

PHIL 481

TOPICS IN PHILOSOPHY: TOLERATION

Tuesdays / Thursdays, 1:05 – 2:25, Leacock 927

INSTRUCTORS

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

Liberal democracies pride themselves on the tolerance that they show towards a diversity of beliefs and practices. Similarly, as individuals we often take personal pride in being tolerant of those who are different from us, those who pray to different gods (or no god), who identify with different cultures, or who pursue different ways of life. While few citizens in Western democracies would question the importance of being tolerant—many, in fact, consider it a key virtue—from a philosophical point of view it is not as clear *why* being tolerant is so important. In fact, upon examination, our commitment to tolerance can easily be shaken. It is not always obvious that we should be tolerant, let alone affirm as good the fact that others do not share our beliefs and practices. Why should we accommodate diversity, especially if we are sure that our way is the right way?

In this course we will look at various ways of justifying toleration both as a value and a social practice. The course begins with an examination of historical arguments both for and against toleration: arguments offered by Saint Augustine (354-430 CE), John Locke (1632-1704), Jonas Proast (1640-1710), Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Willhelm von Humbolt (1767-1835), and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). The point of discussing these authors is not merely historical; the pragmatic, moral, and meta-ethical arguments for toleration employed by these authors often reappear (in whole or in part) in contemporary philosophical debates about toleration. Thus, these historical arguments serve as important precursors for the array of contemporary arguments in favour of toleration that we will consider in the second section of the course. We will discuss the relationship between toleration and scepticism, relativism, fallibilism, autonomy, equality, identity, and political liberalism. Some of the authors that we will discuss are John Rawls, Charles Taylor, Joseph Raz, Michael Walzer, Brian Barry, Bernard Williams, and Karl Popper.

The remaining sections of the course will focus on several philosophical issues: the distinction between toleration as an individual and as a socio-political virtue; the limits of toleration; the relationship between toleration and free philosophical debate; and, crucially, critical perspectives

on toleration. One of the questions we shall ask is whether toleration is an essentially hierarchical value and practice, one that implies an asymmetrical relationship between the virtuous (tolerator) and the base (tolerated).

Throughout the course, we will attempt to keep in view the relationship of toleration to a wider set of moral norms and practices, including those of liberalism and human rights. In addition, an effort will be made by the instructors to demonstrate the relevance of toleration to current events and politics. Topics for discussion will include: The Satanic Verses, the danish cartoons, the rights of holocaust deniers, anti-gay laws in Africa, Québécois nationalism, and the plight of Native American peoples as well as other ethnic minorities.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- 15% Class Participation: This is an advanced class in which we expect the students to have always done the readings and to be prepared to actively contribute to the discussions in class. Since we don't want to penalize students who work hard but are timid, the grade for participation will not be below the average grade for the other components of the evaluation.
- 20% Presentation in class of the assigned text (or texts) for one session. The presentation must include (a) a concise summary of the argument set forth in the text and raise (b) three critical questions about the argument that will introduce the class discussion. Presentations should be about 15 – 20 minutes long. Important: A handout clearly laying out the argument's structure must be distributed before the presentation.
- 20% Short paper of 1800 – 2000 words, due on 19 February. The paper must (a) clearly present the argument and (b) critically discuss one of the texts of the three first course segments (either an assigned text or a suitable supplementary text). The text discussed in the paper may not be the same as the text that you presented in class.
- 45% Final paper of 3600 – 3800 words, due on 9 April. The final paper must critically compare two or more of the main positions that we discussed in class (classical liberalism, communitarianism, multiculturalism, cosmopolitanism, etc.). It may be based on the assigned or the supplementary readings of the syllabus, or on other suitable texts that were not discussed in class (the texts selected for the short paper or for the presentation cannot be the main texts for the final paper). You should clearly assess the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments for the positions that you compare and present a well-informed and critical solution. Choosing an appropriate topic for the final paper is part of the task. The topics must be submitted for feedback to the instructors at the latest on 2 April.

Notes:

Papers submitted late will be penalized by 1/3 grade per day (e.g. A- instead of A if the paper is one day late).

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code

of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information).

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

COURSE MATERIALS

You must acquire the following two books at "The Word" Bookstore on 469 Milton Street (payment in cash or cheque):

- 1) John Locke, *Locke On Toleration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), ed. Richard Vernon.
- 2) John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ed. Stefan Collini.

All other texts will be made available in form of a course pack at the McGill Bookstore under: Carlos Fraenkel / Adam Etinson, PHIL 481. Note: The course pack will be available from 13 January.