PS 209, Fall 2016: Introduction to Political Theory

Tuesday/Thursday 11:00-12:15, 270 Soils

Instructor:
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Office Hours: Wednesday, 9:30-11:30 am, held in the Education Building, Morgridge Commons

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I. Scope and Purpose

This course is an introduction to political theory. What is political theory? One way of answering the question is to say that political theory entails the normative and conceptual analysis of politics. For example, rather than ask the question, Why do we obey states?, political theory might instead ask, Why should we obey states? (Or, should we obey states?) That is, it asks a normative question: what should be done, rather than what is done.

This question – Why should we obey states? – is the central question of this course, and it structures the choice of texts that we will be studying and how we will study them. We live in a world of states, and we can demonstrate their empirical existence in a number of ways. Whether we should live in a world of states, whether we should obey states, or any particular state: those are different issues. Is there a reason, then, why we should obey governments (apart from the fact that they can fine or imprison us)? Is there a reason why, for all of their problems, democratic forms of rule are better than non-democratic forms of rule? Is there a reason why, under certain circumstances, a state can cease to be legitimate – and may in fact be disobeyed or overthrown? These are some of the questions we will be concerned with in this course.

Of course, we take it for granted that not only do states exist, but that we should obey their laws. But this belief, like any other belief, is not self-explanatory, and should be subjected to critical analysis. And much of what we will do in this course is study intensively how a number of writers – Wolff, Plato, Hobbes, Rousseau, Wollstonecraft, Mill, Rawls, Nozick, Scott, and Douglass – have explored the nature of this belief. We will discuss obedience, obligation, legitimacy, rights, consent, rebellion, revolution, monarchy, democracy, human nature, religion and politics, and a variety of related topics. And we will start, and end, our discussion with readings which suggest that our understanding of political obligation should be much thinner, if not done away with altogether.
II. Course Objectives

1. To read and analyze a survey of texts dealing with the fundamental questions of political theory.

2. To explore and analyze how political and ethical theories are formulated, and to critically evaluate their strengths and weaknesses.

3. To explore and analyze how different political and ethical theories relate to each other.

4. To explore and analyze the ways in which works of political theory may inform, illuminate, and enrich contemporary political and ethical discussions.

5. To analyze and evaluate contemporary culture and individual experience through the lens of philosophical texts.

Through their careful and close engagement with course material, class attendance and participation, and completion of course work, students will develop the following capacities: verbal communication and presentation; expository, analytical, and reflective writing; critical analysis of arguments, concepts, and theories; teamwork and flexibility; and independent research.

III. Assignments

A. Papers and Midterms (55%)

All non-honors students enrolled in this course will write 1 5-8 page paper, due on or before Tuesday, November 1, and take 1 in-class midterm, to be held on Thursday, October 20. In addition to these two assignments, all non-honors students will choose to write either a second paper or take a second midterm. You must let your teaching assistant know by email whether you will take the second midterm or write a second paper on or before Tuesday, November 15. If you do not email you TA on or before Tuesday, November 15, you will lose the option of choosing the third assignment and will be required to take the second midterm exam.

If you choose to write 2 papers and take 1 midterm, the higher of the two papers will count for 20% of your overall grade, while the lower will count for 15%; the midterm will count for 20%. If you take 2 midterms and write 1 paper, the higher of the two midterms will count for 20% of your overall grade, while the lower will count for 15%; the paper will count for 20%. Thus, all non-honors students will complete a total of three written assignments: either two papers and one in-class midterm, or one paper and two in-class midterms.

The first paper is due on Tuesday, November 1; if you write two papers, the second is due on Tuesday, December 6. Midterms will be held in class on Thursday, October 20, and Tuesday, November 15.
Further details on the papers:

These papers are to be critical analyses of a creative work – a novel, play, film, television episode, poem, opera, album, etc. – through the theoretical framework provided by one of the course texts. A critical analysis involves asking an interpretive question about the creative work, and developing an answer to that question through the lens of a course text. For example, if we were reading Machiavelli’s *Prince* in this course, it might remind you of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the interpretive puzzles it raises for the viewer or reader. An interpretive question might be, “Why can’t Hamlet bring himself to act decisively?” An answer – in the form of a thesis statement – might be, “Drawing on Machiavelli’s *Prince*, I will argue that Hamlet is unable to act decisively because he does not know how not to be good.” For the first paper, you can write on Wolff, Plato, Hobbes, or Rousseau; for the second paper, you can write on Wollstonecraft, Mill, Rawls, or Nozick.

Papers are to be handed in as papers (i.e. not electronically), and to be stapled and printed in 12 point Times New Roman font with double-spaced lines. We will not accept papers that are not stapled. Citation style is to adhere to the *American Political Science Review* format, which you can find discussed at length through this link:


Late papers will be penalized in the following fashion: ½ letter grade off for papers turned in after the regular meeting time (T/Th 11:00-12:15), but on the due date AND before the close of the Political Science office closes (4:45 pm); 1 full letter grade per day for papers turned in after 4:45 pm on the due date.

