

Phil. 1200: Philosophy & Society

Fall, 2003

Lecture: MWF, 11:00-11:50, Hlms 211
Professor: Michael Huemer
Web page: home.sprynet.com/~owl1

Office: 266 Hellems
Office Hours: MWF, 12:00-1:20, Prufrock's
W, 3:00, Hlms 266

General Description:

The course will examine a number of controversial social/political issues. We will look at them from a philosophical point of view; hence, we will consider the issues about values and about the general nature of society and human beings that they raise. There will be 4 units, each of which will consider two or three different issues:

First unit: Irrationality; capital punishment; euthanasia.

Second unit: The problem of world poverty; distributive justice.

Third unit: The authority of government; rights; anarchism.

Fourth unit: Drug laws; pornography; discrimination.

We will read articles written by professional academics and intellectuals, arguing for positions on each of these issues. I will explain these arguments in class, after which we will discuss them.

The goal is for you to (a) learn important facts and ideas pertaining to the subject matter, and (b) to improve your ability to think logically about controversial social issues.

Readings:

The text is a course packet from the CU book store (245 pages, \$41.75). Note: the 1st reading selection is also posted on my web page.

Course Requirements:

• *Papers (1/3 of grade):*

I will ask you to write 4 short papers (3-4 pages). Due dates are on the schedule below, and guidelines for writing the papers are at the end of this syllabus.

Papers will be given grades on a scale of 1-5. Most students should expect to receive a '4', with '5' reserved for exceptionally good papers, and '3' or below for papers that fall below expectations.

• *Tests (2/3 of grade):*

There will be 4 in-class tests (multiple choice, short answer, short essay). You will be tested on your knowledge and understanding of philosophical positions and arguments discussed in class and in the reader.

Who Should Take This Class?

There's only one good reason to be here. That is because you want to learn the stuff mentioned in the "General Description" above. If you are not interested in those things, don't take the class. If you want to find out whether you will be interested, you can go to the book store and look over the course packet before buying it.

If you're going to stay in the class, please be prepared to come on time and to do the assigned readings. The objective nature of my tests means that if you don't do the readings and come to

class, you will be pretty much screwed in terms of grades.

Lastly, if you're going to have a problem with a professor calling some philosophical propositions "true," and others "false," then you shouldn't take a class from me. Ditto if you think a professor shouldn't assign his own articles, if you are easily offended by controversial ideas, if you think there are no such things as objective facts, or if you think it's not important to use reason in political discussion. If any of those things apply to you, you probably will not get anything out of the class.

Other guidelines:

1. To contact me: send email to the address listed above, and I will probably respond the same day. Or call between 10 a.m. and 10 p.m. Leave a message, since I screen my calls.
2. Please feel free come to my office hours to talk about philosophy, or play chess. If you have any questions, I will do my best to answer them, but you needn't have a specific question to come. Prufrock's coffee shop is at 1322 College Ave. (on the hill). Also, if you can't come during the main time, I will usually be at my office (266 Hellemes) at 3:00 on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday (except when colloquia and department meetings conflict).
3. During class, please do not hesitate to comment on or ask questions about anything we discuss. Class participation is valuable and important.
4. I have a personal web page <home.sprynet.com/~owl1>, which includes some information about the class, including this syllabus & some lecture notes, among other, cooler things. You may wish to view the philosophy humor as well.

Grading policy:

Class grades will be 'curved' so as to yield a B- average for the class. The usual formula I use is something like the following: (Adjusted score) = (Raw score) \times (.7) + 30, where "raw score" is your percentage score prior to applying the curve. However, the '.7' and '30' figures will be adjusted in order to get the right average for the class (for example, they might be adjusted to .6 and 40, or .8 and 20).

As with many things in the outside world, grades are based on observable performance, rather than effort or virtue. Please do not tell me you should get a higher grade because you worked really hard, you really need it, or you're a nice person. Also, please don't obsess about your grade. After you graduate, no one will ever look at your grades again.

Schedule

This shows what will be discussed on each day. The reading for the day is indicated (by author's last name) on the right-hand side. All readings are in the course packet, in order. Some days have more than 1 reading. Also note the **paper due dates** and **test dates**.

