

THE MORAL BASIS OF POLITICS

Government 159

Spring, 2012

TTh, 9:00-10:20

Office hours: T, 2:40-4; Th 10:30-12, and by appointment (dmoon@wesleyan.edu)

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This course is an introduction to the study of politics that is oriented to the problems of political action. What makes these problems distinctive is the fact that politics is at once the creation of a legitimate public order *and* a system of power, and the requirements of order and the imperatives of power are often in tension with each other. This tension shows up in the questions we will address in the first unit of the course. As a citizen, I am obligated to obey the laws, but as a moral being, I must obey my conscience. But what should I do if the dictates of law conflict with the prompting of conscience? How can I be obligated to obey laws I have not made? When – if ever – may I justifiably disobey?

The second issue of political action we will discuss is often called the problem of ends and means – what can we properly do to bring about a just (or relatively just) society? For the imperatives of power often seem to dictate that one be prepared to dirty one's hands if one wishes to advance the good in political life. Thus, we must ask what kind of person must one be if one is to engage in political activity? Must one, as Machiavelli argued, learn how not to be good, or is there a way in which the demands of politics and ethics can be reconciled, as Gandhi argued? These questions will occupy us during the second part of the course.

In the third part of the class we will consider the character of the political order that claims our obedience. Some kinds of governments may be legitimate, and I may be obligated to obey their laws. But there are certainly some regimes that are illegitimate, and so can make no moral claim against me. We will examine two answers to the question of what kind of regime has the authority that obligates us to obey its rules. The first is Plato's idea that the best regime is one in which authority is vested in the hands of those who have knowledge of political and moral truth. The second is the ideal of liberal democracy, which rests on the idea that authority can only arise from the people over whom it is exercised.

The last part of the course will take up a question that has come to be of particular urgency today, that of inequality. We will ask what principles determine a just distribution of wealth and income, and whether the inequalities we find in America today are justified.

Course Structure and Expectations:

This course is structured to permit a high level of discussion and intensive work on writing and the close analysis of texts. The reading is quite varied, including plays, classical philosophical texts, essays in various styles, contemporary works of political theory, and a film. Like all classes, this class is a cooperative endeavor, in which we work together to explore and enhance our understanding of a subject. Each of us brings a unique background and perspective to the class, and each contributes by engaging with one another and with the readings and other class material. We need to listen sympathetically and respectfully in order to understand each other's concerns and points of view, especially since many of the topics we discuss may provoke serious disagreement. At the same time, we need to engage critically, raising questions to clarify and deepen the discussion. That will only work if everyone comes to class prepared to listen thoughtfully and having done the reading. All participants have the responsibility to make class discussions fruitful, which means that everyone must do the reading and think about the issues prior to class. Thinking about the readings means being prepared to state and explain the key concepts used by an author, to outline the main thesis or theses in two or three concise sentences, to set out the core argument(s) of the text(s), and to present your own evaluation of its persuasiveness. **Thus, it is essential**

that the readings be done before class in order to make an effective discussion possible.

Written assignments: two short (2-3 page) papers, two 6-8 page essays, and a final. During the semester short papers will be due on the following dates: February 8, February 22, April 11, and April 18. You must write one short paper in the first half of the term and one in the second. No late short papers will be accepted for any reason. The longer essays will be due March 9 and April 27. Unexcused late 6-8 page papers will be penalized one letter grade per day. If you anticipate any problem getting a 6-8 page paper in on time, you must see me ahead of time, as extensions will not be granted on the day the paper is due. There will also be an in-class final on Wednesday, May 18, at 9 AM. In computing the final grade, short papers and class participation, each 6-8 page essay, and the final will have equal weight.

Papers will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

1. analytical rigor (logic, precision, clarity of argument, consideration of counterarguments, etc.)
2. originality / creativity
3. scholarship (accurate representation of authors cited, other works engaged with when appropriate, quality of research if a research paper, etc)
4. mechanics (quality of prose, grammar, spelling, citation of sources, etc.)

All work is to be done in accordance with the Honor Code.

