

Loren E. Lomasky  
Office: 527 Cabell  
Office Phone: 434-924-6925  
lel3f@virginia.edu

PPL 399, Philosophical Perspectives on Liberty  
M, W 6 - 7:15, Cabell  
Spring 2007

## SYLLABUS

### I. Required Texts

Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*  
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Basic Political Writings*  
Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*  
John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*  
Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State & Utopia*

### II. Scope and Goals of the Course

Patrick Henry, the great orator of revolutionary Virginia (and *bête noir* of Mr. Jefferson) demanded, “Give me liberty or give me death!” Did he get his wish? Abraham Lincoln apparently believed so, because he declared at Gettysburg that the United States was conceived in liberty. More recently, an unsuccessful but very impressive presidential candidate declared, “Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice.” For Americans, then, there is no value more central to our identity than liberty.

Without wishing any disrespect either to Henry, Lincoln, or Goldwater, we might wish that they had supplied us with a bit more conceptual specification. What is *liberty*? Is it just being left alone by others? Or is it a capacity to achieve valuable ends? These do not amount to the same thing. Someone who isn’t interfered with by others may nonetheless lack other requisites for leading a satisfying, meaningful life: money, health, power, etc. Suppose further that one is able to secure her desired ends, but that upbringing and environment have conditioned her such that she is psychologically incapable of formulating aspirations that express her own individuality. Might we say that whatever the circumstances of her external conditions, she resides in an internal straitjacket that deprives her of liberty? Theorists sometimes attempt to address these questions by distinguishing between *negative liberty* and *positive liberty*, but it’s not obvious that the distinction relieves more puzzles than it exacerbates.

Beyond the problem of stating what liberty is, there are additional important ones involving its place within morality and politics. What sort of government best promotes a society of free individuals? Is the ideal of liberty incompatible with other ideals such as *equality* and *well-being*? Are some species of liberties categorically more important than

others: for example, freedom of speech or religion as opposed to a freedom to buy and sell? And so on.

PPL 399 will examine these and related questions, not in the abstract but as they emerge in the writings of five prominent social theorists of the modern era: Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Ayn Rand, John Rawls, Robert Nozick. We won't be combing through their writings only to find explicit mentions of liberty but will read widely with an eye to how issues of liberty fit into their overall conceptions. A significant emphasis of the course will be counterposing these theories one against others so as to be able to form intelligent judgments concerning which are the better arguments and which less compelling. The overall goals of the course are, then, to make (or renew) an acquaintance with a handful of the most interesting social thinkers who ever lived and to piggyback on their insights to acquire for ourselves a better understanding of the nature and value of liberty.

### III. Format of the Course

1. *Readings; Classroom work.* These are *terrific* books! Ideally, we would read them in the entirety. However, they are also long and complicated books, so the ideal isn't practical. We will, therefore, be selective, reading salient chunks rather than entire works. The exception is actually the biggest book of all, Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Is it respectable to expect students to read a volume of more than a thousand pages? Yes, if it's a novel. Besides, I'm betting that once you get into it you'll find it hard to put down. And with the fortunate timing of the Spring semester, you'll be able to turn pages while lying on the beach of Cancun (or maybe your bed). The reading schedule is given below in IV.

Let me give you fair warning: you will almost certainly find some of the material difficult to understand, at least on first encounter. Although I don't expect you to sail through these readings effortlessly, I do expect you to give them your best shot. That includes your having carefully read assigned material *in advance of the class in which it will be discussed*, and also your willingness to *reread* sections that initially prove elusive. Our job in class will be to work together to understand the problems addressed by these philosophers. I think of this as being very much a joint enterprise. My role is one of exploring with you points of special interest, helping to clarify complexities, raising questions implied by the material. Correlatively, your responsibilities are to read and think conscientiously about all texts and to be prepared to tell me what you find perplexing or challenging or worthy of deeper pursuit. Within that context, we shall strive for a maximum of discussion. Personally, I can think of nothing duller than a class in which one person (me) does all the talking. I hope you agree. Although I don't grade on the basis of classroom participation as such, contributions to the flow of the course will be duly kept in mind as I assign course grades. To state the obvious, if you are not present for a class, you are not carrying your weight. If a grade is otherwise borderline, this is what will tip the balance.

