Political Philosophy

THE BASICS

Course Instructor: Dr. Robert Kirkman, Associate Professor, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter School of Public Policy

Web Site: We will be using Canvas to organize the course. You'll use the site, among other things, to find class documents, access readings and resources, check plans for each week, coordinate with other students, and submit assignments.

Resources: There are three required texts for the course. **NOTE WELL:** It is important that you *own* your own *print* copy of *precisely these editions* of the required texts. Some of the work of the course *will not be possible* if you only have an electronic edition of the text, and using other editions and/or translations will cause a lot of confusion.

- Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Focus) ISBN 9781585103768
- Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge) ISBN 9780521357302
- Rousseau, *The Social Contract and other later political writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge) ISBN 9781316605448

These should all be available through the Georgia Tech Bookstore.

THE COURSE

Overview

Humans live in communities, and often there are decisions that need to be made for and about the community as a whole, decisions that must be backed up with some kind of authority and, ultimately, some kind of force.

Political philosophy asks, among other things, *how* and *by whom* such decisions *ought* to be made. These are *normative* questions as distinct from the descriptive questions that are the interest of political science. They are also questions of *process* and of *position*, which distinguishes them from policy analyses that focus on the content of the decision.

An easy way to remember all this is to imagine a challenge that might be posed to someone who would claim to make an enforceable decision for and about a community: "Who the heck are you?" and "Where do you get off telling people what to do?"

You will work alone, in small groups, and with the class as a whole to dig into three primary sources in political philosophy: one ancient source which set down the outlines of political philosophy as such and two modern courses which offer variations on the idea – or the hope – that the legitimate use of political power rises from the consent of the governed.

The Goal

The goal of the course is to arrive at a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the nature of human political association and of the basis for the legitimate use of political power. This deeper understanding may take the form of some facility in describing and discussing different theoretical models in political philosophy, but an even better outcome would be to see and think more clearly – and more critically – about the current political scene.

A secondary but still important goal is simply to spend a lot of time reading old books, diving deep into one small corner of the Western philosophical tradition.

For our purposes, these goals should be enough for us to go on. For administrative purposes, though, the syllabus must include some more determinate "outcomes," which align with our aims.

General Education:

Core IMPACTS: Humanities

This course should direct students toward a broad Orienting Question:

- How do I interpret the human experience through creative, linguistic, and philosophical works?

Completion of this course should enable students to meet the following Learning Outcome:

- Students will effectively analyze and interpret the meaning, cultural significance, and ethical implications of literary/philosophical texts or of works in the visual/performing arts.

Course content, activities and exercises in this course should help student develop the following Career-Ready Competencies:

- Ethical Reasoning
- Informational Literacy
- Intercultural Competence

The Work

Reading for Understanding

The work of the course, week to week, will be all about the texts. For most class sessions, there will be a substantial reading assignment to be completed before we meet. Perhaps the most important work you do for this course will consist in sitting alone, with no distractions, engaging with the texts.

The point of reading philosophical works is not to glean *information* but to develop your *understanding* of the author's way of making sense of some aspect of human life in the world – a way of making sense of things that might be quite different from your own.

In short, don't just let your eyes drift down the page. Instead, dig into the text, ask questions, seek answers, challenge the author and allow the author to challenge you. You can also read more adventurously, coming at the text from surprising angles, as Billy Collins would have his own students read a poem.

Reading this way, really getting into the way the author makes sense of the world, may cause some dissonance or even discomfort. That is as it should be. Learning – real learning – is not a simple process, nor is it an easy one; the only way to make progress in developing your understanding of the world is to allow your current ways of making sense of things to be shaken or even overturned. That is never a comfortable process.

As a practical matter, read with pencil in hand, both to mark key points in the text and to jot down notes for yourself. It's a good idea to write down one or more prompts for class discussion: a passage that you

found especially puzzling or provocative, a question that arose for you while you read, or a connection between the text and something important to you in the wider world.

