

Philosophical Analysis of Policy Choices

PHIL 2025, 3 credits

Fall 2026

Tue, Thu 3:30 p.m. – 4:45 p.m., Molecular Science and Engineering G021

Instructor: Hernán Medina-Botero

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Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday, 2:15-3:15 p.m., DM Smith 112. If you need to come to office hours but these times don't work for you, please send me an email proposing two or three different times and we will arrange an alternative Zoom meeting.

General Information

Course Description:

Different considerations come into play when deciding on public policy. Is this policy something we can afford? Will it have enough support from stakeholders? Is investing in the policy a good use of resources? Will it be efficient in achieving its intended goals? What can go wrong? Does the cost-benefit balance lands on the side of the benefits?

However, when we analyze a policy choice from a philosophical standpoint, the main questions are not reduced to efficiency, feasibility, or a monetary analysis of costs against benefits. Some policies have implications that relate in different ways to core ethical and political values. These values, in turn, reflect what we think a good society should look like, or what human beings are and how they should be treated (their dignity and rights respected, for example), or what our relation to the environment and other species should be like. The goal of this course is to introduce students to philosophical analysis, its tools, and the type of questions it addresses so they can be used to inform the complex decision-making in policy debates and research.

Course Goals and Learning Outcomes:

Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to

- distinguish key normative theories in political philosophy (liberalism, welfarism, egalitarianism, communitarianism),
- use philosophical tools to analyze policy choices,
- design and write papers stating a clear thesis or main idea, and justify it using good arguments,
- conduct small research on philosophical and other literature, and present the results to an audience of peers,
- clearly formulate their own points of view regarding public policies, as well as assess the points of view of other students.

This is a Core IMPACTS course that is part of the Humanities area.

Core IMPACTS refers to the core curriculum, which provides students with essential knowledge in foundational academic areas. This course will help master course content, and support students' broad academic and career goals.

This course should direct students toward a broad Orienting Question:

- How do I interpret the human experience through creative, linguistic and philosophical works?

Completion of this course should enable students to meet the following Learning Outcome:

- Students will effectively analyze and interpret the meaning, cultural significance and ethical implications of literary/philosophical texts or of works in the visual/performing arts.

Course content, activities and exercises in this course should help students develop the following Career-Ready Competencies:

- Ethical Reasoning
- Information Literacy
- Intercultural Competence

Course Materials

Textbook:

The following textbook is required for this course; any other reading materials will be available on Canvas:

- Wolff, Jonathan. (2020). *Ethics and Public Policy. A Philosophical Inquiry (2nd Ed.)*. Routledge.

Course Website:

The course website is on Canvas. Canvas is our main interaction place. Any relevant and available content (video links, papers, journal pieces, etc.) will be posted there. News and changes to the syllabus or the course format will be also announced there. Make sure you visit the canvas site regularly (at least once some hours before class).

Course Requirements and Grading

Assignment	Grade Weight	Grading Scale	
Exam	15%	A	90 - 100%
Essay 1	15%	B	80 - 89%
Research Project	25%	C	70 - 79%
Final Essay	20%	D	60 - 69%
Quizzes	15%	F	below 60%
Participation	10%		

According to policy, grades at Georgia Tech are interpreted as follows:

- A Excellent (4 quality points per credit hour)
- B Good (3 quality points per credit hour)
- C Satisfactory (2 quality points per credit hour)
- D Passing (1 quality point per credit hour)
- F Failure (0 quality points per credit hour)

Description of Graded Components:

- *Exam:* Exam will be in person and will cover the main political philosophy theories discussed in the first unit of the course.

