

PHIL 531: Seminar in Political Philosophy

Winter 2024-25, T1 (Wednesdays 6:00-9:00 p.m., SFU Harbour Centre)

Topic: Coercion in political philosophy

Instructor: Scott Anderson

Office hours: Thursdays, 1-3, and by appointment; Buch. E373.

Email: scott.anderson@ubc.ca

Zoom: 643 516 1769, password 2354466

Phone (cell) 778-235-4466

Throughout the history of modern Western political philosophy, coercion has been regarded as a fundamental factor in thinking about the organization of the state, its justification, justice, and limits. The concept of coercion also features prominently in ethics and the philosophy of law and of action, thus providing theoretical linkages among these topics. However, philosophers did not start sustained efforts at analyzing the concept of coercion until the 1960s, at which time thinkers such as J. R. Lucas, Robert Nozick, and Harry Frankfurt took up the topic, generating a sizable literature on the subject. This course looks at coercion in political philosophy (and ethics and action theory) to help students understand a key element in politics, as well as the current state of debates in this area. Notably, Rawls and most commentators on Rawls have had little to say about how to understand coercion, creating something of a gap between the dominant approach to political philosophy in the last 50 years and philosophical work on coercion. By contrast, "civic republicanism" has re-energized interest in this topic within political philosophy. This course will try to make sense of some of this recent history, some strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to thinking about coercion, and give significant attention to methodology in political philosophy, especially around the analysis of concepts like coercion, power, freedom, and domination. We will also read some writing by the instructor (in draft) that is part of a book he's writing on the subject.

From the start I want to emphasize that the concept "coercion," as the subject of our seminar, has two distinct but related roles. On the one hand, it refers to a range of *activities* that are picked out by the concept "coercion" (or "coercive" and other cognates). Activities typically thought to count as coercion are generally useful means for committing all sorts of aggressive, wrongful acts, such as robbery, extortion, kidnapping, or sexual assault, but are also useful means for achieving some laudable ends, such as preventing or deterring these wrongful acts, collecting taxes, enforcing contracts, and curbing imprudence. As such, these activities are generally agreed to play an important role in the structuring of political societies and the justification and limitation of the state, and also amount to a kind of interpersonal activity that is ethically very significant. On the other hand, "coercion" names a *concept in relationship with other concepts* that appear in various combinations in claims about politics, ethics, and action. Some of these other key concepts include freedom, rights, justice, law, privacy, responsibility, and agency (each of which also plays the sort of dual role I've described). Some of the claims in which the concept of coercion appears include that being coerced decreases an individual's freedom, that states ought to exercise a monopoly on the authorization to use coercion, and that being coerced diminishes one's responsibility for coerced actions. These claims are not taken as axioms, but are to be judged and defended or rejected by whether some collection of such claims, using these key concepts without ambiguity, individually reflect our lived experiences and collectively constitute an appealing theory about political philosophy and related areas such as ethics and action theory. Such a theory defines structures which people and institutions rely on

in their decisions and functions, sets out what rights and duties a society's members and officials have, and more generally provides the ontological elements that make up a community's shared political life. While coercion is not singularly important or basic among concepts in this area, it is one of the most important and basic concepts, and is perhaps better suited for us to get a grip on than many of the other more abstract concepts. Hence it makes a good entry point into this broader set of discussions.

Studying the philosophical treatments of coercion also provides a number of useful lessons in better and worse ways of doing political philosophy, and demonstrates the limitations of certain approaches. Of course your view on what is more and less fruitful here may differ from mine, and I welcome the possibility of thoughtful disagreement in this area. I do, however, urge everyone in the seminar to pay close attention to the methodological choices that underpin work in this area, and to consider whether an understanding of coercion that appears attractive for some purposes, or with respect to some prior views, squares with the full range of accepted claims in which the concept figures.

Coercion may be rightly regarded as related to power, though *power* is itself a difficult and much disputed concept. While we will not have time to give *power* detailed consideration in its own right, some of our discussion will invoke this concept, and we'll give some attention to the difficulties that it presents. Still it is useful to place coercion in the broader context of the family of forms of social power as part of a broader project of theorizing the workings of societies and social groups, and thereby also to be able to calibrate the relative importance of each of these different concepts to political philosophy.

Depending on student interests, we may adapt later parts of the syllabus to cover topics of special interest to students. I will also be presenting drafts of some writing I have done on coercion that is intended to be part of a book on the topic.