2. *Tests.* A midterm and final exam will be given. The former will count for approximately 25% of your course grade and the latter approximately 40%. Each test will involve some form of essay questions. A warning: Only under the most exigent circumstances can I be persuaded to give a makeup exam for one that has been missed, and then only if I have been informed in advance concerning the reason for your absence. Moreover, when I do give a makeup, it's more, ahem, "challenging" than the original. The moral? Don't miss either test! Because I do not yet know our full visiting speaker schedule, I am not yet able to select a day for the midterm. It will be announced well in advance
3. *Papers.* I shall ask you at irregular intervals to write short (4-7 pages) papers in response to particular questions I'll toss your way. You are required to write any 2 of them, and you may submit 3, with the 2 best counting toward your course grade. Thus, if one (or perhaps two) of the assignment topics or times doesn't suit you, then you should feel free to skip it. There will be at least 4 papers assigned. These may either address the writings of one of our five theorists or involve comparison between two or more. Unless you have received explicit permission to the contrary, all submissions must be hard copy. Please retain the disk file just in case something goes awry. Cumulatively, they will determine the final 1/3 of your PPL 399 grade.

All paper assignments will involve working through some problem suggested by the assigned readings. Although you are entirely at liberty to consult any sources written or human that you think might help you write a better paper, it is imperative that any borrowings of ideas or language be credited via a citation. You may use whatever style of footnote or endnote you please just so long as full attribution information is provided. Failures to do so, even if not malicious, risk putting you on the wrong side of the plagiarism divide. That is definitely not a place you want to be.

Paper grades will be based on "content" rather than style or grammatical correctness (although it should be noted that your ability to express yourself accurately in written English prose very definitely affects the content as it appears to your reader). However, any paper that comes to me with more than a very few errors in spelling, grammar, etc. will either be rejected as failing to meet minimal standards of acceptability or, if I'm feeling especially generous, handed back to you for revision and resubmission. This means that you ought to proofread carefully anything you will be submitting to me. I very much care about the quality of your writing - and so should you! One final caution: *Late papers will not be accepted.* Thus, if for some reason you must miss a class, it's a good idea to check and see if there has been an assignment.

4. *Guest speakers.* During the semester we will host distinguished visiting scholars. Although the schedule is not yet set in stone, there will probably be one for each of the five philosophers. These are world-class experts; we are exceedingly fortunate to have them joining us. Please make every possible effort to (i) attend the classes in which they appear; (ii) bring to these sessions your best questions and reflections.

#### IV. Readings

I'm not able to predict our precise pace for the next 15 weeks. That's especially so for a course that has never been taught before. So consider this schedule tentative. If there are any significant changes, they will be announced in advance. Otherwise, please gauge your reading so as to be at least one unit ahead of where we left off last time. You are, of course, free to read sections omitted from the syllabus.

##### WEEK 1

Jan. 22 *WN*, Introduction and Plan of the Work, pp. 10-12  
Jan. 24 *WN*, Bk I, Chaps. 1-4, pp. 13-46

##### WEEK 2

Jan. 29 *WN*, Bk I, Chaps. 5-8, pp. 49-104; Chap. 10, pp. 116-126  
Jan. 31 *WN*, Bk II, Chap 3, pp. 330-349; Bk III, Chaps 1-3, pp. 376-411

##### WEEK 3

Feb. 5 *WN*, Bk IV, Chaps 2-3, pp. 452-498; Bk V, Chap 1, pp. 698-727  
Feb. 7 *WN*, Bk V, Chap 1, pp. 758-816

##### WEEK 4

Feb. 12 *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, pp. 33-60  
Feb. 14 *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*. pp. 60-81

##### WEEK 5

Feb. 19 *Discourse on Political Economy*, pp. 111-138  
Feb. 21 *Social Contract*, Bks I, II pp. 141-172

##### WEEK 6

Feb. 26 *Social Contract*, Bk III, pp. 173-203  
Feb. 28 *Social Contract*, Bk IV, pp. 203-227

##### WEEK 7

March 5 - 9 SPRING BREAK: NO CLASS THIS WEEK!  
Use this week to read as much of *Atlas Shrugged* as you can

##### WEEK 8

March 12 *Atlas Shrugged*, roughly first 400 pages  
March 14 “

##### WEEK 9

March 19 *Atlas Shrugged*, roughly middle third of the book  
March 21 “

**WEEK 10**

March 26

*Atlas Shrugged*, conclusion

March 28

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**WEEK 11**

April 2

*TJ*, Chap 1, Secs. 1-6, pp. 3-33

April 4

*TJ*, Chap II, Secs. 10-15, pp. 54-95**WEEK 12**

April 9

*TJ*, Chap III, Secs. 20-22, pp. 118-130

April 11

*TJ*, Chap III, Secs 24-28, pp. 136-175**WEEK 13**

April 16

*TJ*, Chap IV, Secs. 31-35, pp. 195-221

April 18

*AS&U*, Preface, pp. ix-xiv; Chaps 1-2; pp. 3-25**WEEK 14**

April 23

*AS&U*, Chap 3, pp. 26-53

April 25

*AS&U*, Chap 7, Sec I, pp.149-182**WEEK 15**

April 30

*AS&U*, pp. 183-231

FINAL EXAM: TBA