

Western University: Department of Political Science

POLISCI 2537F: Foundations of Political Theory

Summer 2022

Distance Online

Course Instructor

Caleb Althorpe, calthorp@uwo.ca

Office Hours: Wednesdays and Fridays 11-12, or by appointment

Course Description

This course offers a topical survey of a very diverse field. It will address: (i) what is the purpose of the state? (ii) what is freedom and what are the limits of liberty? (iii) what is equality and how might we pursue it? (iv) what is justice and how is it best achieved? In the course we will be assessing how different theoretical perspectives answer these questions, and also looking at the variety of methodologies and research methods available to do political theory. The emphasis throughout the course will be on critical review of the arguments provided in the readings and which we analyse in the lectures, but also how to develop your own views of these matters: what do you think and, more importantly why? In each reading response you will be expected to discuss the merits and demerits of each reading. The essay and exam will require you to be able to argue persuasively, taking due consideration of others' arguments.

Antirequisite(s); Political Science 2237E, Philosophy 2800F/G, Philosophy 2801F/G, Philosophy 2802E, Political Science 2237W/X

Course Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Understand the major concepts, questions, and themes in the area of political theory, including how different theoretical perspectives and methodologies answer these questions
- Read, understand, and critically evaluate academic articles in political theory
- Formulate your own considered opinions about live issues in political theory, expressing them coherently in writing.

Readings

There is no textbook for this course. All readings will posted on OWL.

Course Format

This course is online and there is **NO** in person learning. Each week's content (lecture videos and readings) will be posted on OWL and made available the Monday morning of each week. The lecture videos do not simply cover or explain the material in the readings, but also include

additional material. It is thus crucial that for each week you watch the videos **and** do the readings. Assessments will cover all assigned material.

For Weeks 2-6 you will be required to submit a reading response by 12pm Friday (more info below). There will also be stand-alone lessons on tips for how to do well on both the essay and the exam. I will also hold 'drop-in' sessions over Zoom each week during my office hours. Given there are no tutorials, I **strongly encourage** you to come to these sessions (or arrange an alternative time) with me to discuss any questions or concerns you have about the course content or the assessments. I am also available over email (calthorp@uwo.ca) and aim to reply to all emails within 24 hours.

Statement on Inclusion

Political theory in general, and this course in particular, covers topics and issues that might be controversial, difficult, or personal for some students. I recognize that members of this class will be coming into the course from different standpoints and with different life experiences (academic background, race, religion, gender, class, etc.). I endeavour to create a learning environment in which each student has the opportunity to be heard, to be respected, and to feel safe being themselves. If there are circumstances that make your participation in this class difficult, please reach out to me and we can discuss accommodating strategies. This includes discussing whether certain topics in the course are particularly sensitive or triggering for you.

Assessment

20%: Reading Responses
40%: Essay (5% for essay proposal)
40%: Exam

You are only able to use a self-reported absence (SRA) for the reading responses and the essay proposal. If you do use an SRA, then the new due date will be due 48 hours after the original deadline. You are unable to use an SRA for either the essay or the exam.

Reading Responses

Each week (minus Week 1) you will submit reading responses of approximately 400-600 words, focusing on **one** of the readings for that week (each week I will list which readings can be used as a response). These responses will be graded on a four-point scale. To receive consideration the responses must be sent to me by **12pm on Friday** for the applicable week. The 20% reading response grade will be made up of 5 reading responses, so 4% for each response. To achieve high marks for the reading responses, it is imperative to not only summarize the reading, but to also analyze its argument and tell me what you found strong or weak about it. I will provide feedback on your responses, so they are a great way to hone the skills you will need for the paper and the exam.

Essay

2500 words (+/- 10%). **Due 11:59pm June 6** via OWL.

A list of essay questions will be posted shortly after the commencement of the course. For the essay you are expected to research from outside the course syllabus (\approx 5 external and academic sources is fine). The emphasis is on developing a clear argument in support of a thesis. You are also able to choose your own question if you wish (however, you must confirm the question with me beforehand). There will be a short lecture video on how to write a good political theory essay, which I strongly encourage you to watch.

A 1-page essay proposal (5% pass/fail) will be **due 11:59pm May 27** via email. For the proposal you do not need to know exactly what your thesis will be, but you will be expected to have selected a topic and a research question, and to have an idea of how you will go about answering the question. I will provide feedback on the proposal.

Exam

Timed (2hours). **June 17** via OWL.

The exam will be composed of two parts: the first part will be short answers, and the second part will be essay responses. For each of the two parts, you will select from a list of five questions **two** questions to answer. The short answer questions will be assessing your understanding of particular topics and arguments, while the essay response will be assessing your ability to make connections between topics from across different weeks. We will have a practice exam session to help you prepare.

Late Submission:

Late submission will be penalized 5% per day. Extensions may be granted in extenuating circumstances, so long as this is arranged with me **before** the deadline. If you think you may need an extension for an assignment, please email me as early as possible.

Course Schedule

Week 1: Intro to the Course and the Methodology of Political Theory

What is political theory? Why should we study it? How do we do political theory? What is political theory's relationship to other subfields of political science? To what extent should political theory be normative and idealized?

Readings:

- Writing Philosophy, 6-11
- Issues in Political Theory, 1-5
- DePaul "Reflective Equilibrium"
- Kimberley Brownlee and Zofia Stemplowska, "Thought Experiments" in *Methods in Analytical Political Theory*

Week 2: The State, Political Obligation, and Punishment

What is the state and what is its purpose? What makes a state legitimate? Are we under a moral obligation to obey the law, and if so, on what grounds? Under what conditions might it be

justifiable (or even required) to break the law? What might justify the state punishing a person when they break the law?

Readings:

- Bird, "Authority," 154-166 from *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*
- MacKinnon, "The Liberal State"
- Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail"

Week 3: Liberty and Freedom

What does it mean to be 'free'? What sort of things limit our freedom: being interfered with? being dominated? not being able to do what we want? Does poverty limit our freedom? What role does freedom play in struggles for liberation? How is freedom affected by systems of power?

Readings:

- Waldron, "Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom"
- Bird, "Oppression" in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (2nd ed.)
- Fanon, "On Violence"

Week 4: Rights

What does it mean for someone to have a 'right' to/over something? What best grounds a right? Can groups hold rights or only individuals? Are there such things as human rights? What do we do when different rights conflict? Is there something conservative about rights-based liberalism, or can rights be a tool in emancipatory struggles?

Readings:

- Waldron, "Rights" in *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*
- O'Neill, "The Dark Side of Human Rights"
- Darby, "Race and Rights"

Week 5: Equality

What does an equal society look like? To what extent is it based on social relations being equal, or people having equal 'stuff'? What are some alternatives to the focus on equality? How far can objections to systems of oppression (e.g., colonialism, racism, sexism) be based on their violation of the principle of equality?

Readings:

- Anderson, "What is the Point of Equality?" 312-end
- Ypi, "What's Wrong with Colonialism"

Week 6: Justice

What does a just society look like? Is it based on certain outcomes, or on what persons are entitled to? What is structural injustice? In thinking about justice is it more appropriate to idealize a perfectly just state, or to focus on rectifying the injustices faced by the currently and historically disadvantaged? How might justice be achieved for victims of oppression, exploitation, and colonialism?

- Rawls, selected pages
- Mills, "Retrieving Rawls for Racial Justice?" from *Black Rights/White Wrongs*
- Young, "Structural Injustice and the Politics of Difference"