Political Ethics and the Theory of Public Choice

Syllabus

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1. **The overarching purposes of Part II, Political Ethics** –
   a) To explicate the distinctiveness of political morality in its tension-ridden relationships with “morality as such” (sometimes labeled as “private morality”) and political ethics perse;
   b) To present a cognitive map of the field of contemporary discourse over political morality and to bring to light the strengths and weakness of the major theoretical approaches to it;
   c) To elucidate a distinction between morality as a set of principles whereby politics can be normatively assessed (in one way or another) on one hand and political morality as a guiding light of actual political activities on the other, that is, between a kind of morality, which evaluates and instructs politics, and a different kind of it, which works “inside” politics;
   d) To define and locate the aforesaid distinction on the two levels of moral reflections on politics – that of the “spectator” and that of the “actor” (political agency);
   e) To trace the implementation/manifestation of political morality in actual political practices and strategies, such as anticolonial struggles, civil disobedience, revolutionary dictatorships, etc., which will serve as the “case studies” for testing the validity of the theoretical insights into the “nature” of political morality discussed hitherto.

2. **The supposed outcomes** –
   a) Advancement of the students’ grasp of ethics by means of connecting theoretical ethics with applied ethics;
   b) Augmentation of the students’ knowledge of contemporary philosophy through their exposure to the contemporary debates over political morality;
   c) Enhancement of the students’ ability to pursue a “problem-oriented” rather than a “method-driven” strategy of research (as it can be applied to the ethical quandaries, riddles and dilemmas of politics);
   d) Intensification and enrichment of the students’ awareness of the ethical dimension of political life and furtherance of their ability to critically and independently form their theoretical and practical position in relation to it;
   e) Improvement of the students’ analytical and polemical skills in matters of ethical judgments and ethical-political discourse.

3. **Requirements and grading** –
   The general requirements and principles of grading, as they are determined for the course, *Contemporary Philosophy and Political Ethics* as a whole (see clauses #6.1 and 10 of the syllabus), apply to its Part II unreservedly. The weekly reading loads, within Part II, will average fifty-sixty pages. This relates to the “required literature” only. The students are encouraged to peruse or at least to skim over the section of “suggested
literature” attached to each topic of the syllabus of Part II, but this is not mandatory. There will be a take-home written exam halfway through Part II—the students will have to choose two questions from five prompts distributed by the course’s instructor in advance, that is, a week before the students’ responses are due. Each response should not exceed three double-spaced pages.

4. General design of Part II and its schedule—

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<td>Theoretical Reflections on Violence and Nonviolence: The Spectator’s Perspective</td>
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<td><strong>Part 3. Acting from Moral Principle: Civil Disobedience as a Philosophy and Political Strategy</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Part 4. The Pursuit of Moral Utopias: Its Terroristic and Redemptive Meanings and Manifestations</strong></td>
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Topics and Reading Assignments.

Topic 1.
No specific reading assignment. *Ex post* suggested readings include –


Topic 2.

- How would you explain the opposition between political moralism and political realism?
- Why are both of them, as Reinhold Niebuhr maintains, not just erroneous but dangerous approaches to politics?
- What is a realistic and yet morally conscious and ethically informed approach to politics?
- What makes political morality, i.e., morality congruous with politics essentially different from private morality, i.e., the one practicable by private persons (within the “private sphere” of life)?

*Required literature:*


*Suggested literature:*


Topic 3.
- What makes the “colonial situation” inherently and incurably violent, according to Fanon?
- Why can human emancipation begin in this situation only with unmitigated violence on the part of the rebels? Why does “only violence pay”? 
- Does such an advocacy of revolutionary violence amount to a complete dismissal of “humanistic values”? 
- Why is it so important to curb violence when the revolution gains momentum?

Required literature:

Suggested literature:


Topic 4.
- Is a universally valid definition of “violence” possible / meaningful? Is there an unambiguous context-independent dichotomy between violence and nonviolence (peace)?
- What does amoral, or moralistic, ban on violence apply to—physical harm, mental and/or psychological manipulation, self-inflicted harm (including our unvirtuous habits and behaviors), all forms of structural domination or something else? Does such an absolute ban have any relevance to and purchase on politics?
- What are the conceivable alternatives to violence?
- Why is it so difficult, according to Ted Honderich, to detect many, and arguably most important, forms of political violence? Can we have an unbiased conception of political violence?

Required literature:


*Suggested literature:*


**Topic 5.**

- What are the deontological foundations of Thoreau’s conception of civil disobedience?
- Why is the divide between Thoreau’s civil disobedience and revolution blurred? Why can Thoreau’s civil disobedience embrace violence?
- How and why does Rawls “narrow” Thoreau’s conception of civil disobedience?
- What are the distinctive features of civil disobedience as a type of political action, according to Rawls?
- In Rawls, civil disobedience, although morally endorsed and justified, ceases to be an enactment of moral principles and appears as a “political conception” *par excellence*. What are the theoretical grounds and political ramifications of this transfiguration of the concept of civil disobedience?

*Required literature*


*Suggested literature:*


R. Celikates, “Rethinking Civil Disobedience as a Practice of Contestation—Beyond the Liberal Paradigm”, in *Constellations*, 2016, Vol. 23, No. 1.
Topic 6.

- How does Socrates explain his mission (that of the “gadfly”) in relation to his Athenian fellow-citizens?
- Why did he choose the method of elenchus to fulfill his mission and why did he practice it (mainly) on the marketplace?
- Does not the pronouncement of the death verdict by the jury evidence the failure of the Socratic discursive strategy to restore the moral awareness of his fellow-citizens?
- How does Socrates manifest his defiance of the verdict of the jury / his civil disobedience in the Apology?
- Why did Socrates refuse to escape from jail, thus saving his life from the unjust execution? Why is Socrates perfectly law obedient in Crito?
- Is there a contradiction between his defiance of law in the Apology and his complete acquiescence with law in Crito?

Required literature:


Suggested literature:


Topic 7.

- What is Plato’s vision of the perfect state?
- What does the “completion of philosophy mean”? Why is it shameful to “know” without trying to put “knowledge into practice”?
- What are the advantages of tyranny for the implementation of moral utopia?
- Are there apolitical ways to achieve political goals? The paradoxes of Plato’s strategy of empowering Reason.

Required literature:

Suggested literature:


Topic 8.

- How are utopias related to “reality”? What are the major differences between “relative utopias” and “absolute utopias”?
- What are the fundamental differences between “ideology” and “utopia”, according to Mannheim? Why does he believe that whenever utopias disappear history ceases to be “in the making”?
- What are the major metamorphoses of “utopia” in the course of modernity (as it has been known so far)?
- What causes the attenuation/exhaustion of “utopias” at the present stage of history, according to Mannheim, and what does it entail, culturally and politically speaking?

Required literature:


Suggested literature:


