

# Survey of Ancient and Medieval Political Theory

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This course introduces students to some of the most influential texts and themes in Western political thought, from the Ancient Greeks through the Renaissance. We examine questions like: What is the good life? What is justice? What are the advantages of and problems with democracy? What is the best political arrangement? The course requires no prior knowledge of political theory, though a basic familiarity with the broad outlines of ancient and medieval history is helpful. The course does not merely aim to impart historical information, but to prompt students' critical engagement with some of the central texts of the Western philosophical tradition. Students are therefore expected to explore and develop their own considered responses to the ideas and arguments encountered in the readings.

## 1. Required Texts

\*\*NB: Translations are important and online sources are often horrible. It is therefore important to purchase the edition of each work indicated below. If you already have a version of one or more of these texts, please speak with me about whether it will work for this class.

Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, trans. Steven Lattimore (Hackett)

Sophocles, *Antigone, Oedipus the King, Electra*, trans. HDF Kitto (Oxford classics)

Plato, *Five Dialogues* (Hackett)

Plato, *Republic*, eds. Grube and Reeve (Hackett)

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Lesley Brown, trans. David Ross (Oxford)

Aristotle, *Politics*, ed. CDC Reeve (Hackett)

Cicero, *On the Commonwealth* (Cambridge U. Press)

Epictetus, *The Handbook (The Encheiridion)*

*The Holy Bible* (Any edition is fine, but RSV or KJV is preferred)

St. Augustine, *The City of God* (Penguin)

*Saint Thomas Aquinas on Law, Morality and Politics*, eds. Baumgarth and Regan (Hackett)

Luther, M., *On the Freedom of the Christian* (with related texts) ed. Helferrich, T. (Hackett)

*Machiavelli: Selected Political Writings*, ed. Wootton, D. (Hackett)

Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of the Peace* (Cambridge U. Press)

## **2. Rules and Requirements**

### **Attendance**

Attendance at all classes and sections is a requirement of the course. Persistent unexplained absences constitute grounds for failing the class, regardless performance in other course requirements.

### **Participation**

The more students actively participate in class discussion, the better. I encourage questions and discussion during all meetings. Participation will count in my assessment of your final grade.

### **Laptops and portable electronic devices**

Texting, browsing, emailing, etc., during class are distracting to you and others, and so I respectfully ask that all laptops, phones, and other electronic devices be switched off and stowed away during class. Students are likely to retain more of the information covered in class if they take handwritten notes, so I encourage bringing a notebook and pen.

### **Readings/Viewings**

Students are expected to complete the reading and viewing assignments in accordance with the schedule. If you have trouble understanding what you have read or watched, don't be shy about visiting office hours for help. Learning to navigate through complex material is one of the most valuable skills a college degree can impart and I am happy to offer pointers on how best to develop that skill.

### **Academic Integrity**

Students must comply with all provisions of the UVa Honor Code. Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty are surprisingly easy to detect and very easy to avoid. Collaboration on tests and quizzes is strictly forbidden.

## **3. Grading Policies**

### **Grade breakdown**

- In-class Participation = 10%
- Quizzes = 25%
- Two Papers = 50% (25% each)
- Final Exam = 15%

### **Late work**

Requests for extensions must be received in writing, by email, at least one week prior to the deadline. No extensions will be granted after that date. To request an extension, please send an email to me. Outside of approved extensions, late work will be penalized at a rate of a third of a grade per 24-hour period. These penalties may be waived in cases of documented emergency. NOTE: Loss of data (e.g., due to computer problems) does *not* count as an emergency. It is your responsibility to ensure that your work is backed up.

## Grading procedures

Every effort will be made to return graded assignments within one week of submission. Students who wish to query their grades can submit a written grade appeal beginning five days after the assignment is returned. Students should understand, however, that grades may be adjusted up or down upon review.

