Introduction

What is justice? What would a completely just government be like? How does legitimate political authority arise, if ever?

These are some of the questions we will attempt to answer in this introductory course, mainly by examining what some of the most influential philosophers have had to say about these issues. We will focus on one particular area of philosophy—political philosophy. The disadvantage of this is that we will not learn what philosophers have said about other important topics (such as epistemology, metaphysics, value theory, etc.). But, the advantage is that, by focusing on what many philosophers have said about one topic, we can delve more deeply into it, and consequently do more philosophy ourselves. We also raise the likelihood of correctly answering such questions, or, at the very least, make ourselves able to formulate and more cogently defend views about political philosophy.

The goals of the course are the following:

1. The students should learn the varying views on the topics, as well as the arguments for and against them.
2. The students should learn how to critically evaluate these arguments, and, by extension, arguments in general.
3. The students should be introduced to various tools from the philosopher's toolbox, e.g. logic, critical thinking, conceptual analysis, identifying fallacious and valid reasoning, and clarifying and reconstructing more-or-less opaque arguments.
4. Students should improve their ability to formulate and defend their own political views, and argue for them in a way that is charitable to their opponents.
5. Students should also learn how these political theories, even ancient ones, relate to our political arrangements and discourse today.
6. Students should learn how to develop a lengthy and rigorous argument about political philosophy in their papers.

Course Texts

- Plato – Republic
- Aristotle – Politics
- Thomas Hobbes – Leviathan
- John Locke, Second Treatise of Government
- John Stuart Mill – Utilitarianism
Course Requirements
The course requirements and their percentage weighting is as follows:

1. Class Participation - 20%
2. Midterm 25%
3. Final Exam (non-cumulative) 30%
4. Term Paper 25%

Your class participation final score is a function of your attendance, how often and how well you ask questions and enter into class discussion, how you conduct yourself in class, how well you interact with fellow students in group activities, and so on. Two things at this point to mention—Please try and remain respectful of your fellow students (and me!) in this course. We will often be dealing with issues that tend to get folks angry. Just because you disagree with one another, or me, is no reason to get nasty, or to make things personal. In fact, one of the goals of this course is to get past what are usually knee-jerk, emotional reactions, and to see instead what reasons those who disagree with you have for their beliefs, in order to promulgate a useful and sensible dialogue and an assessment of such reasons, rather than engaging in personal attacks and vindictive behavior. In connection with this, it is important to note that I will often play what’s called the ‘Devil’s Advocate’ in this course. That is, I will often advocate views that I do not really hold, or go against views that I really do hold, because of the pedagogical utility that such a strategy has in getting students to think about why it is that they believe what they do, and whether such views are defensible. Since I do this, I’ll occasionally appear a moral monster, or puritanical, or downright stupid. I think it’s important to realize this, so that students understand why it might be that I say some of the apparently outrageous things that I do. And now, for the most important point in the syllabus - the greatest predictor and guarantee of success in the course is to regularly do all your readings on time—before the class where we will discuss the readings in question. If you don’t do the readings regularly, and on time, you will most likely not do well in the course.

The midterm and (non-cumulative) final exam are rather straightforward attempts to ascertain that you have read and understood the course readings and listened to and grasped the lectures and discussions. The exams are objective in that they are questions about what positions the authors have, and what their arguments for them are, which have definite answers.

Rather than merely parroting back the course material (which is what the exams are all about) students are encouraged (nay, required!) to express their opinions and give arguments for them in the course and their term papers. This is a discussion course, not a lecture course (although I will often lecture). A significant part of your grade is how well you participate.

Every student will write an (approximately) five page term paper on topics yet to be determined. Details will emerge later on the papers page. I encourage students with worries to meet with either myself or the TA with a draft of their papers.

One more point. I hope that none of you hesitate seeking me out for help. I can be reached via e-mail, can meet with you in office hours, after class, and so on. I am here to help, and some of the material is quite difficult.
Lastly, I hope you enjoy the course. Anybody who has special needs, requirements, learning disabilities, etc., should feel free to consult me about what might aid you in succeeding in the course.