

PHIL 3325: Social Philosophy

Instructor: Lewis Wang

Time and Location: Online (Asynchronous)

Office Hours: Monday 9am-11am or virtual by appointment (MS Teams link TBD)

Course Description

What holds a society together, and what entitles it to make demands on us? This course takes up the philosophical and political questions of social existence: justice, freedom, rights, authority, legitimacy, and inequality. We begin by asking what a society is and who constitutes it. We then turn to classic social contract theories as well as their anarchist challengers. The second unit takes up the issues of inequality, social hierarchy, and justice. We will discuss the origin of inequality, arguments for and against social hierarchy, and various contemporary accounts of justice. Finally, we turn to our current world and discuss the effect of new technologies like social media and AI on society. Along the way, we will read works by sociologists such as C. Wright Mills and Georg Simmel, canonical Western philosophers such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx, Chinese philosophers like Confucius and Mencius, and contemporary masters like Rawls, Nozick, Charles Taylor, Iris Marion Young, G.A. Cohen, and Martin Luther King Jr.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be familiar with some of the central questions in social philosophy, have seriously engaged with major existing views on them, and have developed their own views on these questions in relation to their own lives and the society and community they live in. In addition, this course also aims to cultivate in students the following abilities:

- The ability to read and understand complex and abstract texts.
- The ability to clearly and concisely summarize the main question, claim, and argument of a piece of writing, both orally and in writing.
- The ability to analyze and evaluate an argument, including its logical structure and its premises.
- The ability to write clear explanatory and argumentative prose.
- The ability to keep an open mind to foreign, antiquated, or unfamiliar thoughts and conceptual frameworks.

Required Texts

All readings will be made available either through a web link or on **Blackboard** in pdf format.

Assignments and Grading

Short Reading Reflections (15%)

Each week, you are required to complete a short reflection post on Blackboard on the readings of the week. These reflections should be 1-2 paragraphs long, and can include any thoughts, comments, or reactions you have about the readings of the week. The purpose of this assignment is to show that you have read and thought about the readings seriously and to help you document your thoughts as you do the readings. **Reading reflections will be graded based on effort rather than quality.** That is, you receive full credit as long as you show that you have done the readings and thought about them seriously; I am not grading whether your reading is correct. **Reading reflections are due at the end (11:59pm) of every Wednesday.**

Weekly Homework Assignment (25%)

At the end of each week, after finishing up the module for that week, you will complete a homework assignment that consists of a set of short answer questions. Roughly half of the questions will be factual questions based on that week's readings and materials. They are meant to test your understanding of the course materials. **These questions will be graded based on quality (that is, whether you got the answer right).** The other half of the questions will be open-ended questions that invite you to reflect on and develop your own views. **These questions will be graded based on effort. Homework assignments are due at the end (11:59pm) of every Sunday. The lowest homework grade will be dropped.**

Papers (3x20% = 60%)

There will be three papers in this course, roughly one on each unit. Each paper should be 1200-1500 words long, double spaced, Times New Roman, 12 pt fonts. I will give out paper prompts in advance; each prompt will contain 2-3 options for you to choose from. **See schedule below for paper deadlines.**

Grading Scale

94 - 100 = A
90 - 93.99 = A-
87 - 89.99 = B+
84 - 86.99 = B
80 - 83.99 = B-
77 - 79.99 = C+
74 - 76.99 = C
70 - 73.99 = C-
60 - 69.99 = D
Below 60 = F

Course Policies

Deadline and Extension Policy

All papers, reflections, and assignments must be submitted using the course Blackboard page in **.docx** or **.pdf** format. Papers are due at 11:59 pm El Paso time on the date indicated. If you need an extension, please contact me, preferably before the deadline, and in all cases sooner rather than later. **For extension request up to 48 hours, you do not need to offer me a reason.** Late submissions without communication will have 5 points (out of 100) taken off for each day they are late.

Technology Requirement

Some course content is delivered via the Internet through the Blackboard learning management system. Ensure your UTEP e-mail account is working and that you have access to the Web and a stable web browser. You will need to have access to a computer/laptop. If you do not have word-processing software, you can download Word and other Microsoft Office programs (including Excel, PowerPoint, Outlook and more) for free via UTEP's Microsoft Office Portal. Click the following link for more information about [Microsoft Office 365](#) and follow the instructions. If you encounter technical difficulties beyond your scope of troubleshooting, please contact the UTEP [Technology Support](#) as they are trained specifically in assisting with technological needs of students. **Please do not contact me for this type of assistance.** The Help Desk is much better equipped than I am to assist you!

AI Policy

Use of AI technologies or automated tools, particularly generative AI such as ChatGPT or DALL-E, is ***not allowed*** for assignments in this class. Each student is expected to use critical and creative thinking skills to complete tasks and not rely on computer-generated ideas. Any direct use of AI-generated materials submitted as your own work will be treated as plagiarism and reported to the [Office of Community Standards](#).

Course Drop & Incomplete Grade Policy

I will not drop you from the course. However, if you feel that you are unable to complete the course successfully, please let me know and then contact the [Registration and Records Office](#) to initiate the drop process. If you do not, you are at risk of receiving an “F” for the course.

Incomplete grades may be requested only in exceptional circumstances after you have completed at least half of the course requirements. Talk to me immediately if you believe an incomplete is warranted. If granted, we will establish a contract of work to be completed with deadlines.

