

GVPT 241, Political Theory: Ancient and Modern, fall 2014

Professor Alford, 1151 Tydings, 405 4169. Office hrs: Tu. 5:15-6:00, Thur. 5:15-7:00, and by appointment. Often we can talk briefly after class, occasionally before. Please make an appointment even during regular office hours. Often I have meetings with graduate students during these times. The best way to make an appointment is by email calford@umd.edu. The second best is by voice-mail, 5/4169. While I ask you to make an appointment (to avoid disappointment; you are always free to drop by my office hours and see if I am available), don't think this means that I am unwilling to chat with you about almost anything related to the course during office hours. If you cannot meet me during my office hours, we can arrange another time.

Your teaching assistants/discussion leaders will provide their office hours, phone numbers, and so forth in your discussion group. Please visit them too. They are your most constant and most important contact with this class. Their office hrs and contact info will be posted on ELMS.

I assume you keep up with assignments and readings on ELMS, and that if you use an email address other than a UMCP address that your email is properly forwarded. You will receive e-mails from me from time to time. Various notices and additional material and so forth will also be posted on ELMS. Still, it is your discussion section that is where you connect with the course. This is not a MOOC. Each discussion section is relatively small, about 37 students or less.

Goal of the course:

At one level, the goal of this course is impossible: survey 2,500 years of Western political thought in one semester. I have focused on the following four questions: political order, obedience to authority, the meaning of life, and why be moral. Obviously the questions are related. You could spend not just a semester, but a lifetime on them.

As much as possible I have tried to make the questions and answers personal, not just abstract and political. For example, we read Machiavelli's Prince partly in order to answer the question of whether you should act like a little prince. And we read Plato's Republic in order to answer the question of why you should be moral, even if you could get away with being immoral and never get caught. Not even by God.

Several things to note about the course:

1. This course is designed not just to teach you about political theory, but to improve your writing. I have assigned three papers. The first two may be rewritten once and resubmitted for a better grade. Grammar, punctuation and organization count. Each paper is worth 25% of your final

grade for a total of 75%. More details are given at the end of syllabus.

2. Students do not learn if they do not do the reading. There is, I've learned over the years, a tendency for some students to skip the lectures and skim the readings. With a little bit of persuasion, these students can often be persuaded to come to class and read more carefully. So that we can all benefit (I prefer lecturing to students who have read the material and come to class regularly), I will give 5 pop-quizzes: surprise, unannounced quizzes over the reading material assigned for that day. They will be quite simple: what did the author say about x? The quizzes may be given either in lecture or in discussion section. I will take the best 4 quizzes, each worth 5% of your final grade for a total of 20%. Several of you will likely get a poor grade in the course because you will do everything right but the quizzes

3. I will give you the next day's reading assignment (over which you are "quizzable") on the board every class day.

4. There is no midterm. The final paper will consist of one essay question. [note: I will have to have the approval of the department in order to substitute a final paper for a final exam. I expect this to be forthcoming, but it is not guaranteed. Until you hear otherwise you should not make any plans that assume you will not be taking a final exam at the scheduled time, usually late in the exam period.] The final paper is worth 25% of your final grade.

6. Class participation counts 5% toward your final grade. I do not expect most students to actively participate in lecture; that is impossible. I do expect all students to actively listen, not walk in and out, not play with their computer or text, and so forth. Not doing these things is a graded activity. Your TA's will take note. Class participation in the discussion sections is assumed. You cannot participate if you don't attend.

I will ask you not to use your computer in class unless you must use it to take notes. Then you must get on an approved computer users list kept by your TA. Students tell me that having students sitting next to or in front of them surfing the web on their computers is distracting.

7. Professor Alford is responsible for all the grades in the course. See him if you are unhappy with your grade on any assignment, but please see your TA first.

8. I pace my lectures according to how well students seem to understand the material. We may fall behind, but I'll tell you every lecture where you should be in your readings. You will know what you are responsible for. I specify in the syllabus when the papers are due so you can plan your semester.

Topic 1: Political Order

Weeks 1-2: (3 lectures) Machiavelli, The Prince, read all. The book is more talked about than known. We shall read it for its lessons in politics and life, and conclude with some personal

questions, such as why not lie and cheat when it is to your advantage, just as Machiavelli recommends to the prince.

Weeks 3-4 (3 lectures) Hobbes' Leviathan. Read chapters 11-23, focusing especially carefully on chapters 11, 13-15, 17-18, 21. It is not the easiest book to read. Does Hobbes accurately assess human nature? Where is the state of nature? Is our political system really so different from that recommended by Hobbes? Remember, the sovereign can be an assembly, not just a monarch.

Topic 2: Individuals Respond to Authority

Weeks 5-6 (4 lectures, including video) Milgram, Obedience to Authority, all. We consider a shocking experiment. Most people, it seems, will obey an anonymous experimenter and deliver painful electrical shocks to a sick old man. Why? A video of the experiment will be shown. My idea is that most of you are more obedient and compliant than you know, and that what we call individuality is often superficial. My other idea is that the most important question in political theory for you is what you would do when faced with malevolent authority.

Week 7: Browning, Ordinary Men, all. Would you believe that some ordinary men, people much like you and me, would obey orders to slaughter innocent men, women and children, even though they could have refused with no serious consequences? I wonder what you would do.

Paper #1 (due Friday, October 17 in discussion section): Why are people so obedient? What's Milgram's explanation? Does it fit Browning's? Does Hobbes' explanation of the state of nature help to explain, or does it fail to explain?

