

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT

PHIL 1433

I. Course Description

This is an introductory course to the history of modern Western political philosophy. Its primary focus is on the social contract tradition, a family of views that holds that the legitimacy, authority, and/or justice of political institutions is based on the consent of their participants, in some sense. The course is divided into three parts.

In the first part of the course, we will become acquainted with some of the seminal works in modern social contract theory. In particular, we will read from works written in the 17th and 18th centuries by Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. These authors differ from one another about, *inter alia*, the ultimate grounds of rights and obligations, human nature, and what sorts of political institutions are justifiable. We will endeavor not only to understand their alternative theories in the abstract, but also to apply them to contemporary political questions.

In the second part of the course, we will turn to what is perhaps the most formidable alternative to the social contract tradition in the history of modern Western political thought: utilitarianism. We will read from some seminal works written in the 18th and 19th centuries by David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill. Our aim here will not be to come to some view about which of the rival traditions offers superior answers to questions of legitimacy, authority, and/or justice, but rather to develop an appreciation for the fundamentally different ways in which they interpret and attempt to answer such questions.

In the final part of the course, we will examine a variety of responses to the social contract tradition in the 20th and 21st centuries. We will begin by becoming acquainted with John Rawls's theory of "justice as fairness," a self-conscious attempt to build on the basic ideas in the social contract tradition and to offer a compelling response to the utilitarian alternative. We will then turn to critiques of Rawls's theory and of the social contract tradition more broadly from a variety of perspectives, including libertarianism, socialism, feminism, critical race theory, and critical disability theory.

II. Course Objectives

The goals of the course are to:

- Develop essential philosophical skills, chief among which is the ability to identify, charitably interpret, and critically evaluate arguments.
- Develop your expository and critical writing skills.
- Introduce you to the social contract tradition and enable you to form at least a preliminary judgment on its strengths and weaknesses as a framework for posing and answering the pressing questions of political morality.
- Introduce you to some of the most influential texts of modern Western political philosophy.
- Challenge you to clarify and systematize your own political judgments.

III. Teaching Method

Instruction will consist of two main components: biweekly lectures and weekly recitations.

Lectures may sometimes need to meet synchronously on Zoom or be pre-recorded, but my hope is that this will happen only rarely, if at all (e.g. if I have a childcare emergency). For similar reasons, recitations may sometimes need to meet synchronously.

IV. Evaluation Method

Your final grade will consist of the components described briefly in the following table. *No extra credit will be offered in this course.*

Assignment	Value	Tentative length	Description/Comments
First argument analysis	5%	3-4 pages	Argument analyses are structured writing assignments meant to train your philosophical skills. They will be based on arguments either in course texts, or in short texts I will make available specifically for the assignments.
Second argument analysis	10%		
Midterm	15%		A partial assessment of the skills we have trained, and material we have covered, through (roughly) the midpoint of the semester.
Paper	25%	6-7 pages	A critical philosophy paper on early modern social contract theory or the utilitarian tradition.
Final exam	30%		A comprehensive assessment of the skills developed, and the material covered, in the course.
Attendance and participation	15%		Based on attendance to both lecture and recitation, on online discussion activities or reflections (if any), and on participation during recitation.