POLS 371: Ancient and Medieval Political Thought

For better or for worse, this is not a course designed to give you a taste of what “people thought back then” (or at least some of them), before everybody came to believe what we now know to be true. Rather, the starting assumption of this course is that although important advances have been made, there are some fundamental social and political questions that we need to ask of ourselves now (and perhaps even be able to answer), and that engaging with these particular thinkers can help us to do so. How do we know if our political system is just? What should a just state be expected to do — what should its purpose be, and why? Does it matter, for achieving justice, if our citizens are good people? What is involved in being a good person?

If these thinkers can help, though, it is not because they offer us easy answers. No. If they can help, it is because they can give us ways to say and to think things that the dominant ideas of our time do not give us ready ways to say and think. Especially, they make it easier to think radically — i.e., deeply and with an eye to the whole — and critically — i.e., to assess what is, in light of what ought to be.

Expectations and Policies

This is a course in political philosophy, which means that we will be talking about ideas, rather than examining empirical cases -- as one might expect to do in an applied course on comparative, international or American politics. Do make sure that you understand this, so that you won't be surprised by the abstract nature of the course material.

The bottom line requirement is that you must do difficult reading very, very carefully (more than once, in most cases), and then come to class prepared to talk about it 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 and commitment, you should think hard about whether or not you will be able to meet this expectation; this may not be the course for you to take this semester.

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 5 principles of Jesuit education at SLU, I take it that comportment in the classroom will be good-natured, considerate and intellectually disciplined. 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
Assignments and Grade Breakdown

Participation - 30%
Mid-term - 20%
Final exam - 30%
Paper - 20%
“Benchmark” assignment – ungraded, but you cannot pass the class if you don’t do it

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.

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.

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 or it is an emergency.

Books

The following books are or will be available at the bookstore:

Plato, Republic (Bloom translation)
The Blackwell Guide to Plato’s Republic (ed., Santas)
Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics (Ostwald translation)
Aristotle, Politics (Oxford Classics edition)
*SPRING BREAK*

Aristotle – What Does It Take to Flourish?

Week 9
March 17 – Form, Activity and Virtue: Being an Excellent Version of the Kind of Thing That One Is
   Introductory lecture; Irwin, “The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle’s Ethics”
March 19 – “Flourishing” as a Human Being
   Nicomachean Ethics, Book 1; Book 10; John McDowell, “Virtue and Reason”

Week 10
March 24 – Wanting to do the Right Thing...
   NE, Books 2 and 7; Hursthouse, “A False Doctrine of the Mean”
March 26 – ... and Knowing What That Would Be
   NE, Book 6; Sorabji, “Aristotle on the Role of Intellect in Virtue”

Week 11
March 31 – The Practice of Being an Excellent Person (1) – The Character Friendship
   NE, Books 8 and 9; Kosman, “Being Properly Affected”; Sherman, “The Habitation of Character”
April 2 – No class

Week 12
April 7 – The Practice of Being an Excellent Person (2) – The Polis
   NE, Book 10 (re-read), Politics, Book 1
April 9 – Different Political Associations, Different Purposes
   Politics, Book 3

Week 13
April 14 – Citizenship and Excellence in the Proper Polis
   Politics, Book 7; NE Book 5;
April 16 – The Problem of Rule by the Demos – The Poor are the Majority
   Politics, Books 4-6

Aquinas – Natural Moral Law

Weeks 14 – 15
April 21, 23, 27, 29 – Summa Theologica, selections; MacIntyre, “Aquinas and the Extent of Moral Disagreement”