Political Theory: Renaissance and Early Modern
PS 431
Professor Burke Hendrix
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Office Hours: Wednesday 2:00-4:00, Thursday 1:00-2:00

Course Description

Contemporary conceptions of politics grew out of particular historical roots, primarily within European debates about the power of kings, law, and (eventually) the people. This political theory course considers key textual moments in this intellectual development, to recognize what problems political thinkers were seeking to solve, how they expected to do so, and how ideas developed and changed over time. Some of these theoretical debates will still seem current, while others will now seem peculiar and expired. The goal of this course is to understand better the roots of modern political theories, the abandoned paths not taken, and the deep normative puzzles that sometimes remain unresolved over centuries. Authors to be read include St. Thomas Aquinas, Niccolo Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the writers of the Federalist Papers, and Thomas Jefferson.

The course will have a historical focus, but these texts will also be read as works of normative philosophy. In this regard, the course will focus specifically on questions of law and legality. What is law? Where does it come from, and what justifies it? Who does it apply to, and under what conditions can it be broken? The question of legality naturally involves questions about constitutionality. What is a “constitution”, and why does it matter politically? We will also focus on questions of human rights. Are there such rights, and if so what is their source? What limits do they put on government, and why? By the end of the course, you should be able to analyze questions of this kind more clearly, both in regard to what historical figures (e.g. the American Founders) would have understood by them, and on your own terms.

Required Course Book


- 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 legality, natural rights, freedom, consent of the governed, property ownership, revolution, and permissible violence, 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 even when they are not directly evaluated.

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 Monday, February 9, and the second paper will be due on March 19. 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.

| Participation: | 15% |
| Response Papers: | 10% |
| First Paper: | 35% |
| Second Paper: | 40% |

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.

January 6: Introduction – no reading assigned


1. What are the four features of law, according to Aquinas? Describe each, and explain why at least one of them is important.

2. In the First Article of Question 90, Aquinas makes a distinction between practical and theoretical reason in one of the replies to objections (#2). What is this distinction, and why might it be important?

3. What is Eternal Law, according to Aquinas? What is its relationship to God’s decision-making?

4. What is the relationship between Natural Law and Divine Law, in Aquinas’s argument?


1. In Question 94, Second Article, Aquinas argues that our natural inclinations incline us to the good. Describe some of these natural inclinations, and evaluate the degree to which they will lead reliably to a well-lived human life.

2. Aquinas has critical things to say about homosexuality in the Third Article of Question 94. Explain as well as you can how this argument might or might not fit within his larger intellectual outlook.

3. What are the conditions under which a tyrant can be overthrown? Explain Aquinas’s argument as well as you can, and evaluate its plausibility.

4. In Question 66, Aquinas considers the moral status of wealth. What is his argument, and how well does it fit with the rest of his theories?

1. What should a prince do after conquering a former republic, according to Machiavelli? What vision of human nature does this advice imply?

2. Machiavelli describes a handful of great political leaders including Moses, Romulus, and others. What are the features of these founders, and what was their relationship to law?

3. What difference does Machiavelli see between Cesare Borgia and Agathocles of Syracuse? Do his arguments seem coherent and defensible?

4. What seems to be Machiavelli’s relationship to natural law of the kind Aquinas describes? Where might they agree on certain things, and where might their most important disagreements be found?


1. What is the relationship between the traditional virtues Machiavelli mentions and the virtues that he endorses? Why does this relationship have the form that it does?

2. What is the relationship between appearance and reality in these chapters of the *Prince*?

3. On pg. 540, Machiavelli describes the example of Mr. Giovanni, who came to rule the city of Bologna in interesting circumstances. Is the story Machiavelli describes there consistent with the portrayal of human nature elsewhere in the text? Why or why not?

4. Machiavelli describes Fortune using several metaphors? What are they, and which of them seems most accurate in your judgment?


1. What are the costs and benefits of founding cities in particular locations, according to the *Discourses*? Where does Machiavelli ultimately prefer that they be built, and what is necessary to counteract the dangers of this choice?

2. What kind of governmental system should a well-functioning society have, according to Machiavelli, and why? Does the system of government that he describes seem at all familiar to you? Why or why not?
3. What kinds of virtues should citizens have, according to Machiavelli, and what is necessary to create these? Are these steps consistent with something like “individual rights” as we commonly conceive them today?

4. Machiavelli suggests that it is necessary for states to return to their founding principles in many instances. Why does he seem to believe that this is necessary, and what might such a return mean? Do you agree with the importance that he places on such returns?


