Welcome to Political Science 355, Political Philosophy: Plato to Machiavelli. The course provides an overview of classical political thinking about the best life for humankind and the best ways to live together as a community in which members share similar aspirations. The course is divided into two parts; seven units form Part 1 and six units make up Part 2. Part 1 addresses the main similarities and differences in the political ideas of Plato and Aristotle, and forms two-thirds of the course content. These thinkers, arguably, have been the most intellectually significant as well as the most influential philosophical thinkers then or since. Part 2 discusses a handful of philosophers who embroidered in interesting ways on some of the earlier ideas about politics.

Course Objectives

After completing POLI 355, you should be able to

- Discuss the character of political philosophy as a complex activity as distinguished from ideology or political theory.
- Identify the principal arguments and dominant themes in ancient to early modern political philosophy from Plato to Machiavelli.
- Describe how discussions of order, justice, truth and the good change in ancient, medieval and early modern contexts.
- Discuss the arguments made by various leading thinkers on the subject of the right constitution for the state.
- Discuss the implications of leading political philosophies for citizenship and political obligation.
Course Outline

Unit 1 Perennial Questions and Political Philosophy

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 1 you should be able to:

1. Identify several of the enduring questions in classical political philosophy
2. Outline several significant features of political philosophy
3. Evaluate several different perspectives about how best to study political philosophy
4. Discuss the merits and drawbacks of studying the history of political thought as a canon of literature
5. Identify several challenges that demand a more inclusive approach to the philosophical study of politics

Readings:

1.1 Unit 1 Commentary
1.2 Sheldon S. Wolin, “Political Philosophy and Philosophy,” Reading 1
1.3 Beverly Thiele, “Vanishing Acts in Social and Political Thought: Tricks of the Trade,” Reading 2

Unit 2 Plato on Philosophical Inquiry and the Good

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 2 you should be able to:

1. Provide a general description of Greek society, including the political context in which Plato wrote The Republic
2. Discuss the polity’s ideal function in creating and maintaining a stable social order
3. Identify three conventional views of morality that Socrates rejects

4. Explain Plato’s view that following one’s function results in a good life

5. Summarize Plato’s conception of morality

6. Explain the need for guardians in Plato’s Republic

Readings:

2.1 Unit 2 Commentary

2.2 Robin Waterfield, “Plato’s Life in its Contemporary Political Setting,” pp. xii–lxv

2.3 Larry Arnhart, Political Questions: Political Philosophy from Plato to Rawls, Chapter 1, Sections 3, 4 and 5.

2.4 Plato, “Convention Under Attack,” Chapter 1, pp. 2–43

2.5 Plato, “The Challenge to Socrates,” Chapter 2, pp. 44–56

2.6 Plato, “Fundamentals of Inner Politics,” Chapter 3, pp. 57–69

Unit 3 Plato on Education

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 3 you should be able to:

1. Describe the place of the guardians in the social class structure and their relation to the rulers and ruled

2. Identify the moral qualities that qualify or disqualify different categories of person from leadership in Plato’s Republic

3. Analyze the strengths and drawbacks of having a philosopher king rule

4. Examine critically Plato’s view that political philosophizing provides the highest and best form of philosophical inquiry

5. Define the idea of the Supreme Good

6. Outline Plato’s preferred education for those who rule
Readings:

3.1  Plato, “Primary Education for the Guardians,” Chapter 4, pp. 70–114
3.3  Plato, “Inner and Outer Morality,” Chapter 6, pp. 133–158
3.5  Plato, “Philosopher Kings,” Chapter 8, 190–226
3.6  Plato, “The Supremacy of Good,” Chapter 9, pp. 227–249
3.8  Arnhart, Chapter 1, Section 8 pp. 30-32
3.9  Susan Moller Okin, “Philosopher Queens and Private Wives: Plato on Women and the Family,” Reading 4 in the Digital Reading Room.

Unit 4 Plato on Decay and Corruption

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 4 you should be able to:

1. Relate immorality in individuals to types of government
2. Understand Plato’s criticism of poetry as an unworthy pursuit
3. Explain the importance of immortality of the soul for the possibility of knowledge

Readings:

4.1  Unit 4 Commentary
4.3  Plato, “Happiness and Unhappiness,” The Republic, Chapter 12, pp. 320–343
Unit 5  Aristotle on Human Association and Happiness

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 5 you should be able to:

1. Situate The Politics in relation to Aristotle’s life and times
2. Discuss Aristotle’s understanding of how political science can contribute to the achievement of the good life
3. Draw general comparisons between the political views of Aristotle and Plato
4. Explain the importance of human association for Aristotle’s political community
5. Evaluate the household as the basis for the forms of rule that occur in political communities
6. Assess Aristotle’s precept that justice should treat people according to their individual moral worth
7. Provide a preliminary account of Aristotle’s conception of a fair and just society

Readings:

5.1 Unit 5 Commentary
From The Politics and The Constitution of Athens


5.3 Aristotle, Excerpt from The Nichomachean Ethics, pp. 1–7

5.4…Aristotle, Book I, pp.11–30
Unit 6  Aristotle’s Typology of Constitutions

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 6 you should be able to:

1. Distinguish between a good person and a good citizen
2. Describe Aristotle’s typology of constitutions
3. Categorize good and perverse types of rule
4. Summarize ideal forms of rule
5. Evaluate Aristotle’s conception of citizenship
6. Indicate why mixed or moderate constitutions are preferable
7. Explain why political disorder occurs

Readings:

