

## **Introduction to Contemporary Political Philosophy**

### **Instructor: Zoltán Miklósi**

The course deals with a few of the most fundamental problems of contemporary political philosophy, regarding the ground and scope of the authority of the state to make and enforce rules that bind its citizens. Most people agree that governments indeed have such authority, and that citizens are usually under a moral obligation to comply with the rules made by the government. However, there are deep disagreements concerning the source of this authority as well as about its proper limits: what are the goals that the government may or must rightfully pursue and by what means? Under what circumstances are its citizens exempt from the obligation to obey its laws? These are among the questions that will be examined in this course. First, we will discuss different theories of political obligation, i.e. theories about the moral basis of our obligation, if any, to comply with laws. The theories discussed will include consent theories, justice-based theories, and reciprocity-based theories. Second, we turn to the form of collective political decision-making that confers authority to the decisions of the government. Most contemporary theorists agree that only democracy possesses such authority, but they disagree about the grounds of the authority of democracy: we will explore intrinsic and instrumental justifications of democracy. Next, we will attend to the problem of distributive justice: are material inequalities between citizens unjust, and if so, under what circumstances? Which inequalities are relevant from the point of view of justice? Is the state required to pursue some profile of distribution of goods in society, and if so, what characterizes that profile? We will discuss utilitarian, egalitarian, and libertarian accounts of justice, as well as their feminist and socialist critiques. Finally, is the state permitted to endorse, encourage or enforce any particular conception of the good life, i.e. of how its citizens should lead their lives, what ideals they should pursue, etc.? Is it permitted, in particular, to enforce the ethical or cultural preferences and beliefs of the majority or of the dominant historical tradition? What rights individuals have to pursue their own conception of a worthy, fulfilling life? In this context, we will discuss liberal individualism, perfectionism, communitarianism, and multiculturalism.

**Requirements:** students are required to read carefully all assigned readings and to actively participate in class discussions. At a few occasions students will be asked to work in small groups. Each student will present one assigned reading in class (max. 15 minutes). There will be a midterm examination and a final paper.

**Evaluation:** Final paper (50%), midterm exam (25%), participation and presentation (25%)

**Class meetings:** Tuesday and Thursday at 9 am.

**Office hours:** Tuesday and Friday 11 am to 12:30 pm.

**Learning outcomes:** acquiring analytical skills; understanding key debates within and about liberal political theory; analytical and critical writing; ability to orally communicate and discuss ideas, arguments;

#### **General background readings:**

- Daniel McDermott, “Analytical Political Philosophy” in In David Leopold & Marc Stears (eds.), *Political Theory: Methods and Approaches* (Oxford University Press, 2008).
- Joel Feinberg, *Doing Philosophy: A Guide to the Writing of Philosophy Papers* (2008), chapters 1, 4, 8, 10 and 11.

### **I. Political Obligation**

Week 1: Introduction and a survey of premodern and early modern theories of political authority; consent-based theories

Readings:

- Jean Hampton, Chapter 1-2, *Political Philosophy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998).
- John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, Chapter 2 – suggested.

Week 2: Contemporary theories of political obligation: consent-theories and fairness-based theories

Readings:

- John A. Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, Ch 3, 57-74
- Simmons, Chapter 5, 101-136.

Week 3: Theories of political obligation cont.: justice-based theories

Readings:

- John Rawls, *Theory of Justice* §§19, 51, (Cambridge, Mass.: HUP, 1971)
- Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations*, Chapter 6, 143-156.
- Jeremy Waldron, “Special Ties and Natural Duties” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (1993): 3-30

Week 4: Democratic authority: Intrinsic and Instrumental Justifications

Readings:

- Richard Arneson: “Democratic Rights at the National Level,” *Philosophy and Democracy*, Ch. 4
- Thomas Christiano, “The Authority of Democracy,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* (2003)
- Christiano: “An Argument for Democratic Equality” in Christiano (ed.) *Philosophy and Democracy*, Ch. 2 (recommended)

## **II. Distributive Justice**

Week 5: Overview plus Utilitarianism

Readings:

- Hampton, Ch 4, *PP*
- Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 10-48

Week 6: Liberal Egalitarianism

Readings:

- Rawls, *TJ* (§§1-4, 11-12)
- Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 57-87

Week 7: Egalitarianism Cont., **Mid-term Exam**

- G.A. Cohen, “Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 26 (1997): 3-30.

Week 8: Libertarian Critique of Liberal Equality;

Readings:

- Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, 149-182.

- Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 95-159
- Midterm Examination

Week 9: Feminist and Relational Critiques of Liberal Egalitarianism

Readings:

- Elisabeth Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics* 109 (1999), 287-337
- Kymlicka, "Feminism" *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 377-420.

Week 10: Socialist Critiques of Liberal Equality

- Kymlicka, "Marxism" *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, 166-207
- Richard Arneson, "Meaningful Work and Market Socialism" in *Ethics* (1987), pp. 517-545

**IV. Individualism, Communitarianism, Multiculturalism**

Week 11: Neutrality, Perfectionism

Readings:

- Kymlicka, "Liberal Individualism and Liberal Neutrality" *Ethics* 99 (1989), 883-905
- Charles Taylor, "Atomism" in *Philosophy and the Human Sciences*, Ch 8, 187-210

Week 12: Cont.

- Kymlicka, "Multiculturalism," in *Contemporary Political Philosophy*, pp. 327-370.
- Brian Barry, "Equality and Culture," pp. 19-62.