1. What are humans like, according to chapters 1-6 of *Leviathan*? What is our relationship to the rest of the natural world, and how do we know this?

2. What is involved when humans reason, according to Hobbes? What can happen when reasoning is done badly? Provide an example that you believe illustrates his view of how reason can go wrong.

3. In Chapter 12, Hobbes discusses the roots of religious belief. Why do humans naturally gravitate toward religion, according to Hobbes? (There are at least two separate kinds of arguments here.) Do you find some or all of his arguments compelling?

4. Hobbes notes that religious or superstitious beliefs can often lead people to behave in ways that may be problematic. Explain why religion seems to be so powerful, and speculate on what a wise political leader might do to control its dangers.


1. What are the causes of conflict in the state of nature, according to Hobbes? Explain each of the three, and evaluate whether it really leads to the violence that he describes.

2. What kind of natural right(s) do individuals have, according to Hobbes? What does this allow them to do, and why is this the case?

3. Why are covenants/contracts/promises binding on those who make them, according to Hobbes? How confident are you that you understand his logic? Does it seem correct to you or mistaken?

4. What kinds of lawmaking authority do sovereigns have, according to Hobbes? Why is this the case? Explain as clearly as you can.

1. What kinds of liberty do the subjects of a sovereign have, according to Hobbes? Where they permitted to ignore the will of the sovereign, and for what reasons?

2. Hobbes argues that divided governments are impossible to sustain over time, and therefore no basis for a system of law. What are the strongest arguments for and against Hobbes’s position?

3. In Chapter 30, Hobbes links sovereign authority to the Ten Commandments. What is he seeking to achieve here? What are the potential benefits and dangers of linking sovereignty and religious commandments closely in this way?

February 5: **Reading Assignment**: John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapters 1-5, 8 (skipping paragraphs 101-112) in Morgan (pgs. 712-725, 737-738, 742-744). First Paper due electronically next Monday by 4:00 PM!!

1. Why do humans have natural rights, according to Locke? To what degree do you find his argument plausible or implausible? If you find his argument flawed, how could it be improved?

2. What is the “executive right” that Locke describes? What are the good and bad effects that such a right leads to? Do you think that individuals have such a right? Why or why not?

3. Locke argues that the Earth was initially given to humans in common, but that private property can ultimately be created through individual action. Explain his logic as clearly as you can, indicating each of the argument’s steps.

4. What is the relationship between individual property ownership and the territory of a country? Why does this relationship exist, and what are its consequences?


1. What are the primary reasons that individuals have for agreeing to create a commonwealth, according to Locke? To what extent could these problems be solved without a commonwealth? Consider one of them in detail in evaluating this.

2. What are the limits on lawmaking once a commonwealth has been created? How can citizens recognize whether they should obey specific laws or not?

3. Why are certain kinds of division of powers necessary for Locke? What specific problems is the division of powers intended to help societies solve?
4. Locke argues that tyrants can legitimately be overthrown by force. From reading his argument, how can any particular citizen know when it is appropriate to start a revolution? What is the relationship between the will of the majority and legitimate government?


1. Why is religious persecution inherently unable to succeed, according to Locke? There are three stages to his argument. Explain them as clearly as you can.

2. Do you agree with Locke’s arguments about the unworkability of persecution? Examine and carefully evaluate one of his three arguments, seeking to offer counterarguments to it.

3. Locke argues that religious rituals such as child sacrifice can reasonably be banned. What is the structure of his argument for this conclusion, and is it consistent with the rest of his arguments?

4. Locke argues that Catholics and atheists do not deserve religious toleration, while Jews, Hindus, and others do. What are his arguments against Catholics and atheists, and do you find either of them compelling? Why or why not?


1. What was the “first yoke” that historical individuals put on themselves, according to Rousseau, and how was this related to the growth of social inequality?

2. Why are current people continually unhappy with themselves and generally inauthentic in their behaviors, according to Rousseau? Describe his argument as well as you can, and evaluate its plausibility as a description of our own contemporary lives.

3. How were the wealthy ultimately able to create systems of political organization, according to Rousseau? What is the relationship to individual consent? Do you think that problems of this kind can still exist today?

4. Rousseau argues that both savages and the citizens of republics like Sparta would resist the patterns of political life that he otherwise describes. Explain why this is. Does his view seem correct to you? Why or why not?

