

PHIL. 1200: Philosophy & Society (section 011)

Fall, 2010

Lecture: TR, 11:00 - 12:15

Office: 266 Hellems

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Office Hours: TR, 12:30-1:50

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Hellems 266

What Is This Course About?

The course will examine a number of controversial political and moral issues. We will try to determine in each case what is the right social policy, or the right thing for an individual to do. There will be 6 units:

First unit: Course introduction, irrationality in political thinking.

Second unit: World poverty, distributive justice.

Third unit: Authority of the state, obedience, jury nullification.

Fourth unit: Immigration, race.

Fifth unit: Drugs, guns.

Sixth unit: Abortion, animal rights/welfare.

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

Educational Philosophy & Goals

- a. In my view, philosophy in general is a search for truth. Philosophers try to figure out which beliefs are most likely to be true, and discard the others. If you think there is no such thing as truth and all beliefs are equally good, you shouldn't take a course from me.
- b. The way we search for truth is through argumentation: we look at both sides of an issue, formulate logical arguments, consider objections, and look for replies to the objections. If you find this sort of thing fun, you will like the course; otherwise, you won't.
- c. The way I try to teach philosophy is by doing philosophy in the classroom--advancing arguments, addressing objections, and so on. I hope that you will then pick it up.
- d. As a result of this course, you should learn the most important theories about each of the topics addressed, understand the reasons why people hold these theories, be able to form more rational and accurate beliefs about these issues, and improve your ability to think clearly and logically about controversial social issues.

Text

The required readings are on electronic reserve at the library. Go to libraries.colorado.edu/search/p?SEARCH=huemer. You will need your *identikey* and *password*. You may want to print everything now to have it for the rest of the semester. If you don't understand how this works, see the FAQ at uclibraries.colorado.edu/reserves/faqstudents.htm.

If you prefer, you may get the readings in pdf format on a disc from the professor, for \$1.

Who Should Take This Course?

There's only one good reason to take this course. That is because you want to learn more about social issues and how to reason about them. If you don't want that, don't take the course.

Warnings and requests: Don't take the class if you are unable to make it here *on time*. Be forewarned that the objective nature of my exams means that if you don't do the readings and come to class, you will probably bomb the tests. Lastly, if you love political correctness or if you need someone to pump up your self-esteem, you are going to be disappointed.

Other Guidelines

1. *To contact me:* Send email to the address listed above. I will usually respond the same day. Or call between 10 a.m. and 10 p.m. and leave a message.
2. *Office hours:* Come to my office to talk about philosophy and society, play chess, etc. I will try to answer any questions you have, but you needn't have a specific question to come.
3. *Classroom discussion:* During class, do not hesitate to comment on or ask about anything we discuss. You may say anything you think (that has to do with the topic). Don't be afraid to contradict something that's been said, and don't be afraid of "asking a stupid question." Those are the things that help us learn most.
4. *Course web page:* <spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/>. Includes information about the course, including this syllabus and course lecture notes. There is also some philosophical entertainment.

Course Requirements & Grading

- *Unit Tests (65% of final grade)*

There will be six tests. The first one is short and counts for half as much as the others. See schedule below for dates. The tests will consist of multiple choice & short answer, objective questions about what was said in the readings and in class.

- *Short Papers (25%)*

There are three writing assignments, described below.

- *Participation (10%)*

This is based on the professor's subjective sense of how well you contributed to class discussion and how regularly you attended class.

Notes about grades: Grades are based on observable performance, rather than effort or virtue. Please do not ask for a higher grade because you tried really hard, or because you really need it. Also, do not be obsessed with your grades. After you graduate, no one will ever look at them again. You should come here to increase your understanding, not to get a grade.

Writing Assignments

General Guidelines: READ THIS

- ▶ *Length:* At least 2 complete pages, and not more than 5. Do not manipulate margins, font size, etc., to make it look longer.
- ▶ *Due Dates:* are written on the schedule below. Keep track of them; don't expect me to remind you.
- ▶ *Format:* At the top of the page, include your name, course *and section* number, paper #, and # of the question you are answering (see questions below). Example:

John Smith Phil. 1200-011	Paper #2 Question 7
Since the dawn of time, man has pondered the mysteries of philosophy, blah blah blah . . .	

- ▶ *Late papers:* Will lose 10% credit (one letter grade). ☹ Papers more than a week late won't be accepted at all! ☹☹
- ▶ *If you can't come to class:* You may send it by email. Must be *received before 9:30 a.m.* on the due date. Acceptable formats: rtf, txt, pdf, or pasted into an email message. *If you send something I can't read, your paper will be late!*
- ▶ *Grading:* You will lose points if your paper is late, too short, doesn't do what the assignment asks, or is really confused.
- ▶ *Plagiarism:* Don't give me something written by someone else. If you use ideas or information from someone else, cite the source. If you use someone else's words, they must be in quotation marks or set off, and the source must be cited. If you plagiarize a paper, you'll get an F in the *entire course*, and be reported to the dean and your mother. ☹☹☹ (Just kidding about your mother, but you really will fail.) If you are unsure what plagiarism is, see <www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml>
- ▶ *Topic:* See descriptions below.
- ▶ *Writing Guide:* I have posted a guide to writing at <spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/writing.htm>. If you want your papers to be good, read that. All papers should conform to paragraph **29** in that guide. Some of the more important points:
 - Your point in the paper should be explicitly stated up front.
 - Try to say something different from what has been said in class and in the book.
 - Write *clearly* and *directly*.
 - Do not repeat yourself.
 - Do not waste your and my time with unnecessary verbiage, or with discussion of anything not essential to making your overall point.

