

PHIL 491: Joint Action and Special Obligations

Winter Term I (Fall 2016)

Mondays 2-5

Jack Bell Building for the School of Social Work 223

Jonny Thakkar

Practicalities

Office Hours: Wednesdays 1:30-3:30 in Buchanan E163

Email: jthakkar@ubc.ca

Connect Course Site: <http://elearning.ubc.ca/connect>

Description

In the last couple of decades the field of social philosophy has been invigorated by attention to the question of what it means for individuals to act together. When we go for a walk together, or paint a house together, or rob a bank together, is there really a “we” to which the act and its correlative intentions must be ascribed, or is there simply a complex of individual acts and intentions? Does participation in joint action entail any obligations, and, if so, in virtue of what? And do our answers to these questions change depending on whether the group is more or less stable over time? This advanced seminar, limited to 4th-year philosophy majors, will investigate these foundational questions in the hope of shedding light on the responsibilities of corporation and workers in contemporary economic life. Authors to be read include Michael Bratman, Margaret Gilbert, H. L. A. Hart, Christopher Kutz, Robert Nozick, John Rawls and Samuel Scheffler

Texts

The University Bookstore will have copies of each of these books soon. The rest of the readings will be available online via the UBC Connect site. Please bring a copy of the relevant readings to each class.

Margaret Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*

Michael E. Bratman, *Shared Agency: A Planning Theory of Acting Together*

Philip Pettit and Christian List, *Group Agency*

Christopher Kutz, *Complicity: ethics and law for a collective age*

Course Evaluation

Marking Scale

Class participation	10%	90-100% A+	85-89% A	80-84% A-
Discussion boards	30%	76-79% B+	72-75% B	68-71% B-
Peer Review	10%	64-67% C+	60-63% C	55-59% C-
Final Paper	50%	50-54% D	0-49% F	

Class Participation

This is a discussion seminar whose success depends on the collective work of its members. Attendance at each class is therefore required of all students. You should arrive having read and thought about the material, ready to ask questions and respond if called upon. Please set your devices to aeroplane mode during class.

Discussion Boards

To facilitate class participation, we will use online discussion boards to prepare. The class will be divided into four groups (A, B, C, D). Each week the members of one group will write 500 words on a particular passage from the reading that they find particularly interesting or challenging. For example, the passage might:

- seem to contain a bad argument
- seem to contradict an earlier passage
- seem to undermine our usual assumptions
- seem to deploy a surprising rhetorical strategy

Your aim should be to pose a question that we can discuss in class. You therefore need to show why the question is worth spending time thinking about: it should be important and controversial. To show that it is important, you need to explain what is at stake in it, whether for the way we think about the text or the way we think more generally. To show that it is controversial, you need to outline a couple of competing answers that could plausibly be held by reasonably intelligent people in possession of the relevant facts.

These posts should be up on Connect by 11pm on Saturday evening. At that point students in other groups are welcome (but not obliged) to read the posts and comment. Needless to say, this will require discipline and diligence on the part of each student. But it will make for much better discussions.

Papers

Good writing requires rewriting. There will be only one major paper for the course, 8-10 pages in length, but it will be the subject of drafting and redrafting. This is best done collaboratively. Once the first drafts have been submitted, each student will therefore be assigned the task of coming up with a paragraph of comments and suggestions for a peer. This process should benefit the commenter as well as the author, since learning to evaluate and improve others' work can teach one to do the same for oneself. Suggested paper topics will be circulated on November 21st; first drafts will be due on December 7th; comments will be due on December 9th (emailed to the author but cc-ed to me); and then final drafts will be submitted to me *in paper form* on December 12th (all deadlines at 5pm).

Late work will not be accepted unless there is documentary evidence of an emergency or prior arrangements have been made due to exceptional circumstances.

Students found to have plagiarized work will fail the course.

Part One: Relationships as Sources of Obligation

- 9/12 H. L. A. Hart, “Are There Natural Rights?”
John Rawls, “Legal Obligation and the Duty of Fair Play”
- 9/19 Robert Nozick, “The Principle of Fairness” (A)
A. J. Simmons, “The Principle of Fair Play”
- 9/26 Samuel Scheffler, “Relationships and Responsibilities” (B)
Niko Kolodny, “Which Relationships Justify Partiality?”

Part Two: Joint Action as a Source of Obligation

- 10/3 Margaret Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, chs. 6 and 7 (C)
- 10/10 THANKSGIVING – NO CLASS
- 10/17 Margaret Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, chs. 8 and 11 (D)
- 10/24 John Simmons, “Associative Political Obligations” (A)
John Horton, “In Defence of Associative Political Obligations”
- 10/31 Michael Bratman, *Shared Agency*, chs. 1, 2, 3 (B)
- 11/7 Michael Bratman, *Shared Agency*, chs. 4, 5, 6 (C)
- 11/14 Christian List and Philip Pettit, *Group Agency*, chs. 3 and 7 (D)

Part Three: The Question of Complicity

- 11/21 Christophe Kutz, *Complicity*, chs. 3 and 4
- 11/28 Christopher Kutz, *Complicity*, chs. 5 and 6