Scholastic Integrity

Academic dishonesty is prohibited and is considered a violation of the UTEP Handbook of Operating Procedures. It includes, but is not limited to, cheating, plagiarism, and collusion. Cheating may involve copying from or providing information to another student, possessing unauthorized materials during a test, or falsifying research data on laboratory reports. Plagiarism occurs when someone intentionally or knowingly represents the words or ideas of another as one’s own. Collusion involves collaborating with another person to commit any academically dishonest act. Any act of academic dishonesty attempted by a UTEP student is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. All suspected violations of academic integrity at The University of Texas at El Paso must be reported to the [Office of Community Standards](#) for possible disciplinary action. To learn more, please visit [HOOP: Student Conduct and Discipline](#).

Accommodations Policy

The University is committed to providing reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Students who become pregnant may also request reasonable accommodations, in accordance with state and federal laws and regulations and University policy. Accommodations that constitute undue hardship are not reasonable. To make a request, please register with the UTEP Center for Accommodations and Support Services (CASS). Contact CASS at 915-747-5148, email them at cass@utep.edu, or apply for accommodations online via the CASS portal.

Netiquette, Respectful Discourse, and Controversial Subjects

This course includes topics that could be considered controversial or contested. When discussing these topics, we are expected to adhere to our community standards and observe some additional practices:

- Respect and courtesy must be provided to classmates and to the instructor at all times. Personal attacks, harassment, intimidation, disruptive behavior, or actions that interfere with the learning of others are inconsistent with the expectations of this course and the broader UTEP community. **No harassment or inappropriate postings will be tolerated.**
- Blackboard is not a public internet venue; all postings to it should be considered private and confidential. Whatever is posted on these online spaces is intended for classmates and professor only. Please do not copy documents and paste them to a publicly accessible website, blog, or other space.

- Differences of opinion are a normal and valuable part of higher education. You are not expected to agree with one another or with the assigned readings. When expressing your disagreement, remember to:
 - **Engage Ideas, Not Individuals:** Critique arguments, assumptions, interpretations, and evidence rather than people.
 - **Use Evidence and Reasoning:** Support claims with appropriate evidence, course materials, scholarship, data, or other credible sources whenever possible.
 - **Listen to Understand:** Approach differing viewpoints with curiosity and a willingness to understand the reasoning behind another person's perspective.
 - **Recognize Complexity:** Many issues do not have simple answers. Students are encouraged to consider competing explanations, identify assumptions, and examine their own thinking.
 - **Practice Intellectual Humility:** Be open to revising a position when new evidence, perspectives, or insights emerge.
 - **Demonstrate Respect:** Disagreement is appropriate in an academic setting. Personal attacks, ridicule, intimidation, harassment, or dismissive behavior are not.

Course Schedule (may be changed with due notice)

Week 1 (Aug 24 – Aug 30): Introduction to the Course

- Required Readings:
 1. SYLLABUS

Week 2 (Aug 31 – Sept 6): What is Society? What is Social Philosophy?

- Required Readings:
 1. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, Ch.1: The Promise
 2. Georg Simmel, “The Problem of Sociology”

Week 3 (Sept 7 – Sept 13): Who Constitutes Society?

- Required Readings:
 1. Mill, *On Liberty* (selections)
 2. Charles Taylor, “Atomism”

Unit I: Social Contract Theories

Week 4 (Sept 14 – Sept 20): Hobbes

- Required Readings:
 1. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (selections)

Week 5 (Sept 21- Sept 27): Locke

- Required Readings:
 1. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (selections)

Week 6 (Sept 28 – Oct 4): Forms of Anarchism

- Required Readings:
 1. Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism* (selections)
 2. Emma Goldman, “Anarchism: What It Really Stands For”

Unit II: Inequality, Hierarchy, and Justice

Week 7 (Oct 5 – Oct 11): The Origin of Inequality

- Required Readings:
 1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* (selections)
 2. Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (selections)

First Paper due on Friday, Oct 9th, 11:59pm MT

Week 8 (Oct 12 – Oct 18): Why Equality?

- Required Readings:
 1. G.A. Cohen, *Why Not Socialism?*

Week 9 (Oct 19 – Oct 25): May there be Justified Hierarchy and Inequality?

- Required Readings:
 1. Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore, “Some Principles of Stratification”
 2. Confucius, *The Analects* (selections)
 3. Mengzi/Mencius, *Mengzi* (selections)
 4. Plato, *Republic* (selections)

Week 10 (Oct 26 – Nov 1): Liberty and Justice

- Required Readings:
 1. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (selections)

Week 11 (Nov 2 – Nov 8): Rawls’ Theory of Justice

- Required Readings:
 1. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (selections)

Week 12 (Nov 9 – Nov 15): Justice and Oppression

- Required Readings:
 1. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (selections)
 2. Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

Second Paper due on Friday, Nov 20th, 11:59pm MT

Unit 3: Technology and Society

Week 13 (Nov 16 – Nov 22): Social Media

- Required Readings:
 1. C. Thi Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles”
 2. C. Thi Nguyen, “How Twitter Gamifies Communication”

Week 14 & 15 (Nov 23 – Dec 4): Artificial Intelligence

(Note: Weeks 14 and 15 count as one week and thus requires only one reading reflection and one homework assignment. The reading reflection is due on Wednesday, Dec 2nd, and the homework is due on Sunday, Dec 6th.)

- Required Readings:
 1. Marc Andreessen, “Why AI Will Save the World” <https://a16z.com/ai-will-save-the-world/>
 2. Dario Amodei, “Machines of Loving Grace” <https://darioamodei.com/essay/machines-of-loving-grace#4-peace-and-governance>
 3. Weidinger et al. “Ethical and social risks of harm from Language Models” (Parts 1 and 2) <https://arxiv.org/abs/2112.04359>

Third Paper due on Friday, Dec 11th, 11:59pm MT