

Social and Political Philosophy (PHIL 3700):

The Social Contract and its Critics

Spring 2026

Professor: Iaan Reynolds

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Times: T-Th 2:30pm-3:45pm (LA 122)

Office Hours: M-W 11:30am-12:30pm, T-Th 1:00-2:00 and by appointment (CB 507-P)

“The highest ruler should be just in himself, and still be a human. This task is therefore the hardest of all; indeed, its complete solution is impossible, for from such crooked wood as a human is made can nothing quite straight ever be fashioned. Only the approximation of this idea is imposed upon us by nature.”

- Immanuel Kant, “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent” (1784)

This course will provide an introduction to social and political philosophy through an analysis of the composition of political authority. As we will see, this nexus of problems implies a complicated relationship to nature, with some theorists seeing the political community as a natural formation stemming from the precepts of the human essence, and others seeing it as an artificial creation meant to curb the worst excesses of humanity. By studying foundational texts in the tradition of social and political philosophy, we will gain a greater appreciation of the ideas and concepts on which contemporary societies are grounded, as well as an awareness of the problematic or contradictory aspects of these foundations. In approaching social and political thought by questioning the relationship between the social contract and the unconscious features of society obscured by this abstract model, students will become familiar with some of the major historical theorists and positions in this field and gain the skills to philosophically examine their strengths and weaknesses. Developing a shared understanding of these questions and traditions as a class, we will also begin to equip ourselves to engage in this theoretical discussion as thinkers and writers.

Readings

All texts are available as PDFs on Canvas. Students are expected to print out each day’s reading, read it, and bring it to class on the day it is assigned on the schedule below. I recommend you mark up your texts and get in the habit of taking notes during and after your reading, as these measures have been shown to help students retain written material.

Course Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion, students should be able to:

- (1) Explain the major historical and contemporary approaches to social and political philosophy;
- (2) Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of arguments by learning and applying principles of critical thinking and reasoning;
- (3) Develop critical thinking, writing, presentation, and discussion skills about topics in social and political philosophy;
- (4) Apply philosophical reasoning and communicate it to others clearly and effectively;
- (5) Analyze and evaluate various positions, discussions, and debates in historical and contemporary social and political philosophy.

Grading

The grading scale is on the right. Your grade for this course will be broken up as follows:

Participation – 33%
Assignments – 33%
Final Paper – 34%

94-100 = A
90-93.99 = A-
87-89.99 = B+
84-86.99 = B
80-83.99 = B-
77-79.99 = C+
74-76.99 = C
70-73.99 = C-
67-69.99 = D+
64-66.99 = D
60-63.99 = D-
0-60 = F

Late Work

Late work. Late work is typically not accepted without penalty, but I try to be as understanding as possible about extenuating circumstances. I encourage you to get in touch with me if you are going through something that would prevent the timely turning in of any assignments so we can make a plan together for your success in this class.

Technical difficulties. If students experience issues with Canvas preventing the timely turning in of an assignment, the assignment should be emailed to me. In this case, the same due date applies.

Office Hours and Course Adjustments

I will be available every week during the office hours posted above and encourage you to schedule time to meet with me, especially if you are encountering any difficulties with the course material. I am also available to meet with you outside these hours if needed.

It might be necessary for us to adjust the schedule or other elements of the Syllabus at some point in the semester. If this need arises, I will consult with the class to make sure we're all on the same page.

Participation (33%)

Discussion. Successful discussion-based classes depend on broad participation. Participation means coming to class prepared and respectfully engaging in the class discussion. Those who consistently take part in the seminar, including through respectful listening, thoughtful contributions, and a consideration of the class's discussions in their weekly reflections, will have strong in-class participation grades. We will talk more about good practices for class participation during the first few weeks of class.

NB: My attendance policy is not meant to penalize students who feel nervous speaking in front of others for any reason. If this describes you, please come and talk to me and we can make a plan for your success in this course.

Discussion Questions. Each student will be expected to contribute *two discussion questions* to the course during two separate class meeting. We will go over what successful questions look like in class.

Attendance. Students are expected to attend every meeting of the seminar. Unexcused absences beyond the first will negatively impact the participation grade. If you need to miss class due to an emergency or unforeseen circumstance, please get in touch with me over email as soon as possible.

