Sarah Conly, *Against Autonomy*, Chapters 1-3, 1-99.

December 7: Freedom 4

Sarah Conly, *Against Autonomy*, Chapters 4-7, 100-194.

Monday December 13: Long Essay to be submitted electronically before noon.