

***Politics 3534G: Contemporary Political Theory***  
**Winter 2026**

Mondays 11:30-1:20

UC - 3225

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*Office:* SSC 7211

*Office Hours:* TBD

**Course Outline**

This course applies foundational concepts in political theory (e.g., freedom, equality, justice, rights) to a variety of contemporary social issues. In the first class we will agree on a list of topics to cover, so please consider the options (below) in advance and come prepared with your preferences.

The focus will be on developing an understanding of how to develop your own views of these matters: what do *you* think and, more importantly *why*? The emphasis throughout the course will be on critical review of the arguments provided in the readings and by your fellow students. Each week the two readings will provide differing views on the same question. Your job shall be to reflect on and evaluate the persuasiveness of the arguments in each. In each seminar we will discuss the merits and demerits of each article as well as comment on the topic at large. Your essays and exam will require you to be able to argue persuasively, taking due consideration of others' arguments.

**Assessment**

***Essay Proposal (15%): Due March 23 at 3pm***

You must submit a proposal outlining your proposed topic/question and your plan to address it. This includes your thesis (i.e., what you will argue) and a brief outline of the major arguments you plan to make. You must also include 5 academic sources that you will cite in your paper (no more than 2 can be from the weekly reading list), and for each provide a paragraph (4-10 sentences) explanation of what each source argues and why you have selected it. For example, you may use the source to argue for your thesis. You might also use a source that argues *against* what you will argue. Or perhaps you will use a source that provides empirical data in support/against a position that you are analyzing. Whatever the case, you must clearly explain how the source will be used and why it serves the purpose for which you have selected it. The more specific (e.g., you might know specific quotes that you want to use in your paper) the better. I understand that plans can change in the course of writing, so you will not be held to the exact outline or even thesis that you provide in the proposal. However, the topic/question cannot be changed after the proposal is approved. 5% per day (or part thereof) late, including weekends. No proposals will be accepted after 7 days, except as recommended by Academic Counselling.

**Essay (27%): Due April 6 at 11:30am. Please submit on OWL and bring a hard copy to class.**

1500 words due on a topic of your choice, related to the course content. I strongly advise you to come see me or email me to discuss your idea. This is for your benefit—to ensure your topic is relevant and focused enough to be successfully done within the confines of the word limit. 5% per day (or part thereof) late, including weekends. No essays will be accepted after 7 days, except as recommended by Academic Counselling. **This assessment is not eligible for the Absence Without Documentation.**

**Midterm Exam (34%): Date TBD**

1h45min exam held in class. The exam will be short/medium answer questions designed to test your knowledge and understanding of the course readings.

**Discussion Facilitation (10%): Various**

Each of you will (in small groups) facilitate one class discussion. You can organize the discussion however you think works best with the material that week. This could include things like identifying the main arguments of the readings, distributing handouts, giving a presentation, bringing in further materials (like videos or articles), designing group exercises, or generating discussion questions. You will then facilitate that week's discussion (with my help). Generally, each member of the group will earn the same mark for this element; however, if you have concerns that you would like to share with me individually, please don't hesitate to do so. Feel free to come and discuss your ideas for your week with me in advance.

**In Class Writing Reflections (14%): Ongoing**

At the end of every class you will have the opportunity to write a reflection about the class discussion. Question prompts will be provided but you are free to write about anything that you found particularly interesting, intriguing, or controversial during that session. In the week that your group facilitated the discussion, your writing reflection should focus on how you felt the discussion went - what worked and what didn't, what would you do differently if you could do it over, etc. Each reflection is worth 2% (marked pass/fail) so you only need to complete 7. Because of the inherent flexibility involved, no 'make ups'/extensions will be permitted.

**How to Do Well**

The emphasis throughout is on the critical evaluation of arguments. How are important political positions supported? In our weekly discussions we will examine the arguments put forward in the readings and consider whether or not they are persuasive. Generally, the two readings for the week put forward conflicting views, thus inviting us to make evaluations about which has the better argument. (It is taken for granted that we may not all reach the same conclusion.)

**Email Etiquette**

I will do my best to respond to emails received Monday-Friday 9am-5pm within 24 hours. Occasionally there will be delays in replies but if you do not hear back from me within 48 hours (Monday-Friday), please do resend your email as it might have been missed (professors receive a lot of emails!). Note that I rarely work on evenings, weekends, or holidays, so emails sent at those times will take longer to receive a reply. Before you fire off an email at 2am, check and double check this syllabus to see if your question is answered here - I may not respond to emails that ask questions about things that are answered here or in class announcements. Please also include POL3534 in the subject line so I know to which course you are referring.

