

Political Philosophy Syllabus (PHIL V3751)

D. Sidorsky

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Tues/Thurs 2:40-3:55

This course is organized around six fundamental concepts of political philosophy: “Authority,” “Rights,” “Equality,” “Justice,” “Liberty,” and “Democracy.” In the case of each of these concepts, three different approaches are used.

The primary approach is a conceptual analysis of the meaning and use of the term in its contextual application in political philosophy. Each of these concepts has been “contested,” so there is a wide range of disagreement about the correct interpretation of each of these terms.

The secondary approach is an explication of the text in which the concept has been used and which represents, accordingly, the “*locus classicus*” of the concept in the history of political thought. These selections may overlap some of the texts which are studied in Contemporary Civilization, but the focus in this course is directed toward their role in political philosophy.

The third approach involves connecting the concept which has been analyzed and developed in the context of its classical text to the ideological or political dispute relative to this concept that had been a feature of modern or recent political practice. To a degree, this involves the discussion of competing political claims and the course is concerned both with the “relevance” of the concepts for political discussion as well as with the distance between the issue that emerges in political ideology and contemporary politics.

The readings required in each of these areas are available in the course reader, which can be purchased at the Village Copier on the east side of Broadway between 111th and 112th street.

The class votes upon the requirements for a grade, subject to the guidelines provided by the instructor. In the past, this has involved a midterm exam after the conclusion of the discussion of the first three concepts and a final exam at the end of the term. The student decision of the grade requirements can explore and advance other options before the vote although the guidelines tend to limit the available options.

If time permits, as it usually does not, additional concepts will be discussed, including “Obligation” and “Law.”

I. The Concept of Authority

1. **R.S. Peters’ “Authority”** is a linguistic analysis of the concept. The student should take special note of the distinction between “power” and “authority” as well as between “authority” and “rational persuasion.”
2. The *locus classicus* for the concept of authority in modern political theory is probably ***Leviathan* by Thomas Hobbes**. A sequence of selections from that work is provided in the course reader.
3. One ideological debate that emerges from the conceptual analysis of authority relates to the rise of Anarchism as a political movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The underlying argument that anarchism is conceptually incoherent has significant sources in the philosophical tradition that include Aristotle’s account of man as a political animal in his *Politics* and **Hume’s** account of the origin of Justice in his *A Treatise of Human Nature*. The reader contains a selection from Hume: “Of the Origin of Justice and Property.”

There will also be some bibliographical suggestions in the literature of ideological anarchism, including great novels, such as Conrad’s *The Secret Agent*, Henry James’ *The Princess Casamassima* and Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed*, for students who may have a special interest in this topic.

II. The Concept of Rights

1. A background essay on the conceptual issues is provided by **D. Sidorsky, “Contemporary Reinterpretations of the Concept of Human Rights,”** in the Reader. A classic but difficult essay in contemporary conceptual analysis is **H.L.A. Hart’s: “Are There Any Natural Rights?”** which is also in the Reader.
2. The *locus classicus* for the doctrine of natural rights in modern political theory is probably **John Locke’s “Second Treatise.”** Selections from that treatise are presented in the reader.
3. A practical political issue that emerged from the conceptual analysis of rights is the current effort to develop international human rights standards as a replacement or alternative to doctrines of sovereign national interest in international relations. This issue has many ramifications which go beyond the time available for its discussion in the context of this course. The course lecture will present a sketch of the pro and con positions of the primacy of human rights in foreign policy, but the course reader does not provide any readings on this topic.

Background perspectives on this debate could involve student reading of Isaiah Berlin’s essay “The Originality of Machiavelli” for the national interest position and Ronald Dworkin’s “Taking Rights Seriously” for the priority of human rights.

III. The Concept of Equality

1. One conceptual essay for a strong interpretation of equality is **Bernard Williams’ “The Idea of Equality.”**

2a. The *locus classicus* of a substantive interpretation of equality in the ancient world, even before its adaptation in Plato’s *Republic*, is the tradition of Spartan equality. The text provided here is from **Plutarch’s biography of Lycurgus**, the reputed author of the constitution of Sparta.

2b. The *locus classicus* of a formal concept of equality is found in Aristotle’s account of justice in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book V. Since Aristotle’s account is embedded in his discussion of virtue, the reading of the assignment of this text would involve the study of extraneous themes. Accordingly, a direct statement of Aristotle’s definition of formal equality is provided in the class lecture without the support of the text in the reader.

