

PHL 343: Political and Social Philosophy

Fall 2016

TR 9:25–10:40, KL 152

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Office hours: TR 3:30–4:30, F 10:50–11:50, or
by appt.

Course website: <http://www.sydneypenner.ca/ph1343/>

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Living with other people comes with its challenges, to put it mildly. Most people—although even here some dissent—think that the only way to have a tolerable society is to have a government that imposes laws on its subjects, encouraging adherence through punishments and other means. More controversial is the matter of what form of government a state should have, presumably because every form we have tried comes with its problems. As Winston Churchill famously put it, quoting an anonymous source: “Democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” Even if we agree on what form of government to adopt, there is still the question of what the government should then do. Establishing a just society sounds good, but what does that mean? Does justice require taxing the wealthy to aid the poor or require letting everyone keep what they have earned?

In this course we will explore answers to a variety of foundational questions in social and political philosophy. The main focus will be on questions concerning justice, but we will also touch on other questions (what justifies political authority? what form of government is best? what should a state’s goal be? what is the role of religion in a pluralistic state?).

REQUIRED TEXTS

- Michael J. Sandel. *Justice: What’s the Right Thing to Do?* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010. ISBN: 978-0374532505.

Additional readings will be posted to the course website for you to print.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- to think carefully about some foundational questions in social and political philosophy
- to think about how those foundational questions apply to our lives as citizens (of both earthly and heavenly kingdoms)
- to practice reading philosophical texts closely and both charitably and critically
- to learn how to analyze and evaluate arguments with care and precision
- to develop skills in formulating and expressing your own views, both in speech and writing

COURSE
REQUIREMENTS

Attendance and participation: Regular attendance and participation are mandatory. The mere presence of your body is not sufficient for an A for participation. I expect you to come to class having done the readings with care, alert, and prepared to engage in discussion. I will ask you to grade yourselves on your participation, though I will keep an eye on things and will both lower your grade if you are giving yourself a free pass and raise your grade if you are being unduly harsh on yourself.

You may miss two classes without providing any reason for your absence (though I would appreciate an email in advance letting me know you will be absent). I strongly recommend using these two absences with caution, since any additional absences will require an excused absence from the registrar. Every unexcused additional absence will result in your overall participation grade being lowered by a third of a letter grade. No exceptions. Note, too, that I am not responsible for giving you a private tutorial to cover the material you missed during an absence. It is your responsibility to arrange with a classmate to bring you up to speed and share notes. I will, however, make any handouts distributed in class available on the course website.

In-class exercises: I may assign any of a number of different kinds of in-class exercises that I deem pedagogically useful as I see how this particular class develops. These will be incorporated into the participation grade. Some of these are likely to be graded on a pass/fail basis. If I assign a sufficient number of these, I may also at my discretion drop one or more of the lowest grades for each student.

Reading questions and objections: For each day for which there is an assigned reading, I will ask that you to submit either a question you have about the reading or an objection you have to something in the reading (your choice). These questions/objections should be submitted by email and are due by the midnight before we discuss the reading in class. The point of this assignment is to help you engage with the texts and prepare to discuss them in class. You should be prepared to raise the same questions or objections during our class discussions (though you are, of course, also free to raise other questions and/or objections). All good-faith submissions will receive full credit. You may skip this assignment four times without penalty.

Presentation: I will ask that you sign up to do a short presentation related to one of the readings. Your task will be to find an actual situation where the view(s) discussed in the reading find application. You will then present that situation to the class and discuss how it relates to the view(s) under discussion.

Exams: There will be midterm and final exams, composed of true or false, multiple choice, and short answer questions, as well as one or two essay questions. *NB:* The exams will be based on the readings for the course, not on in-class lectures and discussion. Lectures and discussion will, of course, help you understand the readings better and in that way will contribute to preparing for the exams. The final exam will not be cumulative.

Term paper: This assignment will involve several stages. First, you will meet with me to propose and talk about the topic on which you wish to write your paper. Second, you will write the paper (around 2000–2500 words) as you usually would. I will then read your paper and offer comments on it. You, finally, will rework your paper on the basis of my comments. Your grade will be based on both drafts and on your responsiveness to my comments.

GRADING

Class attendance and participation — 20%
 Questions/objections — 10% (all weighted equally)
 Presentation — 10%
 Exams — 30% (15% each)
 Term paper — 30%

GRADING

B+ 87–89.9̄ C+ 77–79.9̄

SCALE

A 93–100 B 83–86.9̄ C 73–76.9̄ D 60–69.9̄ F 0–59.9̄
 A- 90–92.9̄ B- 80–82.9̄ C- 70–72.9̄

READING
PHILOSOPHICAL
TEXTS

Many of the readings in this class will be challenging and they may well seem alien in form. In addition to guidance I will offer in class, you may find some helpful advice on how to read philosophical texts (and many other texts) on the following two webpages:

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>

<http://legacy.earlham.edu/~peters/courses/notes.htm>

ACADEMIC
INTEGRITY

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. In this course, all clear instances of plagiarism, cheating, or other forms of academic dishonesty will result in a grade of 0% for the assignment in question. Additional penalties such as an F for the course or suspension from the university may apply.

Make sure that you know what constitutes plagiarism and other kinds of academic dishonesty. If in doubt, cite your source. Or ask me for guidance. There are genuine grey areas and I am happy to help you learn where the boundaries are. Note, however, that many cases of plagiarism obviously cannot happen innocently. It is students' responsibility to familiarize themselves with Asbury's policies on academic integrity, including the consequences for academic dishonesty and the appeals process:

<http://www.asbury.edu/offices/registrar/bulletin/academic-policies/general-policies>

EXTENSIONS
AND LATE
PENALTIES

I may accept an occasional reading question/objection that is only a few hours late, but if you routinely submit them late, I will stop accepting them. For the term paper, if you need an extension, talk to me in advance (the sooner, the better). Failing an extension, work will have a third of a letter grade deducted if received later in the day, a full letter grade if received the following day, and an additional third of a letter grade for each additional day it is late.

SPECIAL
ACCOMMODATIONS

If you need any special accommodations for reasons related to disabilities, religious observance, athletics, and the like, do not hesitate to let me know. I will be happy to work with you in arranging appropriate accommodations. Again, letting me know sooner is better than later.

MISCELLANEOUS
POLICIES

Please refrain from using electronic devices in class, unless you have a special need for doing so and have cleared it with me. I want the classroom to be a place where we engage in genuine, thoughtful discussion—electronic devices by and large do not contribute to that goal. This policy includes laptops.¹

Unexpected class cancellations will be announced by email. If possible, I will also have the cancellation posted on the classroom door.

Do not try to find my telephone number and call me—by far the best way to contact me is by email. I will try to respond to emails within 24 hours.

The Writing Center

You can get assistance with your writing from the Center for Academic Excellence's Writing Center. Consult their website for more information:

<http://www.asbury.edu/academics/cae/writing-center>

¹ If you are interested in seeing a justification for keeping laptops out of classrooms, see the following piece: Kevin Yamamoto, "Banning Laptops in the Classroom: Is It Worth the Hassle?", *Journal of Legal Education* 57 (2008): 1–46.