- **Essay 1:** Argumentative paper analyzing a policy choice using the concepts and theories introduced early in the course.
- **Research Project:** There will be a group research project. Each group will select a policy that is suitable for philosophical analysis. Research will focus on the history that led to the policy (or to debate about it), alternatives, and philosophical literature around it. There will be periodical research reports and a presentation and discussion of findings.
- **Final Essay:** Tied to the research, each student will write an argumentative paper articulating his/her own reasons defending or rejecting a particular policy.
- **Quizzes:** There will be quizzes on selected readings. Quiz format will be multiple choice.
- **Participation:** The point of ‘participation’ is that you are an active part of the course, that you contribute something to it; as such, there are different ways of contributing. The most obvious one, by speaking up during class. In this case, participation is graded according to the frequency of class comments/questions, and their relevance to the class. If you have a hard time speaking in public, this could be an opportunity to try and speak more often and engage in the conversations with me and classmates. But I also respect those of you that for any reason prefer not to. If this is your case, you can earn participation points by doing things like sharing relevant content with the class—videos, papers, journal articles, any other digital resource, for example—just email me so I can share it during class hours or in Canvas! ***Feel free to propose and discuss with me any other participation activities that come to mind.***

A good rule of thumb is to participate (by doing any of the things mentioned above, or one that you propose) at least once a week (this will guarantee you full credit). *Keep in mind that you cannot get participation points if you are regularly absent from class. Just as there is no way of speaking up during class if you do not attend class, no alternative activity will grant you participation credit if you do it without attending class.*

Weekly Schedule

	Dates Day		Required Reading(s) / Activities	Unit
Week 1	Aug 25-27	Tue	Introduction	Unit 1 – Society and Its Goals
		Thu	Overview of Ethical Theories [No Assigned Reading]	
Week 2	Sep 1-3	Tue	<i>Comprehensive Liberalism</i> . Read from the beginning until section 1.1.4 of “Normative Political Theory” (available here)	
		Thu	<i>Welfarism</i> . From section 1.2 to 1.2.3 of “Normative Political Theory” (available here)	
Week 3	Sep 8-10	Tue	<i>Distributive Justice</i> . From section 1.3 to 1.3.2 of “Normative Political Theory” (available here)	

		Thu	<i>Communitarianism & Fundamental Disagreement.</i> From section 1.4 to 2 of “Normative Political Theory” (available here)	
Week 4	Sep 15-17	Tue	<i>Governance Constraints & Governing Under Constraints.</i> Sections 3 and 4 of “Normative Political Theory” (available here)	
		Thu	EXAM	
Week 5	Sep 22-24	Tue	Introduction of Wolff’s <i>Ethics and Public Policy</i> + “Method in philosophy and public policy” (Available here — redirects to a direct download). [Also available as the first chapter of <i>The Routledge Handbook of Ethics and Public Policy</i> , Annabelle Lever and Andrei Poama (eds.)]	Unit 2 – Philosophical Analysis of Policy Choices
		Thu	Scientific Experiments on Animals	
Week 6	Sep 29 – Oct 1	Tue	Gambling	
		Thu	Drugs	
Week 7	Oct 6-8	Tue	Recess [NO CLASS]	
		Thu	Safety	
Week 8	Oct 13-15	Tue	Risky New Technologies	
		Thu	Selection of Policy Topic for RESEARCH	
Week 9	Oct 20-22	Tue	Crime and Punishment	
		Thu	Disability ESSAY 1 Due	
Week 10	Oct 27-29	Tue	The Free Market	
		Thu	The Future of Work	
Week 11	Nov 3-5	Tue	Poverty	
		Thu	Immigration	
Week 12	Nov 10-12	Tue	Book Conclusion	
		Thu	Presentation 1	
Week 13	Nov 17-19	Tue	Presentation 2	Unit 3 – Research Project
		Thu	Presentation 3	
Week 14	Nov 24-26		Thanksgiving	
Week 15	Dec 1-3	Tue	Presentation 4	
		Thu	Presentation 5	
Week 16	Dec 8	Tue	Presentation 6	

Final Exami- nations			FINAL ESSAY	
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Course Expectations and Guidelines

Attendance, Participation, Late Assignments, and Missed Work

You are expected to attend class regularly. Notice that there is a participation grade in the course, and it is impossible to get full participation credit without regularly attending class. It is your responsibility to attend exams, and complete assignments by the established due date. *If you experience or anticipate circumstances that affect your ability to complete an assignment, please contact me at least 2 days in advance of the due date so we can work on a solution.* Assignments (including exams) will not be accepted past the due date, unless prior arrangements have been made. Please review Georgia Tech's general rules on Attendance and Missed Work [here](#).

