

Political Theory: Visions of the Good/Just Society
POL200Y1-Y (LEC0101)
Fall 2025-Winter 2026

Professor: Matthew J Walton
Sidney Smith Hall Rm. 3005
Email: matthew.walton@utoronto.ca
Office hours: Wednesdays 2-3pm (on Zoom); Thursdays 11am-12pm (in person);
or by appointment

TAs: Head TA Piper Sterling (piper.sterling@mail.utoronto.ca)

Class Meetings: Thursdays, 3-5pm

Course Description:

This course will introduce you to the field of political theory, through an examination of some classic, canonical works of the Western tradition as well as a range of works from other traditions. While our inquiry will certainly not be exhaustive, we will aim to cover some important themes, concepts, and debates within the field, even as we push to expand its boundaries. You can expect to be challenged, enthralled, confused, repulsed and stimulated by your engagement with these thinkers and their ideas. We only ask that you cultivate an openness to evaluating them on their own terms, in addition to considering their relevance for political inquiry today and their capacity to reshape your own political commitments.

Under the broad heading of the “good/just society,” we will explore contrasting visions of human nature, of legitimate and ideal political authority, of the roles of virtue and morality in political leadership and citizenship, and of the purposes of political community as well as its boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Throughout, while we will attend closely to the ideas and arguments of these thinkers in their own contexts, we will also consider the validity or value of their ideas more generally: what do they have to teach us about the nature of political interaction and political inquiry?

The approach taken in this course is broadly interpretive. This means that we will consider multiple understandings of these works and their ideas; after all, political theorists continue to argue over many aspects of these texts and thinkers. We also expect that you will develop your own perspectives on them. This requires that you read the texts diligently and participate in discussions with your peers to help develop and challenge your understandings. While training in the close and attentive reading and analysis of texts will be a primary goal of the course, we will also investigate political thought that emerges from oral traditions, from practice, and from non-textual material objects, further pushing the boundaries of what “counts” as political theory.

Course Objectives:

Over the course of the year, you will:

- Strengthen your ability to closely read, analyze, summarize and compare political thinkers
- Learn how to critically engage with a range of political theory texts from different traditions
- Refine and improve your skills in exegetical and argumentative writing
- Begin to develop your own perspectives about politics, justice and the good life
- Engage productively and respectfully with your TA and peers in tutorial discussions
- Apply what you have learned in assignments, essays and a final exam

Course Readings:

The following required texts are available at the U of T Bookstore, in electronic versions or through your preferred online or brick & mortar used bookstore. If you're purchasing through the bookstore, please make sure you use the correct course code and confirm that these are the right editions. It is *very important* that you get these editions so that we can refer to them in lecture and tutorials and so that you can cite them in your essays. Every effort has been made to minimize the cost, but if you are experiencing financial impediments to purchasing books for the course, please talk with your TA.

Plato. 1992. *Republic*. Trans. G.M.A. Grube, Rev. C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. ISBN: 9780872201361

Aristotle. 1998. *Politics*. Trans. C.D.C. Reeve. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. ISBN: 9780872203884

Christine de Pizan. 2018. *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Ed. Sophie Bourgault and Rebecca Kingston. Trans. Ineke Hardy. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. ISBN: 9781624667299

Machiavelli, Niccolò. 1994. *Selected Political Writings*. Trans. David Wootton. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. ISBN: 9780872202474

Hobbes, Thomas. 1994. *Leviathan*. Ed. Edwin Curley. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. ISBN: 9780872201774

Locke, John. 1980. *Second Treatise*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett. ISBN: 9780915144860

All additional course readings (marked below with a +) are available online, as copyright-compliant postings on the course Quercus site, as links to the University of Toronto Libraries electronic collection or as external links. *You are responsible for completing all readings by the dates indicated on the syllabus.*

Course Requirements:

Participation (20%): Your participation grade will primarily reflect your attendance and participation in tutorials. You should ensure that you have read the texts, attended or watched the lecture, and come prepared to participate in discussion. Your participation grade will consist of:

