

PHIL 303 – Contemporary Political Philosophy

Trimester 1, 2025 | Thursday & Friday 9:00–10:50 | EA LT206

Office Hours: Thursday & Friday 11:00–12:00 (or by appointment)

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The Course

In this course we will discuss a broad range of perspectives within the subfield of political philosophy. In each unit, we will consider a set of arguments advanced by contemporary thinkers representing a particular political ideology (with a particular focus on liberalism, its radical children, and its critics). Our aim in class is to reconstruct these arguments and critically assess them. You will then be asked to engage with the philosophers we read by developing your own sustained arguments about the topics we have covered.

Classes

Classes will be discussion-driven, and attendance is strongly recommended. Recordings of the class will be made available on Nuku along with any other relevant materials.

Assignments

For this course, you will take one test and write two medium-length essays (1,500 and 3,000 words, respectively). Here is how the grades for these assignments will be weighted:

Assignment	Percentage of Final Grade	Due Date
Test 1	25	March 28
Essay 1	35	April 28
Essay 2	40	May 30

Both essays will reconstruct an argument from one of the readings and then present and defend an original objection to that argument. The reconstruction should (a) state (and explain) the conclusion of the argument, (b) present (and explain) the premises of the argument, and (c) explain how those premises support the conclusion. The objection will then target one of these three parts

of the reconstruction. It should take the form of your own argument with its own clear premises, conclusion, and explanation of how your premises support your conclusion. In the longer essay, you will be expected to provide an additional argument supporting your most controversial premise(s). This might take the form of replying to an objection that might be raised against your argument.

Essay 1 must be submitted on Nuku by 11:59 p.m. on April 28. Essay 2 must be submitted on Nuku by 11:59 p.m. on May 30. If you need an extension, you must request one before the deadline and have a good reason for being granted an extension. Late submissions will be marked down 5% for each day that has elapsed since the deadline.

Plagiarism and ChatGPT

Everything that you turn in should be written by you without consulting any resources beyond the assigned readings and me. Assignments found to contain copied or LLM-generated material will be subject to disciplinary action. The use of ChatGPT and other LLMs is prohibited and particularly discouraged, as (a) it will keep you from practicing the skills you are trying to develop, (b) they produce tedious writing that's annoying to encounter when marking, and (c) they can be unreliable when it comes to doing the kind of reasoning that is crucial in philosophy essays (see below).



You

Monty Hall offers you the chance to choose from between two doors, door 1 and door 2. Behind one door is a car, and the other a goat, and Monty knows which is which but you don't. You choose door number 1. Before opening the door, Monty opens door number 2 to reveal a goat. He then offers you the chance to switch to door number 2 or keep your original choice. What is the optimal move?



ChatGPT

The scenario you've described is a variation of the famous Monty Hall problem, a probability puzzle based on a game show scenario. In the traditional Monty Hall problem, there are three doors, but in your version, there are only two doors, which changes the dynamics of the problem.

In the standard three-door version, it is always statistically advantageous to switch doors after Monty reveals a goat behind one of the unchosen doors. This is because initially, you have a $1/3$ chance of picking the car and a $2/3$ chance of picking a goat. When Monty, who knows where the car is, opens a door to reveal a goat, the probability of the car being behind the other unopened door goes up to $2/3$ if you initially chose a goat (which you did with $2/3$ probability).

However, in your two-door version, the situation is different. You initially choose one of the two doors, and then Monty, knowing what's behind them, opens the other door to reveal a goat. Since there are only two doors and Monty will always reveal a goat, the odds of the car being behind either door remain equal - $1/2$.

In this two-door scenario, there is no statistical advantage to switching doors. The probability of the car being behind either door is the same, so the optimal move is simply a matter of personal preference. You can either stick with your original choice or switch to the other door, but your chances of winning the car are 50/50 either way.

PB

You

What is a four-letter animal that, when you reverse its letters, becomes the name of a plant?



ChatGPT

That's a clever riddle! The answer is "bear" and "brae."

PB

You

No it isn't. You have to reverse the letters.



ChatGPT

Ah, my bad! Let's try that again. The correct answer is "rats" and "star."

PB

You

Star isn't a plant



ChatGPT

Oops, my mistake again. How about "taco" and "coat"?

Democracy in the Classroom

In this course, students are given the final say regarding all matters that pertain to its content and structure (grading excluded, unfortunately). You are free to propose any changes to the course that you would like (e.g., changing what we read), with a class vote then determining if those changes are adopted. Any proposed changes to the course must be announced one week prior to a vote to allow for adequate time for discussion. Anyone who wants to propose a change should email me before class so that I can announce it.

Readings

All readings will be made electronically available via the Reading List section on Nuku.

Liberalism

February 28 – John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, excerpts.

March 6 – Martha Nussbaum, “Perfectionist Liberalism and Political Liberalism.”

Libertarianism

March 7 – Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, excerpt.

March 13 – Jessica Flanagan, “A Libertarian Approach to Medicine.”

Javier Hildago – “The Libertarian Case for Open Borders.”

Socialism

March 14 – G. A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?*

March 20 – S. M. Love, “Socialism and Freedom.”

Marxism

March 21 – Nancy Holmstrom, “Exploitation.”

March 27 – G. A. Cohen, “Forces and Relations of Production.”

TEST – March 28

Left-Libertarianism

April 3 – Allan Gibbard, “Natural Property Rights.”

April 4 – Michael Otsuka, “Self-Ownership and Equality: A Lockean Reconciliation.”

Anarchism

April 10 – Jesse Spafford, “Social Anarchism and the Rejection of Private Property.”

April 11 – Jessica Flanigan, “Anarchism and Redistribution.”

MID-TRIMESTER BREAK

ESSAY DUE – April 28

Republicanism

May 1 – Philip Pettit, “Republican Freedom in Choice, Person, and Society.”

May 2 – Anca Gheaus, “Republican Families?”

Conservatism

May 8 – John Kekes, *A Case for Conservatism*, Chs. 1-2.

May 9 – Tristan J. Rogers, “The Family.”

Nationalism

May 15 – Tristan J. Rogers, “Nationalism.”

May 16 – Yael Tamir, “National Choices and the Right to Culture.”

Multiculturalism

May 22 – Will Kymlicka, “Justice and Minority Rights.”

Communitarianism

May 23 – Charles Taylor, “Atomism.”

Feminism

May 29 – Susan Moller Okin, “Vulnerability by Marriage.”

May 30 – Ann Cudd – “Oppression by Choice.”

ESSAY DUE – May 30