PHIL689: Recent debates in egalitarian political philosophy

Fall 2017

Course description:

Equality is a central value in contemporary political philosophy but its precise meaning, requirements and relationship to the real world remain the subject of intense debate. This course will focus on the recent, post-Rawlsian debate about the value of equality. We will begin by considering so-called ‘luck egalitarian’ approaches, such as those proposed by G. A. Cohen and Richard Arneson. These approaches take their cue from important insights developed by John Rawls but develop these in a very different direction than Rawls did. Proponents of ‘relational equality’ have criticized central aspects of luck egalitarianism and distributive approaches to equality more generally. We will consider both the relational egalitarians’ objections as well as the ‘relational’ account of equality they propose as an alternative. The final section of the course will consider appeals to ‘epistemic justice’, which draw attention to concerns about justice and equality in the generation of social knowledge and in the interactions of individuals as ‘knowers’. Throughout, we will also consider underlying methodological concerns that inform these debates, such as questions about ‘ideal’ vs. ‘non-ideal’ approaches in political philosophy.

Class days and times: Tuesdays, 11:35 am - 2:25 pm. (We will discuss how best to structure the time slot.) First class on 5 September.

Location: Leacock 927

Course materials: All readings will be available through myCourses. I will also make available additional materials that are relevant to the topics we’re discussing throughout the course.

Prerequisites: This is a graduate-level philosophy class, open to graduate students and undergraduates in U3 or higher. I will assume familiarity with basic debates in contemporary political philosophy and the methodologies of analytical and normative philosophy. This also includes skills such as engaging in philosophical arguments and writing philosophical papers. Students should have taken at least one introductory and one higher-level course in contemporary political philosophy. (For undergraduates, there is a form to fill out and a requirement that you have a CGPA of 3.3 or higher, although exceptional cases will be considered.) If you are at all unsure whether you meet the prerequisites, please contact me before registering for the class.
Assignment and evaluation:

Grades for this class are based on four elements:

(1) **Reading reflections** (10%). Each week (starting the week of 11 September), you must submit reflections on the required readings of the respective week. This assignment must be emailed to me (kristin.voigt@mcgill.ca) by 11 pm on Wednesday (please use ‘reading reflections’ or similar as the subject line so I can distinguish these emails from other inquiries).

The assignment is:

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<th>After completing the required readings, write brief responses to the following 3 questions:</th>
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<td>1. What are the main claims of the reading (1-2 sentences for each assigned item)?</td>
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<td>2. What did you find surprising or interesting? Why? (1-2 sentences)</td>
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<td>3. What did you find confusing? Why? (1-2 sentences)</td>
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Your responses will be graded on a Pass/Fail basis, and your grade will be calculated as the total number of passes out of 10 (max 100%). Failure to submit your reading questions or late submission will count as a Fail (no exceptions).

(2) **Response paper** (30%). Short response paper (up to 3,000 words), discussing one of the book chapters/articles assigned for the course. This assignment can be submitted at any point during the semester but must be submitted within two weeks of the day that the piece you are responding to was discussed in class.

(3) **Final paper proposal** (15%), up to 1,500 words. Due on 20 November.

(4) **Final paper** (45%), up to 6,000 words. Due on 7 December.

Some notes regarding assignments:

(1) **Reading reflections** form part of the assessment but they also help me identify any particular interests you might have that you’d like to discuss in class, and any concerns or questions that should be addressed.

(2) The purpose of the **response paper** is for you to begin thinking critically about the arguments presented, for example by identifying possible inconsistencies, problems or omissions in the author’s argument. There is no set ‘recipe’ for this type of paper and different approaches will work. Keep exposition of the overall argument in the article/chapter you’re discussing concise so as to leave yourself enough room to develop your own argument.

