

POL 2000H1F: ANCIENT POLITICAL THOUGHT TO THE RISE OF MODERNITY
(Ph.D. core in political theory, part I)

Fall 2025

Course meeting time: Wednesdays, 3-6 pm

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We will spend one to two weeks apiece on major works of ancient and early modern political theory. The course presupposes some familiarity with these theorists. By the time of class on a given theorist you will be expected to have read all of their work that is under consideration in the course. This will enable us to consider the relationship between earlier and later parts of a work, or in some cases relationships among different works, in addressing questions of interpretation.

Requirements:

1. Six short papers (**maximum one page – single spaced, 12-point type, one-inch margins**). We require that you not skip more than one week between response papers, but you can ask us if you need an exception.

Completion of these papers is worth **10 percent of the final grade**.

We will provide questions to guide each week's discussion, and each short paper should respond to one of the sets of questions for the class in which the paper is submitted. Your papers should not attempt to develop an argument in detail. Rather you should provide a summary statement of claims that you are prepared to support with arguments and **explicit references to the text** in class discussion.

The papers must be posted on the class website (on Quercus, under “Discussions”) by **5:00 pm on the Tuesday before class**. They will be graded on a pass/fail basis. **Late papers (i.e., papers submitted after 5:00 pm) will not be accepted**. If you fail to turn in your six papers on time, you will be required to write a five-page makeup paper for each one you have missed. These makeup papers will also be graded on a pass/fail basis.

2. Active and informed participation in class discussion (including familiarity with your colleagues' short papers): **20 percent of the final grade**. Regardless of whether you have written

a paper or not, you should come prepared to discuss the week's questions and you should have read carefully the comments of your fellow students.

3. One 15-page paper on a topic of your choice dealing with the theorists from the term. The paper may either analyse one theorist or compare two of them. The paper is worth **70 percent of the final grade** and is **due on December 10**. Please submit your papers electronically as a PDF via Quercus under "Assignments".

Academic honesty clause: "Normally, students will be required to submit their course assignments to the University's plagiarism detection tool website for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their material to be included as source documents in the University's plagiarism detection tool reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of the University's plagiarism detection tool service are described on the company web site."

CLASS SCHEDULE

Week 1, September 3:	Plato, <i>Republic</i> , Books 1-5
Week 2, September 10:	Plato, <i>Republic</i> , Books 6-10
Week 3, September 17:	Aristotle, <i>Politics</i>
Week 4, September 24:	Augustine, <i>Confessions</i>
Week 5, October 1:	Machiavelli, <i>The Prince</i> and the <i>Discourses</i> (excerpts)
Week 6, October 8:	Hobbes, <i>Leviathan</i> , Parts 1-2, "Review and Conclusion"
Week 7, October 15:	Locke, <i>Second Treatise of Government</i>
Week 8, October 22:	Smith, <i>Theory of Moral Sentiments</i> , Part I, Sections 1-2 and Section 3, ch. 1-3; Part III, ch. 1-4; Part VI, Sections 1-2.
Week 9, October 29:	Reading Week. No Class Meeting.
Week 10, November 5:	Rousseau, <i>Discourse on the Origins of Inequality</i>
Week 11, November 12:	Rousseau, <i>Social Contract</i>
Week 12, November 19:	Burke, <i>Reflections on the Revolution in France</i>
Week 13, November 26:	Wollstonecraft, <i>Vindication of the Rights of Woman</i>

REQUIRED TEXTS.

Students are **required** to bring the relevant **hard copy** of the text being discussed **each week** to class. Editions we have ordered from the University of Toronto Bookstore are marked with *:

Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube revised by C.D.C. Reeve (Hackett)*

Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. C. Lord (Chicago)*

Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions*, trans. H. Chadwick (Oxford)*

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

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. Macpherson (Penguin), R. Tuck (Cambridge), or E. Curley (Hackett)*

John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Laslett (Cambridge); *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C.B. Macpherson*

Adam Smith, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. R. Hanley (Penguin)*; ed. K. Haakonssen (Cambridge)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. D. Cress (Hackett)*; *Discourse on Inequality (Second Discourse)*, ed. P. Gourevitch (Cambridge), and *On the Social Contract*, P. Gourevitch (Cambridge)

