

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LIBERTY SYLLABUS

I. Required Texts

Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Basic Political Writings*
Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*
G. A. Cohen, *Why not Socialism?*
James Otteson, *The End of Socialism*

II. Scope and Goals of the Course

Patrick Henry, the great orator of revolutionary Virginia (and *bête noir* of Mr. Jefferson) demanded, “Give me liberty or give me death!” Did he get his wish? Abraham Lincoln apparently believed so, because he declared at Gettysburg that the United States was a country “conceived in liberty.” More recently, an unsuccessful but very impressive presidential candidate declared, “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice.” For Americans, then, there is no value more central to our identity than liberty.

Without wishing any disrespect either to Henry, Lincoln, or Goldwater, we might wish that they had supplied us with a bit more conceptual specification. What is *liberty*? Is it just being left alone by others? Or is it a capacity to achieve valuable ends? These do not amount to the same thing. Someone who isn’t interfered with by others may nonetheless lack other requisites for leading a satisfying, meaningful life: money, health, power, etc. Suppose further that one is able to secure her desired ends, but that upbringing and environment have conditioned her such that she is psychologically incapable of formulating aspirations that express her own individuality. Might we say that whatever the circumstances of her *external* conditions, she resides in an *internal* straitjacket that deprives her of liberty? Theorists sometimes attempt to address these questions by distinguishing between *negative liberty* and *positive liberty*, but it’s not obvious that the distinction relieves more puzzles than it exacerbates.

Beyond the problem of stating what liberty is, there are additional important ones involving its place within morality and politics. What sort of government best promotes a society of free individuals? Is the ideal of liberty incompatible with full-fledged devotion

to other ideals such as *equality* and *well-being*? Are some species of liberties categorically more important than others: for example, freedom of speech or religion as opposed to a freedom to buy and sell? And so on.

PHIL 3999 will examine these and related questions, not in the abstract but as they emerge in the writings of five prominent social theorists of the modern era: Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ayn Rand, G. A. Cohen, James Otteson. We won't be combing through their writings only to find explicit mentions of liberty but will read widely with an eye to how issues of liberty fit into their overall conceptions. A significant emphasis of the course will be counterposing these theories one against the others so as to be able to form intelligent judgments concerning which are the better arguments and which are less compelling. The overall goals of the course are, then, to make (or renew) an acquaintance with a handful of the most interesting social thinkers who ever lived and to piggyback on their insights to acquire for ourselves a better understanding of the nature and value of liberty.

III. Format of the Course

1. *Readings; Classroom work.* These are *terrific* books! Ideally, we would read each of them in the entirety. We'll come close to achieving the ideal but compromise a bit with *Wealth of Nations* and our study of Rousseau. But when we turn to the fattest book of all, Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, we will make no compromises. Is it respectable to expect students to read a volume of more than a thousand pages? Yes, if it's a novel. Besides, I'm betting that once you get into it you'll find it hard to put down. And with the fortunate timing of the Spring semester, you'll be able to turn pages while lying on the beach of Cancun (or maybe your bed). The reading schedule is given below in IV.

Let me give you fair warning: you will almost certainly find some of the material difficult to understand, at least on first encounter. Although I don't expect you to sail through these readings effortlessly, I do expect you to give them your best shot. That includes your having carefully read assigned material *in advance of the class in which it will be discussed*, and also your willingness to reread sections that initially prove elusive. Our job in class will be to work together to understand the problems addressed by these philosophers. I think of this as being very much a joint enterprise. My role is one of exploring with you points of special interest, helping to clarify complexities, raising questions implied by the material. Correlatively, your responsibilities are to read and think conscientiously about all texts and to be prepared to tell me what you find perplexing or challenging or worthy of deeper pursuit. Although this is officially a lecture class with rather a large number of bodies in the room, we shall nonetheless strive for a decent amount of discussion. Personally, I can think of nothing duller than a class in which one person (me) does all the talking. I hope you agree. Although I don't grade on the basis of attendance or classroom participation as such, your contributions to the flow of the course will be duly kept in mind as I assign course grades. To state the obvious, if

you are not present for a class, you are not carrying your weight. If a grade is otherwise borderline, this is what will tip the balance.

