

Great Political Thinkers: Introduction to Political Thought

Yeshiva College, Fall 2019

Instructors: Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveichik and Dr. Neil Rogachevsky
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Course Summary

Political philosophy examines the fundamental problems faced by human beings both as individuals and as members of associations that, in the Western tradition, have come to be called political. It asks two decisive questions: “how should I live my life?” and “how should we live together?” Together these questions point to central dilemmas of human life that the great thinkers of the Western tradition have explored with tremendous depth. What is justice? How does the good of the individual relate to the good of the political community? Is thought superior to action or is action superior to thought? What is virtue? Piety? Courage? The inquiry into these questions has profoundly shaped our lives as well as the countries we inhabit, including the United States. In this class, we will study seminal thinkers in the history of political thought, both ancient and modern, including Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke. Great Jewish political thought, including that of Abarbanel, Maimonides, and the political thought of the Bible, will be brought in to enrich our discussions. The course will conclude with an assessment of the influence of early modern political thought on America and the American founding.

For Poli Sci majors: toward Intro course requirement or Political Theory distribution.

Expectations

Students will be expected to carefully read between 100 and 150 pages a week. Prior to every class, students will be expected to have read and reflected upon the readings of that week, and to participate in class discussions about them. Students will have been given a question to facilitate reflection on the readings for the week ahead, and will be asked to respond before class with several paragraphs of reflection in response to the question. In addition, students will write a longer essay that asks for interpretation of one or more great political thinker. A take home final exam will ask for comparisons between thinkers covered and major themes addressed in the course.

Attendance

Active attendance and participation is essential for the functioning of the course and learning experience. All absences are to be cleared in advance with the instructors. Any more than 2 unexcused absences will result in a docked attendance grade.

Grading

20%: Class Attendance and Participation

25%: Response Papers
 25%: Essay
 30%: Take Home Final Exam

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services, (646) 592-4280, akelsen@yu.edu during the first week of class. Once you have been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodation letter to ensure the successful implementation of those accommodations.

READING MATERIAL

All students are required to obtain their own copies of the following works, **in the following noted editions/translations**. Please contact the instructors if you have any difficult, financial or otherwise, in obtaining these texts.

Plato's *Republic* (Allan Bloom translation)
 Aristotle's *Politics* (University of Chicago, Lord translator)
 Aristotle's *Ethics* (Susan Collins Translation)
 Machiavelli's *The Prince* (University of Chicago, Mansfield translator)

Other readings will be distributed.

Schedule

Week I – (August 27 and 29) Introduction: Why Political Philosophy?
 Readings: Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?” Hannah Arendt, “Understanding and Politics”

Week II – (September 3/5) Plato *Republic*

Week III – (September 10/12) Plato *Republic* II

Week IV – (September 17/19) Plato *Republic* III

Week V – (September 24/26) Plato *Republic* IV

Week VI – (October 29/31) Aristotle *Politics* + Maimonides “Law of Kings”

Week VIII – (November 5/7) Aristotle *Politics*, + Abarbanel “Commentary on the Torah” and “Commentary on Nevi'im”

Week IX – (November 12/14) Aristotle *Ethics*, Yochanan Ben Zakai

Week X – (November 19/21) Aristotle *Ethics*, Maimonides *Eight Chapters*

Week XI – (November 26) Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*

Week XII – (December 3/5) Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*

Week XIII – (December 10/12) Machiavelli, *The Prince*

Week XIV – (December 17/19) Machiavelli, *The Prince & Conclusion*