

PL340. Freedom and Slavery in Western Philosophy

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Office Hours by appointment

Course Description

Freedom is one of the core concepts of modern political thought. This course will focus on seminal conceptions of freedom in European philosophy from the 17th to the 19th centuries that continue to shape our thinking today. But we will look at these conceptions through the lens of the supposed opposite of freedom: slavery.

Philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Mill, Marx, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche defined freedom in contrast to slavery. Strikingly, though, they rarely – if ever – paid any attention to the real-life slavery in the Americas, a system they were at least indirectly complicit in. Instead, they drew their examples from Greek and Roman antiquity and the Bible or operated with abstract ideas of slavery. Taking this disturbing observation as a starting point, we will discuss if and to what extent the classical western concepts of freedom can still provide answers to big questions such as: What is freedom? Are there different kinds of freedom? How do we gain freedom? For one person to be free, must another person be un-free? Where, when, and how can we be truly free? We will proceed in three steps: first, we will look at some pre-modern origins of modern concepts of freedom in the Hebrew and Greek Bible and ancient Greek philosophy. Second, we will discuss the aforementioned classical positions. And third, we will confront them with perspectives from (formerly) enslaved people.

Course Readings

All course readings will be provided as pdf files. You are expected to print the texts and come to class with paper copies.

Please note that the schedule and the readings are subject to change. All changes will be communicated in class and via email.

Requirements

Class preparation: Preparing for class means reading thoughtfully and engaging with the texts, for instance, by thinking through the argument of a particular section and taking notes while reading. The readings for this course will be difficult and challenging. You should give yourself enough time to read them more than once. You will be expected to regularly submit short written comments or questions about the readings. Details about this will be communicated in the first session.

Attendance and participation: Regular attendance and active participation are essential to the success of this course. Therefore, attendance at all sessions and participation in all discussions is expected. Missing more than two 90-minute sessions will significantly affect the participation grade. Missing more

than 30% (more than 8 sessions) would mean failing the course. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Assignments: Students are required to complete the following assignments for this course: A midterm essay (about 2000 words, due Oct. 27) , and a final essay (about 4000 words, due Dec. 22).

Grade Breakdown:

Class participation: 40%

Written comments on readings: 10%

Midterm essay: 20%

Final essay: 30%

Policy on Late Submission of Papers: Please note the following policy from the Student Handbook on the submission of essays: essays that are up to 24 hours late can be downgraded one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. Where an instructor agrees to accept a late essay, it must be submitted by the agreed deadline. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.

Academic Integrity: Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Schedule*

Tuesday, Sept. 5	Introduction Susan Buck-Morss: "Hegel and Haiti" (2000)
Thursday, Sept. 7 & Tuesday, Sept. 12	Isaiah Berlin: "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1959)
Thursday, Sept. 14	Freedom & Slavery in the Hebrew Bible
Tuesday, Sept. 19 & Thursday, Sept 21	Aristotle, <i>Politics</i>
Tuesday, Sept. 26	Freedom & Slavery in the New Testament
Thursday, Sept. 28 & Thursday, Oct. 5	Thomas Hobbes: <i>Leviathan</i> (1651) [No class on Tuesday, Oct. 3!]
Tuesday, Oct. 10	John Locke: <i>Two Treatises of Government</i> (1689)
Thursday, Oct. 12 & Tuesday, Oct. 17	Jean-Jacques Rousseau: <i>On the Social Contract</i> (1762)

Thursday, Oct. 19 Immanuel Kant: “Answering the Question: What Is Enlightenment?”
(1784)

FALL BREAK

Midterm essay due on Friday, Oct. 27

Tuesday, Oct. 31 Immanuel Kant: *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797)

Thursday, Nov. 2 G.W.F. Hegel: *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807)

Tuesday, Nov. 7 John Stuart Mill: *On Liberty* (1859)

Thursday, Nov. 9 &
Tuesday, Nov. 14 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867)
Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels: “Manifesto of the Communist Party” (1848)

Thursday, Nov. 16 &
Tuesday, Nov. 21 Søren Kierkegaard, texts tbd

Thursday, Nov. 23 &
Tuesday, Nov. 28 Friedrich Nietzsche: *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887)

Thursday, Nov. 30 &
Tuesday, Dec. 5 C.L.R. James: *The Black Jacobins* (1938)

Thursday, Dec. 7 Frederick Douglass: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845)

Tuesday, Dec. 12 Angela Davis: *Lectures on Liberation* (1971)

Thursday, Dec. 14 Final Discussion

Final essay due on Friday, Dec. 22

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