## Grade explanation

Here is a rough guide to interpreting the grades assigned to work in the class:

- A grade of A, in any flavor, signifies (varying degrees of) excellence: to earn a grade in this region, students must show genuine insight into (as opposed to a basic grasp of) the material, and successfully develop cogent, convincing and original responses to it.
- A grade of B+ signifies superior command of the course material: to earn it, students must show a good understanding of the leading arguments covered in the course, and demonstrate the ability to assess them critically on their own terms without necessarily achieving responses to them that are fully cogent or convincing.
- A grade of B signifies good performance: students receiving this grade will have shown a firm understanding of the course material and made plausible, if not fully developed, critical responses to it.
- A grade of B- indicates solid performance: B- work shows a decent basic understanding of the leading ideas covered in the course nonetheless marred by (e.g.) unclear or vague writing, omissions of relevant ideas, ambiguous formulations, conceptual muddle, or unsophisticated argumentation.
- C grades indicate performance of mixed quality: in work receiving C grades competence, understanding and insight will sit alongside error, misunderstanding, cliché, simplification and confusion.
- A grade of D, in any flavor, indicates work that is in some respect (and in varying degrees) radically inadequate: such grades are symptoms of (e.g.) unfamiliarity with, failure to understand, or half-hearted engagement with, the course materials.

## 3. Schedule

### Part I: Pre-Socratic Greek Thought

*Week 1: Thucydides and the Substance of Political Morality*

Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.20-1.24, 2.34-54, 3.37-3.50, 5.84-5.116

*Week 2: Antigone and the Authority of the Polity*

Sophocles, *Antigone*, lines 1-705, 706-end

## **Part II: Plato and Aristotle**

*Week 3: Political Obligation and the Socratic Problem*

Plato, *Apology*, in *Five Dialogues*, pp. 21-44

Plato, *Crito*, in *Five Dialogues*, pp. 45-57

*Week 4: The Nature of Justice and the Importance of Virtue*

Plato, *Republic*, Bks. I-III

*Week 5: The Just City and the Just Soul*

Plato, *Republic*, Bks. IV-IX

*Week 6: The Good Life*

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bks. I-II, V, VIII, IX (chaps. 4-12), X

*Week 7: Politics, Nature, and Citizenship*

Aristotle, *Politics*, I, II (chaps. 1-5), III

*Week 8: Ideal and Non-ideal Constitutions*

Aristotle, *Politics*, VII and VIII (chaps. 1-2); IV-VI

## **Part III: Political Thought after the Polis**

*Week 9: Stoicism and the Cosmopolitan Turn*

Epictetus, *Enchiridion*

Inwood & Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy*, pp. 233-249 (posted online)

*Week 10: Natural Law and Its Critics*

Cicero, *On the Commonwealth*, Book III, pp. 195-228

Cicero, *The Republic & The Laws*, pp. 62-71, 101-28 (posted online)

## **Part IV: Christian Political Thought**

*Week 11: The (Non-)Politics of Early Christianity*

The Holy Bible, “The Gospel According to St. Matthew,” “Romans”

*Week 12: Politicizing Christianity and the Ethics of Despair*

St. Augustine, *The City of God*, Bks. XII (1-8, 22-28), XIV, XIX

*Week 13: Natural Law and the Two Swords*

Selections from *The Crisis of Church and State* (posted online)

Aquinas, *On Law, Morality and Politics*, pp. 11-88, 190-210

Marsilius, *The Defender of Peace*, selections TBD

*Week 14: Distributive Justice, Resistance, and Just War*

Aquinas, *On Law, Morality and Politics*, pp. 130-158, 173-189, 164-172

Marsilius, *The Defender of Peace*, selections TBD

## **Part V: The Emergence of Protestant Political Ethics**

*Week 15: Freedom of Conscience and the Right of Resistance*

Luther, "The Freedom of a Christian," pp. 1-43

Luther, "Against the Robbing and Murdering Hordes of Peasants," pp. 116-122

Luther, "Dr. Martin Luther's Warning to his Dear German People" (posted online)

