Social and Political Philosophy, 01:730:445 and 16:730: 583 (Fall 2015)

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Course Description

This seminar will focus on the topic of democracy: What is it and what justifies its adoption (in preference to other political systems)? Defining “democracy” or “democratic” is a delicate business. It is commonly associated with political equality and majority rule. But what kind of equality is pertinent here: Equality of interest-satisfaction? Equality of respect? Equality of power? Is there really equality of power in any democracy, especially in a representative (as opposed to a direct) democracy? Questions can similarly be raised whether democracy requires majoritarian rule. A procedure has been identified that is, arguably, democratic and egalitarian but not majoritarian. We shall pursue the question of what constitutes democracy, and (if time allows) consider how it is related to liberalism. Then we shall proceed to the question: What justifies a preference for democracy over competing systems? What makes democracy (uniquely?) legitimate or authoritative, in the sense that it (morally?) merits its citizens’ obedience? A variety of answers to these questions have been advanced. Some argue that democratic procedure is intrinsically fair, or just. Others argue that it’s the system most conducive to the production of good outcomes, or substantively just outcomes. Still others argue that it has valuable by-products. A recent trend in democratic theory is the “epistemic” approach, which holds that democracy is superior to its alternatives in being more “intelligent,” that is, in leading to correct choices or optimal policies. One strand of the epistemic approach emphasizes the truth-getting powers of majoritarian procedure (as ostensibly supported by Condorcet’s jury theorem). A second strand emphasizes collective deliberation. Can any of these epistemic approaches be sustained? If not, what can and should be said on democracy’s behalf, in either moral or prudential terms? Finally, we shall discuss what kinds of institutions or practices can enhance (or impair) a system’s democraticness.