

Phil 858: Seminar in Social and Political Philosophy

Fall 2022

Prof. Jeremy Reid

Course and Contact Information

Meeting times: Wednesday 4–6:45pm

Location: Marcus Hall 217

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Office Hours: Email me to make an appointment

Course Description

This course will cover three main topics in contemporary social and political philosophy, each of which I take to be genuinely difficult and think deserve further discussion:

The first topic is the relationship between collective and individual responsibility, and parallel issues about how we should evaluate individual actors in unjust and oppressive systems. Adolf Eichmann managed the logistics of deporting Jews in Nazi Germany and was later executed for crimes against humanity—how should we evaluate his actions and character, and think about the justice of his trial? How should our practices of blame and holding responsible be affected by the adverse circumstances in which people were raised? How should we think about what our individual responsibilities are with respect to systemic problems (e.g. sweatshop labor for consumer products, and harm to animals), and how should we think about what nation-states are responsible for with respect to global problems (e.g. climate change and poverty)?

The second topic is about deep moral disagreement. Is reasonable moral disagreement possible? Is moral agreement something that we should expect or aim for? Is it possible to live and cooperate with people who have moral beliefs substantially different from our own? What are the virtues and structures that make dialogue between people with different moral views possible, and what are the vices and structures that impede that dialogue? How does Rawls's later political philosophy seek to address the problem of deep moral disagreement and how does he think we can have a stable democracy in a society of people who have very different conceptions of justice and the good life?

The third topic concerns equality, complexity, and the open society. We will look at some recent empirical work on the moral psychology of cooperation and anti-tyrannizing, the nature of complex systems, and then consider their philosophical implications for good governance, the possibility of political expertise, equality as an ideal, and experiments in living as a political framework. Is our evolved moral psychology compatible with the norms of a market society? Which kinds of equality are relevant for assessing the justice of a society? What

aspects of our political and economic life are susceptible to central governance? Can perspectival diversity be recruited to improve and bolster the open society?

For each section, the goal is to show why the problem is genuinely difficult and then to explore what some good first steps to solving the problem might be. My hope is that these issues will also start turning your cognitive wheels while laying foundations for future research.

Assessment

50% Weekly Writing Assignments, due Wednesday at noon at the latest, no extensions. There are 14 writing assignments across the semester. I will take the grades for the highest 10 and drop the lowest 4. Aspire to keep your assignments on a single page (12pt single spaced, non-ridiculous margins). You must do the writing assignment for the final week of class.

50% Final paper (5000–8000 words)—due Sun Jan 15 (though I would very much appreciate it if you didn't wait until the last possible day: the more time I give you to write, the less time I get to grade and provide comments, so papers submitted earlier are likely to receive more and cheerier feedback). See the “How to Write a Good Graduate Term Paper” guide for general expectations.

Texts

All texts for this course can be provided as pdfs. For those who prefer hard copies, we will be reading all or large chunks of the following texts, and I recommend purchasing them as they're going to be good books for budding political philosophers to have on their bookshelves. Amazon links are provided for reference only—you are welcome to use other suppliers:

[Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*](#)

[Young, *Responsibility for Justice*](#)

[Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*](#)

[Rawls, *Political Liberalism*](#) (note: the edition here is important)

[Gaus, *The Open Society and Its Complexities*](#)

Schedule of Readings

You must do all of the assigned readings for graduate courses in philosophy before class, so that we can talk about the readings in class making reference to the text. There will be more of interest in the readings than we can cover in class. Some of the readings are long; this is because important ideas are often complicated, and politics is very hard.

+ means the reading is optional but recommended

Unit 1: Collective Responsibility and Individual Evaluation

1. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (chapters 1–8)

[No writing assignment for the first week, use the time to read Arendt]

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2. Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (chapters 9–15 + epilogue and postscript)

Writing assignment, week 2: Based on Arendt’s account, describe Eichmann’s psychology (i.e. describe his motivations, goals, blind spots, rationalizations, character traits, habits, temperament etc.). In which respects does Arendt think he is banal? In which respects does she think he is evil?

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3. Young, “Five Faces of Oppression”
Watson, “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil”
Midgley, *Wickedness*, chapter 3: “The Elusiveness of Responsibility”
+ Midgley, *Wickedness*, chapters 1–2

Writing assignment, week 3: Watson vividly portrays two different perspectives through which we might evaluate somebody’s character and actions—explain each perspective as precisely as you can. Do you think one perspective is more important than the other for determining what somebody is morally responsible for? Why?

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4. Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, chapters 3–4 (“Guilt versus Responsibility: A Reading and Partial Critique of Hannah Arendt”; “A Social Connection Model”)
Shahar, *Why It’s Ok to Eat Meat*, chapter 4, “Making a Difference”
+ Zheng, “What’s My Role in Changing the System? A New Model of Responsibility for Structural Injustice”

Writing assignment, week 4: What are the different kinds of responsibility Young identifies? When does she think each kind is important? Which category does Eichmann fit into?

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5. Miller, *National Responsibility and Global Justice*, chapters 1–4
+ More Miller (I would recommend chapter 5, “National Responsibility” and especially chapter 7, “Human Rights: Setting the Global Minimum” if you want to read more)

Writing assignment, week 5: In chapter 4, “Two Concepts of Responsibility”, Miller clearly distinguishes four kinds of responsibility: outcome responsibility, remedial responsibility, causal responsibility, and moral responsibility. Explain each kind of responsibility. Provide your own plausible example of when assignments of outcome responsibility and remedial responsibility come apart.

