POLS 270: Basic Issues in Political Philosophy:
Power, Obedience & Fairy Tales

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Course Description

This course satisfies the political theory requirement for students who have not taken POLS 170. The theme of the course may vary from semester to semester.

The class this spring has two objectives. The first objective is to prepare you to ask disquieting political questions about your own society. The second objective is to give you an introduction to the history of Western political philosophy. The governing idea of the course is given by the title: one way that power can be secured is if a people hold treasured beliefs about their society that are false. We will read major works by four canonical thinkers, for the purpose of considering this fact from a number of different angles.

This is a course in political philosophy, which means that our discussion will be conceptual rather than applied. We will be talking about ideas, rather than examining concrete cases as you might expect to do in a course in American politics. Applied thinking is important, and may even be your preferred approach. But empirical analysis presupposes underlying theoretical assumptions. Political philosophy is the area of political science in which such assumptions are examined directly.

You will be required to read complicated, challenging, original texts. It is perfectly possible that you will not understand what you read at first – that’s just how it is with this kind of material – and it will be up to you to keep at it until you do. You will not be spoon-fed information, though I am always genuinely happy to talk with you and to help you. One of the important benefits of political philosophy courses being this way is that you learn to track complex lines of argument for yourself.

General Expectations and Policies

The bottom line requirement for this course is that you do the reading very, very carefully (more than once, in most cases), and come to class prepared to talk about the material with others in order to understand and evaluate it. If, for whatever reason, you are not in a position to take on a high level of intellectual responsibility this semester, this may not be a good class for you to take this term. Similarly, if you are secretly hoping that this won’t really be a philosophy course, you should make sure that you understand that it will be. The good news is that you are bright, and the material is genuinely compelling, so as long as you are willing to work hard, you’re bound to benefit from the course.

Attendance is mandatory, unless you are sick or face an emergency situation. Please do not come to class sick. Cell phones, laptops and other electronic devices must be turned off during class. In keeping with the values of Jesuit education at SLU, I take it for granted that comportment in the classroom will be good-natured, considerate and intellectually serious; failure to meet this expectation will result in you being required to leave the room, and will constitute an unexcused absence. I also expect that you will come to class on time.
Academic Integrity

The University is a community of learning, whose effectiveness requires an environment of mutual trust and integrity. Academic integrity is violated by any dishonesty such as soliciting, receiving, or providing any unauthorized assistance in the completion of work submitted toward academic credit. While not all forms of academic dishonesty can be listed here, examples include copying from another student, copying from a book or class notes during a closed book exam, submitting materials authored by or revised by another person as the student’s own work, copying a passage or text directly from a published source without appropriately citing or recognizing that source, taking a test or doing an assignment or other academic work for another student, securing or supplying in advance a copy of an examination or quiz without the knowledge or consent of the instructor, sharing or receiving the questions from an on-line quiz with another student, taking an on-line quiz with the help of another student, and colluding with another student or students to engage in academic dishonesty.

All clear violations of academic integrity will be met with appropriate sanctions. In this course, academic dishonesty on an assignment will result, at a minimum, in a grade of zero for the assignment and a report of academic dishonesty being sent to the Academic Honesty Committee of the College of Arts and Sciences. In the case of Class B violations, the Academic Honesty Committee may impose a larger sanction including, but not limited to, assigning a failing grade in the course, disciplinary probation, suspension, and dismissal from the University.

Students should refer to the following SLU website for more information about Class A and B violations and the procedures following a report of academic dishonesty:
http://www.slu.edu/college-of-arts-and-sciences-home/undergraduate-education/academic-honesty

Student Learning, Disability Statement

In recognition that people learn in a variety of ways and that learning is influenced by multiple factors (e.g., prior experience, study skills, learning disability), resources to support student success are available on campus. Students who think they might benefit from these resources can find out more about:

• Course-level support (e.g., faculty member, departmental resources, etc.) by asking your course instructor.

• University-level support (e.g., tutoring/writing services, Disability Services) by visiting the Student Success Center (BSC 331) or by going to www.slu.edu/success.

Students who believe that, due to a disability, they could benefit from academic accommodations are encouraged to contact Disability Services at 314-977-8885 or visit the Student Success Center.

Confidentiality will be observed in all inquiries.

Course instructors support student accommodation requests when an approved letter from Disability Services has been received and when students discuss these accommodations with the instructor after receipt of the approved letter.
Access to me

The easiest way to contact me is through e-mail, which I check regularly. In most cases I will be able to get back to you within a few hours; if you haven’t heard back within 12 hrs, send me another e-mail. I will retrieve phone messages when I am in my office, but I will not be on campus every day; e-mail is much more reliable. I’m also delighted to talk to you in person, during office hours.

