Prospective Students: This is last year's version of the syllabus, but next year's will be very similar

Political Theory: Ancient and Medieval - PS 430
Professor Burke Hendrix
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Office Hours: T and Th 1:00-2:30

Course Description

Modern conceptions of democracy, citizenship, legality, virtue, equality, and political order grow out of certain ideas that were initially developed in ancient Athens and other Greek city-states, and then refracted and changed through the Roman Republic and Empire, before being altered in strong ways with the birth of Christianity and the fall of Rome. Ideas of democratic self-rule do not seem to have emerged in stable form within urbanized societies anywhere in the ancient world beyond the Greek city-states, and these earlier political experiences have in important ways set the terms for our own. Yet they are also in many ways deeply alien – captured by views of citizenship, virtue, and participation that we now see as rare rather than fundamental elements of political life. We may – or may not – see more familiar forms of political life as we move forward toward the Roman world, before turning the Christian politics of St. Augustine to conclude.

The goal of this course is to understand certain key ideas from the ancient world, with a focus on recognizing the kinds of problems that motivated political writings among certain ancient thinkers, and with understanding the kinds of answers to these questions that they sought to offer. The course will thus seek to reconstruct the arguments of specific thinkers, and – where possible – the mental and political worlds in which they lived. We will seek to recognize where they would agree with us, and where they would find us deeply mistaken or lacking in sufficient virtue. We will also seek to understand the changes that occurred over time in the ancient world, that helped to make possible many aspects of the political world that we now take for granted.

Required Course Books


- Earlier volumes of this book have very different page numbers, and may lack some of the assigned materials. If you order an earlier edition, you are responsible for correcting page numbers to the course edition in papers and other written work.

Some other readings will also be assigned for the course. You will receive electronic copies of these readings by email the week before they are assigned. They will also be posted to the course’s Blackboard site.

**Learning Objectives and Evaluation**

This course has several learning objectives. The central goal is to gain a better understanding of some of the major political concepts in the Western tradition, including democracy, citizenship, equality, virtue, freedom, transparency, and legal obligation, and to learn to use these concepts as tools for the critical evaluation of political life. At the same time, students should hone more generalizable skills of careful reading, logical thinking, moral imagination, and appropriate political judgment, along with clarity in writing. Not all of these skills can be evaluated easily through course assignments, but members of the course should take seriously their importance.

To assist with careful reading, and to encourage writing, you will need to turn in a one-paragraph reaction to the assigned reading for 10 of our 19 course meetings. These should be about 1/3 to 1/2 of a typed page. A paper copy can be turned in after class, or an electronic copy can be sent before class begins. Reading questions are listed for each day, but you are free to come up with your own question to answer if you prefer. These reaction papers are not individually graded: anyone who completes the assigned number of reaction papers will receive full credit for this portion of the course. (They should, however, represent your own reactions; copying materials from web sources such as Wikipedia counts as plagiarism.)

The primary written assignments are two eight-page papers, on topics to be assigned two weeks prior to their due date. The first paper will be due Wednesday, November 12th, and the second paper will be due on December 11th. The papers should be submitted electronically to SafeAssign, or directly to the professor’s email if SafeAssign has technical difficulties.

This course will be relatively small in size, so we will often spend substantial class time on discussion, especially in the later weeks of the course. Plan to come to class prepared to participate, having read assignments carefully. Participation will form a part of your overall grade for the course, and the quality of participation as well as quantity makes a difference.

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Roll will be taken for each class period. All students have two “free” days, in which their absence will not be counted; after that absences between to diminish your participation grade. After five unexcused absences, your participation grade will drop to F.

Laptop and cell phone use is not permitted during class time without prior approval. The first incident will lead to a warning. The second will drop your participation points two grades
(e.g. from B to D), while a third will drop your participation points to 0. If there are important reasons for you to have access to these devices during class (e.g. small children in school about whom you might receive texts, vision issues that make magnification essential), please see me within the first week of class.