Stephen Junius Brutus, *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* (posted online)

## **4. Assignments**

### **First paper, due Week 9**

Plato and Aristotle defend many controversial political claims; you will find yourself disagreeing with at least some if not most of them. Identify one of the claims with which you most strongly disagree and then write a 2000-2500 word paper mounting the strongest defense of that claim that you can muster. You might imagine yourself being hired as an attorney to represent Plato or Aristotle and to argue for their views before a jury (or the Athenian assembly!). Your paper should be structured as follows:

- (a) An introductory paragraph stating the view you propose to defend
- (b) Three to four paragraphs outlining some of the strongest reasons to reject that view
- (c) Three to four paragraphs attempting to rebut those objections
- (d) A brief conclusion explaining whether you still disagree with the view you have defended. If so, explain why; if not, why not.

Note that the best papers will engage deeply with the relevant literature, and offer sophisticated and thoughtful argumentation.

Below are examples of claims that you might take on. (NB: This list is by no means exhaustive.)

- Plato's assertion that democracy is almost as bad as tyranny.
- Plato's view that political leaders ought to be prohibited from holding any private property or personal wealth.
- Plato's defense of censorship or eugenics.
- Plato's proposal that only philosophers should rule.
- Plato's claim that virtue is necessary *and* sufficient for happiness.
- Aristotle's claim that human beings are the only political animals.
- Aristotle's defense of slavery, patriarchy, or anthropic supremacy.
- Aristotle's description of oligarchic regimes in which wealthy elites compete for elective office as "deviant" or "corrupt."
- Aristotle's defense of, or objections to, democracy.

## **Second paper, due Week 15**

Answer one of the following questions, structuring your response on the model of the first paper:

1. Does the idea of a 'Natural Law' valid at all times in all places, and binding on all rational creatures, make sense? Discuss with reference to Cicero and Aquinas.
2. Can political activists be Stoics, or does successful political engagement necessarily require a degree of emotional attachment to ideals, causes and campaigns for social reform to which Stoics must object?
3. Some say that "without God there would be no reason to be moral." Should we agree? Discuss with reference to any three texts from the course.
4. Evaluate Augustine's criticisms of Greek ethics in Book XIX of *The City of God*.
5. In Book XIX, chapter 6, of *The City of God*, Augustine appears to condone the use of torture by magistrates, even in cases in which the victim is innocent. Does this Augustinian position provide valid support for the position apparently taken by the U.S. in its 'war on terror'? Or does it merely exemplify the confusions inherent in the current American stance on torture?
6. "Christianity: an intolerant religion." Discuss with reference to Aquinas and Augustine.
7. Does Christianity give up prematurely on the possibility of earthly happiness and justice? Discuss with reference to at least one Christian thinker and one ancient Greek thinker covered in this course.
8. "As Aquinas realized, Christian ethical doctrines imply that there ought to be strict limits on the levels of material and economic inequality among people around the world. Today, many Christian leaders advocate political views that seem either indifferent to increasing economic inequality, or actually to celebrate it. But Aquinas is right, and contemporary Christian conservatives are wrong, about the distributive implications of Christian beliefs." Should we accept or reject this statement?
9. Aquinas and Marsilius are both Aristotelians. Yet, they disagree on crucial issues. On the question of popular sovereignty, which is more faithful to his Aristotelian roots? Explain.
10. Both Aquinas and Augustine accepted the possibility of a just war, and the use of violence to promote legitimate moral and political ends. Is this consistent with the pacifism apparently preached by Jesus?

## **Quizzes**

- Administered randomly, but at least once a week
- 2-3 questions long (responses should be approximately 3-5 sentences each)
- Graded on a scale of 1-10
- Only the top 10 (out of 15) count

## **Final Exam**

- Open book, open note
- No collaboration or use of outside sources permitted
- Details about the examination format will be announced in the final part of the semester