

GVPT 241, Political Theory: Ancient and Modern, fall 2016

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.

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 three questions: morality personal and political, obedience to authority, and the meaning of life. That should take us at least a semester to answer.

Most people seem to think that politics is about government, elections, and policy. I hope to show you that it's so much more. The ancients believed that politics was about the regime that best fostered human excellence. That's a very different idea, and we will spend time on it in this course. For example, 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.

Several things to note about the course:

1. I will be using ELMS/Canvas to communicate with you, but your small group and TA are your primary connection with the course. Of course, you can come to talk to me too.
2. 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.
3. 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 convinced 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
4. I will give you the next day's reading assignment (over which you are "quizzable") on the board every class day.
5. There is no midterm. The third paper will consist of one essay question. It too is worth 25% of your final grade. It will be due shortly after reading day.
6. Class participation counts 5% toward your final grade. I do not expect most students to

actively participate in lecture. I do expect all students to actively listen, not walk in and out, not play with their computer or text, and so forth. Your TA's will take note. Class participation in the discussion sections is assumed. You cannot participate if you don't attend.

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.

Topic 1:

Weeks 1-2: (3 lectures, maybe 4): John Locke, The Second Treatise of Government. Locke's Second Treatise was an inspiration to men like Thomas Jefferson and others who wrote the Constitution. I imagine that most of you assume that government is a social contract, even if you haven't thought about it explicitly. I think the social contract is a way of talking about the natural law.

Topic 2: Individuals Respond to Authority

Weeks 3-4 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 is what you would do when faced with malevolent authority.

Week 5: 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.

Week 6: Glendon, A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Are international human rights the answer? It depends on what the question is.

Paper #1 (due Friday, October 7 in discussion section): Why are people so obedient? What's Milgram's explanation? Does it fit Browning's? What are we to do about it? Do documents like the Universal Declaration help?

Topic 3: Amor Fati?

Weeks 7 & 8: Nietzsche, A Nietzsche Reader. The passages you are to focus on will be assigned. 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 9: The Book of Job, in The Bible. The Western political tradition is the place where Athens and Jerusalem meet. Mostly this course represents Athens, the voice of reason. But Jerusalem (representing faith) has and should have its say. I approach Job, a religious text, in a secular spirit of study and understanding, not from a faith perspective.

[Note: you can find The Book of Job in hundred places on the web. Or perhaps you have access to the Bible. I have not ordered any copies. My personal favorite is *The Book of Job*, trans. with notes by Raymond P. Scheindlin. W. W. Norton, 1998. However I haven't ordered any copies in the interests of holding book costs down.]

Week 10: Epictetus, The Handbook

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: In what ways are the Book of Job and Epictetus' Handbook similar? In what ways are they different? Due Friday, November 4, in discussion group. If Nietzsche seems relevant, talk about him too.

Topic 5: Why be just (or ethical or moral)?

Week 11: Plato, The Apology and The Phaedo.

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. What he thinks about death is the subject of The Phaedo.

Weeks 12-14: Plato, The Republic, Rowe 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.

Third class paper on Plato will be due after reading day. You will upload it to ELMS/Canvas.

About the papers

Each paper is to be about 5-7 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. Avoidance of BOMFOG (I will define).
4. Use of argument and evidence, not opinion and assertion.
5. Frequent and proper reference to texts to support argument. This is especially important.
6. 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). 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: <http://www.inform.umd.edu/CampusInfo/Departments/JPO/Aclnteg/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 any paper and resubmit it for a better grade. It must be resubmitted within one week of its return. Please return the original and the new version.

Sample pop quiz questions

1. What does Locke say about the state of nature?
2. What is Milgram's explanation in chapter 10 for the high levels of obedience he found?
3. What are the five most memorable statements (for you) in Epictetus' Handbook. You can paraphrase. It need not be word for word.

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

Computers: I would prefer that you not use a computer during lecture. If you must, then notify your TA and get on the approved list. Computers, especially if you are using one for non-class purposes, distract those around you. Students have told me this. Please do not text, etc. from your smart phone during class.

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. 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. There are a couple during the fall semester. 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. No last minute conversions please.

To learn more about course related policies at UMCP, go to the webpage <http://www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html>

Required Books

Locke, Second Treatise of Government

Milgram, Obedience to Authority

Browning, Ordinary Men

Glendon, A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt . . .

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

Epictetus, Handbook of Epictetus

Plato, Apology, The Phaedo (in Last Days of Socrates)

Plato, The Republic, ed. Rowe (Penguin edition is best)

Find your own copy of The Book of Job.

Grading Formula

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

All 3 Papers, each: 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.