

Contact information and office hours

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Overview

In this course, we bring together scholarship from philosophy, politics and economics to study the philosophical underpinnings and social institutions of contemporary American society and the world in which it operates. Working across disciplinary boundaries, we examine scholarship that seeks to describe the liberties, freedoms and safeguards that promote human flourishing and that looks carefully at the roles played by market economies and political institutions in the construction of contemporary society.

One purpose of this course is to prepare PPE majors to write their senior theses in the spring. To this end, concrete work on the thesis is required at regular intervals throughout the term. One assignment asks you to locate, read and report on source material; the final project of the course is a thesis prospectus. Another goal is to synthesize work in the three disciplines of philosophy, politics, and economics. This year, our focus will be on inequality, with special emphasis on social constraints that take the forms of rules or, alternatively, social norms, and on property rights, which can be surprisingly nuanced and malleable. We will ask what economists, philosophers, and political scientists have to say about inequality and how work in one discipline is related to work in the others. In this presidential election year, we pay special attention to recent scholarship on democracy and American political institutions. An additional goal is to present and model some fruitful habits of inquiry and some organizational skills that undergird a successful senior thesis.

Coursework and grading

All students enrolled in this course are expected to do the assigned reading in a timely manner, to attend class regularly, and to participate thoughtfully in class discussions. There will be a writing assignment due roughly every other week. Four of these writing assignments are essays based in the reading for the course or on sources relevant to your thesis project. All essays are due electronically, in MSWord or pdf format. The lowest essay grade is disregarded and there is a mild penalty of 0.083 point per day for late work. The written prospectus is due on Wednesday, December 4, no later than 11:59pm.

Grades will be based primarily on written work with participation in the seminar being taken into account. More specifically, the grading algorithm (1) tosses out the lowest essay grade and averages the remaining three; (2) compares this average with the professors' perceptions of the student's contributions to class discussion, allowing adjustment as indicated by no more than one-third Pomona

grade point on a 4-point scale; (3) evaluates the thesis prospectus grade in light of the work on the thesis throughout the semester and adjusts the prospectus grade accordingly by no more than one Pomona grade point; and (4) averages the adjusted aggregate essay grade and the prospectus grade with weights 3:1. In computing the final grade, we round to the nearer grade, with ties being rounded down. For example, 3.5 earns a grade of B+ because it is halfway between a B+ and an A- whereas 3.6 earns a grade of A-.

We realize that the arrival of ChatGPT and other AIs has the potential both to do good and to do harm as part of any educational strategy that relies on graded essays as a tool for student reflection, learning, and expression. Here are our requirements for using AI in this class:

- *At the end of any assignment for which you've used AI, include a paragraph explaining what AI tool(s) you used, what you used the AI for and what prompts you used to get the results. Failure to do so is a violation of our academic honesty policies.*
- *If you have not used AI for an assignment, include a statement that, upon your honor, you have not used AI in the creation of your work.*
- *Cross-check any AI-generated information and references. You are responsible for any errors and fabrications that creep into your work.*

Materials

The readings, assignments, paper topics, and notes on class sessions will be posted on the Canvas site for this course: <https://pomona.instructure.com/courses/2367>.

Outline

[NB: This outline constitutes a plan rather than a binding contract. If we get off track, we will let you know at the end of each class period what we will be covering in the next couple of classes. It is your responsibility to keep track of divergences from the schedule presented here.]

Tue, Aug. 27 In addition to the standard Reading of the Syllabus, we will do some real work. The question we will ask is: what do you think your thesis might be about? For inspiration, you can look at the titles in “PPE Theses 2007–2024.”

