

Social and Political Philosophy

Philosophy 126 – Fall 2023

Basic course information

Instructor: Dr. Justin Mooney
Email: mooneyj@denison.edu
Office: Knapp 205K
Office hours: 1:30-2:30 MWF

Course dates: Aug 30 – Dec 13
Days: Tuesdays & Thursdays
Time: 3:00 – 4:20pm
Room: Fellows Hall 207

The best way to communicate with me outside of class is via the email address listed above. I will do my best to answer emails within 48 hours.

Course description and objectives

Are human beings naturally good or naturally evil? What would life be like if there were no state? Are we normally obligated to obey the laws of the state, and if so, why? Is civil disobedience sometimes justified, and if so, when? What is the nature of oppression? How should wealth be distributed? Is it ever wrong to vote? In this class, we will explore what philosophers throughout history have said about these and other issues debated in social and political philosophy.

As we think through topics such as these, we will be working to develop and hone philosophical skills such as analyzing concepts, constructing and critiquing arguments, and evaluating philosophical theories.

Relevant Resources

Accessibility: Students with a documented disability should complete a Semester Request for Accommodations through their Accommodate MyAccommodations app on MyDenison. It is the student's responsibility to contact me privately as soon as possible to discuss specific needs and make logistic arrangements well in advance of an evaluation. I rely on the Academic Resource Center (ARC) located in 020 Higley Hall, to verify the need for reasonable accommodations based on the documentation on file in that office. Reasonable accommodations cannot be applied retroactively and therefore ideally should be enacted early in the semester as they are not automatically carried forward from a previous term and must be requested every semester.

Writing center: Students are encouraged to seek assistance from the Writing Center while working on the assignments for this course. Information about the writing center can be found here: <https://denison.edu/academics/support/the-writing-center>

Readings: All of the required readings for this course will be articles and extracts provided on Canvas. You do not need to purchase any textbooks.

Assignments

Validity and Soundness Exercise: near the beginning of this course you will be asked to complete a short exercise that gives you an opportunity practice a basic philosophical skill: determining whether an argument is valid and sound.

Reading Responses: You will be asked to complete a total of eight reading responses throughout the course. These are short, written reactions to the reading assignments, and they will be posted in a shared forum on our course Moodle page. Some of them may be replies to other student's posts. Aim for about one paragraph for each response. These assignments will give you practice expressing philosophical thoughts in writing.

Argument evaluations: You will be asked to complete two argument evaluations: 1-1.5 page critical discussions of the philosophical arguments that I will introduce to you in class lectures. These argument evaluations will help you learn how to critique a philosophical argument. They will also prepare you to write the final paper. More details about these argument evaluations will be provided in class.

Final paper (and draft): You will be asked to write a 5-6 page final paper in which you defend a position on a topic in philosophy. You should use one of your argument evaluations as the foundation for the final paper. One class period near the end of the semester will be a peer-review session where you can get feedback on a draft of your paper before turning in the final version. More details about the final paper will be provided in class.

Participation: this is a discussion-based class, and participation will be important to your learning experience. In this class, participation has three main components:

- (i) Attending class regularly. Poor attendance may negatively impact your grade. (See below for my attendance policy.)
- (ii) Completing the assigned readings on time. In the course schedule below, each reading is listed next to the date that we will discuss it in class, and should be completed by the start of class on that date.
- (iii) Speaking up regularly during small group discussions and class discussions. Most class sessions will include both a small group discussion time and a full class discussion time. To ensure that you get full points for participation, you should always contribute to small-group discussions, and frequently contribute to full-class discussions.

Grades

Your final grade in this class breaks down as follows. The validity & soundness exercise will be worth 4% of your final grade; the eight reading responses will be worth 16% of

your final grade (2% each); the two argument evaluations will be worth 30% of the final grade (15% each); the first draft of the final paper will be worth 10% of your final grade; the final paper will be worth 30% of your final grade; and the remaining 10% will be based on class participation, which includes attendance and contribution to class discussion.

This class will use a standard grading scale:

A	93-100%	C	73-76%
A-	90-92%	C-	70-72%
B+	87-89%	D+	67-69%
B	83-86%	D	65-66%
B-	80-82	F	0-65%
C+	77-79%		

Policies¹

Attendance: Regular attendance is expected. However, students are permitted three unexcused absences with no penalty. More than three unexcused absences may result in a deduction of points from the student's final grade.

