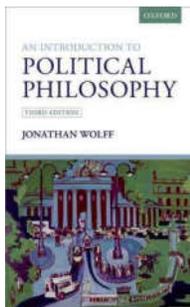


POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY | PHIL 4304
Fall 2019
Monday, Wednesday, Friday
10:00 - 10:50 AM | New Classroom Building 130A

Instructor: Gil Hersch, Ph.D
Email: hersch@vt.edu
Office: 224 Major Williams Hall
Office Hours: MW 11-12 AM and by appointment

In this course we will familiarize ourselves with some of the most central and enduring questions in political philosophy: How do we justify the existence of the state? How should we organize the state, and is democracy the best way to it? Why is liberty important, and what are its limits? And what counts as a just distribution of the things we have? We will also devote time to examine some more recent questions such as how to cope with historical injustices and whether states have obligations to open their borders to immigration.

Course textbook



An Introduction to Political Philosophy (3rd edition) by Jonathan Wolff

The rest of the course readings are available on the course Canvas website.

Learning outcomes and expectations

Apart from content knowledge, you will be expected to acquire and hone the skills that are necessary to do analytic philosophy, in particular to reason logically and analyse problems systematically. To this end, you will need to learn to, and improve at, distinguishing between valid and invalid arguments, sound and unsound arguments, tracing the implications of your arguments, and considering possible objections to them. Further, you will need to learn to listen carefully, think critically, debate, and express your views clearly, both orally and in written form. The academic skills that you acquire in this course will help you to deepen your understanding of the course material, and they are often transferable to other courses that you may take, and more generally, and perhaps more importantly, to other aspects of your lives.

In order to acquire the content knowledge and academic skills that are necessary to pass this course, you will be expected to: **(i) carefully read the texts assigned before classes, (ii) attend all classes, (iii) actively participate in classroom discussions, and (iv) submit all written assignments.** Only by preparing properly for classes, participating actively in the classroom, and developing your writing skills, will you gain the level of understanding and depth of knowledge that is necessary to do well in this course. Overall, you must take an active rather than passive role in this course to make the material your own and develop independent thoughts.

Course requirements

The different graded elements in the course are weighted as follows

Class participation	20%
Weekly reading reflections	10%
Class discussion leader	20%
Midterm paper	20%
Final paper	30%

1. **Attendance:** You can have up to 4 *absences (10% of classes)* without any penalty, no explanation needed. Each absence beyond that deducts a third of a letter grade from your final grade. Exceptions to this policy will only be made in the case of a *serious* extenuating circumstance (e.g. emergency medical or family problem) supported by appropriate evidence.
2. **Participation (20%):** Philosophy is often best learned through discussion and dialogue. A significant portion of our time in class will be devoted to discussion of the issues, both in small groups and as a class. You are expected to read about the topics before class and come prepared to ask questions and discuss the ideas. Please come to class with the course texts and your notes, having read all the material assigned for the day. You should be fully prepared to discuss the material and actively participate in class discussion. I encourage you to take notes while you read, noting points of interest, what you may agree or disagree with, and any questions that may arise as you go through the material. Your experience in this class will be significantly better if you do these things.
3. **Weekly reading reflections (10%):** each week, starting with the 2nd week of class, you will be asked to submit a reading reflection of 300-600 words by the beginning of the Monday class. Each of these will receive a grade (check plus (A), check (B+), check minus (B-), unacceptable (C)).

I will be looking for three things, weighted roughly equally:

- Comprehension: understanding of the concepts and ideas discussed in the essay.
- Clarity: presentation of the ideas and concepts in a clear and concise manner.
- Engagement: serious, sincere and independent thinking about the items under discussion.

Each paper should be submitted on Canvas with a word count and **no name**.