6.1  Unit 6 Commentary
From The Politics and The Constitution of Athens

6.2  Aristotle, Book III, pp. 61–91

6.3  Aristotle, Book IV, pp. 91–119

6.4  Aristotle, Book V, pp. 119–152
Unit 7  Aristotle on Education, the Ideal State and Revolution

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 7 you should be able to:

1. Explain the special role for statesmen
2. Understand Aristotle’s belief in the superiority of Greek political culture
3. Explain several obligations of citizenship
4. Discuss the education that is suited to different forms of government
5. Evaluate the good life in the best state

Readings:
From The Politics and The Constitution of Athens

7.1  Aristotle, Books VII and VIII, pp. 166–207


Unit 8 St. Augustine

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 8 you should be able to:

8.1  Describe Augustine’s view of human nature
8.2  Contrast the City of God and the City of Man
8.3  Evaluate how society needs to be governed, given Augustine’s view of human nature
8.4  Discuss the equality of souls as it affects slaves and women

Readings:
Unit 8 Commentary

From St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics

Saint Augustine, “Introduction” and excerpts from The City of God, pp. 102–111

From the Reading File

Paul Weithman, “Augustine’s Political Philosophy,” Reading 8

Unit 9 Hildegard of Bingen

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 9 you should be able to:

1. Explain how Hildegard gained authority
2. Describe Hildegard’s cosmology
3. Identify similarities in the organicism of Plato and Hildegard
4. Discuss the place of women in medieval political philosophy

Readings:

From the Reading File

Helen J. John, “Hildegard of Bingen: A New Twelfth–Century Woman Philosopher?” Reading 10

Diana Coole, “Women in Medieval Thought: Transitions from Antiquity to the Renaissance,” Reading 11

Unit 10 St. Thomas Aquinas

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 10 you should be able to:

1 Summarize several factors that affected the context in which Thomas Aquinas developed his theology
2. Describe several classical influences on medieval Christian theology
3. Identify similarities in the views of Augustine and St. Thomas
4. Summarize Aquinas’s conception of Natural Law
5. Discuss the forms of government that are consistent with Natural Law
6. Evaluate women’s capacity to govern under Natural Law

Readings:
10.1 Unit 10 Commentary.
From St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics
10.2 Paul E. Sigmund, “Introduction,” pp. xiii–xxvii
10.3 Thomas Aquinas, selections from Summa Contra Gentiles, pp. 3–13
10.4 Thomas Aquinas, selections from The Summa of Theology: pp. 37–38; 40–41; 44–60; and 66–68

Unit 11 Machiavelli and the Sources of Power

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 11 you should be able to:
1. Describe several ways that rulers come to power
2. Compare the merits and drawbacks of hereditary rule
3. Identify the special requirements for governing following a military conquest
4. Elaborate Machiavelli’s view on the use of force to maintain power
5. Develop a preliminary account of Machiavelli’s political morality
Unit 12  Machiavelli on Successful Political Leadership

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 12 you should be able to:

1. Evaluate the treatment to be given to one’s fellow subjects and allies in relation to Machiavelli’s political morality

2. Summarize Machiavelli’s attitudes and recommendations concerning the behaviour of princes

3. Assess Machiavelli’s aspirations for the unification of Italy

4. Use the constellation of concepts represented by virtù, fortuna and necessità to describe Machiavellian prince

Readings:

12.1  Unit 12 Commentary.

12.2  From The Prince

12.3  Niccolò Machiavelli, Chapters XV–XXIII, 49–77

12.4…Niccolò Machiavelli, Chapters XXIV–XXVI, 78–85

From the Reading File

12.5  Hannah Pitkin, “Fortune,” Reading 11
Unit 13  Conclusion: Changing Answers to Perennial Questions

Learning Objectives – After completing Unit 13 you should be able to:

1. Discuss the centrality of the concept of Order and political stability to political philosophy (Unit 1)
2. Evaluate the place of morality in classical and medieval political philosophy (Units 2–10)
3. Indicate what purposes individual happiness serves for the well-being of political communities (Units 2–12)
4. Reflect on the intellectual merits and limitations of classical political philosophy and the range of questions it identifies as relevant for the study (Units 1 through 13)
5. Describe the influence of Aristotle or Plato on medieval political thought (Units 8–10)
6. Characterize the influence of Christian theology on political philosophy (Units 8–10)
7. Identify and discuss several differences between Machiavelli’s study of politics compared to classical and medieval political philosophy (Units 11–12)
8. Identify several of the vanishing acts that result in women never being considered as persons who are fit to rule (Units 1–13)

Learning Activities

1. Extend earlier comparisons of the ideas of Plato and Aristotle to all of the major political philosophers studied in the course.
2. Assess the legacy of each philosopher’s ideas for the developments in subsequent political philosophy.

3. Assess Machiavelli’s political advice to demonstrate ways in which it both reflects and rejects age–old answers to perennial questions.

4. After viewing the film Gladiator, draw on the course materials to explain one of the major themes of political philosophy that the film touches on.

**Additional Background to Learning Activity 4**

In Gladiator, the failing old emperor Marcus Aurelius salutes General Maximus for successfully fending off a barbarian attack. The Emperor gives the impression that Maximus has won his approval as his successor. Aurelius actually plans to democratize rule by handing over more power to the Senate, and Maximus could play a role in this innovation. Aurelius’s son, Commodus attempts to thwart his father’s plan, rid himself of Maximus and his family, and gain the authority that he thinks is his birthright. Maximus escapes execution but is captured, enslaved and turned into a gladiator by slave traders. The lust for power of a hereditary ruler and the rise to power of a plebeian who displays virtue could be used to support several of the political theories studied in Political Science 355. After viewing the film, draw on the course materials to explain one of the major themes of political philosophy that the film touches on.