Politics 9503A/Philosophy 9128A: Central Problems in Political Theory

September-December 2022

Tuesday 3:30-5:20, SSC 7200

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Office Hours: Tues 2:00-3:00, Wed 1:30-2:30, and by appointment

Each year this course examines a central problem in political theory. In 2022 we will investigate the fundamental problem of political authority. By the end of the course, students will be able to:

(1) Describe the problem of political authority and explain -- and evaluate -- the main arguments on the subject,
(2) Describe the history of the modern problems of political obligation, political legitimacy, and civil disobedience, along with the pros and cons of the most influential recent work on these problems,
(3) Provide a critical evaluation of the arguments about political authority and defend their own views on the topic.

Texts


Plato, *Crito*.


How Your Final Mark is Determined

25% Participation

25% 2,000 word (5-6 page) Critical Notice of Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*
25% 2,000 word (5-6 page) Critical Notice of Huemer and Layman, Is Political Authority an Illusion? A Debate

25% 2,000 word (5-6 page) Critical Notice of Delmas, A Duty to Resist: When Disobedience Should be Uncivil

**Participation: 25%**

To be eligible for this portion of the final grade, students must attend all classes except when there are medical or compassionate reasons. **Students will be provided with a list of questions to discuss and will be expected to attend with pre-written answers, ready to talk about their answers.**

Students will receive a mark that reflects their contributions to seminar discussion – average contributions will receive marks that translate into the B range, excellent contributions will receive marks that translate into the A or A+ range. I expect that all students will contribute to every class, or at least will not fail to contribute to two classes in a row.

**Critical Notices: 2,000 words (5-6 pages), 25% each.**

Critical Notices are to be submitted electronically by 12:00 noon on the relevant due date. Late submissions are subject to a penalty of 2% per day.

On Simmons: Due Friday October 21.

On Huemer and Layman: Due Friday November 11.

On Delmas: Due Friday December 9.

**Weekly Meetings**

At each meeting, I will begin by offering some background to a few of the issues covered in the day’s assigned readings. This will not be a lecture on the readings themselves. Students will be expected to do this reading before the meeting. After my background comments, we will have an open discussion of the readings, focusing on their content, plausibility, and implications. In addition to the pre-written answers mentioned above, students are encouraged to contribute their own questions and comments.
September 13: Introduction: Overview of the course

September 20: Plato’s *Crito*


September 27: Martin Luther King and John Rawls on civil disobedience

Martin Luther King, ‘Letter from a Birmingham Jail’

John Rawls, ‘The Justification of Civil Disobedience’

October 4: Simmons 1

A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, Introduction, Chapters I & II, 3-56.

October 11: Simmons 2


October 18: Simmons 3


Friday October 21: First Critical Notice, on Simmons, due today at noon.

October 25: Huemer and Layman 1

November 1: Reading Week: No Class Today

November 8: Huemer and Layman 2


Friday November 11: Second Critical Notice, on Huemer and Layman, due today at noon.

November 15: Delmas 1


November 22: Delmas 2


November 29: Delmas 3


December 6: Delmas 4


Friday December 9: Third Critical Notice, on Delmas, due today at noon.