POLS 105: Introduction to Political Theory

Trinity College
Spring 2013
Course Time: MW, 1:15PM-2:30PM
Course Location: McCook 106

Professor Rebekah Sterling
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Office: Downes Memorial 211
Office Hours: M 3-5pm

Course website (Moodle): http://moodle.trincoll.edu/course/view.php?id=5355

Course Description

This course is an introduction to major concepts, debates, texts, and authors in Western political theory. We will focus broadly on two questions: What is politics? What does it mean to be a political actor, and especially a citizen? In the process, we will also explore related questions: What is justice? How should society be organized? Who should rule? What is the purpose of government? What does freedom mean, and how can we achieve it? What forms of political action are legitimate? Through careful readings of classic texts, we will grapple with these and other big and difficult questions about political life.

Political theory may at first seem like a very abstract activity, but each of the authors that we will read were responding in some way to concrete political problems they saw in their own times. They all engage in critical reflection about their own societies and about human life more generally. Some of their problems and questions may seem quite different from those of today, while others may seem very familiar. Our approach will be broadly historical: we will consider the contexts in which these authors were writing and the problems to which they were responding, and we will also explore how political ideas and debates change and persist over time. In turn, we will also engage in critical reflection about the texts, the ideas and questions that they raise, and their implications for our own lives.

This is a reading-, writing-, and discussion-intensive class. In papers and exams, you will be expected to demonstrate familiarity with the major concepts and arguments of each author and text. However, the goal of this class is not simply to learn what the texts say, but more importantly to learn how to engage critically and analytically with political and theoretical arguments, and then to make your own considered judgments and arguments about the issues they raise. That means more than merely having an “opinion”: it requires developing considered, cogent, and well-supported arguments through careful analysis of the texts and ideas. It requires you to engage in critical reflection on and careful analysis of not only the texts, but also your own ideas and views.

Required books

Make sure you have these editions and translations.

Hannah Arendt, Crises of the Republic, Mariner. ISBN: 0156232006
Other readings (posted on Moodle):
- Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*
- George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”
- Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”
- Hannah Arendt, “What is Freedom?”
- Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet”
- Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

Summary of Course Requirements and Key Dates:
- Short writing assignment #1 2.5 % Fri. Feb. 1
- Paper 1 (4-5 pages) 10 % Mon. Feb. 18
- Midterm Exam 20 % Mon. Mar. 4 (in class)
- Short writing assignment #2 2.5 % Wed. Mar. 27
- Paper 2 (5-6 pages) 20 % Wed. Apr. 17
- Final Exam 30 % Fri. May 10, 3pm.
- Participation %
  - In-class 10 % Every day
  - Online discussion forum 5 % 5 class days of your choosing, by noon

Course expectations in brief:

*Before class:*
- Carefully read all assigned texts, making notes of key themes, claims, and concepts, as well as points you find interesting, confusing, or otherwise noteworthy.
  - Read over any study questions provided by the professor, and jot down ideas, relevant page references, or other notes related to those questions.
- Complete any other assignments or exercises required for the day.

*In class:*
- Attend all classes on time, barring illness, emergencies, or special circumstances.
- *Always* bring the readings and your notes. Bring print-outs of any Moodle readings.
- Participate actively, constructively, and respectfully in our discussion: e.g. answering questions; asking questions; pointing out passages relevant to the point being discussed; making an argument or disputing one; explaining a concept; etc.
- Listen attentively and respectfully to the contributions of others (professor and other students).
- Take notes: on key concepts introduced or discussed in class; on passages referenced or discussed; on points clarified or questions answered; etc.
- Do not use electronic devices (e.g. laptops, phones) in class, and avoid distracting or disruptive activities.

