PART IB PAPER 07:
POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

COURSE OUTLINE

On one view of contemporary political philosophy its central question is: what should the state do? This course examines three topics that go to the heart of this question.

The first topic, democracy, asks whether a government is legitimate only if it is democratic, and what democracy requires. There are many different forms of democracy and this topic explores their competing strengths and weaknesses.

The second topic is a value with hidden complications: equality. Contemporary political philosophy sits on an "egalitarian plateau": the idea that human beings have equal worth is seldom contested. However, it is obvious that humans are far more different than they are the same, so what does it mean to say that people are equal? And given that human beings are in some important sense equal, what normative implication does this have for how the state should treat them? In what sense, if any, should people be treated equally?

The third topic addresses one of the fundamental values of contemporary political philosophy: liberty. At least in Western societies, more freedom is widely regarded to be better than less, and governments are thought to do better the more freedom they allow their citizens. But what is liberty and what exactly is its value? This question is explored through the writings of both classical and contemporary political theorists.

Prerequisites

None

Objectives

Students taking this paper will be expected to:

1. Acquire a detailed knowledge of some of the concepts, positions and arguments in the central literature on the topics of the course.
2. Acquire a sense of how the positions on different topics relate to each other.
3. Engage closely and critically with some of the ideas studied.
4. Develop their ability to think independently about some of the ideas studied.
5. Construct their own arguments, responding to but not merely reproducing the arguments of others.

Preliminary Reading

The following text books are listed in rough order from most to least introductory.

ZWOLINSKI, Matt, ed., Arguing About Political Philosophy. 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014). [Anthology containing readings on many of the topics on the syllabus]

READING LIST

Items marked with an asterisk* are important.

DEMOCRACY

Why should polities be democratic? Is democracy the best form of government, or simply the least problematic? What values does democracy promote and reflect? This section also considers paradoxes of democracy: what should a democrat believe and support if they are in the minority?

Justifications of Democracy

Forms of Democracy

The Ancient Greeks advocated direct democracy, a democratic form which has C21st application via referendums and new technologies. But most democracies have always been representative, with the electorate playing a part only once every few years. Recently, political philosophers have advocated deliberative democracy, where the people are involved in ongoing debate about policy and governance. This section investigates the characteristics and (dis)advantages of each form.

Representative Democracy

*BRITO VIEIRA, Mónica, and David RUNCIMAN, Representation (Cambridge: Polity, 2008).


*MILL, John Stuart, Considerations on Representative Government, (many editions available, including online), especially chs. 3 & 4. Also available online at: http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/234

*PITKIN, Hanna, The Concept of Representation (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972);


Deliberative Democracy


EQUALITY

Egalitarianism

This section considers the landmark egalitarian theory of John Rawls, as outlined in his *A Theory of Justice* and later works. Rawls's work, and the discussions of his theory, is the place to start for this topic. After studying Rawls students might like to move on to considering luck egalitarianism, a theory developed by sympathetic critics of Rawls such as Ronald Dworkin, G.A. Cohen, and Richard Arneson. See later topic "The value of equality" for critics of luck egalitarianism.


Labour, Property and Theft

What rights do we have over our property? Do we own ourselves? Do we own the fruits of our labour? Is taxation theft? The idea that we have property rights in ourselves and our labour is key to both libertarian arguments, most prominently Robert Nozick’s work, and the Marxist concept of exploitation.

*Cohen, G. A.,* *Self-Ownership, Freedom, and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), especially chs. 2.-, 6, 9 & 10. Also available online at: http://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511521270


The Value of Equality

This section considers why we should care about equality. What sort of value is it, and what is its significance? Are concerns for distributive equality better understood as concerns for sufficiency, or for giving priority to the worst off? Alternatively, is there more to equality than the distribution of resources?


*Parfit,* Derek, ‘Equality or Priority?’ in M. Clayton and A. Williams, eds., *The Ideal of Equality* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 81-125. Also available on Moodle


LIBERTY

Excerpts of much of the listed material can be found in:


Classical Theories of Liberty

This section considers classical conceptions of liberty, those that are the foundation for much contemporary work.

*HOBBS, Thomas, Leviathan, selected passages. Available on Moodle


BENTHAM, Jeremy, Of Laws in General, selected passages. Available on Moodle

BRETT, Annabel, Liberty, Right and Nature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), ch. 6 'Natural liberty in the next century: the case of Thomas Hobbes'.


RIPSTEIN, Arthur, Force and Freedom (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), ch. 1 'Kant on law and justice'. Also available online at: http://doi.org/10.4159/9780674054516-001


Contemporary Theories of Liberty

This section considers whether liberty is properly divided into positive and negative liberty, and whether a third form of republican liberty can be identified. Which of these concepts properly captures the nature and value of liberty? What are their political implications?


*HAYEK, Friedrich, Freedom and Coercion, , in Miller (above).


*PETTIT, Philip, 'The Republican Ideal of Freedom', in Miller (above), pp. 223-42.


CHAMBERS, Clare, *Sex, Culture and Justice* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), ch. 5 ‘Two Orders of Autonomy and Political Liberalism: Breast Implants Versus Female Genital Mutilation’. Also available online at: https://muse.jhu.edu/book/7456.


We welcome your suggestions for further readings that will improve and diversify our reading lists, to reflect the best recent research, and important work by members of under-represented groups. Please email your suggestions to phillib@hermes.cam.ac.uk including the relevant part and paper number. For information on how we handle your personal data when you submit a suggestion please see https://www.information-compliance.admin.cam.ac.uk/data-protection/general-data.