4. **Class discussion leader(s) (20%):** Each student will have the opportunity to lead one Friday class. If we have more students than classes, there will be a few pairs. The students should start by focusing on a particular element of the weekly topic they found particularly interesting and present to the class (no more than ten minutes). Following a formal presentation, the class leader is responsible for leading a discussion in class on the topic. Since this is not an easy or straightforward assignment, each student is required to meet with me no later than the Wednesday before their presentation, but they are welcome to meet with me earlier and as many times as needed to be confident that they have their class planned appropriately.
5. **Midterm paper 20%** The paper is to be written on assigned questions and should be between 1,200-1,500 words long. Essay topics will be announced approximately two weeks before the submission deadline. Late essays that have not been given an extension *ahead of time* will not be accepted and will receive a failing grade. The essay is important, not only because it forms a constitutive part of your grade, but also because it is crucial for the development of your philosophical writing skills. There is no better way to develop clear and precise ideas and arguments than writing essays. As such, you should take the essay seriously, as well as the feedback provided on it. If you feel that your writing skills need improvement, please come and see me during my office hours or contact the [Virginia Tech Writing Center](#).
6. **Final paper 30%** Similar instructions to the midterm paper, except that the paper should be between 2,200-2,500 words long.

Grading scheme for papers

The assessment criteria are: 1) expression and style, 2) structure and organization, 3) understanding and use of literature, 4) quality of argument, and 5) independence and originality. The grading scheme is as follows:

A	Excellent work. Topic addressed clearly, concisely and with precision. Relevant literature understood and appropriately employed. Analysis of concepts, arguments and positions is rigorous and sufficiently thorough. Arguments are given where appropriate, and are cogent and properly supported by evidence and reasons. In addition, displays a further
A-	strength such as outstanding technical competence or depth of knowledge of the relevant literature, or originality in the treatment of this literature.
B+	Good work. Topic clearly and concisely addressed. Relevant literature consulted and understood. Answer is well organized. Important concepts and positions presented
B	clearly and analyzed sufficiently. Arguments are cogent and properly supported by
B-	evidence and reasons. Some attempt at critical reflection.
C+	Satisfactory work. Topic adequately formulated and understood, but not necessarily with
C	great clarity or depth. Most relevant literature consulted and understood to a large
C-	degree. Important concepts and positions presented. Fails to meet the criteria for a B because of inadequate organization, errors of understanding, lack of analysis and critical reflection, or failure to support arguments with reasons.
D+	Barely adequate work. Some familiarity with the relevant literature, but poor grasp of
D	essential concepts. Presentation of material shows basic understanding. However,

	understanding and formulation of topic and/or understanding of the literature and relevant concepts and positions is only just adequate.
F	Work is totally unsatisfactory. Issues completely misunderstood or understanding of them is very poor. Fails to show even basic understanding of essential concepts and positions.

Course plan

We meet three times a week over the course of the semester. While some weeks this is not the case, this will be almost always the case. In order to make things clearer and more transparent, for all those weeks in which we meet three times, our classes will be regularly divided as follows:

MONDAY

The reading for the week will be due at class on Monday. Each Monday I will expect to receive your reading reflections by the beginning of class.

Reading reflections should be about one page long, contain a *brief* summary of the reading and then a discussion of 1-2 issues that come up in the reading that you found particularly interesting.

The class itself will primarily take lecture form in which I will discuss the reading topic, tie it into a broader context, and lay the theoretical groundwork for discussions in the Wednesday and Friday classes.

WEDNESDAY

We will discuss our weekly topic as it pertains to some applied context or a current event. Not every topic necessarily ties perfectly into such a context, but generally we will either read a short newspaper article/op ed, watch a short clip, or play some game that will link to the weekly topic and will serve as a point of departure for a discussion of the issue. This day will (except for the time dedicated to doing a short reading or watching a clip) be entirely devoted to class discussion.

FRIDAY

Each week a different student will present a question/issue that is related to the weekly topic that they are particularly interested in. The student will lead a discussion of that topic. I am quite open to different approaches to completing this assignment. The student will choose a (short) reading for their classmates to read, and then direct the class discussion as they see fit. This will require meeting with me no later than the previous Wednesday.

