

# PHIL 161: Problems in Social Thought

Spring 2009

Instructor: Donovan Cox

Email: donovan.cox at philos.umass.edu

Office Hours: by appointment.

Office: 359 Bartlett Hall

Website: <http://www.people.umass.edu/cox/>

## Course Overview

The course will be divided into five units (though the last unit may be dropped if we are short on time):

1. **Classic Readings.** This introductory unit will be devoted to looking at some highly influential treatises in modern liberal thought. The goal of this unit will be to gain an understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of the modern liberal state. Many of the issues discussed in these readings will be revisited in greater detail in later units. So the material in this unit will serve to provide a general background to other issues we will discuss.
2. **The Authority of the State.** Does the state have legitimate authority over the individual? If so, what justifies this authority? In this unit we will look at several attempts to answer these questions. Much of the material from our first unit will also be relevant here, as many of the theories we will see in the classic readings are attempts to answer these questions.
3. **The Limits of State Authority: Paternalism and Perfectionism.** Once we grant that the state does have some authority over the individual, we might then ask how far this authority reaches. Some, like J.S. Mill, have thought that the state should never interfere with the private lives of individuals except to prevent them from harming other people. Others have thought that greater state interference, or *paternalism*, is sometimes justified. A particular kind of paternalism that some thinkers, like Aristotle, have thought to be justified is *perfectionism*. Perfectionism is the view that it is the role of the state to

improve people, or to help make them better human beings. In this unit, we will look at whether any form of paternalism, and in particular perfectionism, is rationally justified.

4. **Justice.** In this unit we will look at several competing accounts of justice (specifically *distributive* justice, the just distribution of goods and resources). Justice is often understood as *fairness*. But what does it mean to be fair? Is a fair distribution one in which everyone has the same, or may some people fairly have more than others?
5. **Rights.** If time permits, we will close the semester by looking at the nature of rights. There are many interesting philosophical questions concerning rights: do we have them by nature? how do we know what our natural rights are? how do competing rights weigh against one another?

## Readings

Most readings will come from:

***Political Philosophy: Classic and Contemporary Readings***

Edited by Louis Pojman.

This book is available from Amherst Books in downtown Amherst.

Additionally, there will be a few readings not found in this book. I will post these readings as PDFs on the course website:

<http://www.people.umass.edu/cox/161S09.html>

To download these readings, go to the above url. Click on “schedule”. Here you will see a PDF version of our class schedule. Scroll down to the day for which the additional reading is scheduled, and simply click on the title of the reading to view the PDF of the reading.

To save a copy of your own, right-click (Windows) or control-click (Macintosh) on the link and select “save as” from the context menu.

I strongly encourage you to print these readings and bring printed copies to class the day we discuss them.

## Assignments and Grading

**Take-Home Assignment 1: 20%** (Feb. 18)

**Take-Home Assignment 2: 20%** (April 13)

**Mid-Term Examination: 25%** (March 13)

**Final Examination: 25%** (TBA)

**Class Preparation: 10%**

- **Take-Home Assignments:** There will be two take home assignments during the semester, the first due on Feb. 18th, and the second due on April 13th. For each one, I will give you two questions to answer, about a week before the assignment is due. You will then have a week to prepare written answers to the questions. We will talk in more detail about these as the time for the first one approaches, but here are a few guidelines:
  - Your answer for each question should average half a page in length, 12-pt. typeface, single-spaced.
  - You are allowed to consult me during your preparations, either by email or in person.
  - You *are allowed* to consult one another during your preparations. However, you may not copy answers from one another—every student must write his answer in his own words. If you *talk* to other students about your answers, I advise you to *write* your answers in isolation. This minimizes the risk you will fail to use your own words. Any answers that resemble one another too closely will be considered candidates for cheating, and subject to the appropriate penalty (see below)
- **Exams:** There will be two exams in the class, a mid-term (March 13th) and a final (date to be announced). Each exam will consist of two parts. The first part, called “short-essay”, will require you to rehearse specific arguments from our readings. The second part, called “long-essay”, will require you to discuss a broader issue or doctrine from our readings, often asking you to piece together an author’s complete view on an issue. I will give you a pool of possible exam questions to study before each test. I will try to give you these study guides about one week prior to the exam day.
- **Class preparation:** The preparation will be based on two things: (i) attendance and (ii) your level of preparation for class. You will begin the semester with an A for preparation. Penalties will be introduced for:
  1. Absences. Any more than three absences will reduce your preparation grade to a C. Any more than five absences will reduce the preparation grade to a D.
  2. Indications that you are not prepared for class (you clearly haven’t done the reading, etc.)
  3. Failure on occasion to contribute to class discussion. Contribution may be by asking questions, or by answering questions I may ask you in class.

## Academic Dishonesty

Academic dishonesty comes in two primary forms: plagiarism and cheating. Plagiarism is intentional or unintentional use of someone else's words as your own. Do not plagiarize. Cheating is any attempt to violate the rules or understood conventions pertaining to exams, quizzes, or similar assignments. Do not cheat. **Academic dishonesty on any assignment will earn you a failing grade for the class.** There will be no compromises. If you have any questions about academic dishonesty, ask me, or consult the student conduct code.