### **Electronic Devices**

There is a vast array of research demonstrating that the use of electronic devices not only does not aid learning, but actually hinders it. Research suggests that information taken down on laptops is not retained as well as handwritten notes. Laptops may of course present a variety of social media and internet distractions to the user and those within eyesight. Furthermore, the class is run as a discussion seminar, and laptop use creates a ‘wall’ of screens that is not conducive to active discussion. With this in mind, laptops are not banned, but I encourage you to think seriously about whether you really need to use it during a discussion-based class such as this. It goes without saying that if you do choose to use your laptop/tablet, you should not use it for non-class related activities. Students found to be using technology for non-academic purposes may be asked to leave class. Cell phones must be put on silent (not vibrate) and placed out of view for the duration of class.

### **Inclusivity**

The course tackles topics that may be controversial and personal to some students. Members of this class are from a variety of different academic backgrounds, races, religions, etc., so whilst robust debate is encouraged, it must be done respectfully. If there are circumstances that might affect your performance in this class, please let me know as soon as possible so that we can discuss strategies to accommodate your needs. This includes discussing whether some topics on the syllabus are particularly sensitive for you.

### **Readings:**

Once we have selected the topics, I will post the reading schedule and links to readings. There is no textbook for this course.

### **Schedule**

**January 5 - Introduction and Topic Selection**

**January 12 - Duty to work**

[Tommie Shelby \(2012\) “Justice, Work, and the Ghetto Poor” \*Law & Ethics of Human Rights\*](#)

[Michael Cholbi \(2018\) “The Duty to Work” \*Ethical Theory and Moral Practice\*](#)

### **January 19 - Raising children in religion**

[Clayton, Matthew \(2012\) "The Case Against Comprehensive Enrolment of Children", \*Journal of Political Philosophy\* 20 \(3\).](#)

[Cameron, Christina \(2012\) "Clayton on Comprehensive Enrolment", \*Journal of Political Philosophy\* 20 \(3\).](#)

### **January 26 - Discrimination based on looks**

[Andrew Mason "What's Wrong with Everyday Lookism?" \*Politics, Philosophy, & Economics\*](#)

[Xiaofei Liu, "Discrimination and Lookism" in \*Routledge Handbook on the Ethics of Discrimination\*, ed. Kasper Lippert-Rasmussen](#)

### **February 2 - Right to housing**

[Wells, Katy \(2019\), "The Right to Housing" \*Political Studies\* 67\(2\).](#)

Jenkins, David & Kimberly Brownlee (2022), "What a Home Does" *Law and Philosophy*: 41.

### **February 9 - Permissibility of abortion**

Thomson, Judith Jarvis (1971) "A Defense of Abortion" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 1(1) - READ THIS FIRST

Tooley, Michael (1972) "Abortion and Infanticide" *Philosophy & Public Affairs*: 2(1)

### **February 16 - READING WEEK**

### **February 23 - Midterm Exam**

### **March 2 - Immigrant selection**

[Miller, David \(2016\) \*Strangers in Our Midst\*, p. 102-111](#)

[Blake, Michael \(2002\) "Discretionary Immigration" \*Philosophical Topics\* 30\(2\). P. 282-end](#)

[Carens, Joseph \(2013\) \*The Ethics of Immigration\* ch. 9](#)

### **March 9 - Parental licensing**

[LaFollette, H. \(1980\) "Licensing Parents," \*Philosophy and Public Affairs\* 9\(2\): 182-197](#)

[Andrew Botterell and Carolyn McLeod, "Parental Licensing and Discrimination" in G. Calder, J. De Wispelaere, and A. Gheaus, eds., \*Routledge Handbook on the Philosophy of Childhood and Children\*](#)

### **March 16 - Optional Zoom Class - Essays & AI**

In this class we will go through examples of AI generated essays on class-related topics, look at what AI does well, what it does badly, and how we can use our own human brains, knowledge, and critical thinking to produce better work than AI.

### **March 23 - No Class**

### **March 30 - Gentrification**

[Daniel Putnam \(2021\) "Gentrification and Domination" \*Journal of Political Philosophy\* 29\(2\).](#)

Jakob Huber & Fabio Wolkenstein (2018) "Gentrification and Occupancy Rights" *Politics, Philosophy and Economics* 17(4).

**April 6 - Affirmative action**

Ronald Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle*, ch. 14.

Robert Simon (1974) "Preferential Hiring," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 3.