Classroom policies

Students are bound by the Virginia Tech Honor Code. Please familiarize yourself with its content. In particular, the Undergraduate Honor Code pledge that each member of the university community agrees to abide by states: "As a Hokie, I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times. I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do." A student who has doubts about how the Honor Code applies to any assignment is responsible for obtaining specific guidance from the course instructor before submitting the assignment for evaluation. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the University community from the requirements and expectations of the Honor Code. Below I

stress some general rules of conduct that are particularly relevant for this course and that are not necessarily explicitly stated in the Honor Code in this form:

Attendance and classroom behavior: You are expected to attend every class on time and to have read the assigned material ahead of time. Attendance will be taken some time in the first five minutes of class. It will not be possible to sign in late. Disruptive classroom behavior will not be tolerated.

Personal electronic devices (cell phones, smart phones, laptops, tablets, etc.): **Cell phone use and laptop use is prohibited in class.** Deductions to participation points may be incurred for failure to abide by the policy. If the policy is not abided by, this may be done without warning or notification.

Plagiarism: The Honor Code prohibits plagiarism. In short, any work submitted by you for assessment must be your own. If you submit someone else's work or ideas as your own, then you are guilty of plagiarism. The best way to protect yourself against suspicion of plagiarism is to be scrupulous in acknowledging the source(s) (the persons or texts) of any ideas, arguments, or facts that you draw upon. Anyone caught cheating on an exam or plagiarizing an assignment will be sent directly to the Honor Court, without exceptions. In the worst case, you will be permanently dismissed from the university for plagiarism. The official sanctions are listed [here](#).

Students with disabilities: I am committed to making this class as accessible as possible. If aspects of this course — such as time-limited exams or inaccessible web content — result in barriers to your inclusion or your ability to meet course requirements, please notify me as soon as possible. We will adapt methods, materials or testing in order to offer fair terms of participation. You are also encouraged to contact the Services for Students with Disabilities office to discuss and arrange reasonable accommodations.

Classroom engagement: We will be discussing some controversial issues, some of which you may have strong personal opinions about. Please be respectful and civil in all your classroom interactions, regardless of how strongly you may (dis)agree with the views you may be arguing for or against. You must distinguish between positions and arguments on the one hand and the people who advance them on the other. While the former are open to reasoned criticism, the latter are not legitimate targets. See VT's [Principles of Community](#)

Schedule

Week 1 - Introduction

- Plato (±380B.C.), *Republic*, Book II 561b-564a.

Week 2 - The State of Nature

9/2 M – LABOR DAY (NO PRESENTATION FRIDAY)

- Wolff Ch. 1

Week 3 - The State of Nature

- Hobbes, Thomas (1651), *Leviathan*; Part I, Chapters 13-14; and Part II, Chapter 17.
- Hume, David (1739/40), *A Treatise of Human Nature*; Book III, Part II, Sections II, V, VII.

Week 4 - Justifying the State

- Wolff Ch. 2

Week 5 - Justifying the State

- Nozick, Robert (1974), *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 10-17, 108-119

Week 6 - Who Should Rule

10/4 F – FALL BREAK

- Wolff Ch. 3

Week 7 - Who Should Rule

- Brennan, Jason (2016) *Against Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 140-171.
- Anderson, Elizabeth (2009) “Democracy: Instrumental vs. Non-Instrumental Value” in *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy* (eds. Thomas Christiano and John Christman), pp. 213-228.

Week 8 - The Place of Liberty

10/18 F – NO CLASS

- Wolff Ch. 4

Week 9 - The Place of Liberty

- Moore, Margret (2009) “Liberalism, Communitarianism, and the Politics of Identity” in *Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy* (eds. Thomas Christiano and John Christman), pp. 323-342.

Week 10 - The Distribution of Property

- Wolff Ch. 5

Week 11 - The Distribution of Property

- Thomas Mulligan (2018) *Justice and the Meritocratic State*, New York: Routledge, pp. 3-8, 96-125.

Week 12 - Justice for Everyone, Everywhere?

11/11 M – NO CLASS

11/13 W – NO CLASS

- Wolff Ch. 6

Week 13 - Justice for Everyone, Everywhere?

- Spinner-Halev, Jeff (2012) “Historical Injustice” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy* (ed. David Estlund), pp. 319-335.

Week 14 - THANKSGIVING**Week 15 - Student choice**

- Immigration, open borders, and cosmopolitanism
- Free speech
- Disability and justice
- Obligations to future generations
- Other?

Week 16 – Summary and review