

PHIL 431: Topics in Social/Political Philosophy

Topic: Solidarity and Complicity

Overview:

This course will focus on two distinct but related topics in social/political philosophy: the nature, significance and role of solidarity in society and politics; and the problem of complicity, which we may say involves acting for purposes that are benign or laudable but doing so in league with others whose larger interests are at odds with one's own, and possibly quite bad. Both concepts are difficult and deserve sustained attention, but the combination of them shows some deeper tensions in how to think about the pros and cons of acting collectively.

Solidarity is frequently advocated as a desirable or even noble quality for people to demonstrate, as people acting in concert are much more capable of achieving goals than individuals acting without organization or common purpose. And solidarity seems to require a commitment to one's fellow members of society that regards them with respect and concern. But solidarity can itself be put to bad ends (such as a Mafia's code of *omerta*) and enforced in ways that impose constraints on individuals who may not endorse the goals for which solidarity is demanded. Moreover, the basis of a group's solidarity may itself be exclusionary (say, based in racial or gendered criteria), such that solidarity among some implies differentiation from others with whom one may want to make common cause.

Complicity (and related concepts such as *appeasement*) is typically regarded as an ethical fault, amounting to acquiescence to the bad actions of others for reasons that are morally less weighty than the value of standing in opposition to those actions. But the problem of complicity raises a number of puzzles: How much responsibility must one take for the bad actions of others? How much does one need to know about another person before one can morally engage in cooperative action with them? When can or should one act in concert with another while rejecting some of their views or goals?

Issues around complicity interact with solidarity in at least those situations where different groups oppose each other on some issues but have reasons to cooperate or act in solidarity in others. To what extent is solidarity possible—ethically and practically—among people and groups who share some goals but have significant disagreements on other issues? This course will attempt to develop the tools to answer this and related questions.

Format/Expectations for synchronous/asynchronous participation:

This course will be taught entirely online, as is the case for all UBC courses taught in Winter 2020-21 Term 1. My expectation, subject to development and refinement with the students enrolled in the course, is that the content of the course will be delivered in the following ways:

1. I will produce an online lecture early in each week (either in a single video or several shorter ones), with some overview of the content of the week's readings, and guidance regarding other things that students will be expected to do for that week. This will be available most likely on Mondays, in advance of the course meeting time which is Tuesday from 2-5. I expect such recorded content to take between 30-60 minutes for students to view.

2. During the scheduled meeting time (somewhere between 2-5 p.m. on Tuesdays), students will be expected to participate in a discussion section, perhaps every week, perhaps every other week, that will last 30-90 minutes, depending on the topic and week. Most likely, I will try to break the class into 2 or 3 different discussion sections to meet for roughly an hour each during the 2-5 time block on Tuesdays. I may be present for some of these discussions, but not necessarily for all. I will aim to provide some discussion questions/guidance for these sections, either as part of my lectures or as a separate communication.

For students who are living in time zones for which it is not feasible to appear in real time during the 2-5 Tuesday block of time, I will endeavor to schedule alternative student discussion group times that allow those in that group to meet simultaneously at a different time, either once a week or perhaps every other week.

3. Students will be expected to meet and work less formally in smaller groups of peers (probably groups of 2 or 3) at various times over the semester to develop presentations to be recorded or written, and shared with other students in the seminar, as supplements to or in place of lectures by me over the readings from the course, or as prompts to the discussion sections mentioned above. I anticipate that each student may be tasked with developing such group presentations between 2-3 times over the term, depending on enrollment and logistics. These presentations may be 10-20 minutes in length, and students will be expected to watch one such presentation by other groups of students most weeks of the term. Organizing such meetings to prepare presentations will be done by the students at times when all are able to participate.
4. Students will also be asked to contribute to online discussion boards on an occasional basis. Such contributions will count toward the participation part of their course mark.
5. I will be available for video/voice consultations during scheduled office hours as well as by appointment.