**Course Reading Schedule**

Plan to read course materials prior to the meeting for which they are assigned. The reading assignments are generally short, so read them carefully and thoughtfully. Come prepared to discuss these materials, including with questions about them.

The assigned course readings are subject to revision according to professorial judgment. I will let you know about updates in class and/or electronically.

September 30: Course Introduction

October 2: **Reading Assignment:** “Pericles’ Funeral Oration” from Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* and Isocrates, selections from *Aeropagiticus* – electronic sources.

1. What are the central political values of Athens, according to Pericles? To what degree do these seem to you like central political values? What, if anything, do they leave out?

2. To what degree do you believe that Athens was capable of living up the capacities that Pericles attributed to it? What would make a political society more or less able to live up to high aspirations of this sort?

3. Isocrates is arguing for a restoration of the role of the “Aeropagitica”, a group of older citizens who oversaw the general moral character of the city as a whole. Do you believe that his idea is a good one or a mistake?

October 7: **Reading Assignment:** Sophocles, *Antigone*, pgs. 2–14 (to Second Stasimon) in Morgan, *Classics*.

1. What is your sense of the justice of Creon’s judgment in this case? Do you think that traitors should or should not have a right to a normal burial, and why?

2. Is Antigone making the right decision? What principle or principles drive your judgment in this regard?

3. What conceptions of law and legality seem to be at play in this work? Where do laws seem to come from, and why?
4. What is the role of political transparency so far in the play? That is, who is being transparent to others in their actions, and why?

October 9: **Reading Assignment:** Sophocles, *Antigone*, remainder, in Morgan, *Classics*.

1. Is the ultimate outcome of the play just toward Creon? If so, why? If not, why not?

2. Does Sophocles have an implicit understanding of a kind of law or political system that would have avoided these difficulties? What is the evidence one way or another?

3. Presuming that the social purpose of the play is the political education of citizens, how well does it seem to succeed? What lessons are learned and what are not learned?

4. Do we have methods for educating citizens similar to those found in Athenian theater? If so, what are they and how well do they work?

October 14: **Reading Assignment:** Plato, *Republic*, pgs. 75–81 (line 336b), 93 (Book II start)–103 (line 374a) in Morgan, *Classics*.

1. What is at stake in the conversations between Socrates and his interlocuters? Why is this politically important?

2. Is there a way to answer Glaucon’s challenge to justice? Explain as clearly as you can what a good answer would be?

3. What is the founding principle that Socrates uses in beginning to describe a just city? Is this a good fundamental principle? Why or why not?

4. Is Socrates a bad citizen? Drawing on Pericles, Sophocles, or your own thoughts, argue that Socrates as we see him here is subversive of Athenian citizenship.

October 16: **Reading Assignment:** Plato, *Republic*, pgs. 103 (374a)–118 (398b), 125 (409a)–130 (end of Book III) in Morgan, *Classics*.

1. Does Socrates’ argument about the kinds of stories children in his society should hear seem plausible to you? Why or why not?

2. Whose style of citizen education seems to you likely to be more effective – Socrates or Sophocles?

3. Socrates is ultimately arguing for political dominance by those who are good judges. Do you think this is a reasonable political goal, and if so has Socrates conceptualized the problem rightly?
4. Socrates famously bases his society around a central “noble lie.” Does this seem to you morally permissible basis for political stability? Why or why not?

October 21: **Reading Assignment:** Plato, *Republic*, pgs. 147 (Book V start)–164 (474a), 169 (Book VI start)–176 (495c) in Morgan, *Classics*.

1. Socrates argues that women should be permitted to be members of the same social classes of men. What is his argument, and where is it strong and weak? Could Socrates be considered a feminist?

2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Socrates’ argument for the abolition of family ties through the collective raising of children? What goals does he seek to achieve, and to what degree does he succeed?

3. Socrates defends a program of eugenics, in which the best members of society will reproduce with one another. Leaving aside the details of his program, does the basic proposal seem sound to you? Why or why not?

