

“The Social Contract”

Summer 23

Course Information:

Instructor: Paul Musso

Email: pmusso@sas.upenn.edu

Time: Tuesdays and Thursdays (5:15 - 9:05 PM, EST)

Course Name: The Social Contract

IMPORTANT NOTE: The course is scheduled for 5:15-9:05 PM. Obviously, since the course is accelerated, the sessions will be longer than normal. We will not go for four hours straight, however, you will have a significant break in the middle of class. The basic template will be a three part structure where we have a session for an hour and a half, then take a long break of an hour, before returning for another session of an hour and a half.

Course Description:

This is an introductory political philosophy course. We will begin by exploring three prominent strands of the social contract tradition in political philosophy. First, we will explore the contractarian tradition starting with Hobbes, then we will turn to the contractualist tradition with Rousseau, before moving on to the libertarian tradition in Locke. We will conclude the course with several weeks on Marx and Marxism.

The course will consist of three main components: reading, writing, and discussion. The readings for this course will be difficult. The other two components are intended to help with this. The course will be *writing intensive*, and involve a robust discussion board, as well as two short papers. The writing component will force you to think actively about the text, and prepare you for discussion. The discussion component is where we will grapple with the difficult ideas of the course as a group, and deepen your understanding of the material. Although the material and ideas will be difficult, the grading will largely be focused on your effort. If you bring a strong effort to every class, or almost every class, and try your best to wrestle with the ideas, you are **likely** to do well.

The course will be both synchronous and asynchronous. In the synchronous sessions, we will meet to discuss the readings and explore the philosophical questions raised in them. You will be expected to attend and participate, and this will be a significant portion of your grade. There is also an indirect benefit, which is that you are far more likely to do a better job on your papers by attending and actively participating in discussions. Philosophy is hard, so it helps to go over the ideas several times with the help of others. The asynchronous component of the course will be a course discussion board (more info below).

Readings:

Political Philosophy: The Essential Texts, Steven Cahn, 3rd Edition

Assignments & Grade Breakdown:

- Participation (40%)
- Five page papers (x2, 45%)
- Discussion board (15%)

Attendance and Participation:

This course is structured around reading, writing, and class discussions. Our mutual goal is to build an intellectual community to investigate the primary questions of the course together. Consistent attendance is essential to succeeding in this course, and making the discussions lively and enjoyable for everyone. Merely being present, however, is insufficient for receiving full marks. Your attendance and participation score will be determined by my judgment of your contribution to the intellectual community of the course. I will grade you based on your perceived effort to learn and think about the material, and engage with your classmates. You will be permitted **one** unexcused absence. After that, you will lose 5% of your final attendance and participation grade for every absence. If you have a legitimate reason for being excused from class, please email me in advance. If there was an emergency, please follow up with me afterwards and provide as much detail as you feel comfortable with, or have your academic advisor reach out to me if you prefer.

Discussion Board:

You will be expected to post on the discussion board prior to each class. I want to get you into the habit of writing and thinking about philosophy. To that end, for each class you will be **required** to write **750 words** by either responding to the relevant discussion board prompt, to another classmate's response, or raising your own detailed question. These responses will help you think about the text in a deeper way prior to our class discussions, and also help your classmates do the same. I will read these responses and try to incorporate your thoughts into our discussion. Each response will be due **prior** to the start of each class discussion on the relevant topic. They will be graded on a **pass/fail** basis (with no submission being a 0). In order for your response to pass, it must demonstrate textual knowledge or, if responding to someone's comment, a detailed engagement with their ideas.

Note: You must do *at least* one of each type of response throughout the course to get full credit.

If you want to do *more*, or want to carry on side conversations, there will also be an informal discussion board. On this board you can raise questions if you are struggling, or just post interesting links to relevant things you found on the internet. This is meant to be a part of the course where we can talk philosophy without having the pressures of public speaking on Zoom. I will not be keeping track of your responses for this informal discussion board and it is not part of your grade, but you are encouraged to use it.

Five-Page Papers (x2):

You will be required to write two five-page papers (double spaced, 12pt. font). In these papers, you will need to reconstruct the reasoning behind a philosophical position and criticize or defend it. More info will be given during the course.

Course Rules:

Legal

Academic honesty is fundamental to our intellectual community. Please read Penn's Code of Academic Integrity. It can be found in the Pennbook. Any suspicious activity will be thoroughly investigated. A confirmed violation of the Code in this course will very likely result in failure for the course.

In compliance with Penn policy and equal access laws, I am available to discuss appropriate academic accommodations that you may require as a student with a disability. Requests for academic accommodations need to be made during the first two weeks of the semester, except under unusual circumstances, to arrange reasonable accommodations. Students must register with Student Disabilities Services (SDS) for disability verification and for determination of reasonable academic accommodations.

Etiquette

The livelier our class discussions the better. You are welcome (even encouraged) to **disagree** with one another and with me, but always do so respectfully and in terms that stimulate rather than stifle discussion. In fact, if you think I have misspoke or misrepresented a view, I encourage you to disagree with me. I am a *student* of philosophy just like you, and I can make mistakes. Correcting mistakes is often when the most learning happens in philosophy. In particular, I expect you to

-Listen to what others have to say.

-Let others finish their thoughts.

-Be Charitable: I expect you to be a charitable interpreter of your interlocutors. Assume at all times that your interlocutors are after the truth, just as you are, and that their efforts to get at it are in good faith. If some statement you read or hear seems obviously false, attempt to find some interpretation of it on which it seems at least plausible, even if you do not ultimately accept it.

Note: We all make mistakes from time to time. These are ideals that should be aimed at, but so is forgiveness. The world is changing at a rapid pace, and we must be mindful of the radically different assumptions, and bodies of knowledge, which have shaped our lives. For a more robust list of good practices, please consult the following link:

<http://consc.net/guidelines/>

Office Hours

I will distribute information about office hours on Canvas.

Contact Policy

Email has become a staple of life, but it is often an inefficient tool in various ways. Hence the following: I am available over email to answer simple, specific questions, or for any matter pertaining to the logistics of the course. I will try to answer all such emails as soon as possible (though expect a longer turn-over during weekends). If I have not answered an email (which should have been answered) within 48 hours, do not hesitate to send a reminder. Please consult the syllabus before asking a question which may be answered there. For all other questions, feel free to come to office hours.

Some Random Bits of Advice For New Philosophers

Philosophy is *hard*. Some of the smartest people in human history were philosophers. Many of the myths about philosophy in popular culture are not accurate, though. Philosophers have often been wrong about many things, and sometimes they even made basic errors and held deeply objectionable beliefs. You do not have to be “smart” to be a philosopher, we are all philosophers to some extent. Being a philosopher encompasses doing many different things, which require different skills, all of which can be learned and require practice. Being a *professional academic* philosopher requires an additional set of skills (social, bureaucratic, etc.). I am becoming a professional philosopher, but I am not quick-witted. I like to do philosophy slowly, which often means that I don’t have a good answer until most conversations have already ended (this is what books are good for!). The most impressive people in conversation are not always the most insightful(though, sometimes they are), so don’t get intimidated. Like many hard things, dedication goes further than talent towards achieving success and enjoyment. Insofar as we are all engaged in the project of living life in a principled way, we are all philosophers to some extent. **How much of a philosopher you are, though, depends on how many “why” questions you are comfortable leaving unanswered as you carry on living.**

N.B. I reserve the right to revise the policies put forth here, provided that I give fair notice to the students. E.g., if it becomes evident that students are failing to do the required readings, I may have to implement reading quizzes.