

# Moral Pluralism

Time: Friday 3 pm to 5:30 pm

Location: Page-Robinson Hall 503

Instructor: Julia Netter

<http://julianetter.de/pols1825f>

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 is targeted towards upper-division undergraduate (junior and senior) students interested in exploring the challenges of moral pluralism in liberal societies through the lens of analytical political philosophy. First year and sophomore students are welcome to attend subject to my approval. 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 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 responses 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 you developing rigorous 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 improve these skills. This is not a lecture course, but a discussion-based class that expects you to 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 essays 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 essays (10%+20%)

You will write two short essays of around 2500-3000 words. Prompts will be distributed in weeks 4 and 8 and the essays are due on Saturday, February 22 and Saturday, March 21 respectively. I will provide detailed comments on each essay and you will have the chance 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 (20%)

Every week (with the exception of weeks 6 and 10) you will write a brief but polished critical reply ( $\approx$ 250 words) to **one** of the readings assigned for the week. These comments are due by 6pm on the day before class; that means, they are due by **6pm on Thursday**. In weeks 6 and 10, you will provide comments on one of your classmates' short papers instead.

All comments should engage with the core argument(s) advanced in the text, assess whether they are sound and conclusive, and highlight any serious objections the author has not addressed. All critical feedback should be constructive. Don't just point out where you think the argument falls short, but also highlight parts that you believe are strong or which you think the author might have built upon further in order to strengthen their argument. These comments are graded for completion: you will get full credit as long as you submit all of them and each comment reflects a reasonable effort in engaging with the text.

### Final paper (30%)

You will write one final paper of around 6,000 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, April 3. I will provide feedback on your question, make suggestions to refine it, and finally approve it. The final paper is due on Monday, April 27. As with the short essays, you will receive detailed comments on your final paper and be able to revise and resubmit it by May 10.

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 seminar 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%)**

The discussion in class is an essential component of this course. That said, 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 responsible for leading and engaging others in parts of the class 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.

### **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 performing well at Brown, we 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: Wednesday 5-6pm, or by appointment. My office is located in the Political Theory Project (8 Fones Alley), room 001.

## Schedule

*This is a provisional 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](mailto:julia_netter@brown.edu)).*

*The course website (<http://julianetter.de/pols1825f>) 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: 24 January

### Introduction

- *recommended:* Richard Madsen and Tracy B. Strong, “Three Forms of Ethical Pluralism”, in Madsen and Strong (eds.), *The Many and The One: Religious and Secular Perspectives on Ethical Pluralism in the Modern World*.

Week 2: 31 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: 7 February

### 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: 14 February

First essay prompt distributed

### 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.

Week 5: 21 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.

22 February

**Short essay #1 due**

Week 6: 28 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: 6 March

### **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: 13 March

**Second essay prompt distributed**

### **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.

Week 9: 20 March

### **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.

21 March

**Short essay #2 due**

Week 10: 26 March

**Spring recess**

Week 11: 3 April

**Final paper question due**

**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 12: 10 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 13: 17 April

**Pluralism and Feminism**

- Clare Chambers, *Sex, Culture, and Justice: The Limits of Choice* (2008), chapter 4.
- Susan Moller Okin, "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women", *Boston Review*, October/November 1997.

Week 14: 24 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.

27 April

**Final paper due**

Week 15: 1 May

**Moral pluralism over time: perennial issues and new developments**

- Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, chapters 5 and 6.

10 May

**Revised final paper due**