I will discuss writing in the class, but here are some important guidelines:

1. Establish a focus. A good paper has a thesis, a central idea or claim that it is making, and it presents an argument supporting that thesis. You should be able to make an outline of your paper, which will at the same time be the skeleton of the argument you are making. It is often helpful to write out the outline – in sentence form, not as a list of topics – before writing the paper or, at least, the final draft. A good way to think about your paper is ask yourself, “What do I want my readers to believe after they have read my paper? What reasons can I offer them to think that?” If you can answer these questions succinctly, you’re off to an excellent start.
2. Title. The title should express the main idea or focus of your paper, preparing your reader to see immediately what you’re going to say, and why it’s interesting.
3. Structure and organization. The paper should have a clear structure, with an introduction presenting the central question or problem you are addressing, a body that sets out a logical development of the reasons and evidence you are offering, and a conclusion that ties the paper together. In longer papers it is often useful to provide section headings. The introduction should generally state your main thesis, and provide an overview of the structure of the argument, to make it easier for your reader to follow it.

Some specific points:

1. Please NUMBER your pages.
2. All quotations, paraphrases, and direct use of another's ideas (even if not quoted) MUST BE cited. Using parenthetical references (author’s last name, page number) with a bibliography is fine; you do not have to use footnotes or endnotes in short papers. Footnotes can be used to present additional ideas, qualifications, or other points that would detract from the flow of the paper.
3. Avoid common but egregious errors such as misuse of too, to or two; there, they're, or their; its or it's; affect or effect; principal or principle.
4. Stamp out sexism. If you mean men and women or he and she, say so. Don't assume that "man" or "men" refer to human beings generally. There are lots of ways of writing that avoid the awkwardness of, e.g., saying he or she over and over again. For help, you might consult Williams (see #5) or a more specialized guide such as the Handbook of Nonsexist Writing by Miller and Smith.
5. There are a number of excellent guides for good writing. Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* is a classic, especially for grammar and word usage; it offers a useful set of “principles of composition,” and is available on four hour reserve (but it is not among the reserve readings for this class). I also recommend Joseph Williams, *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. His work is particularly helpful in offering examples of how awkward passages can be rewritten, using rules or principles that are fairly concrete and address

specific issues such as clarity, cohesion, emphasis, etc. (these are all chapter headings in his book). Anthony Weston, *A Rulebook for Arguments*, offers a helpful discussion of how to develop (and express) an argument in a tight, logical way.

For my part, I am committed to being accessible in and outside of the classroom. I will hold regular office hours and am available to meet at other times by appointment. You should feel free to contact me by e-mail, and I will get back to you within a reasonable amount of time. I will also make every effort to read your papers quickly and to provide constructive feedback on your work. I am happy to meet or correspond with you about your ideas before you write a paper, and to read outlines and drafts. I also promise to be demanding but not crazy in assigning grades. A paper in the “B” range is a good paper: it will be well argued with a clear thesis, showing a strong command of the materials of the class, and will be well written. An “A” paper is an excellent paper: it will have the strengths of a “B” paper but to a higher degree, and it will reflect original and creative thinking about the issues. A paper in the “C” range is one that does not adequately meet one of the first three criteria.

Please note that it is the policy of Wesleyan University to provide reasonable accommodations to students with documented disabilities. Students are responsible for registering with Disabilities Services, and should make requests for accommodations to me during the first week of the semester so that appropriate arrangements can be made. The procedures for registering with Disabilities Services can be found at <http://www.wesleyan.edu/deans/disability-students.html>

Books: The following books have been ordered at the bookstore and are on reserve, except those that are available in electronic format, noted by the symbol {E}; many of the classic texts are available in the library in multiple translations and editions. Please note that, in many cases, we will not be reading an entire book, so you may wish to use the reserve room rather than purchasing every book.

Sophocles I (Oedipus Trilogy) (Chicago) 0-226-30792-1 (v. 1)
Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, Hackett 0 915144 158
Nicolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, Hackett 0 87220 316 6 {E}
Jean Paul Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, Vintage 0 679 72516 4
Albert Camus, *Caligula and Three Other Plays* (Vintage) 0-394-70207-7
Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove) 0802141323
Mahatma Gandhi, *Selected Political Writings* (Hackett) 0 87220 330 1
Plato, *The Republic* (Hackett) 0 87220 136 8 {E}
John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Hackett) 0 915145 60X
The Federalist Papers (Mentor, New American Library) 0 451 62881 0 {E}
John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* Hackett 0 915144 43 3 {E}

Syllabus: Readings must be done by dates shown. Items marked by asterisk (*) are available online or through the library e-reserves; articles in journals are available through the library; all books assigned for the course will be on reserve in Olin except as noted above. There will be one film, “Battle of Algiers,” for which there will be a special showing, scheduled for Tuesday, February 21 in the evening (but subject to change). For students wishing to pursue certain topics in greater depth, I have listed a small number of recommended readings for certain topics. Students wishing further guidance should consult with me.