Electronics. We don't often spend time in spaces free of constant distraction from the outside world. Since removing disruptions such as texts and social media facilitates the process of critical reflection, I would like this class to be such a space. Please keep your electronics in your bags. The use of electronic devices for purposes unrelated to our class will count as an unexcused absence.

Assignments (33%)

Students will prepare three short papers (2-3 pages double-spaced, 600-900 words) over the course of the semester, aimed at developing skills in argumentation, exegesis, and conceptual discussion. These papers are meant to give students an opportunity to work on their writing in a lower-stakes context before writing the final paper.

Final Paper (34%)

The final paper (10-12 pages double-spaced, 3,000-3,600 words) will emphasize both the close reading of texts, and the development of an original philosophical argument. Students are encouraged to expand on reflections from class in the brainstorming, organization, and composition of the Final Paper. The process of writing the paper will include sub-assignments (thinking through the core problem and organization of the paper, drafting an introductory paragraph, and possibly workshopping a draft of the paper with a partner) which will be factored into the total grade. The Final Paper is worth 34% of the total course grade. We will go over the requirements for this paper in class.

Academic Integrity and Plagiarism

Students are expected to maintain a high standard of academic integrity in accordance with UVU's Student Code of Conduct (<https://www.uvu.edu/studentconduct/students.html>). **Any instance of plagiarism or cheating will result, at the least, in a grade of zero for the assignment.** Please cite any sources you use in completing your assignments (such as webpages, books, articles, etc.), and please be in touch with me if you have any questions about plagiarism. **Large Language Models and online learning support platforms (like ChatGPT or Google Bard) may not be used for course assignments. This includes the use of generative AI for text editing.**

Course Calendar

Please complete and be ready to discuss the reading in class on the date that it is listed in the calendar. As noted above, the calendar might shift or change throughout the course of the semester. I will be in touch about any of these changes and update the Syllabus on Canvas.

Nature and Rule (Week 1)

- 1/6 – Getting Our Bearings
 - o Course Syllabus
- 1/8 – Natural Mastery and Servitude
 - o Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. 1, Secs. 1-6

Myth and Second Nature (Week 2)

- 1/13 – The Artificiality of Political Myths
 - o **Plato**, *Republic*, Bk. 3, 413c-419
- 1/15 – Superstition and False Ideas
 - o Benedict de **Spinoza**, *Ethics*, Appendix to Book 1

Nature and Artifice in Hobbes (Week 3)

- 1/20 – Human Nature and Human Creation
 - o Thomas **Hobbes**, *Leviathan*, Frontispiece and Introduction
- 1/22 – The State of Nature and the First Two Natural Laws
 - o **Hobbes**, *Leviathan*, Chs. XIII and XIV (pp. 74-88)

The Powers of the Commonwealth (Week 4)

- 1/27 – Personhood, Representation, and the Commonwealth
 - o **Hobbes**, *Leviathan*, Chs. XVI, XVII (pp. 101-110)
- 1/29 – Sovereignty and Liberty
 - o **Hobbes**, *Leviathan*, Ch. XVIII (pp. 110-118), Ch. XXI (pp. 136-38)

Contract and Property (Week 5)

- 2/3 – The State of War v. The State of Nature
 - o John **Locke**, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chs. 2-4 (pp. 8-18)
- 2/5 – Property and the Ends of Political Society
 - o **Locke**, *Second Treatise of Government*, Ch. 5 (pp. 18-30), Ch. 7 excerpt (pp. 46-51), Ch. 9 (pp. 65-68)

The Contract as an Idea (Week 6)

- 2/10 – The Contract as an Idea of Reason
 - o **Kant**, “On the Relation of Theory to Practice in Constitutional Right (Against Hobbes)” (pp. 44-59)
- 2/12 – Procedural Justice
 - o John **Rawls**, *A Theory of Justice*, §§3, 4, 24, 25

Complicating the Contract I (Week 7)

- 2/17 – The Social Contract’s Concealing Function
 - o Carole **Pateman**, *The Sexual Contract*, Ch. 1: “Contracting In”
- 2/19 – Undergraduate philosophy conference

Complicating the Contract II (Week 8)

- 2/24 – Slavery and Sexual Domination in the Original Contract
 - o **Pateman**, *The Sexual Contract*, Ch. 3: “Contract, the Individual and Slavery”
- 2/26 – Justice = “Just Us”
 - o Charles **Mills**, *The Racial Contract*, Ch. 1: “Overview”

Beyond the Logic of Contract (Week 9)

- 3/3 – The Individual’s Dependence on the State
 - o G.W.F. **Hegel**, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §§72-5, §§257-262
- 3/5 – Property and the Self-Alienation of Humankind
 - o Karl **Marx**, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*: “Estranged Labor”

Spring Break (Week 10)

The Idea of Universality (Week 11)

- 3/17 – Towards a Universal History
 - o Immanuel **Kant**, *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*, Introduction, Theses 1-5
- 3/19 – History as the Realization of the Species
 - o **Kant**, *Idea for a Universal History*, Introduction, Theses 6-9

Ideal and Nonideal Theory (Week 12)

- 3/24 – The Ideologies of Political Philosophy
 - o Charles **Mills**, “Ideal Theory as Ideology”
- 3/26 – Slavery and Modern Political Thought
 - o Huaping **Lu-Adler**, “Slavery and Kant’s Doctrine of Right”
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Particularity I: Socially Reproductive Labor (Week 13)

- 3/31 – Situating Household Labor in Materialist Analysis
 - o Tithi **Bhattacharya**, “How Not to Skip Class: Social Reproduction of Labor and the Global Working Class”
- 4/2 – No class (final paper activity in groups)

Particularity II: Education and Childhood (Week 14)

- 4/7 – Childcare and Economic Reality
 - o Nancy **Fraser**, “Contradictions of Capital and Care”
- 4/9 – The Erosion of Childhood
 - o Susan **Ferguson**, “Children, Childhood and Capitalism”

Critiquing Historical Progress (Week 15)

- 4/14 – In Search of New Concepts
 - o Massimiliano **Tomba**, *Revolution and Restoration*, Introduction
- 4/16 – Revolution and its Opposite
 - o **Tomba**, *Revolution and Restoration*, Chapter 1

Rethinking History (Week 16)

- 4/21 – Beyond Teleology
 - o Walter **Benjamin**, “Theses on the Concept of History”

Student Resources

Accessibility: Students who need accommodations because of a disability may contact the UVU Accessibility Services Department (ASD), located on the Orem Campus in LC 312. To schedule

an appointment or to speak with a counselor, call the ASD office at 801-863-8747. Deaf/Hard of Hearing individuals, email nicole.hemmingsen@uvu.edu or text 385-208-2677.

Religious Accommodations: UVU values and acknowledges a wide range of faiths and religions as part of our student body, and as such provides accommodations for students. Religious belief includes the student's faith or conscience as well as the student's participation in an organized activity conducted under the auspices of the student's religious tradition or religious organization. The accommodations include reasonable student absences from scheduled examinations or academic requirements if they create an undue hardship for sincerely held religious beliefs. For this to occur, the student must provide a written notice to the instructor of the course for which the student seeks said accommodation prior to the event.

Title IX: Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender (which includes sexual orientation and gender identity/expression) is a civil rights offense subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, color, religion, age, status as a person with a disability, veteran's status or genetic information. If you or someone you know has experienced or experiences harassment or sexual assault including, dating and domestic violence, stalking or sexual exploitation, you are encouraged to report it to the Title IX Coordinator in the Office for Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, BA-203, (801) 863-7999. Please be aware that all faculty members and university employees are considered "Responsible Employees" and are required to report incidents of sexual misconduct and relationship violence and thus cannot guarantee confidentiality. Please know that you can seek confidential resources at UVU Student Health Services, SC-221, (801) 863-8876. Please visit <https://www.uvu.edu/equityandtitleix/> for more information.

Writing Center. The UVU Writing Center is a free resource provided to students of all disciplines. Specially trained and certified tutors work one-on-one with students on any assignment at any stage of the writing process. Tutors will help students identify patterns of error and discuss revision strategies. The Writing Center is located in the Library, Room 208, across the hall from the Visual Arts Lab. To contact the front desk, call 801-863-8936, or visit the website at: www.uvu.edu/writingcenter.

Health resources. UVU has resources available if you struggle with physical and mental health. Student Health Services is located at SC-221. You can contact them by phone (801-863-8876) or find more information at: <http://www.uvu.edu/studenthealth/>. If you feel that a health issue is affecting your performance in this class, please try to let me know early on so we can work something out together.

Food pantry. If you have trouble affording food, know that UVU has a food pantry available: <https://www.uvu.edu/socialimpact/programs/food-pantry.html>