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Unit 2: Moral Disagreement and Political Liberalism

6. Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, No. 10
Joshi, “What are the chances you’re right about everything?”
Calhoun, “An Apology for Moral Shame”
+ Calhoun, “Standing for Something”

Writing assignment, week 6: Why does Madison think faction and political disagreement are inevitable? Why does Joshi think that it’s wildly unlikely that either political party in the US is right about everything?

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7. Calhoun, “The Virtue of Civility”
Nguyen, “How Twitter Gamifies Communication”
Tosi & Warmke, “Moral Grandstanding”
+ Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles”

Writing assignment, week 7: What does Calhoun understand by civility and why does she think it is a virtue in liberal societies? How might contemporary venues of public discourse undermine sincere and productive moral debate?

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8. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, both introductions, and lectures I & II (“Fundamental Ideas” & “The Powers of Citizens and their Representation”)
+ Gaus, “The Turn to a Political Liberalism”

Writing assignment, week 8: What does Rawls mean by “the fact of reasonable pluralism”? Why is it a fact? Why does Rawls expect reasonable disagreement about the good life (our comprehensive doctrines) *and* about conceptions of justice?

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9. Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lectures IV & Part Four (“The Idea of an Overlapping Consensus” & “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited”)
 - + If perchance you’re interested in the Supreme Court right now, read Lecture VI, “The Idea of Public Reason” as well, especially §§5–6
 - ++ If you’ve read some Habermas and know about his ideas about deliberative democracy and the theory of communicative action, Lecture IX, “Reply to Habermas” is very interesting (it responds to Habermas’ article “Reconciliation Through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls’s Political Liberalism”)

Writing assignment, week 9: Rawls distinguishes between societies that have conceptions of justice that are stable for the right reasons and those that are stable for the wrong reasons (e.g. because they have achieved only a *modus vivendi*). Explain what each kind of stability looks like and why Rawls thinks the stability for the wrong reasons is inadequate.

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Equality, Complexity, and the Open Society

10. Sen, “Equality of What?”
 - Anderson, “What is the Point of Equality?”
 - Gosepath, “Equality”, from the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Writing assignment, week 10: Making reference to the assigned readings, which kind(s) of equality do you think are the most important for justice? Why?

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11. Mill, *On Liberty*, chapters 3–4
 - Anderson, “John Stuart Mill and Experiments in Living”
 - Muldoon, “Expanding the Justificatory Framework of Mill’s Experiments in Living”

Writing assignment, week 11: What are experiments in living? What does Mill think is valuable about experiments in living for a democratic society? What does Muldoon think is valuable about experiments in living (especially when compared to Rawlsian public reason liberalism)?

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12. Gaus, *The Open Society and Its Complexities*, Part I
 - + Gaus, “The Open Society and Its ‘Friends’”

Writing assignment, week 12: Why was Hayek worried about the tension between our evolved moral psychology and the norms of a market society? How does Gaus characterize our basic moral psychological package and how does this help to assuage Hayek’s worry?

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13. Gaus, *The Open Society and Its Complexities*, Part II
+ Page, *Diversity and Complexity*, prelude and chapter 1, "On Diversity and Complexity"

Writing assignment, week 13: What is a complex system? How does a complex system differ from a complicated determinate system? What is autocatalytic diversity? Provide examples of each.

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14. Gaus, *The Open Society and Its Complexities*, Part III
+ Barrett & Gaus, "Laws, Norms, and Public Justification: The Limits of Law as an Instrument of Reform"
+ Barrett, "Social Reform in a Complex World"

Writing assignment, week 14: On p. 183, Gaus provides an inelegant but *very important* table stipulating the modes of governance that he thinks are appropriate for each level of society. Explain the table as best you can (it is ok if you brazenly violate the 1-page limit for this assignment).

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15. Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint" (the preface to Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste*)

Writing assignment, week 15 (note: everybody must do this assignment): Reflect on how a theme or themes from the course plays out in Roy's analysis of caste in India and the debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar. (For example, you might write on the relationship between laws and social norms, on moral disagreement, on the possibility of moral reform, on collective responsibility and systemic injustice, on the importance of political equality, on how groups become ostracized, etc.)

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Plagiarism

Plagiarism is a form of cheating or fraud; it occurs when a student misrepresents the work of another as his or her own. Plagiarism may consist of using the ideas, sentences, paragraphs, or the whole text of another without appropriate acknowledgment, but it also includes employing or allowing another person to write or substantially alter work that a student then submits as his or her own. Any assignment found to be plagiarized will be given an "F" grade. All instances of plagiarism

in the College of Liberal & Creative Arts will be reported to the Dean of the College, and may be reported to the University Judicial Affairs Officer for further action.

Disability Access

Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/415-338-2472, video phone/415-335-7210) or by email (dprc@sfsu.edu).

Student Disclosures of Sexual Violence

SF State fosters a campus free of sexual violence including sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and/or any form of sex or gender discrimination. If you disclose a personal experience as an SF State student, the course instructor is required to notify the Title IX Coordinator by completing the report form available at <http://titleix.sfsu.edu>, emailing vpsaem@sfsu.edu or calling 338-2032.

To disclose any such violence confidentially, contact:

- The SAFE Place - (415) 338-2208; http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe_plc/
- Counseling and Psychological Services Center - (415) 338-2208; <http://psyservs.sfsu.edu/>
- For more information on your rights and available resources: <http://titleix.sfsu.edu>