

Political Science 227

Introduction to Political Philosophy

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Course Description

What *is* political philosophy? How can there be a philosophy about something as biased as politics? Is it possible to know the “truth” about politics, as opposed to mere opinions? In this course we will study the way people have thought about politics, government, and society, from the earliest writings in the western European tradition. The object is consider the extent to which the classic political philosophers we investigate had a political agenda or vision that extended beyond “objectivity” or “truth.” We will do this by reading what one late twentieth century political philosopher wrote about the subject of “Truth and Politics” and then reading selections from five major figures in the history of political thought to see what sort of political society they envisioned, and how they argued for its credibility. What distinguishes political philosophy from ideology, opinion, or rhetoric?

General Requirements:

Attendance is required, but no roll will be taken (although there will be occasional attendance sheets distributed randomly throughout the semester). This class relies on lectures and discussion to make sense of difficult readings. If you don’t come to class, and you don’t keep up with the readings, it will be very difficult to get a good grade. Participation in class discussion is highly recommended, although there is no systematic point system for it. It is also a good idea to introduce yourself to me at some point during the semester, either after class, or during office hours. Knowing who you are enables me to read your work with greater knowledge of where you’re coming from. Participating in class discussion is the best way for me to get to know who you are. Learning abstract material is enhanced exponentially when you take a risk and express an opinion or ask a question in class. There will be group discussion assignments throughout the semester to encourage participation.

Writing Assignments:

There will be three take-home writing assignments at appropriate points in the semester, asking you to discuss and evaluate the philosopher’s conception of truth and its relation to politics. There may be reading quizzes throughout the semester, if students are not prepared for class discussions.

A Few Rules:

Notes should be taken on paper. Students who require the use of laptops during class should see me to explain why, and will be asked to sit in the first two rows of the classroom. Checking email, playing online games, or using the internet for any other reason during class time is regarded as non-attendance, with the added bonus of being rude and disrespectful to both professor and classmates. Same policy applies to cell phones. If you have difficulty staying off-line for one hour and fifteen minutes, it might be best to take a different class.

Students with any special needs should see me for accommodations.

Plagiarism, or stealing writing from a published source, an internet source, or another student, is against university policy, and will result in a failing grade on either the assignment or the class, depending upon the seriousness of the incident.

Schedule of Readings:

Weeks 1-2 (Aug. 25-Sept. 3)

HANNAH ARENDT, "TRUTH AND POLITICS" (E-RESERVE)

Weeks , 3-5 (Sept. 8-24)

PLATO, THE REPUBLIC: BOOKS 1-3, PP.1-86, BOOK 5, PP. 114-146, BOOK 7, PP. 174-182

First writing assignment

Weeks, 6-8 (Sept. 29-Oct 15)

ARISTOTLE, POLITICS: BOOKS 1, 2

Weeks 9- 11 (Oct 20- Nov.5)

MACHIAVELLI, THE PRINCE

Second writing assignment

Weeks 12-13 (Nov 10-Nov.19)

JOHN LOCKE, SECOND TREATISE OF GOVERNMENT (CHAPTERS I-VIII, PP. 100-154)

Weeks 14-16 (Nov. 24-Dec 8)

JOHN STUART MILL, ON LIBERTY (CHAPTERS 1-3)

Third writing assignment