

Moral Pluralism

Time: Friday 3pm to 5:30pm

Location: online

(Zoom link will be available on Canvas)

Instructor: Julia Netter

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<http://julianetter.de/pols0920e>

Moral pluralism is an unmistakable characteristic of modern liberal societies. Even though the dire conflicts of religion which fuelled wars and civil unrest appear to be a thing of the past, fundamental moral disagreements are still plentiful today. Now as then, these disagreements expose tensions among the core of ideas upon which liberal societies are built. This course explores moral pluralism through the lens of classic and contemporary works in political philosophy and engages with questions such as: should the state be neutral in relation to different religious and moral convictions? Are there some values which we can expect all citizens to share despite their deep disagreements? How should citizens engage with each other when they debate controversial moral questions in the public forum?

Approach and Objectives

This course explores the challenges of moral pluralism in liberal societies through the lens of analytical political philosophy. Over the course of the semester, we will engage with a range of key texts and debates relating to liberalism and pluralism. The aim of this course is to equip you with the knowledge and skills to delve deeper into these topics and connect them to each other, as well as to political debates beyond the classroom.

More specifically, this course will help you learn to think *philosophically* about these topics. You will develop the skills necessary for constructing critical arguments in political philosophy, and will apply them both orally and in writing. We will approach each topic based on assigned readings as well as short critical comments that you write each week. This course is as much about acquainting yourself with the key ideas related to liberalism and moral pluralism as it is about giving you the tools to develop and respond to arguments on these topics. Developing those arguments requires you to think and write both creatively and precisely, and the course is structured to help you build those skills. This is not a lecture course, but a discussion-based class and you will actively engage with your peers and me in each session. You will write regularly and on a wide array of topics, and by the end of the semester, you will be able to write a thoroughly argued, philosophical paper of your own.

Writing Designation

As a writing-designated course, this course will hone your analytical writing skills in three major written assignments: two short papers and a longer final paper. You will meet with me to discuss your plans for writing and will receive ample feedback throughout the course.

The Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning also hosts a variety of resources if you want additional support for writing. You can schedule an appointment with one of the Sheridan writing tutors for additional feedback and guidance. For more information, visit <https://www.brown.edu/sheridan/programs-services/writing>

Assignments and Grading

Two short papers (10%+20%)

You will write two short papers of around 2500-3000 words. Prompts will be distributed in weeks 3 and 7 and the papers are due on Saturday, **February 13** and Saturday, **March 13** respectively. I will provide detailed comments on each essay and you will have the opportunity to revise your essay within a week of receiving my feedback.

It is important that your essay focuses on answering the question in the prompt, and for it to defend your position by offering a well-structured argument that anticipates potential objections and engages with them. Given the brevity of these essays, I do not expect your discussion be exhaustive. A very good essay demonstrates that you understand the structure and substance of the arguments you invoke, as well as their limitations, and the extent to which they support a particular view. We will talk about what makes a good essay in our first session.

Weekly comments and questions (20%)

Every week you will write a short critical comment (≈ 200 words) on the readings assigned for the week. There are very few constraints here: your comment could, for example, point out problems with one of the arguments in the text, discuss a conclusion you find puzzling, draw parallels between ideas from the readings and real-world situations. The only thing it cannot be is a summary of the readings. In addition to the comment, you are also asked to submit one question every week. The question can be based on your comment, focus on a different aspect in the reading material or more generally related to topic of the upcoming session. Comments and questions are due by 6pm on the day before class; that means, they are due by **6pm on Thursday**.

Comments and questions are graded for completion: you will get full credit as long as you submit all of them and they reflect a reasonable attempt to engage with the topic and texts.

Final paper (30%)

You will write one final paper of around 4,000 to 5,000 words, on a question of your choosing which relates to the material in the course. I ask you to send me your chosen question by Friday, **March 19**. I will provide feedback on your question, make suggestions to refine it, and finally approve it. The final paper is due on Saturday, **April 10**. As with the short essays, you will receive detailed comments on your final paper and be able to revise and resubmit it by Friday, **April 23**.

