Contemporary Political Theory: The ‘What?’ and the ‘How?’ of Distributive Justice

POLI 363
Winter 2018
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CURRIE 408/9
W/F 10:05-11:25 AM
TA: Matthew Scarfone
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Office Location/Hours: TBD (will be posted ASAP)

This course aims to provide students with a thorough grounding in the contemporary literature on distributive justice. It will be roughly divided into two parts. In the first part of the course we will consider several answers to the question of what the appropriate currency of distributive justice is (candidates discussed will include well-being, resources, Rawlsian primary goods, and capabilities). We will then turn our attention to the question of how we can best distribute whatever it is that is to be distributed. Is equality valuable in itself, or is what matters just that everybody has enough, or that those who are worst off are as well off as possible? If inequality is bad, is this only where it is a product of mere luck rather than choice? Throughout, we will also reflect on the ways in which distinct answers to the ‘what?’ and the ‘how?’ questions might turn out to be mutually supporting (or incompatible).

Prerequisites

This is a 300-level course. In accordance with departmental regulations, this means that students must have taken a 200-level course in the same field (i.e. POLI 231 or 232).

Required Texts

All readings are either available online through the McGill Library or will be made available on myCourses.

Methods of Assessment

The grade for this course will be based on three papers of approximately 2000 words each (together worth 2/3 of the final grade), and a take-home
final exam (worth 1/3 of the final grade). A choice of topics for each paper will be handed out 2 weeks before the due date. The final exam will consist of short essay questions, ranging over all the course material. To pass the course, you must hand in all three papers and write the final exam.

**Course Policies**

All assignments are due on the dates indicated in the syllabus. Late papers will be docked one third of a letter grade for every day late, including weekends. Requests for extensions must be addressed to the instructor (the TA will not grant extensions). No extensions will be granted on (or after) an assignment’s due date.

Research shows that people learn more when they actively engage with the material and participate in the learning process, as opposed to passively listening to the lecturer. Group discussion is an important part of this class. It is critical that you come to each class ready to raise and respond to questions about that week’s readings (you should aim, whenever possible, to do all the readings for the week prior to the Wednesday session).

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 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.
Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant-e a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté.

Students, per McGill policy, have the right to request that their work be re-read and re-assessed. The Department of Political Science’s Assessment and Re-Read Policy applies. If the assignment was graded by the TA, any
concerns about grading/assessment must always be brought to them first. All requests must be accompanied by the original assessment including the grades, comments, and annotations made by the TA or the professor, as well as by a brief one-paragraph explanation why the student deems the grade inappropriate.

It is of the utmost importance that all students feel that they can express themselves, in the knowledge that their persons and contributions will be respected by their peers. Kindness and civility are not only compatible with spirited intellectual debate, but essential to it. Please let me or your TA know if you have any concerns about the climate of the lectures.

As the instructor of this course I endeavor to provide an accessible and inclusive learning environment. However, if you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the Office for Students with Disabilities, (514) 398-6009.

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

**Class Schedule**

W, Jan.10: Intro, Run-through of Syllabus. Readings: None
F, Jan. 12: Intro to Unit 1: Currency (The ‘What’). Readings: Carter “The Quest for an Egalitarian Metric”
F, Jan.26 Well-Being cont’d. Readings: Arneson “Welfare Should be the Currency of Justice”
F, Feb.9 Capabilities cont’d. Readings: Nussbaum Creating Capabilities Preface, Chs 1 and 2

**First Paper Due**
W, Feb.14 Capabilities cont’d. Readings: Nussbaum Chs 3 and 4
F, Feb.16 Capabilities cont’d. Readings: Nussbaum Chs 5 and 6
W, Feb.21 Capabilities cont’d. Readings: Nussbaum Chs 7 and 8
F, Mar.2 Intro to Unit 2: Distributive Principles (The ‘How’). Readings: None

**Second Paper Due**
F, Mar.9 Against Telic Egalitarianism. Readings: Parfit “Equality or Priority”.
F, Mar.16 Against Prioritarianism. Readings: Otsuka and Voorhoeve “An Argument Against the Priority View”
F, Mar.23 Against Sufficientarianism. Readings: Casal “Why Sufficiency is Not Enough”

**Third Paper Due**
F, Apr.6 The Desert View. Readings: Kagan “Equality and Desert”
W, Apr.11 Against the Desert View. Readings: Weber “Should Desert Replace Equality?"
F, Apr.13 Wrapping Up. Readings: None