

Introduction to Political Philosophy

Professor: Taojie Wang (taojie_wang@brown.edu)

Course Meetings: This course is designed with two meetings/week, 13 weeks/semester timeframe in mind that fits a class size of over 30 students (adjustable to fit other timeframes & smaller class sizes).

Office Hours: Sign up in Google doc

Course Description

This course is an introduction to some of the core problems of political philosophy through a study of major historical and contemporary figures. We will study important historical accounts of the origin and purpose of political society, from Plato through some Early Modern philosophers such as Hobbes and J. S. Mill to some contemporary analytic political philosophers such as Rawls, Nozick, and Nussbaum. The problems and topics we will focus on include political obligation, civil disobedience, liberty, rights, equality, and democracy.

During this course, we will work towards a better understanding of the complexities and concepts involved in these topics and what those concepts mean for the contemporary political issues that we care deeply about in our daily lives. Therefore, our class will be of practical importance even though our starting point is some abstract concepts.

Course Materials

You are not required to buy any texts for this course. All readings will be made available electronically online.

Learning Activities and Assessments

Weekly Response Piece

As a weekly assignment, you are required to write either one response piece to one of the two readings of your choice or a response to one of your classmates' response piece. A response piece should be between 200-300 words, submitted through Canvas under the Discussion post section. Response pieces are meant to be short notes to help you keep in mind what the structure of the text is and the question(s) you have regarding the text. It should be something that, once you look back at it during class, can help you have something to say, or some questions to ask, about the text.

If you are writing a response to someone else's response piece, you are likely to do something different. In that case, if you find the point they made appealing, or that you share the questions they had, you can support them by saying your reasons for finding their point appealing, and saying why you think these questions matter. It would also be great if you could offer a potential answer to their questions. On the other hand, if you find that their understanding of the structure of the text differs from yours, you could compare the two readings and see which one is better supported. Or if you have an objection to a point they made, you can do that.

Doing these may take a little time at first. However, I will guide you by providing extensive feedback. As the course progresses and you become more familiar with the reading and reflective processes, writing this will become more comfortable and rewarding.

Papers

Students will be required to write three papers throughout the semester:

- Paper 1: 800 words
- Paper 2: 1000 words
- Paper 3: 1500 words

For each of the papers, you should choose one of the topics we have covered so far in class. In addition to the provided guidelines on how to write a philosophy paper, there will be a class session dedicated to that.

Grades Breakdown

Grades will be based on classroom participation, response pieces, and the three papers. Here's the weight each of these carries:

Classroom participation: 10%

Response piece: 20%

Paper 1: 15%

Paper 2: 25%

Paper 3: 30%

Attendance Policies

It is expected that you will be present at all course meetings. Please contact me if you cannot make it to class; students may have up to three such excused absences with no effect on the contributions to the participation grade (even without completing any additional work). Beyond three such absences, you will need to contact me to work out alternative arrangements for contributing to our collective work and class conversation (generally, additional comments in the Google Doc, but other options may be available). If you are more than ten minutes late to class, you will be counted as absent.

Diversity, Accessibility, and Accommodation

I strive to make this course a welcoming place for all perspectives, where all students are treated as valued and respected members of the class community regardless of gender, sex, ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual identity, socioeconomic background, or ability. Please reach out to me early in the term if you have a condition, religious commitment, or extenuating circumstance that might require accommodations or modification of any of the course procedures.

Reading Schedule and Important Dates

Week 1: Introduction

Tuesday

- Introduction.
- Complete the Welcome Survey.

Thursday

- "The Virtue of Civility," Calhoun (Classroom climate building).

Week 2

Tuesday

- *Crito*, Plato.

Thursday

- *Republic*, Book I, Plato

Week 3

Tuesday

- *Republic*, Book IV, Plato

Thursday

- *Leviathan*, Chapters 13, 14, 15, Hobbes.

Week 4

Tuesday

- *Leviathan*, Chapters 17, 21, Hobbes.

Thursday

- Writing Workshop before the first paper is assigned.
- Paper 1 assigned.

Week 5

Tuesday

- *Second Treatise of Government*, Chapter 1-8, Locke.

Thursday

- *The Social Contract*, Books I, II, and IV, Rousseau.
- Paper 1 due.

Week 6

Tuesday

- "On the Jewish Question," Marx.

Thursday

- "A Vindication of the Rights of Women," excerpts, Wollstonecraft.

Week 7

Tuesday

- "On Liberty," excerpts, J. S. Mill.

Thursday

- "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" Douglass.

Week 8

Tuesday

- *A Theory of Justice*, excerpts I, Rawls.

Thursday

- *A Theory of Justice*, excerpts II, Rawls.
- Paper 2 assigned.

Week 9

Tuesday

- *Anarchy, State and, Utopia*, excerpts, Nozick.

Thursday

- "Robert Nozick and Wilt Chamberlain: How Patterns Preserve Liberty," Cohen.

- Paper 2 due.

Week 10

Tuesday

- “Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism,” Waldron.

Thursday

- “Ideal Theory as Ideology,” Charles Mills.

Week 11

Tuesday

- *The Subjection of Women*, excerpts, J. S. Mill.

Thursday

- “Feministic Critique of Liberalism,” Nussbaum.

Week 12 (flex week, adjust as needed)

Tuesday

- *Anger and Forgiveness*, excerpts, Nussbaum.

Thursday

- “The Aptness of Anger,” Srinivasan.
- Paper 3 assigned (due by the end of next week).