C. Section (20%)

Discussion section will be worth 20% of your overall course grade. Teaching assistants will hand out detailed section syllabi on the first day of section.

D. Final (25%)

All students in this class will take a final exam worth 20% of the overall grade. The exam will be held on December 20 from 5:05-7:05 pm.

IV. Grading

Grades will be assigned based on the following scale:

- A ≥ 93.5
- AB = 87.5-93.4
- B = 82.5-87.4
- BC = 77.5-82.4
- C = 69.5-77.4
- D = 60-69.4
- F ≤ 59.9

V. Course Materials
Students in PS 209 are expected to acquire the following 9 books, all of which are also on reserve at College Library.

5. Plato, *Republic* (Hackett)
9. Douglass, *The Essential Frederick Douglass* (Hackett)

**VI. Class Expectations**

You can expect me, as your instructor, and your teaching assistant to come to class prepared, to be available for assistance during office hours or by mutually convenient appointment, to answer email correspondence in a reasonable amount of time (provided your email uses proper punctuation, grammar, spelling, appellation, and is signed), to provide feedback on your performance, to hand back written work in a reasonable amount of time, and to provide clear instructions and guidelines. You can expect your teaching assistant or me to discuss questions about evaluation of assignments in person and no sooner than 24 hours after assignments have been returned.

I expect you, as students, to come to class prepared to engage in the material and on time (which involves bringing the assigned materials to class), to be attentive and respectful in class, to check your university-registered email regularly, to read and understand the syllabus and other course guidelines, in addition to adhering to all university policies and policies stated in the syllabus. If you plan to use a laptop, please sit in the back of the classroom so that other students are not distracted by laptop screens and typing. If you are using electronic devices for reading texts, however, feel free to sit anywhere in the room.

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated, and will be dealt with severely. For information on academic honesty, see http://students.wisc.edu/doso/acadintegrity.html.

This syllabus is a general plan for the course; deviations may occur.
Schedule of Lectures and Readings

Tuesday, 9/6: Course introduction; no reading

1: The Problem of Political Philosophy, and Philosophical Anarchism

Thursday, 9/8: Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism*

Tuesday, 9/13: Wolff, *In Defense of Anarchism*

2: The Rule of the Wise and Few

Thursday, 9/15: Plato, *Republic*, Books I and II

Tuesday, 9/20: Plato, *Republic*, Books I and II, cont’d; Books III and IV

Thursday, 9/22: Plato, *Republic* Books III and IV, cont’d; Book V

Tuesday, 9/27: Plato, *Republic* Book VII (through 517b5); Books VIII and IX

Thursday, 9/29: Plato, *Republic*, conclusion

3: Achieving Stability and Security

Tuesday, 10/4: Hobbes, *Leviathan* Chapters I-VI, X

Thursday, 10/6: Hobbes, *Leviathan* Chapters XIII-XVI

Tuesday, 10/11: Hobbes, *Leviathan* Chapters XVII-XIX, XXI

Thursday, 10/13: Hobbes, *Leviathan* Chapters XXVI-XXX

Tuesday, 10/18: Hobbes, *Leviathan* Chapters XXVI-XXX (I will lecture on Chapters XXXI and XXXII, but do not expect you to have read them)

Thursday, 10/20: Midterm 1

4: Achieving Independence

Tuesday, 10/25: Rousseau, *Social Contract* Book I, Chapters 1-7; Book II, Chapters 1-10

Thursday, 10/27: Rousseau, *Social Contract* Book II, Chapters 1-10, cont’d; Book IV, Chapters 1, 8

5: Protecting Individual Rights

Tuesday, 11/1: Wollstonecraft (selections TBA); Paper 1 due
Thursday, 11/3: Wollstonecraft (selections TBA)

6: Promoting Human Development

Tuesday, 11/8: Mill, *On Liberty*

Thursday, 11/10: Mill, *On Liberty*

Tuesday, 11/15: Midterm 2*

7: Achieving a Fair Society

Thursday, 11/17: Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, Chapter I.1-4; Chapter II.10-11, 13; 17 (to be supplied via Learn@UW)

Tuesday, 11/22: Rawls, *Theory of Justice*, Chapter III.24-29; Chapter IV.32-39 (to be supplied via Learn@UW)

Thursday, 11/24: Thanksgiving

8: A Libertarian Solution


Thursday, 12/1: Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Chapter 7

9: Practicing Disobedience

Tuesday, 12/6: Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism*; Paper 2 due*

Thursday, 12/8: Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism*

10: Thinking Anew

Tuesday, 12/13: Douglass, *The Essential Frederick Douglass* (selections TBA)

Thursday, 12/15: Douglass, cont’d; course conclusions