It is important that your selected question calls for substantive philosophical argument and not merely for a descriptive summary of the positions you encounter in the literature. However, unlike in the short paper, the topic is relatively unconstrained. It should relate to one or several topics we discussed in class, and I encourage you to look beyond the abstract, technical debates in the literature to search for interesting questions, puzzles, or problems in your everyday life. Political philosophy in particular is driven by the clashes of ideas, ideals, and values that we encounter in society and the political sphere. In turn, political philosophy has also shaped our social and political environment. In the fomaö paper, I want you to show that you can relate the debates you encounter in this class to a new question, and that you can make a rigorous argument advocating a philosophical position on that question.

In our first session and throughout the course, we will talk about how to identify philosophical questions as you go through your everyday life and about what makes a good question for a seminar paper. Throughout the semester, we will also discuss how to write a good essay.

Participation (20%)

This is a seminar course, so the discussion in class is an essential component. I think of class discussion primarily as a space for learning, which is why you will not be graded on your course participation week by week. The participation grade is based on three components:

1. **your presence in class:** one unexcused absence is no problem, but beyond that, if you cannot attend class for legitimate personal reasons or due to sickness, please email me in advance;
2. **discussion leadership:** you will be the expert in class on one of the topics and will be responsible for leading and engaging others in parts of the discussion in one course session this semester.
3. **participation in discussion in selected parts of the course:** a few times this semester, your participation in specific parts of the class discussion or other activities in class will be assessed. These occasions will be announced in advance.

One note on the culture of debate which I would like to foster in this course: discussions in political philosophy are not about winning an intellectual battle, but about engaging with others' views on their merits. They are also about taking intellectual risks, putting forward a potentially controversial argument, as well as receiving and offering constructive criticism. This is only possible in a class environment in which we build trust. In class, I therefore expect us all to treat each other courteously, engage with each other's arguments constructively and in good faith no matter the topic.

Course Time

You will spend approximately 2.5 hours per week in class (32.5 hours), and 4 hours per week reading the assigned texts and preparing comments and questions (52 hours), and on average 8-10 hours per week on writing assignments (104-143 hours). Assignment workload for the different papers will vary week by week; the approximate total time commitment for the course is in the range of 189-215 hours.

Accommodations

Brown University is committed to full inclusion of all students. Please inform me if you have a disability or require accommodations or modification of any of these course procedures. You may email me, come to office hours, or speak with me after class, and your confidentiality is respected. You may also wish to contact Brown's Student and Employee Accessibility Services (<https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/support/accessibility-services/>, 401-863-9588, seas@brown.edu) for more information about the accommodation process and further services. I will do whatever I can to support accommodations recommended by SEAS.

Mental Health

Being a student can be very stressful. If you feel you are under too much pressure or there are psychological issues that are keeping you from making the most of your time at Brown, I encourage you to contact Brown's Counseling and Psychological Services (<https://www.brown.edu/campus-life/support/counseling-and-psychological-services/>). CAPS provide confidential counseling and can provide notes supporting extensions on assignments for health reasons.

Academic Integrity

From the Brown academic code: "Academic achievement is ordinarily evaluated on the basis of work that a student produces independently. Students who submit academic work that uses others' ideas, words, research, or images without proper attribution and documentation are in violation of the academic code. Infringement of the academic code entails penalties ranging from reprimand to suspension, dismissal, or expulsion from the University.

"Brown students are expected to tell the truth. Misrepresentations of facts, significant omissions, or falsifications in any connection with the academic process (including change of course permits, the academic transcript, or applications for graduate training or employment) violate the code, and students are penalized accordingly. This policy also applies to Brown alums, insofar as it relates to Brown transcripts and other records of work at Brown.

"Misunderstanding the code is not an excuse for dishonest work. Students who are unsure about any point of Brown's academic code should consult their courses instructors or an academic dean, who will be happy to explain the policy."

Please review the Brown Academic Code here: <https://www.brown.edu/academics/college/degree/policies/academic-code>

Office Hours

Time: Thursday 5-6pm, or by appointment. Office hours will be on Zoom (link available on Canvas) this semester.

Schedule

This is an initial overview of topics and readings. There is some flexibility in the schedule and we can adapt it if there are specific topics related to moral pluralism which you find particularly interesting. If you have any questions or suggestions, feel free to email me (julia_netter@brown.edu).

The course website (<http://julianetter.de/pols0920e>) includes links for texts available as ebooks from the Brown libraries. All other texts on the reading list will be available on Canvas.