4. Socrates argues that philosophers must become kings if politics is to reach its real potential, yet he does not seem confident that this will actually happen. If he does not expect this to actually come about, what is the purpose of the argument as a whole?


1. The Greeks and Romans generally expected that political societies would travel through predictable cycles, from well-governed to badly governed. Do you find Socrates’s description here plausible? If not, would a different expectation be more plausible?

2. How accurate do you believe Socrates’s description of the “democratic man” to be? What changes to society would be necessary to ensure that people of this kind do not exist?

3. If you were to characterize our current “citizen character”, how would you describe it, using Socrates’s terms and ideas where possible? What elements are dominant, and why does that seem to be the case?

4. Socrates ultimately seeks to argue that a tyrant is the most unhappy of all human beings, so that Glaucón’s original challenge to justice was mistaken? Are you persuaded by his argument? Why or why not?

1. To what extent is happiness central in deciding how we should live, according to Aristotle? Where do you find his position most compelling, and where least?

2. Aristotle argues that virtue forms a kind of mean between two extremes. What are the most plausible features of this argument? What are its most implausible features?

3. Aristotle argues that friendship is deeply important, including civic friendship. What features of contemporary societies may make friendship among citizens more difficult than it needs to be?

4. How would you compare Aristotle’s description of a well-lived human life with that implicit in Plato’s work? Where do they seem to agree, and where disagree?

October 30: **Reading Assignment:** Aristotle, *The Politics*, Books I, II (chapter 5 only), III in Morgan, *Classics*.

1. Aristotle famously argues that humans are “political animals”. What is it exactly that marks humans apart from other animals, and why is this important?

2. Aristotle has a number of troubling things to say about the status of slaves, women, and others. What is the central principle underlying arguments of this kind? In other words, what makes some people able to act as equals, and others not, in his view?

3. In Book II (chapter 5), Aristotle evaluates the description of property outlined by Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*. Do you agree with Aristotle’s alternate argument? What are its good and bad features?

4. What is the conceptual difference between the “virtues of a good man” and the “virtues of a good citizen”? What factors lead the virtues of a good citizen to be closer to or more distant from those of the good man?

November 4: **Reading Assignment:** Aristotle, *The Politics*, remainder in Morgan, *Classics*.

1. Aristotle considers which social class should rule. Are the claims that each might make similar in kind, or are they based on diverging kinds of moral arguments? In either case, what is the appropriate standard for deciding between them?

2. What makes a political constitution relatively successful? What are the features that are required of those who hold power for each to function most effectively?

3. Aristotle argues that the best form of government will rely on a middle element which is between rich and poor. To what degree is this argument similar to current arguments in the United States about the “middle class”, and to what degree does it differ?
4. Aristotle argues for the importance of education to a well-organized city. What kinds of education are important in this regard? Do we have mechanisms for approximating this in contemporary political societies?

November 6: **Reading Assignment:** Epicurus, pgs. 420–427 and Epictetus, pgs. 428–442 in Morgan, *Classics.*

1. What do Epicurus and Epictetus disagree most about? Is there anything on which they disagree?

2. Of these two, which has a better understanding of the best approach to living one’s life? What leads you to this conclusion? Is there an alternate view you would endorse instead?

3. It has often been argued that Epicurianism and Stoicism (of which Epictetus is an adherent) originated as reactions to the demise of the Greek city-state. To what degree would these theories seem appropriate or inappropriate for city-state citizens?

November 11: **Reading Assignment:** Polybius, selection from *The Histories* and Marcus Aurelius, selection from *Meditations* – electronic sources. First Paper due electronically tomorrow by 4:00 PM!

1. What is the best source of political stability, according to Polybius, and what is necessary to secure it?

2. What seems to be the best characteristics for members of a political society to have, for Polybius? What sources exist to ensure that individuals of that kind exist?