Introduction, Thursday, January 26

I. Political Obligation, Conscience, and the Claims of Authority

Sophocles, “Antigone” (T, 1/ 31)

Socrates, *Apology* and *Crito* (Th, 2/2)

*Thoreau, "An Essay on Civil Disobedience," at <http://thoreau.eserver.org/civil.html> (T, 2/7)

Recommended: H. Bedau, ed., *Civil Disobedience*; P. Singer, *Democracy and Disobedience*

First short paper due Wednesday, February 8 by noon

II. Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands

A. Ends and Means: The Craft of Politics

N. Machiavelli, *The Prince* (Th, 2/9; T, 2/14)

J.P. Sartre, "Dirty Hands," in *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (Th, 2/16)

*Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber*, pp 77-88, 114-28 (Th, 2/16)

Albert Camus, "The Just Assassins," in *Caligula and Three Other Plays* (T, 2/21)

Recommended: Michael Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 2 (1973): 160-80.

Second short paper due Wednesday, February 22 by noon

B. Violence, Conflict and Political Power

Film: "Battle of Algiers," to be shown Wednesday evening, February 22

F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, "Preface" (by Sartre), "Concerning Violence," and "Conclusion" (Th, 2/23)

*Alan Dershowitz, "Should the Ticking Time Bomb Terrorist be Tortured," ch. 4 of his *Why Terrorism Works*, pp. 131-63 and 247-54 (T, 2/28)

David Luban, "Liberalism, Torture, and the Ticking Bomb," *Virginia Law Review* 91 (October, 2005): 1425-1462 (T, 2/28)

M. Gandhi, *Selected Political Writings*, Parts I and II (Th, 3/1, T, 3/6)

*Martin Luther King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," at <http://abacus.bates.edu/admin/offices/dos/mlk/letter.html> (Th, 3/8)

Recommended: G. Orwell, "Reflections on Gandhi," in Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters, vol 4.

First 6-8 page paper due Friday, March 9 at noon

Spring break weeks of March 12 and 19

III. The Moral Foundations of Political Life I: Authority and Knowledge

Plato, *Republic* (3/27 - 4/5)

Third short paper due Wednesday, April 11 at noon

IV. The Moral Foundations of Political Life II: Liberal Democracy

Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration* (T, 4/10, Th, 4/12)

Federalist nos. 9, 10, 14, 39, 47-53 (T, 4/17)

J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (Th, 4/19, T 4/24)

*Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in Robert Paul Wolff et al., *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965).

Fourth short paper due Wednesday, April 18 at noon

V. Justice and Inequality

A. Transactional approaches (Th 4/26)

N. Gregory Mankiw, "Spreading the Wealth Around," *Eastern Economic Journal* 36 (2010): 285-98.

*Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, 149-64; 167-82.

B. Institutional approaches (T 5/1)

Malcolm Gladwell, "Talent Grab," *New Yorker*, Oct 11, 2010: 85-93.

*John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, 4-12; 14-18; 39-79.

C. A critique of Rawls (Th 5/3)

*Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia*, 213-31.

D. Equality and well-being (T 5/8)

*Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level: Why Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, 3-30.

Recommended:

See the links to data on inequality in America at <http://www.tax.com/taxcom/taxblog.nsf/Permalink/UBEN-8MXTRH?OpenDocument>; the CBO report issued in October, 2011, can be found at <http://www.cbo.gov/doc.cfm?index=12485> ; a useful collection of charts illustrating inequality can be found at <http://visualizingeconomics.com/> .

Second 6-8 page paper due Friday, April 27 at noon

Last class, Tuesday, May 8.

Final Exam: Friday, May 18, 9-12 noon.