Thu, Aug 29 PPE students will write a thesis in the spring. For today’s reading, we have two examples of successful PPE theses. If you are planning to do a social science project, read the thesis on the estate tax. If you think your thesis will involve philosophy, read the thesis on civility. In either case, ask these questions. What could have been better? (As every author knows, there is always something.) Does the thesis successfully integrate at least two of the PPE disciplines? How much do you think the author’s opinions changed during the course of working on it? What features of this thesis would you like to see in your thesis? In what ways would you like your thesis to be different? Also, at the end of this term, PPE students will write a prospectus. We have provided several examples of those as well (see “Prospectus Samples”). You should ask similar questions about them: what works well, what could be better, in what ways do you want your prospectus to be similar, and so on. **Reading:** James Psomas, “Death, Taxes, and Prosperity: Why the Estate Tax Belongs in American Society” 2020 or Lillian Weidhaas, “Civil Discourse: A Philosophical Defense and an Application to K-12 Education”; prospectus samples.

Tue, Sep 3 Today’s reading is the fifth chapter of John Locke’s *Two Treatises of Civil Government*. You have probably read Locke in a political philosophy or political theory course where

he was probably presented as a libertarian, with a story about how labor is used to acquire property rights that the state cannot invade. We are going to read Locke through the lenses of economics and politics. How would an economist analyze the last half of the chapter, about the different kinds of goods and the invention of money? In thinking about social organization, why can property be held in common in England but not by native tribes in the Americas? We will also pay attention to the roles played by rules (laws) versus norms (or customs) in Locke's arguments. **Reading:** John Locke, *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, ch. 5.

Thu, Sep 5 Just how far can a theory like Locke's go? Gibbard notes that ownership limits liberty: owners have rights to exclude others from using the things they own. So how does the right to acquire property work? Remember, it has to both enhance the owner's rights *and* reduce those of everyone else. Gibbard considers two different versions of a right to acquire property and argues that neither supports the acquisition of unlimited property rights. We'll also take a closer look at the multiplicity of rights that are subsumed in the idea of property rights, and the justifications for limiting property rights along certain dimensions in certain circumstances. **Reading:** Allan Gibbard, "Natural Property Rights," *Noûs* 10 (1976): 77–86.

Tue, Sep 10 It might be that Locke was not in a position to appreciate the extent of native American management of forests or the complexity of their governance structures before their populations were devastated by diseases that came with the early European explorers. Additionally, it may be that the colonial interests of Locke's patrons and countrymen influenced his philosophy. One good habit of thesis writers is to keep in mind the intellectual, cultural and political settings in which your sources are writing: these can often help you to puzzle out otherwise perplexing passages. For example, Locke was concerned with opposing absolute monarchy, which he saw as making slaves of the people of Britain. Uzgalis considers Locke from the viewpoint of contemporary concerns. **Reading:** William Uzgalis, "John Locke, Racism, Slavery, and Indian Lands," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, ed. Naomi Zack (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Locke, *Second Treatise*, ch. 4.

Thu, Sep 12 Today we'll think about managing common property resources, such as lakes, rivers, and forests. The mainstream economics theory of self interest restrained by law takes no account of social cohesion, trust, and voluntary restraint on behalf of the community. In her acceptance speech upon winning the Nobel Prize in Economics, political scientist Elinor Ostrom reviews some of the evidence that communities often manage common property resources effectively and that their members cooperate more than game theory expects. **Reading:** Elinor Ostrom, "Beyond Markets and States: Polycentric Governance of Complex Economic Systems," Nobel Prize Lecture, December 8, 2009. NB: The version on the course website has been edited for readability and relevance to this course.

Tue, Sep 17 The world view we see espoused in Locke's writing allows people to accumulate vast amounts of wealth. Today we're reading a part of one of the hottest books on economics and society of this century: Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Piketty does two things. First, he painstakingly constructs long data series that allow us to follow wealth and inequality across the centuries since Locke's defense of private ownership of the means of production and of inequality in holdings. Second, he worries about the societal implications of concentrations of wealth at the top of the income distribution. In particular, he is concerned that the relatively egalitarian national economies of the post-WWII era may become a historical anomaly if we don't do more to constrain the super-wealthy. **Reading:** Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), Introduction.

Thu, Sep 19 Some of this inequality in wealth is, as Locke describes it, the result of individual productivity and hard work. Some of it, however, is the result of prejudicial rules, and some is the

result of prejudicial norms. Darity and Hamilton present data to emphasize some of the barriers to success via individual effort for Black Americans in particular. **Reading:** Darrick Hamilton and William Darity, “The Political Economy of Education, Financial Literacy and the Racial Wealth Gap,” *Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Review*, 99:1 (2017), 59-76.

