

Introduction to Political Theory

POLS 2300

Spring 2017

Old Main 119

MWF 10:30 am-11:20 am

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Office Hours: Monday and Wednesday 1:30 pm-2:30 pm or by appointment

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Course Synopsis

In *Federalist* No. 51, James Madison famously wrote, “But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature?” How often do we deeply consider this dynamic relationship? Do we think of how political actions influence, and are influenced by, our conception of human nature? Should politics aim to correct or merely contain the depravities in human nature? Hence, this course will ask questions we rarely pose in our daily political lives—does our regime foster a good or full human life and how do we design institutions to accomplish our political goals? Answering these questions requires us to grapple with defining the nature of a good regime and understanding the ends of human existence. These are perennial political questions that animate our contemporary society because all political action seeks to either conserve what is good or change what is bad to something better. How can we determine what is worth preserving or changing in society without a conception of what is good for the city and (or) the soul? And, how do we intelligently manage competing answers to these important questions? This course will provide an introduction to some of the key thinkers who, throughout the history of political thought, have grappled with these questions.

Required Texts

Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, second edition, translated by Allan Bloom (Basic)

Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated by Harvey C. Mansfield (Chicago)

John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* edited by C.B. Macpherson (Hackett)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* translated by Donald A. Cross (Hackett)

Course Format

This course is primarily discussion based. I will lecture on some occasions to give necessary historical background, but every class will consist of a good deal of discussion. This means that you will have to read each text carefully and thoroughly. My expectation is that you will read actively—that is, you should read and take note of what intrigues you about the text, what you find puzzling or frustrating or downright wrong. Merely bringing a rudimentary understanding based on some Wikipedia summary or Sparknotes will not sufficiently prepare you to grapple with these difficult texts. In general, I would highly recommend avoiding secondary sources of interpretation. Do not assume that this is an easy course simply because it is an “introduction”.

As you read you may want to engage the author in three steps: first, examine the argument the author is putting forth. For instance, ask, what are the assumptions the author brings to the table? What evidence does the author use to support his claims? Second, assess the arguments. Is the author warranted in making this assumption? Is there a better way of looking at this problem than the author does? What kind of bias does the author possess and does this distort his thinking?

Does the author correctly understand human nature? Third, apply these arguments to contemporary problems and issues in our liberal democracy. For example, do Socrates' concerns about democracy or Rousseau's apprehensions about property still hold true today? How do competing reflections on human nature inform our various approaches to understanding the nature and scope of our own government? Overall, you will want to be a charitable reader and avoid dismissing an author simply because you do not agree with his arguments or you think they are not possible.

Course Goals

This course aims to:

1. Learn fundamental principles, generalizations, or theories
 - a. We will be engaging with authors who provide disparate approaches to understanding human nature and politics. It will be essential that you understand the authors' theoretical framework and how their theories influence their understanding of politics.
2. Learning to apply course material (to improve thinking, problem solving, and decisions)
 - a. The texts we will be reading are really, really old (especially Plato). It may not be readily apparent how reading Plato can inform contemporary political debate. Each author provides a unique way of thinking about enduring political questions and can provide different perspectives or ways to address political problems.
3. Learning to analyze and critically evaluate ideas, arguments, and points of view
 - a. Guaranteed, you will deeply disagree with at least one of the assigned authors. Rather than simply dismissing their writing as irrelevant or misguided, we will endeavor to engage with them in dialogue through charitable readings. You cannot critically analyze a text without first understanding the argument in its entirety. In turn, this will help you engage more meaningfully with others with whom you disagree.

Assignments and Grading

Concept Mapping (30 points)

We read some dense and difficult texts for this course. You will create concept maps while you read, which will give you a visual representation of the key ideas of each author, how those ideas relate to one another in a given text, and how those ideas connect with current events and other readings. There will be three "concept maps" (10 points each) due throughout the semester before each exam. You will submit a copy of your concept map in Canvas **BEFORE** coming to class that day. These concept maps will be your best study guide for the exams.

Using either pencil and paper or an online tool such as <https://bubbl.us/v3/>, you will create a concept map for each text or group of texts that we read. You should include every major idea that you encounter in the text, especially those covered in class discussion. You will also want to include connections between concepts to demonstrate understanding of the overall argument. It is more important to include every major idea than it is to structure the map in a particular way

Each assignment is worth 10 points. Your concept maps will be evaluated on how well they reflect thoughtful engagement with each text in terms of questions such as these (you will not necessarily have an answer to every question on every map):

Factual Questions

- What are the key points of the author's arguments?
- What evidence does the author use to support his claims?
- What assumptions does the author bring to the table?

Critical Questions

- Is the author warranted in making the assumptions that he makes?
- Does the author provide convincing evidence to support his claims? What evidence would make his claim more convincing?
- How does this concept fit within the author's overall argument?

Current Events (20 Points)

By learning about current events, such as questions of public policy, you will practice applying course materials outside of their original context. This will also help in thinking critically about newspapers as a source of information. Before the class session on the date you are individually assigned to, you will post a link to an article in a major newspaper or news magazine in the Current Events discussion board in Canvas. The article must relate to a general discussion theme you identify in the reading, and you should be able to connect it to the text currently being discussed. With your link, you will need to include a few sentences about how the article relates to the reading and one or two discussion questions to help further engage with the article and the assigned reading. Finally, you will help lead a brief discussion in class based on the article and discussion questions you posted.

