

PHIL 449 – Political Philosophy

Trimester 1, 2026 | Wednesdays 12:00–1:50 | AM 104

Office Hours: Wednesdays 2:00–3:00 (or by appointment) in MY612

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The Course

In this course we will discuss a broad range of perspectives within the subfield of political philosophy. Specifically, our focus here will be on distributive justice: who should get what? Each week, we will consider various arguments advanced by contemporary thinkers attempting to answer this question. 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 write two medium-length essays (1,250 and 2,500 words, respectively) and at least four Very Short Papers (VSPs). Here is how the grades for these assignments will be weighted:

Assignment	Percentage of Final Grade	Due Date
Essay 1	35	April 20
Essay 2	45	June 2
Very Short Papers	20	See below

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 also provide a reply to your objection on behalf of the author whom you are criticizing. You will then critically assess the reply.

Essay 1 must be submitted on Nuku by 11:59 p.m. on April 20. Essay 2 must be submitted on Nuku by 11:59 p.m. on June 2. 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.

Very Short Papers

You will write at least four very short papers (VSPs), starting with a one-sentence paper and potentially working your way up to a four-sentence paper. This series of assignments will use the *levels system*, which works as follows.

The Levels System

There are four levels, where your level determines the length of your next paper submission. If you are at Level 1, you will submit a one-sentence paper. If you are at Level 2, you will submit a two-sentence paper. If you are at Level 3 you will submit a three-sentence paper. And, if you are at Level 4, you will submit a four-sentence paper. Each paper will receive a grade out of 10.

Everyone starts out at Level 1. Each time you submit a high-quality paper—which is to say, the paper gets a grade of 8/10 or higher—then you move up to the next level. If your paper receives a grade lower than an 8/10, you will stay at your current level (meaning that your next submission will be the same length as the previous one). You can submit one paper per week.

Your final grade for the assignment will be a function of (a) your earned points and (b) your level. Specifically: $[\text{your total points}] = [\text{the sum of your best four grades}] + [\text{your level}] \times 5$. You can earn up to 60 points, so the final grade is your total points divided by 60.

Here's an example of how this works:

Submission Number	Length	Grade	What Happens
1	1 sentence	9	Advance to Level 2
2	2 sentences	6	Remain at Level 2
3	2 sentences	10	Advance to Level 3
4	3 sentences	7	Remain at Level 3
5	3 sentences	8	Advance to Level 4

Your total points would then be the sum of your best four grades ($9 + 10 + 7 + 8 = 34$) plus your level (4) multiplied by five ($4 \times 5 = 20$). Thus, you would get a 54/60 on this assignment.

Topics for Very Short Papers

Each very short paper will critically discuss one of the assigned readings. You can choose which readings to discuss, but can only write one very short paper per class period. (You can write an essay and a very short paper on the same reading).

For each reading, a one-sentence paper about that reading will present a major thesis from the reading and the author's reason for endorsing that thesis. A two-sentence paper will add an objection to the thesis/reason. A three-sentence paper will add a potential reply to that objection. And a four-sentence paper will add a critical assessment of that reply. See the "Very Short Papers" handout for more details.

Submitting your Papers

Each very short paper that you write must be submitted *prior to the start of the class that covers the reading it discusses*. Late submissions will not be counted. **All submissions should be sent in the body of an email to my VUW address** (in the header of the syllabus). Additionally, you must submit at least two very short papers prior to the mid-trimester break. You will receive a 0/10 for each paper you do not submit prior to this deadline even if you have four VSPs with higher scores.

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 and (b) LLMs produce tedious and shallow writing that's annoying to encounter when marking.

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.

February 25 – Utilitarianism

Peter Singer – “Famine, Affluence, and Morality.”

March 4 – Rawls’ Difference Principle

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

March 11 – Rawls, Incentives, and Structure

G. A. Cohen – “Justice, Incentives, and Selfishness”

G. A. Cohen – “Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice.”

March 18 – Socialism and Luck Egalitarianism

G. A. Cohen – *Why Not Socialism?*

March 25 – Luck Egalitarianism: Some Complications

Serena Olsaretti – “Responsibility and the Consequences of Choice”

Kristin Voigt – “The Harshness Objection: Is Luck Egalitarianism Too Harsh on the Victims of Option Luck?”

April 1 – Prioritarianism

Derek Parfit – “Equality or Priority?”

MID-TRIMESTER BREAK

ESSAY DUE - April 20

April 22 – Sufficiencyarianism

Paula Casal – “Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough.”

April 29 – Rescuing Egalitarianism?

Larry Temkin – “Equality, Priority or What?”, Part I

David O’Brien – “Egalitarian Nonconsequentialism and the Leveling Down Objection.”

May 6 – Relational Egalitarianism

Elizabeth Anderson – “What is the Point of Equality?”

May 13 – Libertarianism

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

May 20 – Libertarianism: Some Complications

A. John Simmons – “Historical Rights and Fair Shares.”

May 27 – Libertarianism and Feminism

Susan Moller Okin – “Libertarianism: Matriarchy, Slavery, and Dystopia.”

Ann Cudd – “Feminism and Libertarian Self-Ownership.”

ESSAY DUE - June 2