

PHIL 350 – Political Philosophy

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I. Required Texts

Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*
Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism*

I'll put additional readings on Moodle.

Note that access to the Moodle page is restricted. The enrollment key is: *boosh*

II. Course Description

This is a survey course in political philosophy. We'll begin by discussing different views about the nature, grounds (if any), and extent of justifiable political authority. We'll discuss anarchism, liberalism, socialism, and libertarianism. We'll conclude by discussing several applied topics, including punishment, discrimination, and voting.

A note on the readings. Many philosophy classes like this focus on classic historical works. But we'll mostly read contemporary work. I have several reasons for this. One is pragmatic: contemporary stuff is easier to understand. The language is more familiar and the writing is clearer and more succinct. The other reasons stem from the fact that this isn't a history class but a philosophy class. It's also a survey class. Our focus is on ideas, not personalities or great figures. To best understand and evaluate the ideas, we should focus on texts that do the best job of presenting them. Furthermore, these ideas have been discussed and developed by many thinkers over a long period of time. It's better for us to read the most current takes on these views. The classics deserve attention. But I don't think they should be the focus of a course like this and I think the assumption that they should be is mistaken.

III. Course Objectives

You won't do well in this course just by memorizing facts. This course is meant to help you develop various **skills**, among them reading, writing and critical thinking skills. You will do this by 1) examining philosophical texts and arguments and 2) advancing and defending your own arguments in speech and writing. You'll learn to identify and evaluate arguments and to formulate and defend your own arguments. This is very difficult. Academic philosophy demands formalism, rigor and a lot of careful thought.

You're going to have to put a lot of effort into trying to understand the readings. You'll also have to **think** about the positions and arguments we'll discuss. This means thinking both about the particular readings we cover – e.g., the claims made by particular authors – and more generally about the particular issues discussed in those readings. In an important sense, you have to be prepared to **go beyond the readings** – say by identifying relevant issues that may not have been discussed by an author and determining how they might bear on the author's arguments and more generally on different arguments and

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positions regarding the topic at issue. You'll be expected to challenge your beliefs by evaluating arguments for and against those beliefs and also to evaluate positions on issues you may not have thought much about before. In the process, I hope you'll learn to become careful, sober, objective, but still enthusiastic and imaginative thinkers.

IV. Course Requirements

<u>Grade Distribution</u>	<u>Grading Scale</u>		
Attendance: 10%	A: 94-100	A-: 90-93	
Participation: 15%	B+: 87-89	B: 83-86	B-: 80-82
3 short papers: 15% each	C+: 77-79	C: 73-76	C-: 70-72
Term Paper: 30%	D: 60-69	F: 0-59	

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. I take attendance. Everyone gets **one** unexcused absence. Further absences will reduce your grade, directly detracting from your attendance and participation scores and indirectly detracting from the other parts of your grade. You are solely responsible for acquiring notes, handouts, etc. for days you are absent and should check with me to see if you missed any announcements.

Papers

You'll write one term paper at least 1500 words long (5-6 double spaced pages) on a topic of your choice. You should get my approval on the topic first, however. It will have to be one of the topics discussed in the readings. I'll also provide a handout outlining how papers should be written. I recommended you give me a rough draft so I can provide comments.

You'll also write 3 short (1.5-3 page) papers on topics of your choice. The purpose of these short papers is to get you to think as you read. As you read, if you spot a particular argument or claim that you disagree with (or agree with but think more can be said in support of), you can write a short paper on the issue. These papers can be on any issue dealt with in the readings. What you write on is up to you. The papers should meet the same general standards as the term paper (see the paper guidelines handout). The grading will be more lenient when it comes to things like grammar, however, given that the objective is primarily to get you thinking at more length about the issues dealt with in the readings. You may turn in a draft of each short paper if you'd like suggestions for revision. Just be sure to give me a reasonable amount of time to get it back to you before the due date.

Reading

You won't do well unless you do the readings. This should constitute the bulk of the coursework. Reading philosophy is difficult and time consuming. Budget your time accordingly, paying particular attention to the length of each reading well before the day it needs to be read – unavoidably, some days will involve more reading than others (because we meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays, you may want to read part of some Thursday readings before our Tuesday meetings). Take brief notes on each piece, identify

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the most important parts (for more reading), jot down questions and comments to bring up in class, etc.