(3) The **final paper** is a research paper on a topic of your choice that engages with themes discussed during the course. You are encouraged to consult with me about possible topics/questions. I will provide feedback on the **final paper proposal**, in which you should set out the questions you want to address in your final paper and provide an outline/summary of how you will proceed. You are also encouraged to discuss possible ideas with me ahead of the proposal deadline.
The final paper can draw on your response paper. For example, your response papers may identify a particular problem with an argument that the author does not address; your final paper could then discuss the problem in more detail, consider possible responses the author might give, etc.

If appropriate, the final paper may also go beyond the readings assigned in class. Additional relevant readings will be provided on myCourses and I am happy to provide further reading suggestions. So as to identify the topics you would like to write about, you are encouraged to look over all the readings early on in the course.

Writing is an important aspect of the course and I am happy to read drafts and outlines and to provide feedback (but bear in mind that turnaround may be longer if we’re close to a deadline). If you’d like comments on a draft, it’s best to agree on a timeline with me in advance. It’s easiest if you email me a Word document so I can add comments directly in the file.

I will provide more details in class on how to approach you written work for this course. Please don’t hesitate to get in touch with me if you are unclear about anything.

Submission of work: All work must be submitted via email to kristin.voigt@mcgill.ca, in a standard format (e.g. MS Word, Apple Pages, PDF) file – I prefer MS Word because it’s easy for me to add comments to your file and return it to you electronically. Please do not leave submissions in my departmental or IHSP mailboxes as I don’t check them every day.

Late submissions: Late submissions incur a grade penalty. Essays turned in late without an extension will be penalized at the rate of 1/3 of a grade (e.g., from a B to a B-) per calendar day of lateness. Submission of corrupted files or files that cannot be opened do not count as submission of your work.

Extensions: Extensions will only be granted in exceptional circumstances and only if supported by a medical note or other appropriate documentation.

Recommended podcasts:
Jonathan Wolff on John Rawls' A Theory of Justice
G.A. Cohen on Inequality of Wealth
Jonathan Wolff on Disadvantage
Miranda Fricker on Epistemic Injustice

Language policy: 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.

Academic integrity: 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/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/) for more information).

**Access:** If you have a disability please feel free contact me to arrange a time to discuss your situation. It would be helpful if you could also contact the Office for Students with Disabilities ([www.mcgill.ca/osd](http://www.mcgill.ca/osd)) at 514-398-6009 to make them aware of any requirements you may have.
Course outline and required readings

NB: The readings are subject to change if there are any topics that all students have previously covered and/or if there are additional topics you’d like to read for this class.

5 September: Introduction to course
Since the focus of the course will be on post-Rawlsian debates, I’d like you to read a paper by Will Kymlicka that briefly summarises Rawls’ main ideas and its relationship to post-Rawlsian egalitarian debates. If you’d like more of a Rawls re-cap, I’d recommend Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, chapters I, II, III, and sections 69, 77. There is also a Philosophy Bites interview with Jonathan Wolff on Rawls (http://philosophybites.com/2010/02/jonathan-wolff-on-john-rawls-a-theory-of-justice.html).


I. Distributive equality and luck egalitarianism

12 September: Equality of resources

19 September: Equality of opportunity for welfare/advantage


26 September: Luck egalitarianism and the real world


II. Relational equality

3 October: Relational equality and its challenge to distributive equality
10 October: Relational equality – what does it require?


17 October: Distributive equality, relational equality and global justice


24 October: The relationship between distributive and relational equality


III. Epistemic (in)justice

31 October: Testimonial injustice


7 November: Testimonial injustice


14 November: Hermeneutical injustice


21 November: Epistemic (in)justice and political institutions

Miranda Fricker (2013). ‘Epistemic justice as a condition of political freedom?’, *Synthese* 190(7).


28 November: presentations and conclusion to course

*We will use this session for students to present their final paper ideas and to get feedback from the rest of the class on how they might develop their arguments. This is compulsory but will not be graded – it is an opportunity for you to test out the ideas and argument you plan to make in your final paper, and to see how other students approach the final paper. You will also have an opportunity to ask any questions you might have about the final paper. This session may be moved earlier into the semester if students prefer.*

Conclusion to course.