THE ETHICS OF GOVERNMENT PROPAGANDA

Instructor: Simon Rippon, Assistant Professor
Department: Philosophy (cross-listed with SPP, Political Science)
Semester: Winter, 2014-15
Course Level: MA and PhD elective
Number of credits: 2
Pre-requisites: A course in ethics or political philosophy
Time and location: Mondays 1:30-3:10, location TBA
Course e-learning site: http://ceulearning.ceu.hu/course/view.php?id=3308
Office hours: Please see http://goo.gl/B4uhbA

Course Description
This course will examine the nature and ethics of government propaganda by reviewing some (purported) examples of propaganda, as well as literature on propaganda and related topics in moral and political philosophy. Government propaganda can be understood loosely as a state-supported strategy of providing partial, distorted or emotionally evocative presentations of information to a population in order to promote attitudes that serve the government's goals. It has had an enormous historical impact, including playing a central role in the wars and genocides of the 20th century. Today, it remains a widely-accepted tool for contemporary governments (including liberal democratic governments); for example in the contexts of war, of public health policies, and of electoral campaigning. Yet it has received remarkably little direct attention from philosophers. Propaganda is morally suspect because it exploits our cognitive biases and may involve lying, thereby undermining our ability to rationally form and revise beliefs and desires as autonomous citizens. It is hard to deny that government propaganda has historically led to great human rights violations. But the central moral question in this course will be: Is government propaganda inherently unethical, or are there legitimate and illegitimate forms of government propaganda (and if so, what distinguishes the two)? The course will be a discussion-based seminar designed for students who have previously completed a class in ethics or political philosophy. Assignments will offer the opportunity to analyze the ethics of a specific contemporary propaganda policy.

Learning outcomes
By the end of the course, students will be able to:
- Identify examples of government propaganda
- Use conceptual analysis to evaluate descriptions of the nature of government propaganda, and give reasons for making distinctions between what is and is not government propaganda
- Use analytic moral reasoning to evaluate the permissibility and value (or disvalue) of various forms of government propaganda
- Express conceptual and moral arguments in writing with concision and clarity
- Logically analyze the ethical implications of particular government propaganda or information policies
Requirements

Regular attendance, carefully completing the assigned readings before class, and active participation in seminar discussions will be expected from all students, whether registered for audit or taking the class for credit. Auditing students may optionally choose to complete the presentation assignment as well.

In addition, for students taking the class for credit there will be the following three assignments:

1) An in-class “show and tell” presentation, no more than about ten minutes in length. Each student will find and present a short example of purported government propaganda to the class, such as a short video, a newspaper article, or a short case study. If the example is written, it should be distributed as a handout readable in under five minutes. The example may be historical or contemporary, but should be identified by the student personally, rather than drawn from the academic literature on communication and propaganda. The presenter should briefly explain the social context of their example, offer an argument for why their example is (or is not) to be identified as government propaganda, and provide a brief assessment of its ethical permissibility. These arguments should as far as possible be related to, and provoke critical engagement with, the academic literature discussed in the course.

2) EITHER:
   A standard 2,000-2,500 word academic final paper on a question about the ethics or nature of government propaganda arising within the context of the course (topic to be determined in consultation with the instructor),
   OR:
   A 2,000-2,500 word advisory report written for a government department, divided into two approximately equal sections: (i) a recommended plan for how a specific real-world message or policy is to be communicated to (a section of) the public, and (ii) a clear but accurate explanation for policymakers why the plan offers the most effective available ethical means for disseminating the message or policy in question.

Final assignments will be due on: 6\textsuperscript{th} April, 2015.

3) A 1-page (maximum) draft outline of the final assignment that clearly presents the thesis or communication plan and the main steps of one’s argument defending it.

The draft outline will be due on: 9\textsuperscript{th} March, 2015.

Assessment

20% presentation and seminar participation; 20% draft outline; 60% final paper. All course requirements must be completed in order to earn a grade for the class.

A “Presentation Score Sheet” listing the evaluation criteria for assessing presentations will be available from the course web site. Presentations will be assessed primarily according to their soundness of arguments, clarity, focus, and helpfulness in understanding the topic, as well as meeting the formal criteria for the
assignment. Participation in the rest of the seminar will count equally with the presentation, and will be graded according to attendance, preparation, attention to others, and quality of contributions in class throughout the term.

Draft outlines for final assignments will be assessed according to the clarity and precision of the thesis and steps of the argument, as well as meeting the formal criteria for the assignment.

**Grading criteria for final assignments**

**Quantity:**
All other things being equal, it is better if the assignment is close to the required length. Writing a good paper using fewer words is more difficult than writing a good paper using more words, and that will be taken into account in the grading. So any additional length will need to be well-justified. In any event, don't go more than 20% over the required length.