Unit 1: Irrationality, Capital Punishment, Euthanasia

M, Aug 25	Introduction, course requirements.
W, Aug 27	Disagreement & irrationality. Huemer, §1-4. (Note: also found at http://home.sprynet.com/~owl1/irrationality.htm)

F, Aug 29		Huemer, §5-8.
M, Sept 1	<i>No class — Labor Day</i>	
W, Sept 3	Capital Punishment. Paper #1 due.	Hook
F, Sept 5		Primoratz
M, Sept 8		Nathanson
W, Sept 10	Euthanasia.	Gay-Williams
F, Sept 12		Brock
M, Sept 15		Rachels
W, Sept 17	Review.	
F, Sept 19	Test #1.	

Unit 2: World Hunger, Distributive Justice

M, Sept 22	World hunger.	Singer
W, Sept 24		Hardin
F, Sept 26		Rand
M, Sept 29	More discussion.	
W, Oct 1	Marxism.	Marx
F, Oct 3	<i>No class — Fall Break</i>	
M, Oct 6		Huemer, “The Theory of Economic Value”
W, Oct 8	Distributive justice.	Rawls
F, Oct 10		Nozick
M, Oct 13	More discussion. Paper #2 due.	
W, Oct 15	Review.	
F, Oct 17	Test #2.	

Unit 3: The Authority of Government, Rights, Anarchism

M, Oct 20	Social contract theory.	Hobbes
W, Oct 22		Locke + Declaration of Independence

F, Oct 24	Authority of government.	D'Amato
M, Oct 27		Milgram
W, Oct 29	More discussion.	
F, Oct 31	Rights.	Friedman, "A Positive Account of ..."
M, Nov 3	Anarchy.	Nozick; Friedman, ch. 28, 29, 39
W, Nov 5		Friedman, ch. 6, 7, 34
F, Nov 7	More discussion. Paper #3 due.	
M, Nov 10	Review.	
W, Nov 12	Test #3.	

Unit 4: Drugs, Pornography, Discrimination

F, Nov 14	Drugs.	Wilson
M, Nov 17		Huemer
W, Nov 19	Pornography.	Longino
F, Nov 21		Carol
M, Nov 24	More discussion.	
W, Nov 26	Discrimination.	"Facial Discrimination"
F, Nov 28	<i>No class — Thanksgiving</i>	
M, Dec 1	More discrimination. Paper #4 due.	Goldberg
W, Dec 3		Dworkin
F, Dec 5		Rand
M, Dec 8	Review.	
W, Dec 10	Test #4. Bye.	

Short Paper Assignments

Guidelines for the papers:

- Check the schedule above for due dates. Late papers will lose points.
- If you can't come to class on the due date for some very good reason (not because you can't be

bothered to get out of bed), you may send it by email, before class. You may send it (a) as text pasted into an email message, (b) as a text-file (.txt) attachment, or (c) as a rich-text file (.rtf). Do not send some weird file format and assume that I can read it. (This is good advice for your after-college life too.)

- Desired length: 3-4 pages. Double-spaced, 10-12 point font, 1 inch margins. Please do not mess with the spacing, font, etc. to try to make it look longer or shorter.
- Try to say something different from what has been said in class and in the book.
- Write *clearly* and *directly*. Don't repeat yourself. Don't waste your and my time with unnecessary verbiage--every sentence should be contributing to making your overall point. Furthermore, your overall point should be explicitly stated.
- Don't plagiarize your paper. If you do, I'll give you an F for the entire course, and report you to the dean and your mother (just kidding about the last one, but you really will fail).

What should you write about?

For each paper, answer *one* of the questions listed below for the unit we are on:

- Unit 1:**
1. What do you think is the biggest/most important social problem? Explain what the problem is and why it is so important.
 2. Why do people disagree so much about politics? Why do you think that *you* disagree with others about politics?
 3. Is capital punishment just? Why or why not?

- Unit 2:**
1. Is it morally obligatory to donate large amounts of money to the poor? Do you think you are satisfying your moral obligations towards the poor? (If not, why are you not doing so?)
 2. Some people have much more wealth than others. Is that bad? If so, what if anything should be done about it?
 3. Why do you suppose some people in the world are so much poorer than others?

- Unit 3:**
1. What is the social contract theory? Does it adequately answer why people have an obligation to obey the state?
 2. Why do you think most people actually obey the laws that the government lays down?
 3. In Nozick's "Tale of the Slave": at what stage does the person cease to be a slave? Justify your answer.

- Unit 4:**
1. What are the main reasons why people support anti-drug laws? Do you agree with them?
 2. What are the main reasons why some people think pornography is bad? Do you agree with them?
 3. Do you think our society has a lot of unfair discrimination? Explain why or why not.
 4. What is "discrimination," and what is wrong with it? And is affirmative action a form of "discrimination"?