Discussion

Class time should be dominated by discussion, driven by your own discoveries from the text and your questions about it. Sometimes you will work in small groups, other times we will discuss as a whole class but, in any case, discussion should always begin and end with the text.

I'll be counting on you to take the initiative, so find in yourself the courage to speak up. This is important: students are often afraid to ask the most pressing questions they have because they are afraid of being seen as stupid or ignorant. The secret is that many other students in the class probably have the same questions, and are beset by the same fear, so be the first to let go of all that: if something is puzzling you, if some point or connection is just eluding you at every turn, ask about it.

I mean, what's the point even of taking a class if you're somehow supposed to know everything already? The admission of ignorance is the beginning of wisdom.

Feel free to disagree with one another and with me, so long as you do so in the spirit of inquiry with a dash of intellectual humility. Raise questions, challenge interpretations, and always – always! – go back to the text.

NOTE: To address the elephant and/or donkey in the room, this is my third time in a row offering a course in political philosophy during a contentious presidential election in the U.S. The work of the course does *not* involve discussing the election or the candidates directly, nor at any point should anyone – including your instructor – use class discussion or other class activities to engage in what might be construed as advocacy for or campaigning on behalf of anyone currently running for political office. We may discuss matters related to the election *indirectly*, insofar as we will be concerned with fundamental questions concerning the nature of democratic representation, the meaning of citizenship, and even the act of voting.

Written Assignment: Comment

From the reading for a given week, pick one passage that stood out to you as especially interesting, engaging, confusing, or infuriating. Quote the passage, with a page reference, and then offer one or two paragraphs of commentary on it.

You have discretion in the approach you take in responding to the passage: you may unpack its meaning in context, a sort of mini-exegesis (see below); you may draw attention to and raise critical questions about the assumptions behind the passage; you may connect the passage to something in another work or in the wider world of your experience; or you may discover possibilities I hadn't thought of. Write a sonnet? Why not?

(The grading scheme for the course, regarding which more in a moment, is designed to encouraged creative, even unconventional approaches.)

A Comment will be due by 5:00pm nearly every Friday of the term.

Written Assignment: Exegesis

After we complete our reading and discussion of one of the main texts, you will complete an *Exegesis*, starting from a single, short passage from the work in question, provided by the instructor.

Exegesis, in religious and philosophical scholarship, is a rigorous, scholarly effort to understand or to interpret texts. The term comes from Greek, with roots that suggest seeking something out, or drawing something out.

For our purposes, an Exegesis is an in-class, open-book exercise which will probably feel something like an exam. Through this exercise you will seek to unpack the meaning the passage in its context, which is to say you will explain how the passage connects to 1) technical vocabulary, 2) key assumptions, and 3) major arguments in the work. You may then expand from there to draw out wider implications of the passage for your understanding of human political life.

Written Assignment: The Final Project

The culmination of the course will be a creation of your own. I won't tell you what that product must be, only that the expectation is that whatever you hand in should be substantial, should engage one or more of the core questions of political philosophy, should draw directly from one or more – preferably more – of the texts, and should capture and preserve some important change in your understanding of human life in organized communities.

Basically, you need to leave a record for yourself of what you have learned from a semester of reading and talking about old books of political philosophy.

I will work with each of you to figure out what kind of project might be appropriate to your interests and talents and to the expectations of the course. The result could be a conventional term paper, a dialogue, a confession (in the literary sense of the term), a deep-dive exegesis, a documentary, an interactive story . . . or, really, anything that gets the job done.

Again, as you'll see, the approach to assessment in the course is designed to encourage creativity and risk-taking.

ASSESSMENT

All written assignments will all be assessed on a 3-point scale, built around the *expectations* of each assignment as specified, above: 3 = exceeds expectations; 2 = meets expectations; 1 = does not meet expectations; 0 = not submitted.