- **10%:** Substantive participation in tutorial discussions, email exchanges or conversations in office hours with your TA.
- **7%:** Weekly Discussion Questions. Each week, the professor will post 1-3 Discussion Questions. You will need to write brief responses (~3-5 sentences/question) and submit them on Quercus to your TA **by the start of lecture each week**. The Discussion Questions will be graded credit/no credit and will not receive written TA feedback, but we encourage you to discuss them with your TAs in office hours or over email. Unless you have a valid excuse, late submissions may be marked as no credit by your TA. Sometimes these will be interpretive questions about the readings, while other times they may ask you to reflect on the implications of the readings, or your own responses to them. The Discussion Questions will be the basis for occasional group discussions in lecture and will also help you prepare for the essays. **NOTE:** You must submit at least two sets of Discussion Questions each term to be eligible to have your Essays graded.
- **3%:** Completing three short online surveys about course materials and practices throughout the year.

Essay 1 (20%): A 1200 word interpretive essay focused on one of the thinkers or texts from the first part of the course. A full prompt and additional directions will be provided. While submitting an outline and thesis is not required, we believe that your final essay will benefit from this level of preparation and feedback. Therefore, if you submit an outline and thesis to your TA **and** meet with them to receive and discuss feedback, you will receive a 2% bonus to your final grade for this essay.

Final draft due **November 27, 2025** by 5pm, submitted on Quercus

Essay 2 (30%): A 2000 word interpretive essay comparing two or more thinkers or texts from the course, with the topic to be chosen from a list provided. Again, if you submit an outline and thesis to your TA **and** meet with them to receive and discuss feedback, you will receive a 2% bonus to your final grade for this essay.

Final draft due **March 12, 2026** by 5pm, submitted on Quercus

Final Exam (30%): The date and exact format of the final exam will be determined later in the year, but it will be cumulative, and a list of potential questions will be distributed a few weeks in advance to help with studying. The exam will be in person and students will be allowed a minimal set of notes. Full details will be provided closer to the exam date.

Course Policies:

Late Work/Make-up Exams

Please plan to submit your work on time and do your best to meet the set deadlines. Cultivating strong time-management skills is an important part of your university education. At the same time, we know that life can intervene, and the coming year promises to be just as uncertain as the last. Our goal is to help you learn the materials and complete the assignments to the best of your ability, even if this takes a few extra days. If you find yourself needing an extension, please reach out to your TA. We ask that you include:

1. The reason for your request (but please note that you are not required to disclose medical or other personal information in detail).
2. A proposal for a new deadline.
3. Additional documentation is not required.

All late work that is not excused in advance can be penalized at a rate of **2% per day of lateness**.

Last-minute extension requests are also disruptive to your TA, so please do your best to plan ahead. **Any extension requests made at least 48 hours before the due date/time will be automatically granted.**

Any requests closer to the due date will be considered at the discretion of your TA, but we guarantee that we will give them due consideration. Your success in this course **and** your personal well-being are both important to us.

Accessibility Policy

We do our best to welcome students with diverse learning styles and needs in this course. In particular, if you have a disability or health consideration that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach your TA and/or the Accessibility Services Office as soon as possible. The Accessibility Services staff are available by appointment to assess specific needs, provide referrals and arrange appropriate accommodations. We know that this formal process can be slow, so please talk with your TA *in advance* about any accommodations you might need or challenges you might be facing. We are also open to hearing about ways in which the course environment or structure might unintentionally exclude or disadvantage certain people and will work to respond to any such concerns.

We will do our best to work with **any** student to help facilitate participation and success in this course, whether you have a formal accommodation granted or not. There are many other circumstances that might affect your ability to engage fully with course expectations. Please feel free to discuss any difficulties you are experiencing with your TA or with the professor and we can work together to address them.

Grading Policy

Your TAs will be open to reconsidering any grades given on assignments. We will do our best to communicate the grading criteria in advance but please ask questions if you are confused. If you feel that a grader has made an error, you can take it up with them through the following procedure. (Please note

that, unless otherwise approved, TAs will only discuss issues with grading during the 7 days after the assignment has been handed back):

1. Wait a minimum of 24 hours after receiving your grade to contact your TA.
2. Put in writing the reasons why you are dissatisfied with the grade.
3. Bring the assignment/exam and your written statement to a meeting to discuss it, if your TA requests this.

