THE ETHICS OF GOVERNMENT PROPAGANDA

Instructor: Simon Rippon, Assistant Professor <RipponS@ceu.edu>
Department: SPP (cross-listed with Philosophy; concentration in Political Thought)

Central European University
Course Status: Elective. 2 credits. Winter, 2015-16
Course e-learning site: http://ceulearning.ceu.edu/course/view.php?id=4870
Time and location: Thursdays 9:00-10:40, Zrinyi u. 14, room TBA

Course Description
This course examines the nature and ethics of government propaganda. Government propaganda can be understood loosely as a state-supported strategy of providing partial, distorted or emotionally evocative presentations of information to a mass audience in order to promote attitudes that serve a government’s goals. Propaganda has had an enormous historical impact, including playing a central role in the wars and atrocities 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 and diplomacy, of public health policies, and of electoral campaigning. Yet propaganda is morally suspect because it involves deception, and undermines our rational capacities to form and revise attitudes as of 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. We will review some (purported) examples of historical and contemporary government propaganda, including examples selected by students, as well as weekly selected readings on propaganda and on related topics in moral and political philosophy. Assignments will offer the opportunity to analyze the ethics of a specific contemporary government propaganda policy.

Selected preparatory readings:

• Institute for Propaganda Analysis. “How to Detect Propaganda,” 1937.
• Plato. Gorgias. 447a-481b.

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
• Assess the ethical implications of particular government propaganda or information policies
• Clearly express conceptual and moral arguments either orally or in writing

Requirements
Regular attendance, carefully completing the assigned readings before class, active participation in seminar discussions and “show and tell” presentations will be expected from all students, whether registered for audit or taking the class for credit.

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

1) Most classes will begin with an in-class “show and tell” presentation, about ten minutes in length. A 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 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, discuss why their example is (or is not) to be identified as government propaganda, and provide a brief assessment of its ethical permissibility. These remarks should as far as possible be related to, and provoke critical engagement with, the literature and themes 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 sections of approximately equal length: (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 of why the plan offers the most effective available ethical means for disseminating the message or policy in question.

   Final assignments will be due by: 8th April.

3) Present a 1-page draft outline plan for the final assignment. The outline should clearly state the thesis of the paper (or the nature of the
communication plan), and concisely the main steps of one’s argument defending it. Students will present and discuss their outlines either in class, time permitting,

The draft outline plan will be due by: 17th March (topic proposals to be agreed in advance, by 10th March.)

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

Presentations will be assessed primarily according to their relevance, clarity, soundness of arguments, and helpfulness in understanding the topic, as well as meeting the formal criteria for the assignment. Careful use of materials studied during the course and evidence of substantive independent thinking (including anticipation of potential objections) will be rewarded.

Participation in the rest of the seminar will count equally with “show and tell” presentations, and will be graded according to attendance, preparation, attention to others, and quality of contributions in class throughout the term.

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
(Particularly for those new to philosophy, or unsure about my expectations)

On philosophy and ethics
- The online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: http://plato.stanford.edu/

On propaganda
COURSE SCHEDULE AND WEEKLY READINGS

NB: The schedule is not set in stone, but is subject to change for pedagogical reasons as the course progresses! The course web site always includes the latest information.

**Part I: What is government propaganda?**

**Week 1: January 14**

**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 explains how philosophers today might approach the study of propaganda, introducing a number of themes that will recur later in the course.

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

Optional:

**Week 2: January 21**

**Techniques of Propaganda**

How does propaganda work? Marlin identifies a range of persuasive techniques and fallacies that propagandists use. George Orwell’s classic essay on political discourse suggests that it is deeply infected by propaganda, and that furthermore, propaganda may not be easily identifiable by way of logical fallacies. The optional reading claims that a wholly “instrumentalist” view of political language of the kind Orwell points toward is influential in today’s Russia.

Mandatory:

Optional:

**Week 3: January 28**

**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: February 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: February 11**

**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: February 18**

**Special Discussion**

Readings TBA

**Part II: Ethics**

**Week 7: February 25**

**Introduction to The Ethics of Propaganda**

The reading introduces deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics and their responses to propaganda. Among other things, we will discuss whether there is moral significance in the distinction between lying and misleading, and the potential conflict between propaganda and autonomy.

Mandatory:

**Week 8: March 3**

**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 9: March 10
Public Relations Ethics and the role of Hill and Knowlton in the First Gulf War
Public relations professionals provide services for modern governments, political parties and corporations. What relationship does their work have to propaganda? Does their role give them special moral permissions, or special obligations?
The optional reading examines some “dirty hands” arguments that politicians ought to violate certain moral requirements – ought PR professionals to do likewise?

Mandatory:

Optional:

***Final Assignment topics must be agreed with the instructor***

Week 10: March 17
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 sort of argument legitimate at least some forms of government propaganda?

Mandatory:

Optional:

***Presentation of draft outline of the final assignment due***

Week 11: March 24
War and Propaganda
Most people think war makes certain things permissible which would not normally be permissible. We will ask: Is government propaganda one of these, and if so, just what kind of propaganda is permitted, when, and against whom? The mandatory reading discusses how propaganda has been used to wage psychological warfare in recent history, and the ethics of these interventions.
The optional reading is a primer on the ethics of war and terrorism which straightforwardly introduces some central concepts in the field. It is worth considering potential points of overlap between propaganda and terrorism.

Mandatory:

Optional:

Week 12: March 31
Further Discussion and Wrap-Up
Readings TBA