

# TOPICS IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY: POVERTY

PHIL 3430

## I. Seminar Description

Philosophers have had remarkably little to say about some basic questions concerning poverty: What exactly is poverty, and what exactly is wrong with it? This majors' seminar is structured around the wager that investigating these neglected questions will put us in a better position to answer (or, at the very least, help us better understand answers to) some pressing empirical, methodological, and practical questions about poverty that social scientists, policy-makers, and philosophers have long debated.

On the social scientific front, we will consider on two downstream questions in empirical poverty research, both of which bear directly on practical efforts to eradicate (or, at least, to alleviate) poverty: How should we measure poverty and what are its causes? If we want to do something about poverty, we need to be able to measure it. We have to know who is in poverty, whether their condition is worsening or improving, whether some demographic groups are more affected by poverty than others, and so on. Remedial efforts must also be based on some account of what makes people fall into poverty and what keeps them there. For example, if it turns out that changes in the prevailing family structure do not account for an increased incidence of poverty among individuals in a community, then efforts to incentivize traditional marriage in that community cannot be justified on the grounds that they are an effective anti-poverty intervention.

On the philosophical front, we will consider two practical questions concerning poverty that have exercised moral and political philosophers: Who, if anyone, is obligated to alleviate or eradicate poverty, and how should they go about discharging this obligation? Since Peter Singer's seminal essay, "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," philosophers have debated whether the affluent bear certain obligations to those living in poverty, and, in particular, to those they often call the "global poor." Implicit in many of these debates have been views about what the affluent ought to do to discharge their obligations: contribute a percentage of their income to effective charities, demand that their elected officials pursue changes to the global trade regime, and so on. We will examine these debates critically in light of our answers to the basic conceptual questions.

*Note.* Due to its nature as a Philosophy Majors seminar, enrolment priority is given in the following order: Philosophy majors, Philosophy minors, and non-Philosophy majors/minors. Non-Philosophy majors/minors are encouraged to submit a Permission Request on Path to join the course.

## II. Seminar Objectives

1. *Interdisciplinary engagement.* You will investigate whether conceptual thinking about poverty can have important insights to contribute to empirical poverty research and anti-poverty practice. You will also engage philosophically with, and engage in philosophical discussions on the basis of, work done in adjacent disciplines such as political science, sociology, and economics.

2. *Working directly with the texts.* Students in lecture courses are often presented with highly refined and contentious interpretations of views or arguments. In this majors' seminar, you will have the opportunity to confront texts in all their complexity and to work collaboratively with me and with your peers to arrive at your own understanding of them.

3. *Exposition and writing.* The assignments in the seminar are designed to help you develop your expository and argumentative skills in both written and oral form. You will learn to lead group discussion on the basis of “discussion papers” (see below) and you will undertake a significant writing assignment, an early version of which you will present to the seminar as whole.

4. *Real talk.* The discussion-based format of the seminar will afford you the opportunity to work on your ability to do philosophy face-to-face and in real time.

### III. Teaching Method

In-person seminar activities, presentations, and discussion.

A typical seminar meeting will begin with some introductory remarks by me that will help frame our discussion for the day. The subsequent discussion will then be led in part by a seminar participant (see below), and in part by me. I will sometimes devote part of a seminar meeting to working through a group activity intended to enrich our critical engagement with the assigned material.

The seminar may sometimes meet synchronously on Zoom, but the plan is for this to happen only in exceptional circumstances (e.g., if I have a childcare emergency).

### IV. Evaluation Method

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

| Assignment                        |                       | Value | Tentative length               | Description/Comments   |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|-------|--------------------------------|--|
| Attendance and participation      |                       | 25%   | -                              | Based on the frequency of your attendance, and on the quality and frequency of your participation during seminar.  |
| Response papers                   |                       | 15%   | 400-500 words                  | A short, (almost) weekly paper responding to some significant interpretive or substantive issue raised by the assigned readings.   |
| Discussion paper and presentation |                       | 15%   | 5 pages (~1250 words)          | I will ask you to write a discussion paper and then present it to the seminar. A discussion paper consists of a critical examination of important views or arguments in the relevant readings that is intended to spur our critical engagement with those readings. After your presentation, you will answer questions from other seminar participants on the argument developed in your discussion paper. |
| Term paper                        | Workshop/presentation | 5%    | -                              | A presentation of your tentative thesis and argument for the term paper, to be held during one of the last few seminar meetings.   |
|                                   | Final draft           | 40%   | 10-12 pages (~2500-3000 words) | A paper on a topic of your choice concerning the topic of the seminar, to be determined in consultation with me.   |