Edmund Burke, *Revolutionary Writings*, ed. I. Hampshire-Monk (Cambridge)*

Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Vindications* eds. D.L. Macdonald and K. Scherf (Broadview)* or *A Vindication of the Rights of Men and a Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Hints*, ed. S. Tomaselli (Cambridge)

QUESTIONS FOR SHORT PAPERS AND CLASS DISCUSSION:

PLATO

September 3

1. Before outlining a novel theory of justice, Socrates first must contend with other, rival theories of justice. What theories are offered by Polemarchus, Thrasymachus and Glaucon? What is at the heart of the challenges posed by these characters?
2. Why is the *Republic* written as a dialogue? How, and where, should the fact that it is written as one affect our reading of it? (Give concrete examples.) Analytic philosophers often ignore the dialogue and analyse Socrates' position as the one to be taken seriously and/or as representing Plato's own view. What, if anything, would be lost by doing so?
3. The discussions of women and the family in the *Republic* have given rise to many different interpretations. What is yours? Does Socrates (and/or Plato) ultimately advocate for a radical alteration in family structure, or does he intend this example as instructive in other ways? Do we have anything to learn today from Plato on these matters? Support your views with explicit references to the text.

September 10:

1. What is the character of Plato's utopianism? (A) Is the *kallipolis* intended as an ideal which human beings can and ought to try to approximate? (B) Is it rather an unattainable standard intended to criticize the project of utopianism altogether? (C) Or, something different again, is it a hypothetical thought-experiment designed to stimulate readers to think more profoundly about politics, whatever the practical outcomes? On what do you base your answer to this question – the words and arguments of Socrates, the literary or dramatic features of the work, or something else?
2. Does Socrates' analogy between the just soul and the just regime (introduced at 368c) work, in your view? Socrates suggests that the "city in speech" is best seen as a model for the well-ordered soul, not as a political ideal. Does this analogy between regimes and souls as it plays out in Books VIII & IX yield any useful or important political insights?
3. The explicit theme of the *Republic* is justice. Can it be read instead as a reflection on the disadvantages or hazards of over-emphasizing justice at the expense of other values (e.g. political stability, liberty, a diversity of chosen lifestyles, government by consent)?

4. Is *Republic* best read as a rejection of Athenian democracy, or does it have a more ambivalent relationship to the regime and its culture (e.g., theatre, education, and rhetoric)?

ARISTOTLE

September 17:

1. What does Aristotle mean by claiming that “by nature the human being is a political animal?” What methodological commitments follow from this starting premise? Do you find his approach more or less compelling than Plato’s for the study of politics?
2. Two of the aspects of Aristotle’s thought that appear least congenial to contemporary readers are his discussions of women and slavery. What does he have to say about each and how integral are these accounts to his overall political philosophy? What do these figures show us about the place of the household economy in the *polis*?
3. Raphael’s School of Athens (<https://is.gd/GUtbiO>) famously portrays Plato pointing up to the heavens while Aristotle insists on starting from what’s in front of him. With respect to Aristotle’s political writing, is this right? To what extent does Aristotle’s inquiry rest on observable phenomena? To what extent could it be undermined by observing—or choosing to take note of—political states or events different from those that Aristotle discusses?
4. What does Aristotle think good citizenship demands? Are his expectations compatible with contemporary politics? Do they pose challenges to contemporary assumptions about the obligations of individuals and polities?

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

September 23:

1. Compare and contrast the Platonic notion of the soul and Augustine’s notion of the self.
2. What, if any, are the implications of the Augustinian notion of the self for a broader normative notion of political life?
3. Reconstruct Augustine’s account of human happiness in *Confessions*. Compare and contrast it with what Plato or Aristotle offers. What do we learn from this comparison?
4. What place does Augustine give to humility in *Confessions*? What are the political implications of his attention to it?