Assignments, Feedback and Grades

Participation - 30%
- Includes regular quizzes and small reading-related assignments; quizzes will be “graded,” but only for the purpose of feedback; these grades will not be calculated. Other assignments will not be graded, except insofar as doing them in good faith will figure into the participation grade.

“Benchmark” essay (5 pps.) – Ungraded, but you cannot pass the class if you do not do it. Date to be set, but it will be before the mid-term.

Midterm Exam – 20%

Essay (6-7 pps.) – 20%

Final exam – 30%

Around mid-semester, you will be required to have a short meeting with me in my office, to check in on your progress in the course. This meeting is mandatory.

Your grade will be based on your performance on the assignments listed above. There is no extra credit available for the completion of additional work. Make-up exams will be offered only under the most extraordinary of circumstances. I give letter grades, corresponding to qualitative assessment criteria. I do not grade on a distributional curve; your grade is based solely on the quality of your own performance. I am a very transparent grader, and I am happy to talk with you about how to do your best in the course and to develop intellectually. Please note the College of Arts and Sciences’ common grading scheme – though, as I have said, I don’t assign number grades: A=93-100; A-=90-92; B+=87-89; B=83-86; B-=80-82; C+=77-79; C=73-76; C-=70-72; D=60-70; F=below 60.

Note

In this class, final grades designate the following:

**A-range** = Excellent at political philosophy;
**B+** = Very good at political philosophy;
**B** = Good, solid work in political philosophy;
**B-** = Acceptable degree of competence in political philosophy;
**C-range** = Weak in the area of political philosophy;
**D-range** = Poor in the area of political philosophy.

**Please be sure that you understand these criteria.** If you have any questions, feel free to ask me.

If you receive a split grade on an assignment (B/B+, for example), it means that a case could have been made for either grade, and that I want to be able to take all of your grades into consideration when I assign the final grade for the course.
I don’t accept late papers, unless you have contacted me ahead of time concerning an absolute emergency. Papers are due at the beginning of class on the date that they are due, unless otherwise stipulated.

**Required texts**

The following books have been ordered at the SLU Bookstore:

- Plato, *Republic*
- Aristotle, *Politics*
- Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*
- Mill, *Utilitarianism, On Liberty, and Representative Government*

Any additional readings will be made available electronically.
Projected Reading and Discussion Schedule

Introduction

Jan 13 – Explanation of the course
Jan 15 – Background lecture

Plato: Speaking Truth to Power

Jan. 20 – Read Books 1 & 2
Jan. 22 – Re-read Book 2; read Book 3
Jan. 27 – Re-read Books 2 & 3; read Book 4;
Jan. 29 – Read Books 5 & 6
Feb. 3 – Re-read Book 6; read Book 7
Feb. 5 – Read Books 8 & 9
Feb. 10 – No new reading

Aristotle: Regimes, Purposes and Structures of Power

Feb. 12 – Background lecture on Aristotle; read Politics, Book 1, chs. 1-2; Book 7, chs. 1-3
Feb. 17 – Discussion: what is a polis? Read Politics, Book 3; Book 7, ch. 4, 8-10
Feb. 19 – No new reading
Feb. 24 – Constitutions & citizenship: Read Politics, Book 3
Feb. 26 – Democracy & economic status: Read Politics, Book 4, chs. 4-9; Book 6, chs. 1-5

March 3: Midterm review
March 5: Midterm

SPRING BREAK

Rousseau: Democracy, Alienation and Self-Determination

March 17 & 19 – Read Discourse on the Origin of Inequality
March 24 – On the Basis of a Distinction Between Force and Right
Read The Social Contract, Book 1, chs 1-6
March 26 – Universality and the formation of a “We”
Read SC, Book 1 chs 7-9; Bk 2
March 31 – Popular Sovereignty and the Institutions of Government
2nd Treatise, Bk 3, Bk 4, chs 1-2
April 2 – No class (Easter)
April 7 – Discussion; no new reading

**Mill: On the Lure of Authoritarianism**

April 9 – Read *On Representative Government*, chs. 1-3

April 14 – Read *On Liberty*, chs. 2-3

April 16 – Read *On Representative Government*, chs 4-8; *Utilitarianism*, chs. 2-3

April 21 & 23 – Discussion; possible short readings or presentations

April 27 & 29 – Review