Participation

Discussion is crucial to philosophy and will factor significantly in your grade. Participation is 15% of your grade. Failing to speak regularly will significantly impact your grade. If you do not speak at all, you'll get a 0 for your participation score. Hence, the best you can do in this class without talking – even if all your other scores are perfect (and I promise you they won't be) – will be a B. The *rough* standard for a perfect participation score is this: say something substantive at least twice a week. My advice is this: if you have something to say, say it – even if you're worried that it might be a lousy idea. Quality doesn't factor into the participation score, and you can't come up with good ideas if you're afraid of trying out bad ones.

This will primarily be a discussion driven class. You are expected to come to class prepared to engage in serious discussion. To do this you will have to carefully read and think about the assigned readings. **You also have to be prepared to think on your feet.** You can ask questions and offer comments any time. I realize that speaking in class can be difficult, but learning to articulate your thoughts is an important skill that this course is intended to help you develop. There's no way around it. If you find it difficult to talk, try to force yourself to do so (thinking up questions or comments in advance, say while reading, can help). If you can't bring yourself to talk in class, I strongly recommend that you consider taking another course.

V. Additional Policies

Academic Dishonesty

If you cheat or plagiarize, I'll catch you and you'll regret it. I enforce the University's policy on academic dishonesty without exception. If you plagiarize or cheat on any assignment, no matter how seemingly insignificant, the incident will be reported to the Honor Council. Even if you plagiarize a paper draft, the incident will be reported.

Excuse policy

If an emergency (serious illness, injury, passing of a friend or family member) forces you to miss class or renders you unable to hand in an assignment on time, try to contact me beforehand (a short email is fine). If you miss a deadline, we'll agree on an extension deadline. Vacations, oversleeping, forgetfulness, hangovers, existential crises, etc. are not acceptable reasons (either individually or in combination). Plan your term accordingly.

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VI. Tentative Schedule

IDA = In Defense of Anarchism

ASU = Anarchy, State and Utopia

Week 1 Political Authority, Political Obligation	3/22 – Introduction 3/24 – Plato, <i>Crito</i>
Week 2 Anarchism	3/29 – Wolff, <i>IDA</i> , pp 3-37 3/31 – Wolff, <i>IDA</i> , pp 38-82
Week 3 Rawlsian Liberalism	4/5 – Rawls, “Justice as Fairness” 4/7 – Rawls, “Distributive Justice” Rawls, “Distributive Justice: Some Addenda”
Week 4 Socialism	4/12 – Cohen, “Rescuing Justice From... The Incentives Argument” (from <i>Rescuing Justice & Equality</i>) 4/14 – Slote, “Desert, Consent and Justice” **Short paper 1 due**
Week 5 Libertarianism	4/19 – Nozick, <i>ASU</i> , pp3-53, 78-79, 81-84 4/21 – Nozick, <i>ASU</i> , pp 88-119, 149-166
Week 6 Libertarianism	4/26 – Nozick, <i>ASU</i> , pp 167-231 4/28 – Reading Day; no class
Week 7 Economic Egalitarianism Legal Punishment	5/3 – Frankfurt – “Equality as a Moral Ideal” 5/5 – Feinberg, “The Classic Debate” Davis, “They Deserve to Suffer” Berman, “Punishment and Justification”
Week 8 Legal Punishment Discrimination	5/10 – Farrell, “Punishment Without the State” Kelly, “Criminal Justice Without Retribution” **Short paper 2 due** 5/12 – Jordan, “Is it Wrong to Discriminate on the Basis of Homosexuality?”
Week 9 Public Reason Voting Ethics	5/17 – Nagel, “Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy” 5/19 – Goldman, “Why Citizens Should Vote” Brennan, “Polluting the Polls” Arvan, “There is No Duty Not to Vote Badly”
Week 10 Voting Rights	5/24 – Mill, “Of the Extension of the Suffrage” Brennan, “The Right to a Competent Electorate” 5/26 – **Term paper drafts due** note: drafts are optional 5/30 – **3rd short paper due** 6/1 – **Term papers due** (12:00pm via email)