3. To what degree should human beings be seen as equal, according to Marcus Aurelius? Do you find his arguments compelling or not compelling?

November 13: **Reading Assignment:** Cicero, Books I, 4–6 (fragments) of *The Republic* (Rudd trans) – omit the “Dream of Scipio” if you prefer.

1. Cicero argues that the most noble people should take part in political life. What are the strongest arguments that can be made against his position? Do you find it compelling or mistaken?

2. Would Cicero’s political advice about leadership be reasonable for members of the kinds of city-states that Aristotle describes? Why or why not?

3. Why exactly does Cicero believe that a particular kind of state is necessary to produce rules that can really bear the name of “law”? Why are other forms of government unable to reliably make law in this way?
4. Cicero presents his arguments in the form of a dialogue. What are the strengths of this dialogue form for educating potential leaders, and what are its weaknesses?

November 18: **Reading Assignment:** Sallust, selections from *Cataline’s Conspiracy* and Cicero, *Third Philippic Against Mark Anthony* – electronic sources.

  1. What impression of Roman politics emerges from these texts? Presuming they are correct, what features of Rome’s political structures made such difficulties possible?

  2. What is the vision of “liberty” that emerges when these works are read together? Is liberty a positive political good, or a political danger, or does it depend on the notion’s specific uses?

  3. What reforms would you seek to institute, if you were a political leader in these times? What are the exact ways in which you hope for these reforms to work?

November 20: **Reading Assignment:** Cicero, *The Laws* (Rudd trans).

  1. What is the basic vision of legality that emerges from this work? What are its core features, and what is necessary to secure it?

  2. What recommendations would Plato likely make for revising Cicero’s arguments, and why?

  3. What recommendations would Aristotle likely make for revising Cicero’s arguments, and why?

  4. If you were Cicero, would you bother with writing arguments of this kind, rather than simply engaging in political action? Why or why not?


  1. To what degree does the concept of legality in the Ten Commandments overlap or disagree with Stoic conceptions of the moral law? How important are these agreements or disagreements?

  2. What vision of political life seems outlined or implicit in Jesus’s sermon? To what degree does it seem consistent with that the Ten Commandments? To what degree does it seem appealing on its own?

  3. Would those who followed Jesus’s standards in the sermon have been good citizens of a Greek city-state? What are the pivotal factors why or why not?
4. What do you think of the plausibility of Paul’s statements about politics? Do they seem consistent with Jesus’s sermon, and do they seem like a good idea on their own?

November 27: Thanksgiving Break.

December 2: **Reading Assignment:** St. Augustine, pgs. 443–457 in Morgan, *Classics*.

1. What are the fundamental differences between those who are primarily part of the City of God and those who are primarily part of the City of Man? To what degree can one choose to be a member of either one?

2. Why do we have politics, on Augustine’s account? What is it for? Do you find his answer persuasive? Why or why not?

3. To what degree does Augustine’s view of personal characteristics and political life overlap with or conflict with that of Cicero? Where they conflict, who seems to you more correct, and why?

4. To what degree would Pericles have agreed with Augustine about the personal characteristics that individuals should have? Where they conflict, who seems to you more correct, and why?

December 4: **Reading Assignment:** St. Augustine, selections from *Political Writings* – electronic source.

1. Augustine argues that Christian and political life are compatible with one another. What are his arguments in this regard? Are you persuaded by them, or not?

2. Augustine argues that war is morally permissible for Christian soldiers. What are his arguments compelling, and do they seem consist with the rest of his theory? Are they compelling on their own terms?

3. What is the structure of Augustine’s arguments about persecution? To what degree do these arguments overlap with and differ from earlier arguments we have read about the importance of preserving a republic from mistaken ideas?

4. What have been the most fundamental intellectual changes observed in this course from beginning to end? To what degree are, say, Augustine and Pericles on the same intellectual ground, and to what degree are they different? Be as specific as you can.

Finals Week: Final Paper due electronically on December 11 by 9:00 PM.