

Politics 3212G Syllabus

Politics 3212G: Theories of Human Rights

January-April 2026

Wednesday 1:30-3:20

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Office Hours: Monday 12:00-1:00pm, and by appointment

This political theory course examines attempts to make sense of the idea of human rights. Some questions to be addressed include: What are human rights? When and how did they originate? How are they justified? What do human beings have rights to? What are the central historical objections to human rights? What is the point of a theory of human rights? Are human rights best understood as moral rights we possess in virtue of being human? Or are they best defined by their practical role in international politics? What is the relationship between basic moral rights and international human rights law? Can groups hold human rights?

Each meeting consists in a lecture on the topics and arguments in the week's readings, along with opportunities for students to introduce questions and concerns about the readings and the issues they raise.

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- (1) Describe competing answers to the question, 'What are human rights?', and understand the historical development of approaches to this question,
- (2) Identify and assess the arguments for and against specific human rights (including life, autonomy, liberty, welfare, privacy, and democracy),
- (3) Understand the main justifying theories of human rights,
- (4) Explain some of the main objections to human rights in European history and in recent scholarship.

Texts

Jeremy Waldron (ed.), *Nonsense upon Stilts: Bentham, Burke, and Marx on the Rights of Man*, London and New York: Methuen, 1987. (Reprinted: Abingdon: Routledge, 2015)

James Griffin, *On Human Rights*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

These may be purchased at the Western Bookstore as paperbacks or e-books. They are also available electronically via the Weldon library.

How Your Final Mark is Determined

10%: *Attendance*

45%: *In-Class Essays*: Wednesday February 11, 2026, during regular class time
45%: *Final Exam* (two hours), during the final examination period in April (to be scheduled by the Registrar, date to be announced)

10%: Attendance

Students must attend all classes except when there are medical or compassionate reasons. Attendance will be taken at each class meeting.

45% In-class Essays

Wednesday February 11, 2026, during regular class time.

Write two in-class essays, 55-minutes each, answering the following questions:

1. With specific reference to Jeremy Waldron, Jeremy Bentham, and Philip Schofield, *outline and evaluate Jeremy Bentham's view of natural rights?*
2. With specific reference to Jeremy Waldron, Karl Marx, David Leopold, and Steven Lukes, *outline and evaluate Karl Marx's view about rights?*

45% Final Exam (two hours): during final examination period in April (to be scheduled by the Registrar, date to be announced)

Schedule

January 7: How did the natural rights tradition develop in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? What is in the 1789 'Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen'?

Jeremy Waldron (ed.), *Nonsense upon Stilts: Bentham, Burke, and Marx on the Rights of Man*, 1-28: Natural rights in the 17th and 18th centuries; the French Declaration

Background reading: James Nickel and Adam Etinson, 'Human Rights', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2024, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rights-human/>

January 14: On what grounds does Jeremy Bentham criticize natural rights?

Jeremy Waldron (ed.), *Nonsense upon Stilts: Bentham, Burke, and Marx on the Rights of Man*, 29-76: Jeremy Bentham, *Nonsense upon Stilts*

Philip Schofield, 'Jeremy Bentham's *Nonsense upon Stilts*', *Utilitas*, 15 (1), 2003, 1-26.

January 21: What are the highlights of Edmund Burke's political career? In Burke's critique of natural rights, what is the role of appeals to tradition, consequences, natural law, reason, feeling, abstraction, and society?

Jeremy Waldron (ed.), *Nonsense upon Stilts: Bentham, Burke, and Marx on the Rights of Man*, 77-118; Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*; Michael Freeman, *Edmund Burke and the Critique of Political Radicalism*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980, Chapter 5: The Principles of Politics, 84-106.

January 28: How did Marx's intellectual development provide the background for his critique of liberal rights? Do the rights of man present human beings as egoistic and atomistic? Should Marx be interpreted as a critic or defender of rights?

Jeremy Waldron (ed.), *Nonsense upon Stilts: Bentham, Burke, and Marx on the Rights of Man*, 119-150; Karl Marx, 'On the Jewish Question'

Steven Lukes, 'Justice and Rights', in Alan Ryan (ed.), *Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993, 164-184.

David Leopold, *The Young Karl Marx: German Philosophy, Modern Politics, and Human Flourishing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 150-163: 'Marx and Rights'.

February 4: What is the career of human rights in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? How are contemporary human rights related to the eighteenth-century Rights of Man? How should we understand the four main objections: abstraction, rationalism, individualism, and egoism?

Jeremy Waldron (ed.), *Nonsense upon Stilts: Bentham, Burke, and Marx on the Rights of Man*, 151-209; Waldron, 'Nonsense upon Stilts? A reply'

Martha Nussbaum, 'The Feminist Critique of Liberalism', in *Sex and Social Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 55-80.

February 11: In-class essays, during regular class time. Two essays: 55 minutes each. Bring pens to write your essays.

Reading Week: February 14-22, 2026

February 25: Describe the Enlightenment project on human rights. What is the difference between a substantive and a structural explanation of human rights? Describe the three main grounds of human rights.

James Griffin, *On Human Rights*, Introduction and Chapters 1 & 2 (1-56).

Richard Dagger, 'Rights' in Terence Ball et al. (eds.), *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 292-308.

March 4: What should be done when human rights conflict with each other? With what else can human rights conflict? Whose rights are human rights?

James Griffin, *On Human Rights*, Chapter 3 & 4 (57-95).

David Miller, 'Personhood versus Human Needs as Grounds for Human Rights', in Roger Crisp (ed.), *Griffin on Human Rights*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 152-169.

March 11: Duties, Metaphysics, Relativity, Ethnocentricity

James Griffin, *On Human Rights*, Chapters 5-7 (96-145).

James Nickel, *Making Sense of Human Rights*, second edition, 2007, Chapter 11: Eight Responses to the Relativist, 168-184.

March 18: Highest-level human rights: autonomy, liberty, welfare

James Griffin, *On Human Rights*, Chapters 8-10 (149-187).

Charles Jones, 'Human Rights and Normative Agency', in Neil Hibbert, Charles Jones, and Steven Lecce (eds.), *Justice, Rights, and Toleration*, Montreal and Ottawa: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2024, 97-118.

March 25: International law, life and death, privacy

James Griffin, *On Human Rights*, Chapters 11-13 (191-241).

Maurice Cranston, 'Are There Any Human Rights?', *Daedalus* 112 (4), 1983, 1-17.

April 1: Democracy, group rights

James Griffin, *On Human Rights*, Chapters 14 & 15 (242-276).

Jeremy Waldron, 'Can communal goods be human rights?', Jeremy

Waldron, *Liberal Rights*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 339-369.

April 8: Course Summary and Exam Preparation

Final Exam: during final examination period in April (to be scheduled by the Registrar, date to be announced).