2c. Aristotle’s definition of formal equality supports the principle of hierarchy which is illustrated in the reader by the speech of Ulysses from **Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida***.

3a. The Marxist support for egalitarianism which transcends the Spartan ideal provides a basis for the discussion of an ideological debate on the dilemma of potential conflict between economic equality and economic growth. (This issue presages the presentation of this dilemma which is developed in the Rawlsian theory of distributive justice.) A selection from **Marx-Engels** is presented in the Reader. The class discussion will include the critical examination of two central doctrines of Marxism. These doctrines refer to the nature of “Historicism” and the nature of “Exploitation.”

3b. An extremely tough-minded criticism of contemporary egalitarianism is available in the reader in the essay by **Lord Bauer, “The Grail of Equality.”**

IV. The Concept of Justice

1a. Justice has been an “essentially contested” concept from the outset. **Plato’s *Republic***, which provided a series of five different definitions of justice, has been considered a *locus classicus* for the concept. The Reader contains the first part of the *Republic* in which four of these definitions are advanced and criticized from traditional justice through poetic justice to the Sophist reduction of justice to power and concluding with one version of the idea of justice as a social contract.

1b. An alternative theory on the origin and function of justice is provided by **David Hume’s** account of justice which is presented in the Reader. The selection from **“Of the Origin of Justice and Property,”** the first part of which has been cited for discussion of anarchism and the fictional character of the state of nature is augmented. The Hume selection follows Aristotle in exhibiting an interpretation of justice which tends to view justice as a conserving social value rather than a reforming social value. Thus class discussion is focused on the thesis that the definition of justice should be restricted to two basic elements: the effort to realize a punitive system in which violations of laws or rules receive appropriate rectification, reparation, or retribution and the effort to avoid differentiation or discrimination for irrelevant reasons. A contrary effort to interpret justice as a reforming social ideal relates justice to equality as in the idea of distributive justice in John Rawls.

2a. An alternative conceptual analysis of “distributive justice” has been extraordinarily popular in twentieth-century philosophy. This is **John Rawls**’s analysis of justice presented in the Reader in the essay “**Justice as Fairness.**” Rawls’s analysis has generated much political controversy that relates back to the justification of egalitarian redistributionism and to the previously raised issue of the relationship between economic growth, economic equality, and economic deprivation.

(Note: the characteristic triad has been slightly altered in the organization of the concept of Justice. It is possible to see the Rawls essay as the current conceptual analysis; Plato, Aristotle, and Hume, as the *locus classicus*; and the criticisms of the application of Rawlsian theory as the issue of ideological controversy.)

V. The Concept of Liberty

1. The classic conceptual formulation was **Isaiah Berlin**’s “**Two Concepts of Liberty.**”
2. **John Stuart Mill**’s *On Liberty* was the canonic text for an approach in favor of the maximization of liberty. Class discussion will focus on the arguments pro and con Mill’s theory of liberty. There is no required text for the criticism of Mill, but I have included, as background reading a chapter from **Fitzjames Stephen**’s *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. Stephen’s book was considered the contemporaneous antithesis to the Millian doctrine. Although Mill represents a *locus classicus*, the issues raised in the reading of Mill are also the subject of current controversy over drawing the line between liberty and security, liberty and order, or liberty and morality.
3. A current ideological extension of the issue of liberty is the program for the redefinition of liberty in “Identity Politics” in which freedom is extended to include the freedom to create the self or the identity of the individual or the group. The justification of the secession of Slovakia from Czechoslovakia or the proposed of Biafra from Nigeria or Quebec from Canada are examples of historical situations which involve the legitimacy of new self-identification by an historical group. A review of the philosophical aspects of this issue is presented in **D. Sidorsky**’s essay titled “**The Third Concept of Liberty and the Politics of Identity.**”

VI. The Concept of Democracy

1. The *locus classicus* for the theory of democracy in modern political philosophy is **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**, *The Social Contract*. A selection from that work is presented in the reader.
2. A conceptual analysis of democracy is provided in the **Schumpeter** selection titled “**Two Concepts of Democracy**” excerpted from his book *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*.
3. The conflict between Rousseau’s model of democracy and Schumpeter’s model of democracy provides a basis for a discussion of the ideological debate over competing models of democracy. From a Rousseauvian point of view, Schumpeter’s model would represent an oligarchical interpretation of democracy while from Schumpeter’s point of view, Rousseau’s model was Utopian or self-destructive. This ideological debate involves practical issues on the limits of democracy and on the conditions for asserting democracy as a universal political standard for all nations.