******* Essay 1 due electronically by midnight Saturday, September 21 *******

Tue, Sep 24 From caste to primogeniture, societal customs and norms affect inequality. This week, we read an especially ambitious, meticulous and engaging bit of social science that is part of a literature highlighting the cultural persistence of social norms. Here, our authors suggest that if we want to understand whether a society believes women belong more in the domestic sphere and less in the public sphere, we need to consider whether, in the neolithic period, their agriculture used the plough. **Reading:** Alesina, Giuliano, & Nunn, “On the Origin of Gender Roles: Women and the Plough,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 128:2 (2013): 469-530. We will take two class meetings to read this ambitious article; a good stopping point for the first day is the section break at page 501.

Thu, Sep 26 We finish discussing the plough.

Tue, Oct 1 In the past two weeks, we have considered research on the extent of wealth inequality and on some of the links between unequal wealth, individual effort and a society’s laws and customs. As we look for causal mechanisms that link wealth inequality to life prospects, Currie urges us not to overlook life experiences before we are born. Does the sort of evidence Currie presents expand the set of social circumstances we might object to if we got to design a social contract? **Reading:** Janet Currie, “Inequality at Birth: Some Causes and Consequences,” *American Economic Review* 101 (2011): 1–22.

Thu, Oct 3 If inequality is inevitable, should society direct its attention to the well being of its least advantaged members? Philosopher Martha Nussbaum and economist Amartya Sen take a deeper dive into the essential nature of human beings and the deprivations important to an understanding of disadvantage. They abandon the pursuit of equality and instead push for the opportunity for human flourishing, which in their view depends on access to adequate supplies of material and other goods. Is their notion of human flourishing hegemonically Western? Is it politically motivated? Is the emphasis on acceptable minimum levels rather than equality a purely pragmatic move? **Reading:** Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 17–45.

******* Essay 2 due electronically by midnight Saturday, October 5 *******

Tue, Oct 8 Members of the seminar will present their ideas for their theses and the group will offer helpful suggestions.

Thu, Oct 10 Continued discussion of thesis ideas.

******* Thesis action plan due electronically by midnight Saturday, October 12 *******

Tue, Oct 15 Fall break, no class.

Thu, Oct 17 Today’s reading is about John Rawls’s famous difference principle. This holds that that inequalities should work for the greatest advantage of the worst off class. Rawls begins with libertarianism, which he finds morally deficient because it allows for inequalities stemming from natural and social causes. He then argues that justice requires that society address both these sources

of inequality. The result is Rawls's favored principles of justice, which he calls "fair equality of opportunity" and "the difference principle." Rawls uses concepts derived from economics in order to explain what the difference principle means. Professor Brown will explain how resource distributions based on the difference principle differ from those deriving from utilitarianism. **Reading:** John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 52–73.

Tue, Oct 22 Ronald Dworkin presents an interesting variant on familiar themes from the social contract tradition. Instead of imagining a social contract, he thinks it is more relevant to consider a social insurance scheme that protects people from forms of bad societal luck. In the course of doing so, he comes up with a novel rationale for markets. Instead of claiming that markets follow from a proper respect for individual liberty, Dworkin thinks they are needed to realize the value of equality. Today we will talk about the basic elements of Dworkin's theory: the so-called envy test, the idea that an equal distribution of resources could be settled in an auction, and how he proposes to deal with the problem posed by people with severe handicaps. **Reading:** Ronald Dworkin, "What is Equality?" *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 10 (1981): 283–304.

Thurs, Oct 24 We will continue our discussion of Dworkin today (it's a long article). Specifically, we will discuss his underemployment insurance scheme and the comparison he draws between his theory and Rawls's. **Reading:** Ronald Dworkin, "What is Equality?" 304–334. Note: skip section VII.