*In your writing assignments:*
- Complete all assignments on time.
- Carefully follow the instructions and guidelines for the assignments.
- In your essays, make a cogent, focused, and thoughtful argument, backed up by appropriate evidence, sound reasoning, and careful analysis of the course readings.
- Cite the texts appropriately and honestly. *Do not use outside sources for this class.*
Course Components

Readings: The readings are the core of this class, and we will focus, individually and collectively, on analyzing and interpreting them, closely and carefully. You must bring the assigned readings (the books and/or print-outs of any Moodle readings) to class and be prepared to discuss them. I expect you to come to class having completed all the readings and thought carefully about them. These are difficult texts, and you should read them slowly, carefully, and actively. Take notes in the margin or in a notebook: make a note of passages that are interesting, confusing, provocative, problematic, of points or concepts that seem important, are unclear, or about which you have questions. Read with a dictionary nearby, and look up words you don’t know. Jot down your thoughts about an argument’s implications, possible objections, comparisons to other authors and texts, and/or connections to current-day society and politics. Bring your notes to class, and come with questions to discuss.

Note: Do NOT use outside sources for this class – and certainly not as a substitute for reading the texts. Doing so is counter-productive, since a key goal of this class is for you to demonstrate your own ability to read the texts closely, to analyze and interpret them yourself, and to defend your own arguments.

Writing: Regular writing is important to help you clarify your questions, work through difficult materials, develop your own ideas, and practice skills of interpretation, analysis, and argument. In this class, you will write:

- two short writing assignments (1-3 pages), brief analyses of the texts to help you develop your thoughts for the longer essays;
- two argument essays (4-5 pages, 5-7 pages), in which you will develop an argument and interpret the texts;
- 5 forum posts: For five class sessions of your choosing (in different weeks), you must post a reading response on the class discussion forum on Moodle. In approximately 200 words, these posts should provide thoughtful and analytic comments about some aspect of the assigned reading for that day. Posts are due by noon on the day your chosen reading is assigned. Forum posts will be graded all together as one unit at the end of the semester.

Exams: The midterm and final exams aim to assess your knowledge of the important concepts and arguments of each text, your ability to analyze those arguments and relate them to each other, and your ability to construct and defend a simple argument of your own. Exam questions will include concept identification and explanation, passage identification and interpretation, and essay questions. The final exam is comprehensive: it will cover material from the entire semester.

Discussion and in-class Participation: Active participation in class discussion is an essential part of this course. In class, we will work collaboratively on interpreting, analyzing, assessing, and debating the arguments in the texts. I expect everyone to participate actively in our discussions, throughout the semester. Again, these are difficult texts and difficult ideas, and so do not think you need to have everything figured out before you can participate. Figuring things out together is part of the point of class discussion. There are many ways to contribute: asking thoughtful questions; pointing out passages relevant to the point being discussed; making an argument or disputing one; explaining a concept; and more. Very often there will not be a single right answer, but there are always more and less thoughtful answers. I will be looking for evidence that you've done the readings and are thinking carefully about them. Your in-class participation grade will reflect not
simply how much you speak, but the quality of your contributions, as well as your degree of preparedness, attentiveness, respect for others’ contributions, adherence to class policies, regular (and punctual) attendance, and factors like improvement over the semester.

Classroom etiquette:
As Thomas Hobbes (whom you’ll meet soon) put it: “To hearken to a man’s counsel, or discourse of what kind soever, is to Honour; as a signe we think him wise, or eloquent, or witty. To sleep, or go forth, or talk the while is to Dishonour” (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, 10). Please show respect for your fellow seminar members by arriving on time, listening attentively when others are speaking, and avoiding noisy, distracting, or disruptive behavior during class. Oh, and no sleeping!

*Electronic devices policy:* Computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices may not be used during class; they must be turned off and put away.

**Additional Course Policies**

**Attendance:** Students are expected to attend class regularly and punctually, barring illness, emergency, or other unavoidable situations. Missing more than 3 class sessions for any reason will adversely affect your final grade. Students who anticipate absences due to religious observance or other circumstances should come see me at the beginning of the semester to make appropriate arrangements. If you do have to miss class for a legitimate and documentable reason:

- let me know as soon as possible, preferably before class.
- write a 1-2 page summary of the assigned readings, and hand it in to me at the next class meeting. This will help make up the missed participation component of the day; however, it will not prevent absences beyond three from hurting your grade.
- get notes from a fellow student for the class you missed, since you are responsible for any material and discussion you missed. Once you’ve reviewed these notes, email or meet with me if you have any questions.

