

*Social & Political Philosophy*  
Philosophy 320  
Fall 2019  
*Term Paper Assignment*  
Due: Monday, December 16

Write an 6-10 page (double-spaced) paper in which you reflect on the relevance to current events on any topic covered in this course. A good paper will be well written, have a sound exposition of at least one of the texts considered in this course, and some decent reflection about the issues raised in the text.

### **Sample Paper Topics**

#### *Is the President Above the Law?*

The impeachment of President Donald Trump has raised the question of whether the President is above the law. In framing the Constitution the founding fathers were concerned with the problem of how to give the President enough power to be the chief executive without thereby making the President a king. In a recent case federal Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson stated that “Presidents are not kings” in her ruling that former White House counsel Donald McGahn must comply with a House Judiciary Committee subpoena for his testimony as part of the impeachment probe. The President’s lawyers have tried to argue that the President is immune from prosecution while he is in office and that he has the right to prevent his counsel, and anyone in his administration, from responding to a Congressional subpoena in the impeachment hearings. How does this issue bring up the fundamental difference between the notion of the social contract in the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke? What is at stake in the impeachment of President Trump? Should the President be above the law?

#### *War Crimes and the Ethics of War and Peace*

President Donald Trump ignored Pentagon advice in recently issuing pardons for two servicemen and restoring the rank of a third after the three servicemen were accused of war crimes. Military law experts warn that this decision by the President will make it harder to prosecute future war crimes. UN officials have criticized the President’s actions as a violation of international law. How does this issue raise the philosophical problem in the ethics of war and peace concerning the justice of war? Is it naïve to consider the justice of war as war realists claim, or is it important that our country accept the principles of just war theory?

#### *The Challenge of Peace*

Does it make sense to consider whether or not wars can be considered just or unjust, or is it the case that wars are only won or lost and not properly classified as just or unjust? If there is such a thing as a just war, what are the principles by which it is justified? What are the conditions that Kant sets out through which the nations of the world can live in perpetual peace? How did President Kennedy argue for a “strategy of peace” in his famous speech at American University in the summer of 1963? To what extent do you think genuine peace is really achievable today?

#### *Gun Control and Violence in America*

How does the debate about gun control laws reflect the difference between the notion of the social contract in Locke and Rousseau? What are contrasting interpretations of the 2nd Amendment? Are laws restricting some individual liberties for the common good of society ever justified?

#### *Capital Punishment*

Is the death penalty justified? How does former New York mayor Edward Koch justify capital punishment and how does attorney David Bruck respond to Koch’s argument? Why did the governor of Illinois George Ryan commute all the death penalty sentences in his state? To what extent would you agree with Koch or Bruck on this issue?

*Civil Disobedience*

According to Henry David Thoreau in his essay "On the Duty of Civil Disobedience, what are the three ways that individuals can serve the state and which of these does he think is the highest form of patriotism? When does Thoreau think that one has an obligation to civil disobedience? According to Thoreau, what are the keys to civil disobedience, how can one break the law and not destroy the state? How does Martin Luther King Jr. connect civil disobedience to Socrates' claim that he is a gift of the gods to the state of Athens? How does King develop Thoreau's theory of civil disobedience? To what extent would you agree with Thoreau and King on the importance of civil disobedience? Can civil disobedience be an effective strategy for advancing social change today?

*Human Rights*

On what basis can human rights be said to be universal? Explain the difference between the early "natural rights" theories found in Locke and Rousseau and the "conventional" account of human rights in Bentham and Mill. With regard to the 1948 *United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights* are the social and economic rights listed in articles 22-29 just as important as the political rights listed in articles 3-21? Can universal human rights be defended from a postmodern position?

*Economic Justice*

Compare Adam Smith and Karl Marx on the role of government in the distribution of wealth. Why did Smith think the division of labor would result in greater wealth? What was Marx's criticism of Smith's argument concerning the division of labor? What did Smith mean by "the invisible hand" that guides a free market to promote the good of society and what did Marx think of this idea? How should the goods of a just society be distributed and what role should government play in this distribution? Should there be limits to the inequities between rich and poor? Should there be private property at all? On what basis is the acquisition of private property justified and what limits should there be on the acquisition of private property?

*The Problem of Climate Change*

Why is there such a strong scientific consensus that the earth is getting warmer and that this global warming is caused by human beings, by the emission of greenhouse gases as a result of our industrial civilization, and that this global warming is dramatically changing the earth's climate, and that this climate change will have devastating consequences in the future? Why does Naomi Klein, in her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs The Climate*, think that free market fundamentalism, the basics of the capitalist economy outlined in Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, is the driving force behind climate change? Is it possible to meet the challenge posed by climate change without challenging the current global economic system?

*Mauna Kea*

Why is there a controversy regarding the proposed Thirty Meter Telescope on the summit of Mauna Kea? What is the philosophical code of conduct called *Kapu Aloha* that has been expressed through the direct action of the Kia'i (protectors) of Mauna Kea? What aspects of this code of conduct resonates with the theory of civil disobedience developed by Henry David Thoreau and Martin Luther King Jr.? To what extent has this direct action to protect Mauna Kea been an appropriate use of civil disobedience?