

Introduction to Political Philosophy: Government, Obedience, and Freedom

I. Content Overview

This course is an introduction to the philosophical study of politics. What distinguishes political philosophy from empirical political science and the history of politics is that its main focus is on 1) investigating what we really *mean* when we talk about basic political ideas like democracy, freedom, etc., and 2) asking how politics *should* be conducted, not only how it is or has been conducted.

This course focuses on two themes. First, the theme of *government*—the phenomenon where some people hold power or authority to direct or control the actions of other people. On this theme, we'll consider questions like: Why does government exist at all? When is it justified for some people to hold power over others, and when is it not? Do we have a duty to obey the law? Second, we'll explore the theme of *freedom*—the state of being unconstrained or self-governing, a widely shared political value. Here we'll consider questions like: What actually *is* freedom—is it merely the lack of chains, or does it require something more, like power or self-control? If I have multiple options (for example, of where to work), does that make me free, or might I be unfree despite having different options? When are we justified in restricting people from certain kinds of freedom?

To explore these, we'll read a number of historical and recent philosophical texts. Alongside texts that focus on ideal political systems (for example, from authors like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Rawls), we'll also read some texts that focus on specific problems that have been particularly pressing in modern politics—namely, slavery, economic inequality, racism, the oppression of women, and incarceration (from authors like Frederick Douglass and Emma Goldman). We'll also work on fundamental philosophical reading and writing skills, including reconstructing arguments from a text, and clearly presenting our own arguments.

II. Format Overview & Learning Objectives

This course takes the format typical to those given in philosophy departments, which means that we will focus on reading selected texts very carefully in order to examine 1) the particular claims and viewpoints presented within each excerpt of text we read, and 2) the arguments given in support of these viewpoints. You may find that compared to some courses given in other disciplines, we cover somewhat less an amount of reading; however, we will read the texts we do more closely and carefully than sometimes happens in the courses for other disciplines.

You will not understand everything said—even those of us who study these texts for years do not understand everything, and I have many questions about these texts I hope we can explore together. If you attempt to chew on this dense material, you will find that the philosophical activity itself *is* the chewing and the difficulty—the activity of philosophy is having new questions and ideas raised for you that you can't immediately make sense of.

It is crucial that you read each text *before* class, and you will also find it helpful to reread the texts after class in order to incorporate new understandings we develop during the class.

When you read, you should write notes in the margins or on a separate document, trying to write down what you think the key ideas and arguments are, as well as what terms or arguments you don't understand. The focus is to get a sense of how the philosophers we read make the case for the viewpoints—not to merely get a summary of some of their key ideas, but rather to enter into their argumentative stance and see *why* they make the claims that they do.

By the end of the course students will:

1. Have developed **fundamental skills** in philosophy such as identifying conclusions and arguments in a text, reconstructing arguments in writing, and framing their own arguments in writing
2. Have a **working familiarity** with key concepts in political philosophy and how they are often used—concepts like *the state, political authority, political duties, legitimacy, freedom* (and its varieties)—such that they could more easily read and engage with political writing in the future
3. Have gained **significant practice** reading and interpreting difficult historical texts as both necessarily bound to their context, but also as connected historically to ideas from both before and after their own context
4. Investigated their own views on some **fundamental questions** in political philosophy, and considered widely differing viewpoints from the text and from class discussions

III. Assignments and Grading

Reading Response Questions: Students will have to submit their answers to the reading response questions for each session by the start of each class. Please email the responses directly to me in .docx format. These reading responses will consist of several short questions about the text for that day to be answered by the student. The completion of these, *not* their correctness, will count towards the grade of the class, as shown in the breakdown below.

Papers: There will be three short papers. I will set prompts for the papers, or if you want to modify or propose a different topic, you must meet with me to discuss and create an appropriate prompt.

Grade Breakdown: I'll calculate all grades using a 4.0 scale. The final grade will be:
20% Reading Responses
20% Attendance and Participation
20% Paper 1
20% Paper 2
20% Final Exam

IV. Course Policies and Accommodations

Accommodations for students with disabilities: Academic accommodations are available to any students with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or is deaf or hard of hearing. Students should register with NYU's Henry and Lucy Moses Center for students with Disabilities, 726 Broadway, 2nd Floor, New York NY 10003-6675. Tel. 212-998-4980. Website: www.nyu.edu/csd

V. Readings

Again, you will need to read each text more than once in order to begin to understand it. It is crucial that you read each text *before* class, and you will also find it helpful to reread the texts after class in order to incorporate new understandings we develop during the class. When you read, you should write notes in the margins or on a separate document, trying to write down what you think the key ideas and arguments are, as well as what terms or arguments you don't understand.

Part 1. Political Authority, Obedience, and Liberty: Classic Accounts, and Responses (Lectures 1-16)

Reading 1 – Handout on reconstructing arguments, Jim Pryor, “Guidelines on Reading Philosophy,” “Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper”; David W. Concepción, “Reading as a Philosopher”

Reading 2 – Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Ch. 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 29)

Reading 3 – John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Sec. 1-24, 77, 85-91, 95-99, 119-149, 175-181, 190-212, 221-229, 240-243)

Reading 4 – Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?”

Reading 5 – Emma Goldman, “Woman Suffrage”

Reading 6 – Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Of the Social Contract* (Book I, all; Book II, Ch. 1-4, 11; Book IV, Ch. 1-2)

Reading 7 – C. L. R. James, *Black Jacobins* (Ch. 1-2)

Reading 8 – John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (pgs. 334, 342-344, 350-362)

Reading 9 – Tommie Shelby, “Justice, Deviance, and the Dark Ghetto”

Part 2. Freedom: What is it? Why do we want it? (Lectures 17-28)

Reading 10 – Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty”

Reading 11 – Charles Taylor, “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty?”

Reading 12 – Philip Pettit, “The Republican Ideal of Freedom”

Reading 13 – Marina Oshana, “Personal Autonomy and Society”

Reading 14 – F. A. Hayek, “Freedom and Coercion”

Reading 15 – G. A. Cohen, “Capitalism, Freedom, and the Proletariat”

Reading 16 – Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden State Gulag* (Prologue and Introduction)

VI. Further Resources

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University Learning Center: The University Learning Center's mission is to assist students in developing the knowledge base, skills, and strategies that will help them to become confident, independent, and active learners. Its various academic support services are intended to help students meet the challenge of NYU's rigorous academic standards.

Website: <https://www.nyu.edu/students/academic-services/university-learning-centers.html>

Writing Center: The Writing Center is a place where any NYU student can get help with his or her writing. It is a place where one-on-one teaching and learning occur, as students work closely with faculty and experienced peer tutors at every stage of the writing process and on any piece of. Website: <https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/ewp/writing-center.html>

Wellness Exchange: The Wellness Exchange is your greatest mental health resource at NYU. Call the 24-hour hotline at (212) 443-9999, chat via the Wellness Exchange app anytime, speak with a certified counselor about any day-to-day challenges or health concerns, including medical issues, stress, depression, sexual assault, anxiety, etc. No concern is too big or too small. Website: <https://www.nyu.edu/students/health-and-wellness/wellness-exchange.html>

NYU Immigrant Defense Initiative: The NYU Immigrant Defense Initiative (IDI) offers free and confidential legal services to NYU students and employees, and their immediate family members, on their immigration cases. Contact IDI at immigrant.defense@law.nyu.edu or (212) 998-6435.