***** **Essay 3 due by midnight Saturday, October 26** *****

Tue, Oct 29 Nussbaum argues from the essential nature of human beings to a call for a basic level of access to rights and goods that allow human flourishing. Williams recognizes that certain goods have special importance to human beings and, in contrast to Nussbaum, returns to the notion of equality and what it might require of the production and distribution of goods such as health care and education that are central to human flourishing. He argues that some kinds of inequality are irrational because they fail to reflect the factual equality of human beings. His claim is that the nature of goods like health care and education determines their proper distribution and that the proper distribution could be considerably different from what a free market would produce. What does that mean? Do goods have natures and, if they do, why should we care about them? Robert Nozick criticizes Williams for failing to establish his point and for reaching conclusions that objectionably limit liberty. Nozick asks some good questions about Williams's argument and, by extension, a lot of commonsense thinking about how the economy should work. **Reading:** Bernard Williams, "The Idea of Equality," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 230–49 and Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), 232–39. Note: the Read Me First document on Sakai outlines Williams's complicated argument.

Thu, Oct. 31 Democracy has been referred to as "the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried". As the election nears, we take a look at voter behavior. **Reading:** Bryan Caplan, "Rational Irrationality," chapter 5 in *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies*, Princeton University Press.

Tue, Nov 5 This week, we turn our attention from voter behavior to the behavior of individuals in government. Levitsky and Ziblatt explain that American democracy has functioned because of both rules and norms of governance. They make the case that the maintenance of norms of civility and cooperation long depended on sidestepping the question of civil rights, and that the advances in civil rights of the mid-20th century have led to an unraveling of the norms of behavior in Congress, the Supreme Court, and the Executive branch. **Reading:** Levitsky and Ziblatt, "Unwritten Rules," chapter 6 in *How Democracies Die*, Crown, 2018, pp 118-144.

Thu, Nov 7 We continue our look into the functioning of American democracy as chronicled by Levitsky and Ziblatt. **Reading:** Levitsky and Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, chapter 7, “The Unraveling,” pp. 145-175. We will also practice one of the best practices of a thesis writer, which is to investigate how a scholar’s thinking may have evolved since the time at which they wrote the piece we admire. We will watch a 24-minute lecture by Daniel Ziblatt in which he lays out the ideas developed in his new book with Levitsky, *The Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point* (Crown, 2023). That video can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyuwkTcQODw> .

******* Essay 4 due by midnight Saturday, November 9 *******

Tue, Nov 12 What does meaningful reform look like? Today we return to the subject of property rights and the legal treatment of “heirs’ property” and the reform of partition law. This little-discussed form of property rights has been associated with significant loss of property wealth among non-wealthy families in Appalachia and the rural South. **Reading:** Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, “Expansion of New Law in Southeast May Stave Off Black Land Loss,” accessed 8/20/2024 at <https://www.atlantafed.org/community-development/publications/partners-update/2020/covid-19-publications/201007-expansion-of-new-law-in-southeast-may-stave-off-black-land-loss>.

Thu, Nov 14 Should those who have done well in an imperfectly just system share their good fortune with others? And if so, what would it entail to do this well? Most of the philosophers we have read come from the social contract tradition. The utilitarian tradition is perhaps a more natural intellectual starting point for economists. Today’s readings concern effective altruism, an idea championed by the utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer. It is based on the idea that it is better to take more effective steps to help others than less effective ones. This apparently innocuous idea leads to surprising conclusions about politics and personal morality that effective altruism’s critics find objectionable. We also approach the topic through the eyes of a critic. **Readings:** Peter Singer, et. al. “Forum: The Logic of Effective Altruism.” *Boston Review* July 6, 2015, and Leif Wenar, “The Deaths of Effective Altruism,” *Wired*, March 2024.

Tue, Nov 19 Presentations.

Thu, Nov 21 Presentations.

Tue, Nov 26 Today is a working day. Bring a laptop to work on your prospectus.

Thu, Nov 28 Thanksgiving break. No class.

Tue, Dec 3 From prospectus to thesis. We will talk about how to put your documents together. Topics will include: how to keep notes and drafts, how to format citations properly, and how to format the final document. Bring a laptop. Signed reader sheets due in class.

*******Thesis prospectus due by midnight Wednesday, December 4*******