If you are still dissatisfied with the resolution, you may contact the Head TA, providing the previous communication with the TA and a further explanation of why you think the assigned grade was not appropriate. After that exchange, if you still believe the issue has not been resolved, you can bring your appeal to the professor, following the same steps. Please note that grading challenges can take up a lot of TA time. It is *your* responsibility to consider whether you have a legitimate argument for a higher grade, or whether the grade you received simply isn't the grade you wanted.

AI Policy

We strongly urge you to use resources other than Generative AI tools in your work in this class. In particular, the Weekly Discussion Questions are designed to be responsive and reflexive: we want to know *your* thoughts and reactions, not an energy-guzzling chatbot's aggregation of perspectives scraped from stolen data! Therefore, you are **not** permitted to use Generative AI tools for Weekly Discussion Questions. We are, however, open to considering proposals for targeted use of these tools that acts as a complement to your own brain and your own work. If you plan to use Generative AI in any way for Essay 1 or 2, you **must** clearly state in an outline or proposal how it will be used, get approval for that use and then follow that plan. However, Generative AI tools **cannot** be used to generate ideas for responses to essay prompts or textual interpretations. This does not constitute original work and will not be approved. Any use of Generative AI that is not approved is **not** permitted.

Academic Integrity Policy

Cheating and plagiarism are offenses against academic integrity and are subject to disciplinary action by the university. Plagiarism is copying someone else's work and presenting it as your own (by not attributing it to its true source). This includes using unaltered AI-generated work, which comes from programs that have themselves been built on the theft of massive amounts of original work to create training datasets. If you are uncertain about what constitutes plagiarism, please ask your TA or the professor. We take this matter very seriously and will **NOT** tolerate plagiarism. We will provide a detailed citation style guide and TAs will go over proper citation in tutorials, but if you are still unsure about how to properly cite an idea, please ask. Your Essays will all be submitted using an online plagiarism detection tool; if you would like to request an alternate method of submission, please let us know in advance and we can arrange this. Please know that TAs are skilled at catching plagiarism even without this software.

Course Schedule:

FALL TERM

Week 1 (Sept 4): Introduction (What is Political Theory and Why Does it Matter?)

****Please Note: NO tutorials this week****

Week 2 (Sept 11): Anishinaabe Thought I (Creation Stories)

Total pages: 17, and a 7 minute video

+Doug Williams. 2018. *Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg: This is Our Territory*. Winnipeg: ARP Books. [****** "Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg Creation Story"] (pp.13-16)

+Watch: ["The Ojibway Creation Story"](#)

+Leanne Betasamosake Simpson with Edna Manitowabi. 2013. "Theorizing Resurgence from within Nishnaabeg Thought." in *Centering Anishinaabeg studies: understanding the world through stories*. (Ed. Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair, and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark) East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press. (pp.279-293)

Week 3 (Sept 18): Anishinaabe Thought II (*Mino-Mnaamodzawin*)

Total pages: 26

+Doug Williams. 2018. *Michi Saagig Nishnaabeg: This is Our Territory*. Winnipeg: ARP Books. [**"The Right Size for a Garden" and "Wiigwamin"] (pp.98-107)
+McGregor, D. 2018. "Mino-Mnaamodzawin". *Environment and Society*. 9(1), 7–24.

Week 4 (Sept 25): Political Thought in Classical South Asia I (Theravāda Buddhist Views on Moral Rule)

Total pages: 23, and approximately 25 paragraphs

+[Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta](#), *Samyutta Nikaya*
+[Milindapañha](#), [The Chariot Simile](#)
+Walshe, Maurice O'C. 1995. *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: a Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications. [***Cakkavatti-Sīhanāda Sutta & Aggañña Sutta*]

Week 5 (Oct 2): Political Thought in Classical South Asia II (Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*)

Total pages: 40

+Kauṭilya, and Patrick Olivelle. 2013. *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra: a New Annotated Translation*. New York: Oxford University Press. [**Book 1 (all); Book 2 (Chapters 1, 2, 36); Book 13 (Chapter 5)]

Week 6 (Oct 9): Political Thought in Classical South Asia III (The Ashokan Rock Edicts)

Approximately 49 paragraphs

+Ven. S. Dhammika (trans). [Ashokan rock edicts](#). [**All except Preface and Introduction]

Week 7 (Oct 16): Plato I (Dueling Conceptions of Justice)