2. *Computers, Phones, etc.* 21st Century electronics are wonderful! I love them as much as you do – well, almost as much. I must tell you, however, that they don't have a place in 3999. If you're carrying a phone, please make sure you turn it off and put it out of sight (and possibly out of mind) before the start of class. If your ringer goes off, or if you are observed staring intently into a display, you owe a 500-word essay on the topic of the day, due at the next class meeting. If it happens a second time you will be asked to withdraw from the course. With some reluctance I also ask you not to open a computer during class. These machines have wonderful utility, but they also offer powerful temptations. Try taking notes the old-fashioned way: pen in hand. Or you may record class sessions for later review and transcription.
3. *Tests.* A midterm and final exam will be given. The former will count for approximately 20% of your course grade and the latter approximately 40%. Each test will involve some form of essay questions. A warning: Only under the most exigent circumstances can I be persuaded to give a makeup exam for one that has been missed, and then only if I have been informed in advance concerning the reason for your absence. Moreover, when I do give a makeup, it's more, ahem, "challenging" than the original. The moral? Don't miss either test! I am not yet able to state definitively the day for the midterm, but at this point March 4 is the favorite. Any change from that date will be announced well in advance
4. *Papers.* I shall ask you at irregular intervals to write short (4-7 pages) papers in response to particular questions I'll toss your way. You are required to write any 2 of them, and you may submit 3, with the 2 best counting toward your course grade. Thus, if one (or perhaps two) of the assignment topics or times doesn't suit you, then you should feel free to skip it. There will be at least 4 papers assigned. These may either address the writings of one of our five theorists or involve comparison between two or more. Unless you have received explicit permission to the contrary, all submissions must be hard copy. Please retain the digital file just in case something goes awry. Cumulatively, they will determine approximately 30% of your 3999 grade.

All paper assignments will involve working through some problem suggested by the assigned readings. Although you are entirely at liberty to consult any sources written or human that you think might help you to write a better paper, it is imperative that any borrowings of ideas or language be credited via a citation. You may use whatever style of footnote or endnote you please just so long as full attribution information is provided. Failures to do so, even if not malicious, risk putting you on the wrong side of the plagiarism divide. That is definitely not a place you want to be!

Paper grades will be based on "content" rather than style or grammatical correctness (although it should be noted that your ability to express yourself accurately in written English prose very definitely affects the content as it appears to your reader). However,

any paper that comes to me with more than a very few errors in spelling, grammar, etc. will either be rejected as failing to meet minimal standards of acceptability or, if I'm feeling especially generous, handed back to you for revision and resubmission. This means that you ought to proofread carefully anything you will be submitting. I very much care about the quality of your writing – and so should you! One final caution: *Late papers will not be accepted.* Thus, if for some reason you must miss a class, it's a good idea to check and see if there has been an assignment.

IV. Readings

I'm not able to predict our precise pace for the next 15 weeks. So consider this schedule tentative. If there are any significant changes, they will be announced in advance. Otherwise, please gauge your reading so as to be at least one unit ahead of where we left off last time. You are, of course, free to read sections omitted from the syllabus.

WEEK 1

Jan 12 Adam Smith, *WN*, Introduction and Plan of the Work, pp. 10-12
Jan. 14 *WN*, Bk I, Chaps. 1-5, pp. 13-64

WEEK 2

Jan. 19 No class; MLK Day,
Jan. 21 *WN*, Bk I, Chaps 7-8, pp. 72-104; Chap. 10, pp. 116-126, 135-145

WEEK 3

Jan. 26 *WN*, Bk II, Chap 3, pp. 330-349; Bk III, Chaps 1-3, pp. 376-411
Jan 28 *WN*, Bk IV, Chaps 2-3, pp. 452-498; Chap 5, pp.524-543

WEEK 4

Feb. 2 *WN*, Bk V, Chap 1, pp. 698-727; pp. 758-788
Feb. 4 Smith Wrap-up

WEEK 5

Feb. 9 Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, pp. 33-60
Feb. 11 *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. pp. 60-81

WEEK 6

Feb. 16 *Discourse on Political Economy*, pp. 111-138
Feb. 18 *Social Contract*, Bks I, II pp. 141-172

WEEK 7

Feb. 23 *Social Contract*, Bk III, pp. 173-203
Feb. 25 *Social Contract*, Bk IV, pp. 203-227

WEEK 8	
March 2	Rousseau Wrap-up
March 4	Likely date for MIDTERM
WEEK 9	SPRING BREAK: NO CLASS THIS WEEK!
March 7-15	Use this week to read as much of <i>Atlas Shrugged</i> as you can
WEEK 10	
March 16	<i>Atlas Shrugged</i> , roughly first 400 pages
March 18	“
WEEK 10	
March 23	<i>Atlas Shrugged</i> , roughly middle third of the book
March 25	“
WEEK 11	
March 30	<i>Atlas Shrugged</i> , conclusion
April 1	“
WEEK 12	
April 6	<i>Why not Socialism?</i> , pp. 1-45
April 8	<i>Why not Socialism?</i> , pp. 46-82
WEEK 13	
April 13	Cohen Wrap-up
April 15	Otteson, Sections 1-3
WEEK 14	
April 20	Otteson, Sections 4-6
April 22	Otteson, Sections 7 - 9
WEEK 15	
April 27	Otteson, Sections 10, 11, Conclusion
April 29	WE'RE ALL DONE!

FINAL EXAM: TBA