Paper Topics


For each paper, answer *one* of the questions listed below. Don't answer the same question (or very similar questions) twice.

1. How have you been irrational about politics? Give at least one example. Explain (a) what the issue is or was, (b) how you are or were irrational about it, (c) why this is a problem, and (d) what you could do about it.
2. What would be the best way in which our society could be improved? Your proposal could be an improvement in political structure, specific laws, the general culture, or whatever else you think of. Discuss (a) how your improvement would work, (b) why you think it is so good, and (c) what objections an opponent might make, and why they would be mistaken.
3. Is it morally obligatory to donate large amounts of money to the poor? Do you think you are presently satisfying your moral obligations towards the poor? If not, why are you not doing so?
4. Some people have much more wealth than others. Is that bad? If so, what if anything should be done about it?
5. What is the social contract theory? Does it adequately answer why people have an obligation to obey the state?
6. In your own life, do you think you are too obedient to authority figures, or not obedient enough, or obedient in just the right degree? Explain why, with examples.
7. Are there circumstances in which jury nullification is appropriate? If yes, discuss these circumstances and why nullification would be appropriate. If no, discuss why it is never appropriate.
8. Do you think our society has a lot of unfair discrimination? Explain why or why not, with examples.
9. Under what circumstances, if any, is 'discrimination' justified? Explain with examples.
10. Should handguns be outlawed? Give the best argument for or against this. Then respond to the best objections to that argument.
11. Same as #10, but with drugs.
12. Same as #10, but with abortion.
13. Do we have any obligations toward animals (to do or not do things to them)? If so, what obligations do we have? What implications does this have for current practices in your life and in your society?

Schedule

This shows what you should read for the class discussion on each day. Also note the **test dates** and **due dates**. All readings are indicated by the author's last name. Some days have *more than one* assigned reading.

Unit 1 Introduction, Irrationality		
T, Aug 24	Introduction, course requirements.	
R, Aug 26	Why you so irrational?	Huemer, "Why People Are Irrational...", §1-4 <spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/irrationality.htm>
T, Aug 31	More irrationality.	Huemer, "Why People Are Irrational...", §5-8
R, Sept 2	Test #1. Prioritization.	Engel, "9/11 and Starvation" Lomborg et al., "Global Crises..."
Unit 2 Rich & Poor		
T, Sept 7	Feed the poor.	Singer, "Rich and Poor". "How Rich You Are", www.givingwhatwecan.org/resources/how-rich-you-are.php
R, Sept 9	Don't feed the poor. Paper #1 due.	Hardin, "The Case against Helping the Poor"
T, Sept 14	Redistribute wealth.	Rawls, <i>Theory of Justice</i>
R, Sept 16	Don't redistribute.	Nozick, "Distributive Justice" + "Entitlement Theory"
T, Sept 21	Test #2.	
Unit 3 Authority		
R, Sept 23	Theories of authority.	Plato, <i>Crito</i>
T, Sept 28	Social contract theory.	Locke, <i>Second Treatise</i> <i>Declaration of Independence</i>
R, Sept 30	Against authority.	Huemer, "The State"
T, Oct 5	Psychology of authority.	Milgram, "The Perils of Obedience"
R, Oct 7	Jury Nullification.	Duane, "Jury Nullification..."
T, Oct 12	Test #3.	
Unit 4 Immigration & Race		
R, Oct 14	For restriction.	Kershnar, "There Is No Moral Right..."

T, Oct 19	For open borders. Paper #2 due.	Huemer, "Is There a Right to Immigrate?"
R, Oct 21	Racism	Rand, "Racism"
T, Oct 26	Slave reparations.	Robinson, "America's Debt to Blacks" Horowitz, <i>Uncivil Wars</i>
T, Oct 28	Against reparations.	(Finish Robinson and Horowitz)
R, Nov 2	Test #4.	
Unit 5 Fun Things: Drugs & Guns		
T, Nov 4	Against guns.	Dixon, "Why We Should Ban Handguns..."
R, Nov 9	For guns.	Huemer, "Is There a Right to Own a Gun?"
T, Nov 11	Against drugs. Paper #3 due.	Wilson, "Against the Legalization..."
R, Nov 16	For drugs.	Huemer, "America's Unjust Drug War"
T, Nov 18	Test #5.	
Unit 6 Cute Things: Fetuses & Animals		
R, Nov 23	<i>Thanksgiving Break - No Class</i>	
T, Nov 25	<i>Thanksgiving Break - No Class</i>	
R, Nov 30	Against abortion.	Marquis, "Why Abortion Is Immoral" 
T, Dec 2	For abortion.	Thomson, "A Defense of Abortion"
R, Dec 7	For animal welfare.	Rolston, "Higher Animals..." Start Singer, "Equality for Animals?"
T, Dec 9	Against animal rights.	Finish Singer, "Equality for Animals?"
M, Dec 13, 4:30 pm	Test #6. Bye.	