Topic 3: The Meaning of Life

Weeks 8 & 9: Nietzsche, A Nietzsche Reader. The passages you are to focus on will be assigned, and posted on ELMS. Nietzsche is another widely misunderstood philosopher. He is concerned with how you might come to love your fate, and what you must give up to do so. Figuring out his political philosophy is no easy task.

Week 10: Epictetus, The Handbook, all

Epictetus, a Roman, popularized stoicism. We shall consider the meaning of the philosophy, and whether it is still relevant today. Epictetus represents another, and in many ways simpler and less complicated, way of coming to terms with one's fate.

Paper #2 (due Friday November 14, in discussion): Nietzsche and Epictetus are similar in some respects, remarkably different in others. Both are chiefly concerned with freedom. Compare and contrast.

Weeks 11 Mill, On Liberty, all. I will give you chapters to focus on. Think about how Mill's vision of liberty or freedom (they are synonyms for Mill) differs from Nietzsche and Epictetus.

Topic 4: Why be just (or ethical or moral)?

Week 13: Plato, The Apology (begin 11/18) Plato's "Apology" is an account of Socrates' defense of himself against the charge that he corrupted the youth of Athens etc. An "apology," in this context, is an aggressive defense. Here we learn much about the life and mission of Socrates, and see a quite different Socrates than that in The Republic. Socrates goes to his death rather than apologize for his teachings.

Weeks 14-16: Plato, The Republic, Lee edition. What if you had a magic ring that would allow you to get away with anything? Would there be any reason to be just? On simple questions like these political theory is built. As you can see, the focus is once again on the question "What would you do?" I will assign selections from the book.

Your final paper is due Monday December 15. You may turn it in electronically, either by email or ELMS, to your TA. We will let you know. You will know the question the day we begin Plato (week 13). The Q. will be posted on ELMS.

About the papers

Each paper is to be about 5 pp, double-spaced, typed. We will look for the following:

1. Papers that answer the question and that don't ramble.
2. Clear topic sentences and topic paragraph.
3. Use of argument and evidence, not opinion and assertion.
4. Frequent and proper reference to texts to support argument. This is especially important.
5. Correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

Because these are class papers, you may use a simplified method of citation, putting the author, short title, and page in parenthesis, like so: (Milgram, Obedience, p. 12). Titles of books are always underlined or italicized in class papers. You should cite sources frequently, which means you should frequently refer to the text to support your argument. Avoid long quotations, however.

No outside research is required or expected.

You should reacquaint yourself with the university's policy on plagiarism. See: www.inform.umd.edu/CampusInfo/Departments/JPO/AcInteg/code

Your discussion leaders will peruse the www for papers on similar topics, and download some. We will also take advantage of turnitin.com. My favorite site (only because its name says it all) is "The Evil House of Cheat." Don't.

You may rewrite the first two papers and resubmit one or both for a better grade. It must be resubmitted within one week of its return. Please return the original and the new version. You may not rewrite the final paper.

Sample pop quiz questions

1. What does Machiavelli say about Fortuna, and why does he compare Fortune to a woman?
2. What is Milgram's explanation in chapter 10 for the high levels of obedience he found?
3. What does Hobbes say about life in the state of nature? Lots of details are wanted, not just that it's unpleasant and nasty.
4. What limits would Mill place on freedom?

As you see, the questions are straightforward and factual. Your responses should be filled with concrete detail, and limited to one side of one page. These are not great intellectual exercises. They are designed to encourage you to read, the precursor of great intellectual exercise. We evaluate the quizzes on the degree of detail. It is not sufficient to get the general idea. We want specifics.

Other Class Matters

Absences: if you miss a discussion group, notify your TA before class if at all possible. When you return, sign a note to documenting your own illness. I remind you that doing so falls under the student honor code. The same goes for the grave illness of a parent, and so forth. Your own signed documentation will suffice the first time. If you miss class due to a university sanctioned activity, bring a note.

If you fail to take a quiz or hand in a paper on time due to illness, I will require a medical excuse. Without such an excuse, you may not make up the quiz. Undocumented late papers will lose one letter grade per class that the paper is late.

If you miss a series of classes due to a serious illness, keep in contact with me, and provide medical

documentation when you return . If you have a disability that I can help you with, tell me.

No quizzes or other graded activities on university recognized religious holidays. If you observe religious holidays not officially recognized by the University, let your TA know and we will make every effort to accommodate you. But, please let us know now at the beginning of the semester.

Required Books

Machiavelli, The Prince

Hobbes, Leviathan

Milgram, Obedience to Authority

Browning, Ordinary Men

Nietzsche, A Nietzsche Reader (you must use this Penguin edition, trans. Hollingdale)

Epictetus, Handbook of Epictetus

Mill, On Liberty

Plato, Trial and Death of Socrates, or simply buy a cheap version of Socrates' Apology

Plato, The Republic, ed. Lee (Penguin edition is best, but you may use others)

Grading Formula

You may keep track of your grade by the following formula:

Papers and final: A+ = 25, A=24, A- = 23; B+ =22, B = 21, B- = 20; C+ = 19.5, C= 19, C- = 18;
D+ 17, D = 16, D- 15; F = 0

Quizzes: A = 5, B = 4.2, C = 3.8, D = 3.2, F = 0. No plus or minus on the quizzes. To find out how you stand in the class, just add up the points associated with your letter grade.