Extensions: Extensions may be granted in special circumstances. Requests for extensions should be made prior to the due date of the assignment. Otherwise, assignments will be deducted by 1/3 letter grade for each day they are late (e.g. a B+ paper drops to a B paper if it is one day late; it drops to a B- if it is two days late; etc.). Assignments more than one week late will not be accepted.

Class Discussion: There will be many opportunities for in-class discussion during this course. Students are expected to be respectful of others. To help ensure that everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute during class discussions, we will use "the finger system", which I will explain on the first day of class.

Academic Honesty: Academic honesty, the cornerstone of teaching and learning, lays the foundation for lifelong integrity. Academic dishonesty is intellectual theft. It includes, but is not limited to, providing or receiving assistance in a manner not authorized by the instructor in the creation of work to be submitted for evaluation. This standard applies to all work ranging from daily homework assignments to major exams. Students must clearly cite any sources consulted—not only for quoted phrases but also for ideas and information that are not common knowledge. Neither ignorance nor carelessness is an acceptable defense in cases of plagiarism. It is the student's responsibility to follow the

¹ The statements on academic honesty and accessibility below are the standard ones provided for use on syllabi by Denison University.

appropriate format for citations. Students should ask their instructors for assistance in determining what sorts of materials and assistance are appropriate for assignments and for guidance in citing such materials clearly. For further information about the Code of Academic Integrity, see: <http://denison.edu/academics/curriculum/integrity>.

Class Schedule

*This schedule is subject to change.

Week 1

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|--------|--------------------|
| Aug 30 | Intro |
| Sept 1 | Facts and opinions |

Week 2

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|--------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sept 6 | Midgley, “Trying Out One’s New Sword”
Reading Response 1 due |
| Sept 8 | Argument basics: soundness and validity |

Week 3

- | | |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sept 13 | Mengzi, <i>Mengzi</i> 2A6
Validity & soundness exercise due |
| Sept 15 | Xunzi, “Human Nature is Bad” |

Week 4

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|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sept 20 | Hobbes, <i>Leviathan</i> (chs. 13-14)
Reading Response 2 due |
| Sept 22 | Locke, <i>Second Treatise of Government</i> (chapters II-III) |

Week 5

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|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sept 27 | Huemer, <i>The Problem of Political Authority</i> (chapter 1)
Reading Response 3 due |
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Sept 29 Huemer, *The Problem of Political Authority* (chapter 2)

Week 6

Oct 4 Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Intro & Chapter 1)
Reading Response 4 due

Oct 6 Mills, *The Racial Contract* (no new reading)

Week 7

Oct 11 Young, “The Five Faces of Oppression”
Reading Response 5 due

Oct 13 Young, “The Five Faces of Oppression” (no new reading)

Week 8

Oct 18 No class - fall break

Oct 20 Pateman, “Sexual Contract” (encyclopedia entry)

Week 9

Oct 25 Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Chapter V)
Argument Evaluation 1 due

Oct 27 “Condemning Music” from the *Mozi*

Week 10

Nov 1 Wolff, “The Distribution of Property,” pp. 153-170 (Rawls)
Reading Response 6 due

Nov 3 Wolff, “The Distribution of Property,” pp. 170-178 (Nozick)

Week 11

Nov 8 Plato, *Crito*

Reading Response 7 due

Nov 10 King, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”

Week 12

Nov 15 Brennan, “Polluting the Polls”
Argument Evaluation 2 due

Nov 17 Workshop: writing a philosophy paper

Week 13

Nov 22 No class – Thanksgiving break

Nov 24 No class – Thanksgiving break

Week 14

Nov 29 *Bhagavad Gita* (chapters 1-2)
Reading Response 8 due

Dec 1 Anscombe, “Mr. Truman’s Degree”

Week 15

Dec 6 Thomson, “A Defense of Abortion”

Dec 8 Peer review session
Draft of final paper due

Week 16

Dec 13 Schouten, “Fetuses, Orphans, and a Famous Violinist”

Final paper due on December 15th at 5:00pm