We read central texts in moral and political philosophy from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. There are three main focuses. The first is meta-ethics: questions of objectivity, moral psychology, and the rational basis of morality. The second is substantive moral theory: utilitarianism versus deontology, and so on. The third is political theory: What are the conditions that a system of government must satisfy before its use of coercive power can be considered legitimate; and what are the conditions that a society must satisfy before it can be considered just? The aim is to get a picture of how the main elements of the field fit together.

Course Outcomes

Upon completion of the course, you will

- Have a thorough and integrated understanding of the major themes of modern Western moral and political philosophy from the seventeenth century until the present.
- Be able to examine, analyse, interpret, and assess critically arguments in moral and political philosophy.
- Be an engaged participant in debates regarding emerging and contemporary issues in moral and political theory.
- Have the cognitive and technical skills to generate critical and creative ideas relating to questions of meta-ethics, ethics, justice, and legitimacy.
- Be able to apply ideas from philosophical work in moral and political theory to legal issues of continuing and newly emerging concern.

Texts

The following books have been ordered at the NYU Bookstore. Feel free to use other editions or retrieve texts online, but I will typically be using pagination from these editions. As far as possible, I will refer to chapter and paragraph for classic texts.

Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Hackett)
Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Hackett)
Hume, *Moral Philosophy* (Hackett)
Rousseau, *Basic Political Writings* (Hackett)
Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Hackett)
Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays* (Hackett)
Mill, *Utilitarianism* (Hackett)
Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford)

Other assignments are available online, as indicated below.

**Assessment**

There will be a take-home examination (4 hours). *Attendance and preparation for each class is a requirement for credit in the course.* Class participation can affect your grade by up to one step in either direction.

**Syllabus**

The reading can be heavy at times, so please plan ahead—and look out in particular for Locke (especially session 6—it isn’t that difficult, but there’s a lot), Rousseau (*On the Social Contract* is both long and difficult, and you need to read the whole thing before the first session), and Rawls.

1: Introduction. No reading assignment


3: *Leviathan*, chs 15-19

4: *Leviathan*, chs 20, 29-30, A Review and Conclusion


6: *Second Treatise*, chs 6-19


8: *Treatise*, Bk. III, Pt. I

9: *Treatise*, Bk. III, Pt. II, §§ i- iv

10: *Treatise*, Bk. III, Pt. II, §§ v-viii
11: Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*


13: Continued

14: Kant, “On the Proverb: That May Be True in Theory, But is of No Practical Use,” only the section headed “On the Relation of Theory to Practice in Constitutional Right (Against Hobbes)”


17: *Restatement*, Part II

18: *Restatement*, Parts IV & V

19: Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Section 1

20: *Grounding*, Section 2

21: Continued

22: Nagel, *The View From Nowhere*, ch. VIII


24: Mill, *Utilitarianism*, chs 1-3

25: *Utilitarianism*, chs 4-5


27: Nagel, *View From Nowhere*, ch. IX

28: Nagel, *View From Nowhere*, ch. X