Week 1: 22 January

What is moral pluralism and why should we care? Introduction and Overview

- *recommended*: collection of topical news articles which can be accessed at <http://julianetter.de/pols0920e/week1>.

Week 2: 29 January

Toleration

- Andrew Murphy, "Tolerance, Toleration, and the Liberal Tradition", *Polity* 29:4, pp. 593-623.
- Michael Walzer, *On Toleration*, pp.1-36.

Week 3: 5 February

First short paper prompt distributed

Liberalism and Perfectionism #1: Neutrality

- John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (2005), pp. 173-211.
- Jonathan Quong, *Liberalism Without Perfection*, chapter 1.
- Ronald Dworkin, "Liberalism," in *Public and Private Morality*, S. Hampshire (ed.) (1978), pp. 113-43.

Week 4: 12 February

Liberalism and Perfectionism #2: Human Flourishing

- Joseph Raz, *The Morality of Freedom* (1986), chapters 5 and 6.
- Matthew Kramer, *Liberalism with Excellence* (2017), chapter 7.

13 February

Short paper #1 due

Week 5: 19 February

Communitarianism

- Steven Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, (2nd ed.) (1996), pp. 25-35, ch. 5, pp. 218-221, and p. 249-58.
- Charles Taylor, "Cross Purposes: the Liberal Communitarian Debate", in N. Rosenblum (ed.), *Liberalism and the Moral Life* (1989).
- Michael Walzer, "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism", in *Political Theory* 18:1.

Week 6: 26 February

Public Justification and Public Reason

- John Rawls, *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*.
- Jürgen Habermas, "Reconciliation Through the Public use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's Political Liberalism," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 92(3).
- Gerald Gaus, "The Place of Religious Belief in Public Reason Liberalism," in *Multiculturalism and Moral Conflict*, M. Dimova-Cookson and P. Stirk (eds.), pp. 19–37.

Week 7: 5 March

Second short paper prompt distributed

Limits of Liberal Pluralism

- Jonathan Quong, "The Rights of Unreasonable Citizens", *Journal of Political Philosophy* 12.3.
- Erin Kelly and Lionel McPherson, "On Tolerating the Unreasonable", *Journal of Political Philosophy* 9.1.
- David Estlund, "The Insularity of the Reasonable: Why Political Liberalism Must Admit the Truth," *Ethics*, 108(2).

Week 8: 12 March

Pluralism and Respect

- Peter Balint, "Respect Relations in Diverse Societies," *Res Publica*, 12: 35–57.
- James Boettcher, "Respect, Recognition, and Public Reason," *Social Theory and Practice*, 33: 223–249.
- Stephen Darwall: 1977, "Two Kinds of Respect," *Ethics*, 88: 36–49.
- Ian Carter, "Respect and the Basis of Equality", *Ethics* 121: 538-571.

13 March

Short paper #2 due

Week 9: 19 March

Final paper question due

Freedom of expression: harm and offense

- Joshua Cohen, "Freedom of Expression", *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22.
- Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (2012), chapter 5.
- Joel Feinberg, *Offense to Others: The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*, pp. 50-96.

Week 10: 26 March

Civility

- Thomas Christiano, "What is Civility and How Does it Relate to Core Democratic Values?" in Cornell W. Clayton and Richard Elgar (eds.), *Civility and Democracy in America: A Reasonable Understanding*.
- Theresa Bejan, *Mere Civility*, pp. 50-81, and pp. 145-166.
- Linda M. G. Zerilli, "Against Civility: A Feminist Perspective", in Austin Sarat (ed.), *Civility, Legality, and Justice in America*, 107-131.

Week 11: 2 April

Conscientious objection and civil disobedience

- Kimberley Brownlee, 'Features of a Paradigm Case of Civil Disobedience,' in *Res Publica*, 10(4), 337–351.
- Joseph Raz, *The Authority of Law: Essays on Law and Morality*, chapters 14 and 15.
- John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 363-391.

Week 12: 9 April

Extended weekend – no classes

10 April

Final paper due

Week 13: 16 April

From the printing press to Twitter: media and the means and manners of disagreement

- Andrew White, *Digital Media and Society: Transforming Economics, Politics and Social Practices*, chapter 3.

23 April

Revised final paper due