**Quality:**
To earn a B+, the written assignment must meet the formal requirements, must clearly and concisely address the selected question, and must be written in clear, professional English. *Insofar as these are relevant,* you must demonstrate a solid understanding of the arguments from readings in the course as well as in-class presentations and discussions. Important principles and concepts should be clearly explained. The views of others should, where necessary, be accurately, charitably, clearly and succinctly reconstructed, and properly cited with a bibliography. The assignment must show that you have analyzed and independently organized the material yourself in response to the question, rather than simply following the organization of in-class presentations or parts of the literature.

To earn an A-, the assignment must demonstrate all the above plus evidence of genuine progress as a result of your own independent thinking, such as your own substantive evaluation and critique of the validity and soundness of the arguments of others, or your own original positive argument. If there are any problems with the exposition or arguments in the assignment, these will be minor. The most obvious objections to your argument (in either a paper or a report) will have been anticipated and answered.

Assignments that earn an A will demonstrate all the above virtues, to the extent that they are nearly flawless in writing style, organization, exposition and soundness of arguments. While remaining entirely relevant to the question, a paper that earns an A will be ambitious in scope and will demonstrate an exceptional degree of understanding and insight into the topic. A report that earns an A will demonstrate an equally high degree of understanding. It need not be as academically insightful and original as an A-grade academic paper, but it will succeed in communicating relevant concepts and arguments in an exceptionally precise, clear and straightforward way for a policy audience.
Some collections and other recommended sources
These are worth consulting in addition to the assigned mandatory and optional readings for each weekly class:

**Guides for philosophical reading and writing**
(for those new to philosophy or unsure about my expectations)

**On philosophy and ethics**

**On propaganda**
COURSE SCHEDULE AND WEEKLY READINGS

Part I: What is government propaganda?

Week 1
Introduction: Propaganda, Rhetoric and Justice
We consider the place of propaganda in public life, and its relation to persuasion, paying particular attention to Plato’s argument that rhetoric is inferior to philosophy. The optional reading is a highly recommended short text providing a classic, simplistic analysis of propaganda in terms of logical fallacies.

Mandatory:
- Plato. *Gorgias*. 447a-481b

Optional:

Week 2
Language and Propaganda
George Orwell’s classic essay on political discourse suggests that it is deeply infected by propaganda, and that propaganda may not be easily identifiable by way of logical fallacies. The optional reading claims that a wholly “instrumentalist” view of political language is influential in today’s Russia.

Mandatory:

Optional:

Week 3
Propaganda as Communication with Special Intent
We put a textbook definition of propaganda given by communications and rhetoric scholars under a philosophical microscope. Are they correct to say that propaganda is defined by its distinctive purpose?

Mandatory:

Week 4
Propaganda as Subverter of Epistemic Value
We examine the relationship between propaganda and the kinds of things epistemologists talk about in philosophy. We will discuss Cunningham’s view that propaganda is to be defined by a cluster of epistemic features.

Mandatory:
Week 5

Bull and Propaganda

Harry Frankfurt’s essay discusses the defining characteristics of bull, the difference between bull and lying, and why there is so much bull. We will examine his discussion to see which features of bull are shared by propaganda.

Mandatory:

Week 6

Special Discussion: TBA

I hope we will be able to have a guest expert in class for a lecture and discussion on aspects of contemporary government propaganda policies.

Part II: Ethics

Week 7

Propaganda as Inherently Unethical

Sometimes propaganda is intentionally conceptualized in a value-neutral way. On other views, the concept of propaganda already explains why it is unethical. We examine Cunningham’s view that propaganda is inherently unethical in virtue of what it is.

Mandatory:

Week 8

Is it Permissible to Deceive?

Immanuel Kant, the most influential deontological moral theorist, claimed that it is never morally permissible to lie—even in extreme circumstances, such as lying to a potential murderer to prevent him discovering a hidden victim. Kant reasoned that this follows from his moral theory, which says that we must never treat another person as a mere means. Some contemporary Kantians deny this: arguing that Kant’s theory does allow for permissible deception under such circumstances. We will discuss this debate, and how it can be applied to the field of government propaganda.

Mandatory:

Week 9

The Ethics of War

Most people think war makes certain acts permissible which would not be permissible in ordinary contexts. We will ask: Is government propaganda one of these, and if so, just what kind of propaganda is permitted, when, and against whom? Both the mandatory and optional readings are primers on the ethics of war and
terrorism that offer an introduction to some of the important concepts and current debates.

Mandatory:

Optional:

***Draft outline of the final assignment due***

**Week 10**
**War and Propaganda**
Continuing the discussion from the previous week, we will discuss how propaganda has been used to wage psychological warfare in recent history, and discuss the ethics of these interventions.

Mandatory:

**Week 11**
**The Ethics of “Nudge”**
A recent burgeoning literature in economics and psychology has highlighted the importance of irrational biases of human beings and their effects on our decisions. Thaler and Sunstein influentially argue that since people will be affected by biases whatever happens, there is no harm in governments engaging in a bit of “choice architecture” or “nudging” – arranging the environment so that people’s biases naturally lead them to do the right thing. We ask: Can this argument legitimate at least some forms of government propaganda?

Mandatory:

Optional:

**Week 12**
**Further Discussion and Wrap-Up**
Reading TBA