Health and Safety

If you are experiencing symptoms of a respiratory illness, it is a good idea to refrain from coming to campus. Keeping each other safe is a shared responsibility. I encourage you to follow the recommendations issued by the CDC (<https://www.cdc.gov/respiratory-viruses/prevention/precautions-when-sick.html>).

Academic Integrity

Georgia Tech aims to cultivate a community based on trust, academic integrity, and honor. Students are expected to act according to the highest ethical standards. For information on Georgia Tech's Academic Honor Code, please visit <http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/policies/honor-code/> or <http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/rules/18/>.

Any student suspected of cheating or plagiarizing on a quiz, exam, or assignment will be reported to the Office of Student Integrity, who will investigate the incident and identify the appropriate penalty for violations.

Generative AI

AI is changing the world quickly. It is impressive what different Large Language Models (LLMs) can do, and it is very tempting to use them for various daily tasks; these models are faster than us, have access to more information than we can process, and even produce text in a tone that sounds strikingly human.

Given this, it can be tempting to use AI models to complete your coursework. I encourage you to use these models to help you in this course if you feel the need to use them (for example, because you are still unclear about a concept and you want feedback on what you are missing). That being said, using them to *help* you and using them to *complete* your assignments are two very different things. The latter is a form of academic misconduct! You do not need AI to do well in this course, and you will get more out of it if you do not rely on AI too much.

Let me say a bit more about this last point. There are multiple abilities that we, as humans, need in order to relate to each other and to navigate the world in a meaningful way. For example, you are better off when you know how to read and write. Similarly, you are better off having a basic command of math. These abilities require practice. Thinking is just the same. You are better off when you can do your own reasoning, and you get better at it by practicing. This is what this course wants you to do: become better at reasoning by having you engage in discussions and debates with your classmates and me.

If you have AI complete your work (summarize readings for you, take notes, answer a quiz, etc.), you are commissioning it to do a basic task that it would be better for you to fully command before giving it up. In fact, what will likely happen in the long run is that you decommission your own thinking. (In debates about the ethics of artificial intelligence, the concern is that you are more vulnerable to *deskilling* over time—the process by which you lose important skills due to lack of experience and practice.) Just as you probably would not be OK saying “I actually do not want to learn to read, since AI can do it for me,” you should be troubled by the idea of having AI doing your own thinking tasks.

This course is an opportunity to slow down and consciously use your thinking abilities, your reflective powers. We do not have that opportunity very often in this fast-paced world. Use AI wisely, as an aid when needed, and use this course as a space to work on your own critical abilities.

** Most of this statement on Generative AI (the parts I largely agree with) is taken from a similar statement by Tyler Cook.*

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you are a student with learning needs that require special accommodation, contact the Office of Disability Services at (404)894-2563 or <http://disabilityservices.gatech.edu/>, as soon as possible, to make an appointment to discuss your special needs and to obtain an accommodations letter. Please also e-mail me as soon as possible in order to set up a time to discuss your learning needs.

Student-Faculty Expectations Agreement

At Georgia Tech we believe that it is important to strive for an atmosphere of mutual respect, acknowledgement, and responsibility between faculty members and the student body. See <http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/rules/22/> for an articulation of some basic expectation that you can have of me and that I have of you. In the end, simple respect for knowledge, hard work, and cordial interactions will help build the environment we seek. Therefore, I encourage you to remain committed to the ideals of Georgia Tech while in this class.

No Discrimination

The Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts supports the Georgia Institute of Technology’s commitment to creating a campus free of discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or veteran status. We further affirm the importance of cultivating an intellectual climate that allows us to better understand the similarities and differences of those who constitute the Georgia Tech community, as well as the necessity of working against inequalities that may also manifest here as they do in the broader society

Student Resources

Here is a great reference list with the wide array of resources that Georgia Tech offers, visit <https://students.gatech.edu/student-resource-guide>.