

**PHIL 167: Contemporary Political Philosophy**  
**Fall 2005; MWF 11-12:50; York 4080A**  
**Instructor: David O. Brink; 8062 H&SS**  
**Office Hours: M 12-1pm, T 11am-noon, and by appt**  
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**Final Exam: Monday, December 5, 11:30am-2:30pm**

This course is concerned with issues about **liberalism** and **distributive justice**. Liberalism is a venerable tradition within western political philosophy that recognizes that individuals have rights against each other and the state. We will look at different conceptions of liberalism and their implications for the nature and importance of issues about distributive justice. We will look at three main conceptions of liberalism and distributive justice, viz. **utilitarianism**, **libertarianism**, and **liberal egalitarianism**. A crude, initial description of the three conceptions might go like this. The utilitarian assesses governmental activities and institutions by the value of their consequences when compared with alternative activities and institutions. In assessing the consequences of rival activities and institutions, the utilitarian counts everyone's welfare equally. Because governmental activity is justified, on this view, insofar as its consequences are good, utilitarianism seems to support a fairly active role for government. Because the utilitarian is concerned with promoting (e.g. maximizing) total welfare, it is not clear if she can attach any intrinsic significance to the way in which welfare is distributed or to rights that trump the pursuit of collective goals. Right-based views defend all and only those governmental functions and institutions that protect fundamental rights of citizens. If a right to liberty is taken as fundamental, the result is a libertarian political philosophy that seems to place important limits on governmental activity. It is not clear if the libertarian can recognize familiar governmental functions, such as the redistribution of resources or the provision of public goods. Liberal egalitarianism derives rights to liberties from a more basic right to equality. It insists that government should treat its citizens as free and equal members of the community and should establish terms of social cooperation and norms of distributive justice that are acceptable to free and equal persons. A central challenge for liberal egalitarianism is to a form of equality that is compatible with a robust concern for individual responsibility.

We will examine influential versions of each of these three approaches to social justice and assess their plausibility. Though our focus will be on systematic and contemporary issues, we will begin our discussion of utilitarianism by looking at John Stuart Mill's classic defense of utilitarian and liberal ideas in Utilitarianism (1861) and On Liberty (1859). We will then look at Robert Nozick's imaginative defense of libertarianism in Anarchy, State, and Utopia (1974). Next we will examine John Rawls's famous defense of a liberal egalitarian conception of distributive justice in A Theory of Justice (1971). If time permits, we will conclude by looking at more recent developments in thinking about distributive justice, by writers such as Derek Parfit, Samuel Scheffler, Ronald Dworkin, and Richard Arneson, that grew out of reaction to Rawls's work. One recurrent theme will be the relationship between liberty and equality. It's a common contemporary view that liberty and equality are independent and, perhaps, conflicting ideals. We want to see what these theories have to say about social equality and individual liberty individually and how they relate these two values to each other.

## **FORMAT**

The class meetings will involve lectures, liberally seasoned, I hope, with discussion. The lectures will provide philosophical background and structure to the issues raised in the readings and will present and assess issues in a fairly systematic way. But I expect students to get involved and

generate discussion by asking for clarification, expressing skepticism about my interpretive and systematic proposals, suggesting alternative interpretations of readings, and proposing alternative assessments of issues and arguments under discussion. Attendance at class is not mandatory, but students who do attend regularly get more out of the class and consistently do better on class requirements.

## **REQUIREMENTS**

Work for the course will consist of bi-weekly quizzes, two papers, and a final exam. The quizzes will be held every other week (generally on Fridays). They will include true/false, multiple choice, and short answer questions. They should not be too difficult for students who are up-to-date with the readings and lectures. The first paper should be approximately 4-5 pages; it is currently scheduled to be due Wednesday, October 12. The second paper should be approximately 5-7 pages; it is currently scheduled to be due Monday, November 14. Paper topics will be distributed at least one week before the due date. Students are encouraged to discuss paper topics and their plans for the paper with me. If students require an extension on a paper, they must get the extension approved in advance. Late papers (for which an extension was not approved in advance) will lose one fraction of a grade for every day late (e.g. a paper that would have received a B+ if handed in on time will receive a B- if handed in two days late). Study questions for the final exam will be distributed before the end of term (details later). The quizzes are worth 20% (collectively), the first paper is worth 20%, the second paper is worth 25%, and the final is worth 35% of your grade. All requirements must be completed to receive a passing grade. Students are not graded on a curve (that is, there is no quota for particular grades; there could in principle be a large number of As or Cs). Students can help their grades at the margins if their grades display linear progress or they are regular and constructive contributors in lecture or section.

## **BOOKS**

The following books have been ordered for the course and should be available at the University Bookstore:

The Classical Utilitarians, ed. J. Troyer (Hackett).  
Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia (Basic Books).  
John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Harvard University Press).

Any additional readings will be posted on Electronic Reserves.

## **READINGS**

The reading assignments are listed on the Syllabus. I will regularly indicate where we are on the Syllabus (remind me if I don't). It is very important to read the assignments on time, and it is helpful if you bring the texts we are discussing to class.

## **WEBSITE**

All course materials and handouts will be available on the course website. You will be expected to have access to print or electronic versions of these handouts during class. You should check periodically to make sure that you have current versions of all the handouts (which are revised or updated periodically).

<http://philosophy.ucsd.edu/~brink/courses/167-05>