Format, expectations

This is a course aimed at graduate students in philosophy who have some interest in political philosophy, social philosophy, action theory, ethics, or the philosophy of social science. (One of the interesting aspects of coercion is that it interacts with so many different elements of philosophy.) Students from outside philosophy will likely find this hard going, though with some background in political philosophy and ethics you will likely manage, though the relevance of some of the considerations motivating this course may remain obscure.

The course will involve a great deal of student participation in discussions, including some leading of discussion as well as preparing material useful for guiding us in advance of those discussions. Students are also encouraged to participate in the online discussion forum on Canvas, and to bring suggestions for topics and readings to me, as there is some room for flexibility in the course schedule, especially in the later weeks of the term. For these reasons, active participation and regular attendance are expected.

Grading:

Student marks for the course will be determined on the following basis:

Attendance, participation, discussion leading: 25%

One short writing assignment (c. 1000 words): 10%

Paper proposal, in advance of the final paper: 5%

Final paper (15-18 pp., 5000-6000 words): 60%

Preliminary, tentative schedule (with much to be determined)

Our schedule of readings will be kept on Canvas; please consult it regularly for updates and for links to the readings. Also, suggested readings that are recommended by not required are also to be found there, as well as some further resources that may be useful for guidance with respect to your papers and additional areas of research we won't be able to get to as a group. Changes are anticipated, and suggestions are welcome.

Week; Topic (readings)

Week/Date	Main readings	Suggested Readings
1 – Sept. 4	Discussion of philosophical method in political philosophy; short excerpts of classics in Western political philosophy (Hobbes, Locke, Kant)	List/Valentini
2 – Sept. 11	Traditional views of coercion, the state, and liberalism (Shklar, Anscombe)	
3 – Sept. 18	Early analysis of coercion (Lucas, Nozick)	
4 – Sept. 25	Coercion and the will (Frankfurt, Feinberg)	Murray and Dudrick
5 – Oct. 2	Normative implications of coercion (Pallikkathayil, Garnett)	Berman
6 – Oct. 9	Reorienting thought about coercion (Anderson)	
7 – Oct. 16	Coercion and the state 1 (Blake, Abizadeh)	
8 – Oct. 23	Coercion and the state 2 (Ripstein, Sangiovanni)	Olsaretti
9 – Oct. 30	Rawls, republicanism, and coercion (McCammon, TBA)	
10 – Nov. 6	Methodology 1: Moralized vs. non-moralized accounts (Wertheimer, Zimmerman)	Edmundson
11 – Nov. 20	Methodology 2: Arguing up from “cases” (Anderson)	
12 – Nov. 27	New work on coercion (Anderson)	
13 – Dec. 4	New work on coercion (Anderson and/or TBA)	

The UBC-V Senate Policy V-130 mandates the inclusion of the following paragraph on course syllabuses:

UBC provides resources to support student learning and to maintain healthy lifestyles but recognizes that sometimes crises arise and so there are additional resources to access including those for survivors of sexual violence. UBC values respect for the person and ideas of all members of the academic community. Harassment and discrimination are not tolerated nor is suppression of academic freedom. UBC provides appropriate accommodation for students with disabilities and for religious and cultural observances. UBC values academic honesty and students are expected to acknowledge the ideas generated by others and to uphold the highest academic standards in all of their actions. Details of the policies and how to access support are available here (<https://senate.ubc.ca/policiesresources-support-student-success>)

Your instructor takes seriously the importance of making sure all students are given equal and full opportunities to participate and learn. The University accommodates students with

disabilities who have registered with the Disability Resource Centre. The University accommodates students whose religious obligations conflict with attendance, submitting assignments, or completing scheduled tests and examinations. Please let me know as soon as possible, preferably in the first week of class, if you will require any accommodation on these grounds. Students who plan to be absent for varsity athletics, family obligations, or other similar commitments, cannot assume they will be accommodated, and should discuss their commitments with me before the drop date.

If you require any particular arrangements in the classroom to facilitate your participation or learning, please let me know, and I will do what I can to make things suitable for you.

If you encounter serious health or personal difficulties during the term, please let me know of these at your earliest opportunity. There are lots of things more important in life than this class, and when one of those things goes wrong, this class should not add to the burdens you may then confront. Within reason, I will do what I can to work around any genuine, serious difficulties you may confront, but it will be helpful to know of them as soon as you are able to notify me.