You are also expected to arrive on time and stay until the end of class. Repeatedly coming late or leaving during class will hurt your grade. If there is a rare occasion when you need to arrive late or leave early for a legitimate reason, you should inform me before class, and then come or go as unobtrusively as possible.

**Submitting papers and written work:** For most of your written assignments, I will require both a hard copy and an electronic copy (submitted via Moodle). I will specify the submission method in class. *I reserve the right to submit any submitted assignments to plagiarism-detection services, at my discretion.*

**Deadlines, late penalties, and extensions:** Late papers and writing assignments will be penalized by 1/3 of a letter grade per 24 hour period. Late forum posts will not receive credit. On rare occasions, I may grant extensions. However, extensions must be requested well before the deadline, and require proof of need (e.g. documentation of family or medical emergencies, other unusual circumstances).

**Intellectual honesty:** I take intellectual honesty very seriously. As the Student Handbook explains: “Intellectual honesty assumes that students do their own work and that they credit properly those upon whose work and thought they draw” (p. 19). Plagiarism, cheating, and other forms of intellectual dishonesty will result in an F for the assignment, and may also lead to disciplinary
hearings and failure of the course as a whole. All students are responsible for understanding what constitutes academic honesty and dishonesty, and for adhering to the Integrity Contract and the Student Handbook.

**Course communications:** I will regularly email the class with important class announcements, discussion questions, and information on assignments. You are responsible for the information in these emails, so make sure that you check your email regularly.

I am happy to answer questions by email, and I try to answer emails within 24 hours during the work week or 48 hours over the weekend. Email is well suited for quick and simple questions; for more complex questions and issues, though, it's best to come and talk to me in person. Please do make use of my office hours to ask questions about the course or to discuss the materials further. If my office hours conflict with your schedule, email me to set up an appointment at another time.

**Accommodations and other circumstances:** If you have a disability that requires accommodations, please come and see me at the beginning of the semester, either in my office hours or by appointment, and bring your official accommodations letter from Trinity College. Students must request accommodations from professors no later than 10 days before the accommodations are needed, but I strongly encourage you to come and see me within the first two weeks of class so that we can make arrangements as early as possible. For information on how to apply for accommodations at Trinity College, contact the Disability Coordinator, Lori Clapis, at Lori.Clapis@trincoll.edu or in her office at the Health Center, and see: http://www.trincoll.edu/StudentLife/DisabilityServices/students/Pages/default.aspx

**Weekly Schedule**

*Note: The schedule may be subject to minor changes during the semester; any changes will be announced in class.*

**Week 1: Introduction**

W 1/23 Introductory lecture

**PART I: PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS**

**Week 2: Socratic Citizenship? Justice and Injustice, City and Soul**

M 1/28 Plato, *Apology of Socrates* (pdf on Moodle); Excerpt from Plato’s *Seventh Letter* (quoted on pp. viii-x of the introduction to *Republic*); and Plato, *Republic*, Book I

W 1/30 Plato, *Republic*, Books II-IV (selections)

** SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE – Friday Feb. 1 **

**Week 3: "Until philosophers rule as kings...": Politics vs. Philosophy**

M 2/4 Plato, *Republic*, Books V-VII (selections)

W 2/6 Plato, *Republic*, Books VIII-IX

George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language” (Moodle)
Week 4: Politics and/as Virtù (vs. Virtue)
W 2/13  Machiavelli, *The Prince*, chapters 15-26

Week 5: Politics, Knowledge, and Human Nature: a Science of Politics?
M 2/18  Discussion: Machiavelli and Plato on politics and philosophy
**  PAPER 1 DUE – Mon. Feb. 18 **

PART II: CITIZEN AND STATE

Week 6: Obedient Subjects? Sovereignty, Security, and the State

Week 7: Thinking like a Citizen? Popular Sovereignty and the General Will
M 3/4   ** MIDTERM EXAM - IN CLASS **

Week 8: Democratic Subjects: Active Citizenship and Civic Duty
W 3/13  Rousseau, continued