Total Pages: 52

Republic, Book I (327a-354c); Book II (357a-378a); (pp.1-53)

Week 8 (Oct 23): Plato II (Justice in the City and in the Soul)

Total Pages: 32

Republic, Book III (412b-417b) Book IV (419-445e); (pp.88-93; 94-121)

****Please Note: NO tutorials this week****

****Please Note: No class on Oct 30 for Reading Week****

Week 9 (Nov 6): Plato III (The Equality of Women and the Primacy of Philosophy)

Total Pages: 41

Republic, Book V (449a-480a); Book VII (514a-521c) (pp.122-156; 186-193)

Week 10 (Nov 13): Plato IV (Moral Decline in Cities and Souls)

Total Pages: 42

Republic, Book VIII (543a-569c); Book IX (571a-580c; 586e-592b) (pp. 213-250; 258-263)

Week 11 (Nov 20): Aristotle I (Political Communities and the Virtues of Citizens)

Total Pages: 46

Politics, Book I (all); Book II (Chapters 1-5); Book III (Chapters 1-5) (pp.1-36; 65-75)

Week 12 (Nov 27): Aristotle II (Constitutions and Political Ideals)

Total Pages 43

Politics, Book III (Chapters 6-18) Book IV (Chapters 11-12); Book VII (Chapters 1-3; 13-15) (pp.75-100; 118-123; 191-197; 212-219)

****ESSAY 1 DUE****

WINTER TERM

Week 1 (Jan 8): Christine de Pizan I (Rejecting Gendered Stereotypes)

Total pages: 52

The Book of the City of Ladies, Book I (Chapters 1-20; 27; 33-38; 43) (pp.21-61; 68-69; 74-83; 88-90)

Week 2 (Jan 15): Christine de Pizan II (Virtues, Gender and the Polity)

Total pages: 53

The Book of the City of Ladies, Book II (Chapters 7-13; 28-30; 36-49; 53-54; 64-69); Book III (Chapters 1; 10-11; 18-19) (pp.106-114; 127-132; 139-154; 164-167; 181-190; 203-209; 217-221)

Week 3 (Jan 22): Machiavelli I (Political Theory from Empirics)

Total Pages: 42

The Prince (Dedication, Chapters 1-14) (pp.5-47)

Week 4 (Jan 29): Machiavelli II (Pragmatism and Amoral Political Rule)

Total Pages: 33

The Prince (Chapters 15-26) (pp.47-80)

Week 5 (Feb 5): Hobbes I (Human Nature and the State of Nature)

Total pages: 50

Leviathan, Introduction, Chapters 4-6; 10-13 (pp.3-5; 15-35; 50-78)

Week 6 (Feb 12): Hobbes II (Constructing the Sovereign)

Total pages: 39

Leviathan, Chapters 14-18 (pp.79-118)

****Please Note: No class on Feb 19 for Reading Week****

Week 7 (Feb 26): Hobbes III (Strong and Weak Commonwealths)

Total pages: 50

Leviathan, Chapters 19-21; 29-30 (pp.118-145; 210-233)

Week 8 (March 5): Locke I (The State of Nature and Property Rights)

Total pages: 45

Second Treatise, Preface, Chapters 1-4 (pp.5-18)

+James, CLR. 1963. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. New York: Random House. [**Chapter I: "The Property" (pp.6-26)

****CONTENT WARNING: Graphic depictions of the violence of enslavement****
Second Treatise, Chapter 5 (pp.18-30)

Week 9 (March 12): Locke II (Forming Civil Society)

Total pages: 47

Second Treatise, Chapters 6-12 (pp.30-77)

****ESSAY 2 DUE****

****Please Note: NO tutorials this week****

Week 10 (March 19): Locke III (The Right to Resist)

Total pages: 47

Second Treatise, Chapters 13-19 (pp.77-124)

Week 11 (March 26): Resistance to Enslavement (Marronage and Freedom)

Total pages: 46

+Price, R. 1996. *Maroon societies: rebel slave communities in the Americas* (3rd ed.). The Johns Hopkins University Press. [****Introduction and Preface**] (pp.1-30; xi-xxvii)

****CONTENT WARNING: Stark depictions of the violence of enslavement****

Week 12 (April 2): Conclusions and Review

****Please Note: NO tutorials this week****