MACHIAVELLI

October 1:

1. What does Machiavelli mean by *virtù*? Discuss the similarities and differences among the historical figures whom Machiavelli cites as examples of *virtù* or as men lacking crucial elements of *virtù*. What do you find most puzzling and what most illuminating in his discussion of these figures?
2. Many readers interpret Machiavelli as a theorist of human agency, first and foremost. How accurate is this as a description of Machiavelli's outlook? How do we make sense of the significant role that fortune plays in his accounts of politics? What are the potential downsides or costs to a single-minded endorsement of human agency, and does Machiavelli acknowledge those downsides or costs?
3. What is the relationship between morality and politics in Machiavelli's thought? Does he advance the view that "the end justifies the means"? If so, what is the end and how is it justified?

HOBBS

October 8:

1. Before he presents his theory of the social contract, Hobbes offers a psychological account of human beings, giving lengthy consideration to the body, the imagination, and language. Why does Hobbes's theory of sovereignty and obligation depend on these principles of moral and natural philosophy? Could one consistently be a political Hobbiist while rejecting Hobbes' science and/or psychology?
2. Hobbes is famous as the founder of the social contract tradition. But is consent really relevant in Hobbes' thought? What makes political authority legitimate in Hobbes' view? Is his account coherent?
3. Do members of a Hobbesian commonwealth have individual rights? Can they legitimately resist political authority? How does Hobbes' work illuminate the link, if any, between methodological individualism and the attachment to individual rights?

LOCKE

October 15:

1. How do people come to own property according to Locke? To what extent does the unequal distribution of property in existing societies violate the requirement that clear property entitlement requires "enough and as good" for others to use? Does Locke justify extreme economic inequality, or does his theory offer resources for mitigating it within a polity?
2. Locke's theory has been denounced in recent years for being a justification of dispossession of Indigenous people in North America. How does this reading of chapter 5 alter or affect your assessment other parts of Locke's theory (e.g., natural rights, consent, rule of law)?
3. If we read Locke as a theorist who deeply values "settled standing laws," what is the function of his defenses of the use political power beyond the written law (e.g., prerogative, the appeal to heaven)?
4. Between Hobbes and Locke, which thinker affords a greater place to violence? Does granting more scope to the role of violence in politics make one a better political theorist?

SMITH

October 22:

1. Compare and contrast Smith's notion of the process of self-regulation with that of Augustine. Is either of interest or of consequence for contemporary politics?
2. Review and assess the Smithian notion of the impartial spectator.
3. What is the scope of a Smithian politics of sympathy? Does it have to be a local politics, or can it be expanded to include distant others?

OCTOBER 29-READING WEEK, NO CLASS

ROUSSEAU'S SECOND DISCOURSE

November 5:

1. What is the nature of Rousseauian *pitié*, and does it have its counterpart in modern social practices for Rousseau?
2. Reflect on the state of nature as a helpful or generative category for political thought.
3. Is the civilizational narrative that Rousseau presents in the *Discourse* a narrative of progress, regress, or something else? What turns on how you interpret it?

ROUSSEAU'S SOCIAL CONTRACT

November 12:

1. What is the general will? Document and analyse the various passages where Rousseau evokes the term.
2. What is the significance of Rousseau's invocation of various ancient Roman political and social institutions in this work?
3. Rousseau claims to succeed philosophically where previous social contract theorists have failed to truly understand the origins of political community. Does his formulation of the social contract solve any of the problems that characterize those offered by Hobbes and Locke? Does it introduce new problems?

BURKE

November 19:

1. Is Burke's position more about a psycho-social attachment to continuity and aversion to change, or rooted in an institutional analysis of the pathologies of power?
2. Compare Burke's stance towards the American and the French revolutions. What accounts for the differences?
3. Burke rejects the rapid political change witnessed during the events in France. As a theorist of conservatism, does he offer an account of political change and criticism? If so, do you find it persuasive? Why or why not?

WOLLSTONECRAFT

November 26:

1. What is the type and nature of education that will improve the condition of women in society for Wollstonecraft? Is she right and is it sufficient?
2. Does Wollstonecraft primarily seek changes for the status of women, or does she advocate changes to social and political life for both men and women? What turns on your answer?
3. The *Vindication* has been variously cast as liberal, socialist, republican, feminist, or even occasionally misogynist. How would you classify Wollstonecraft's political commitments?