Week 9: SPRING BREAK
M 3/18 & W 3/20: NO CLASS

PART III: THINKING
Week 10: Thinking in Public vs. the Tyranny of the Prevailing Opinion
M 3/25  Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”
** SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE – Wed. Mar. 27 **

Week 11: Freedom of Thought and Experiments in Living
M 4/1   Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 2
PART IV: ACTING

Week 12: Action and Political Freedom

M 4/8  Arendt, “What is Freedom?” (pdf on Moodle)
W 4/10  Arendt, “What is Freedom?” continued

Week 13: Violence

M 4/15  Arendt, “On Violence,” in *Crises of the Republic*
Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet” (pdf on Moodle)

** PAPER 2 DUE – Wed. Apr. 17 **

Week 14: Dissent

M 4/22  Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (pdf on Moodle)
        Arendt, “Civil Disobedience,” in *Crises of the Republic*

Week 15: Conclusion: Political Theory, Politics, and the Citizen

M 4/29  Conclusion – readings TBA

Exam Week:  

*FINAL EXAM: Friday, May 10, 3pm*
Tips for reading political theory texts

- **Minimize or eliminate distractions.** Reading carefully – especially for these texts – demands your full and sustained attention. Turn off email, internet, phones, etc.
- **Look the reading over first before starting.** What kind of text is it? How is it structured? Does it have a table of contents, or section headings? What do these tell you?
- **Read slowly and closely, and re-read.** Theoretical texts are rich and dense. Individual sentences matter. These aren’t the kind of texts you can read quickly or skim. It should take several minutes for each page, and you may need to read texts more than once to understand them.
- **Take notes.** Writing and thinking are connected. Don’t just underline or highlight, but make notes in the margins and/or a notebook. Note the structure of the text, the key concepts, the main argument, as well as interesting, important, or confusing passages. (Remember, if you’re underlining or highlighting everything, then you’re really not *highlighting* anything.)
- **Read with a dictionary.** Theoretical and philosophical texts may often use words you don’t know, words that are no longer in current usage, or – and most importantly – words that have a specific theoretical meaning in the author’s text, a meaning that differs from the way the word is used in everyday language. Look up words you don’t know, and make a note of words and concepts that seem to have a special theoretical meaning in the text.
- **What is the central argument?** What is the main point or claim in the text? Is the argument implicit or explicit?
- **To what question(s) or problem(s) is the author responding?** What are the social or political conditions, problems, puzzles, or dilemmas that the argument addresses? Put another way: so what? why is the author writing about this? What’s at stake? Why is the argument important?
- **What are some of the key concepts within the text?** Are there certain terms that recur often and that suggest important concepts or assumptions? How is the author using these concepts, and how are they important to the overall text?
- **What assumptions underlie the argument?** Are there ideas, concepts, or points that are assumed but not explicitly stated? Why do they matter?
- **How is the text – or argument – organized and structured?** What are the different parts and how do they relate to each other? Can you reconstruct the structure of the argument? Why might the text be organized in that way, and what effects might that have on the audience?
- **Who is the intended audience?** Why might that be important to the argument?
- **Think about contemporary relevance and application.** How might we apply the author’s concepts, critiques, or arguments to current-day dilemmas and debates?
- **Connect and compare texts and authors.** How does the reading relate to the other texts we have read? Are they in conflict, and if so in what ways? Are they complementary? Are they in agreement? Are they approaching similar problems but in different ways? Are they approaching very different problems? Are they using similar concepts? Does one author define a particular concept differently from another author? How so?
- **How valid are the arguments in the text?** What specifically are their strengths and weaknesses? Can you think of other points or examples that would support the arguments in the text? How would you go about defending them? Can you think of objections? How would you go about critiquing those arguments?
- **Think critically, but try to understand before simply critiquing or rejecting.** Try to fully understand the author’s perspective before critiquing it. Why would someone find it persuasive? In what ways is it consistent? But, also think critically and analyze the concepts, arguments, and their implications for yourself. Don’t accept perspectives uncritically or simply repeat points you’ve heard in class, but analyze those points and offer arguments (with reasons) to support or critique particular interpretations of the text.