Political Science 103: Introduction to Political Theory

This course will introduce you to political theory by involving you in a careful, sustained investigation of the question “What makes a government be morally legitimate?” You may think that the answer is easy: “It does what people want and/or came to power in ways that people want.” But things are not so simple. Which people? What if what they want is really bad? Again you may think that there are obvious answers: “The majority,” and “There is no such thing as ‘bad’ – if someone wants something, then they think that it’s good; and if they do, then it is. ‘Bad’ just means that the person calling it that doesn’t like it.” The problem with this answer is that (luckily) you don’t actually believe it. So the question is a tricky one. And it underlies just about every single aspect of political life.

We will look at 6 possible ways to answer the question. You will read challenging, original, complicated texts. You may not understand them at first, and it will be up to you to keep at it until you do. You will not be spoon-fed information in lectures, which you might then memorize and repeat back to me and your TA. Instead, my role will be to help you to understand the structures of whole theories, whole ways of answering fundamental questions, such as the one that we will explore. Many students find the thinking that is required of you in this course to be exciting and rewarding. They love it, even though it’s hard work. Others don’t. Only take the class if you’re up for it.

Your grade will be based on a mid-term (15%), a final exam (40%), an essay (25% - due in the second half of the term, date to be determined) and your discussion grade (based on participation (10%) and a section quiz (10%) to be designed by your TA and given before spring break, at a date of his or her choosing). Attendance in lecture and discussion is mandatory. Really. Plagiarism will result in failure of the course.

Books for the class are available at the University at Albany bookstore.

Plato, The Republic (translated by Bloom)
Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics
Aristotle, Politics
Hobbes, Leviathan
Locke, Two Treatises of Government
Rousseau, Discourse on the Origin of Inequality and The Social Contract (in one volume)
Projected Reading Schedule

Jan 23 - About the course
Jan 25 – Introductory lecture

Plato – Legitimacy from Goodness

Jan 28 - Setting the stage
Republic, Bk 1
Jan 30 - The challenge
Bk 2
Feb 1 - The make-believe city
Bk 3
Feb 4 - Justice and the love of truth
Bk 4
Feb 6, 8; Mon., Feb. 11 - Knowledge and the love of goodness
Bks 5, 6, 7
Feb 13, 15 - Types of illegitimate societies
Bk 8-9
Monday, Feb. 18 - No class

Aristotle – Legitimacy from Human Nature

Feb 20 - Living a properly human life
Ethics, Bk 1

Feb 22 – Excellence in human thought/thoughtful human excellence
Ethics, Bks 2 and 6

Feb 25 – Excellence in Relationships
Ethics, Bks 8 and 9

Feb 27 - Flourishing
Ethics, Bk 10 & Politics, Bk 1

Feb 29 - The nature of the political sphere
Politics, Bk 1 (re-read); Bk 3, chs 6-7, 9; Book 7, ch 4

March 3, 5, 7 - The activity of citizenship
Politics, Bk 3, chs 1, 4, 5; Bk 7, chs. 4, 9, 10

Hobbes – Legitimacy from Force

March 10, 12 - The premises
Leviathan, chs. 13, 14, 15 (secs. 1-3); then read chs. 1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11
March 14, 17 – The conclusion  
_Leviathan_, chs. 19, 20, 21, 26 (secs. 1-6), 29

March 19  MID-TERM

*SPRING BREAK*

**Locke – Legitimacy from God**

March 31, April 2 - The “State of Nature” metaphor  
_2nd Treatise_, chs 1-5; ch 6 (paragraph 54);

April 4, 7 - The inviolability of property  
Re-read chs 5

April 9, 11 - The terms of political association  
_2nd Treatise_, paragraphs 87; 89; 91-99; 119-122; 138-140; 221-222

**Rousseau – Legitimacy from Collective Participation**

April 14, 16, 18 - Alienation and the Lockean state  
_The Discourse on the Origin of Inequality_, entire

April 21, 23, 25, 28 - Legitimacy, democracy, collectivity  
_The Social Contract_

**Rawls – Legitimacy from Perceived Impartiality**

April 30, May 2 - The Veil of Ignorance  
_A Theory of Justice_, selections (e-res)

April 5 – Last day of class