

HARD CHOICES IN POLITICAL LIFE

The course will consider a series of cases in which political and military leaders and engaged citizens (revolutionaries, too) have to decide what to do in a crisis, or which side to support in a political dispute or a war, or how to maneuver when worthy causes come into conflict. We will begin with the problem of “dirty hands”: students considering this course might take a look at Sartre’s play by that name. The cases will range widely: from international to domestic politics; from questions about judicial activism to arguments about when to compromise in a political struggle for a good cause; from risk-taking in battle to tracking in schools. In every case, we will try to imagine ourselves in the shoes of the agents, the activists, the people who have to decide what to do and who aren’t deciding only for themselves. They are acting in the name of and on behalf of other people: that’s what makes the decisions hard.

There will be six sessions and eleven cases, each case introduced in a half-hour lecture and discussed for the same amount of time. None of the cases will be strange or esoteric; they will feature well-known dilemmas, which are, nonetheless, very difficult to decide. The point of our discussions won’t be to arrive at the one right decision, but to learn something about the difficulty. There is no required reading, although I may occasionally suggest a relevant article or book.

Tentative Schedule:

Session One: Introduction:

- The problem of dirty hands

Session Two: Risk-taking in battle:

- The use of drones

Session Three: Judicial activism/restraint:

- Enforcing gender equality

Session Four: Public funding of private schools:

- Tracking in schools

Session Five: Majority rights: What limits?

- Minority rights—and duties?

Session Six: Legitimate and “rotten” compromises:

- Political participation: is there a “right to be lazy”?

LEADER: Michael Walzer is a retired Professor of social science at the Institute for Advanced Study.

FORMAT: In-person

MAXIMUM: 25

TUESDAYS 10:00 a.m. to noon 6 sessions starting October 11th through November 15th