1. What is the basic problem that the social contract seeks to solve, according to Rousseau? To what degree does this problem seems solvable, in your judgment? Explain your thinking.

2. To what degree must individuals give up their natural rights to form a social contract, in Rousseau’s view? Why might he conclude this?

3. Rousseau argues that citizens must be subject to the “general will” of society. Among other things, achieving this requires that citizens learn to think in the right way. How should citizens approach political decision-making, in this view? Illustrate with an example.

4. Rousseau describes the figure of the Legislator (or Lawgiver) in Book 2. What exactly does this figure do, and why does he seem necessary?


1. Rousseau argues that the government and the sovereign power must be separated from one another. Why is this necessary? Do you agree with his judgment in this regard? If so, do you find his own proposals plausible or implausible?

2. Why do all governments have a tendency toward corruption, in Rousseau’s view? What is necessary to keep them in check? Do you agree with his judgment in this regard?

3. What does Rousseau mean when he says that the general will is indestructible? If it is indestructible, why are societies ruled by something other than the general will? Explain as well as you can.

4. What are the requirements of the “civil religion”, as Rousseau describes it? What are its differences and similarities compared to Locke’s views on religion? Which view seems to you more correct?


1. According to Condorcet, what is the role of reason in political and social progress? Articulate his position as clearly as you can, and consider arguments for and (more importantly) against it.
2. What is the appropriate relationship between governed and governing, according to Condorcet? What rights do individuals have, and what kinds of authority to political institutions possess?

3. What are the similarities and differences between the views of Condorcet and those of Rousseau? Where the two differ, which seems to you more appealing? Explain your reasoning.

4. Where would Condorcet disagree most strongly with the views that Machiavelli outlines in the *Discourses*? Explain using at least one textual citation from each.


1. Condorcet has many things to say about the social progress in the future (from his time, and perhaps ours). What kinds of changes does he expect to occur? Pick one of those that he describes, and evaluate whether you think it has occurred since his day, or is likely to occur in the future.

2. Condorcet has much to say about the future development of equality. What does he seem to mean by the term, and what does his usage leave out (if anything)? What are the strongest reasons for doubting that such equality is either possible or desirable?

3. When you envision the future of humanity, is it strongly progressive in the way that Condorcet suggested? Or is it less positive, and perhaps even destructive? Explain the kinds of evidence that are relevant in making your judgment.

4. Condorcet wrote this text while hiding in from those who sought to arrest and execute him. (Ultimately, he poisoned himself to avoid being beheaded.) Do you think this was time well spent according to his own theoretical principles, as articulated in the text? Explain as clearly as you can.

March 5: **Reading Assignment**: *The Federalist Papers*, Assignment #1 (electronic source).

1. What is the relationship between small republics and political freedom, according to the Federalist Papers? What are the benefits of small size, and what the dangers?

2. Which theorist that we’ve read earlier has the most similar view of human nature to that of the Federalist Papers? What are the differences even in relation to this theorist?

3. What is the most profound cause of factions, according to the Federalist Papers? Are they correct in arguing that this problem will continue to exist in virtually any just society, or do they seem mistaken in this claim?
4. What is the relationship between law and “consent of the governed” in the Federalist Papers, especially Federalist #10? Does this relationship seem strong enough to create binding law, in your opinion?

March 10: Reading Assignment: The Federalist Papers, Assignment #2 (electronic source).

1. Why is it unwise to call new constitutional conventions to check potential tyrannies, according to the Federalists? Are there other ways in which tyranny might be checked by the actions of the people or other institutions that would fare better in this regard?

2. Is it legitimate for a free society to seek to get the “prejudices” of the community on the side of the established political system, as the Federalists suggest? Is this consistent with social contract theory? Why or why not?

3. The division of powers described in the Federalist Papers is intended to secure justice and political stability with limited direct interventions by the people. Describe at least one way in which the Federalist system could be made more effective, either according to its own standards or to others you judge more appropriate.


1. What is necessary for a free society with free citizens to exist, according to Jefferson? How difficult is it to ensure the continuance of these conditions?

2. Who seems to trust “the people” more strongly: Jefferson or the Federalists, and what serves as evidence either way? Which of them seems to be more correct?

3. How is Jefferson similar to and different from one of the following: Condorcet, Locke, Aquinas? Be as specific as you can.

4. Now that we’ve reached the end of the course, you have many resources to look back on in thinking about the character of law. To what degree does it seem possible for a society to be based on binding law rather than simple coercion, in your view? Explain as clearly as you can.