



# Short Syllabus



## Course Title

Political Philosophy

## Lecturer

Tomer Sassonkin-Efron, PhD

## Contact details

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## Semester

Spring

## Short Description

The course will offer a critical introduction to some of the key ideas, questions, and arguments that have been raised in western political thought – from Hobbes and Rousseau, through Mill and Rawls, to Marx and Foucault. Why do we need states? What are human rights? When is it justified to limit another's freedom? How is power exercised? Should goods be distributed according to how hard we work or how much we need? These are some of the big questions that lie at the heart of political philosophy with which we will acquaint ourselves through a critical reading and discussion of seminal texts in western political thought. Setting out from the baseline understanding of political philosophy as a reflection focused on how political reality *ought to be* (as opposed to how it *is* or *has been*), the course will thematically progress through the following topics:

- (1) Political Legitimacy – *who gets to decide* how we live? why should some have the right to pass laws regulating the behavior of others? what would life look like without any such right? We will discuss here, following Hobbes and Rousseau, the idea of 'state of nature' and consider the basic arguments of political anarchism.
- (2) Political Obligation – *what commits us* to political power? is it a moral, rational, or some other duty that we have to do as the state decrees? from what argument could we deduce an obligation to follow suit with the dictates of political power? To answer these questions, we will discuss social contract theory, again with Hobbes and Rousseau, and consider one of its famous alternatives in the form of utilitarianism.
- (3) Liberty and Liberalism – *how much power* should the state have? how much liberty should individual citizens enjoy? Taking our cue from Mill's seminal work *On Liberty*, we will discuss here the unique dangers of modern democracy, the idea of human rights, and the difference between positive liberty and negative liberty.
- (4) Justice and Fairness – *what is the right balance between duties and rights?* how should goods be distributed? should liberal democracies tolerate large inequalities of wealth? Following Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*, we will consider here the idea of distributive justice as fairness and the hypothetical 'original position' contract.
- (5) Post-Liberalism – *is power exercised only, or indeed primarily, by the state*, namely, in a limiting and public manner? We will end the course with two prominent critiques that have been leveled against political liberalism – those advanced by Marx and Foucault – seeing how each problematizes our understanding of political power, government, resistance, and agency.

## Final grade components

### Midterm:

Short paper (2-3 pages), comprises 30% of final grade

### Final requirement:

Final paper (4-6 pages), comprises 50% of final grade

### Participation:

Active participation, comprises 20% of final grade



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## Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. Students are permitted a maximum of three absences without penalty. Any additional absences will affect the final grade and may result in failure of the course.

## Academic Conduct

Plagiarism is taken extremely seriously. Any instance of academic misconduct which includes: submitting someone else's work as your own; failure to accurately cite sources; taking words from another source without using quotation marks; submission of work for which you have previously received credit; working in a group for individual assignments; using unauthorized materials in an exam and sharing your work with other students, will result in failure of the assignment and will likely lead to further disciplinary measures.

## Additional requirements

While in class, phones must be **turned off**.