To meet expectations, accomplish the basic work of the assignment, demonstrating a solid understanding of the matter at hand, making the necessary distinctions and/or connections, and no more.

To exceed expectations, do more than just putting in effort: take a risk; reach for some new connection among ideas; try an unusual angle, a shift in perspective; conduct an especially careful analysis; follow through on an argument with real rigor; encapsulate some astonishing insight into human political association as a collection of sonnets; or, really, do anything that demonstrates full engagement with the process of inquiry aimed at understanding.

As noted, your lowest score on a Response assignment will be dropped for the calculation of the final grade; that is, of the 9 scheduled commentaries, only your best 8 will be included in the calculation.

The final grade will be determined by an accumulation of points, with the score of each Exegesis multiplied by 3, and the score of the final project multiplied by 5, up to a maximum of 66: 24 points for the Responses, 27 points for the Exegeses, and 15 points for the final project.

A = 57-66 points

B = 48-56 points

C = 39-47 points

D = 30-38 points

In practical terms, and just as an example, you could meet expectations (2 points) on three of the Responses and one of the Exegeses and still receive an 'A' for the course, so long as you exceed expectations on the remaining assignments.

BASIC EXPECTATIONS

Policy on Timeliness

The deadlines for all written assignments are firm. Assignments submitted after the deadline may be accepted if you have some credible, legitimate reason for the delay. For best results, let me know ahead of time if something is happening that might cause you to miss a deadline.

Policy on Academic Integrity

Georgia Tech aims to cultivate a community based on trust, academic integrity, and honor. Students are expected to act according to the highest ethical standards. For information on Georgia Tech's Academic Honor Code, please visit http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/policies/honor-code/ or http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/rules/18/.

Any student suspected of cheating or plagiarizing on a quiz, exam, or assignment will be reported to the Office of Student Integrity, which will investigate the incident and identify the appropriate penalty for violations of the Honor Code.

Take this seriously. All suspected instances of academic dishonesty will be dealt with immediately, according to Institute procedures.

Policy on the Use of LLMs/Generative AI

Do not use an LLM (e.g., ChatGPT) to complete the work of the course. To do so would be contrary to the goal and the work of the course specified above as well as a direct violation of the Policy on Academic Integrity.

In the wider world there may be some contexts in which limited use of an LLM could be acceptable, if only provisionally and never for the production of finished written work. Even in the best case, though, an LLM should be treated as an unreliable and slow-witted research assistant, one which must be given careful and precise instructions, and one whose work must always be checked against the informed judgment of an actual human being.

In any case, this course is *not* one of the contexts in which use of an LLM is acceptable.

If the machine doesn't simply hallucinate something, it will engage in a process of "distributed plagiarism" by skimming other people's work and generating a string of words with a high probability of being minimally coherent to a human user. Hence the violation of the Policy on Academic Integrity.

But consider the goal and the work of this course, which is to prepare *you* for *your* responsibilities as a professional and, really, as an adult human being. As a professional, your stock-in-trade will be your informed, considered judgment.

If you were to outsource your judgment to a machine, what would *you* then have to offer to anyone?

You would make yourself obsolete.

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you are a student with learning needs that require special accommodation, contact the Office of Disability Services at (404)894-2563 or http://disabilityservices.gatech.edu/, as soon as possible, to make an appointment to discuss your special needs and to obtain an accommodations letter. Please also e-mail me as soon as possible in order to set up a time to discuss your learning needs.

Student-Faculty Expectations Agreement

At Georgia Tech we believe that it is important to strive for an atmosphere of mutual respect, acknowledgement, and responsibility between faculty members and the student body. See http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/rules/22/ for an articulation of some basic expectations that you can have of me and that I have of you. In the end, simple respect for knowledge, hard work, and cordial interactions will help build the environment we seek. Therefore, I encourage you to remain committed to the ideals of Georgia Tech while in this class.