Your current events post will be graded according to the following criteria:

- The article must come from a major news outlet.
- The link must be posted to Canvas before the start of the class period on the assigned due date.
- The article must address a discussion theme taken from the reading.
- Your post must explain how the article relates to the course readings and discussion on the theme and include one or two questions to help lead class discussion.

Scholarly Article Analysis

Finding and reading a scholarly article on one of our primary texts will also be an important way you will analyze and critically evaluate others' ideas, arguments, and points of view. For the assignment, you will locate a peer-reviewed, scholarly article and write a 1,000-1,250 word essay that summarizes the article's key points and evaluates the author's arguments in terms of your reading of the primary text.

Your analysis of a scholarly article will be based on the following criteria:

Article Characteristics

- The article must be (or include) a critical reading of the primary text of your choosing.
- The article must come from a reputable, peer-reviewed journal.
- The article must be no more than 15 years old.

Paper Characteristics

- Your paper must show thoughtful engagement with these questions:
 - What arguments does the author make?
 - Does the article's author generally agree or disagree with the author of the primary text? In what ways?
 - What areas of the author's argument are strongest? Which are weakest? Does the article's author misinterpret any details from the primary text? Does the author fail to mention any aspects of the text that might strengthen or weaken his/her argument?

Quizzes (50 points)

There will be 10 random quizzes throughout the semester covering the reading material assigned for that day. The quizzes are designed to reward those who carefully completed the assigned readings. They will also be a source for test preparation. Each quiz will be worth 5 points, and I will drop your lowest quiz score (including zeros) and replace it with your highest. **There will be no opportunity to make up a missed quiz.**

Exams (200 points total)

There will be two exams (50 points each) and a cumulative final (100 points) throughout the semester. The exams will consist of both multiple choice questions and short answer-identifications of key concepts or arguments. The final exam will be comprehensive. I recommend forming study groups to prepare for exams, and we will hold review sessions before the exam days. Please note, "What is going to be on the test?" questions will not be answered at these sessions.

Grading Scale

A	100-94
A-	93-90
B+	89-87
B	86-84
B-	83-80
C+	79-77
C	76-74
C-	73-70
D+	69-67
D	66-64
D-	63-60
F	59-0

Tentative Reading Schedule

Week 1

01/09: Introduction to course

01/11: Martin Luther King Jr. *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (Canvas)

01/13: No Class

Week 2

01/16: No Class for Martin Luther King Jr. Day

01/18: *The Republic*, Book I, 327a-331d

01/20: *The Republic*, Book I, 331d-336a

Week 3

01/23: *The Republic*, Book I, 336b-344d

01/25: *The Republic*, Book I, 344d-354c

01/27: *The Republic*, Book II, 357a-372b

Week 4:

01/30: *The Republic*, Book II, 372c-383c

02/01: *The Republic*, Book III, 386a-398c

02/03: *The Republic*, Book III, 398c-412d

Week 5

02/06: *The Republic*, Book III, 412e-417b

02/08: *The Republic*, Book IV, 419a-427e

02/10: *The Republic*, Book IV, 428a-435d

Week 6

02/13: *The Republic*, Book IV, 435e-445e

02/15: *The Republic*, Book V, 449a-457c

02/17: No Class

Week 7

02/20: No Class for President's Day

02/21: *The Republic*, Book V, 457c-471c

02/22: *The Republic*, Book V, 471c-480a

02/24: *The Republic*, Book VI, 487e-489a; 489b-497a

Week 8

02/27: *The Republic*, Book VII, 514a-521c

03/01: Plato wrap-up

03/03: EXAM 1: IN CLASS

Week 9

03/06-03/10 Spring Break

Week 10

03/13: Kerry Burch, "Plato's Myth of the Noble Lie and the Predicaments of American Civic Education" *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 26 (2) 2007: 115-125 (Canvas). Guest: Robert Heaton, political science librarian.

03/15: *The Prince*, pg. 3-21 (Dedicatory Letter-V)

03/17: *The Prince*, pg. 21-33 (VI-VII)

Week 11

03/20: *The Prince*, pg. 34-38 and 61-68 (VIII, XV-XVII)

03/22: *The Prince*, pp. 71-83 (XIX)

03/24: *The Prince*, pp. 83-106 (XIX-XXVI)

Week 12

03/27: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Introduction and cpt. XI (Canvas)

03/29: *Leviathan*, cpt. XIII (Canvas)

03/31: *Leviathan*, cpt. XVII-XVIII (Canvas)

Week 13

04/03: *Second Treatise* pg. 7-16 (cpt. I-III)

04/05: *Second Treatise* pg. 18-30 (cpt. V)

04/07: No Class

Week 14

04/10: *Second Treatise* pp. 65-88 (cpt. IX-XIV)

04/12: EXAM 2: IN CLASS

04/14: *Discourse* pp. 16-29 (part one)

Week 15

04/17: *Discourse* pp. 29-44 (part one)

04/19: *Discourse* pp. 44-56 (part two)

04/21: *Discourse* pp. 57-71 (part two)

Week 16

04/24: *Federalist No. 10* (to be distributed on Canvas)

04/26: *Federalist No. 10* and *Federalist No. 51* (to be distributed on Canvas)

04/28: *Federalist No. 51* (to be distributed on Canvas)

FINAL EXAM: WEDNESDAY, MAY 3 IN OUR REGULAR CLASSROOM