

Political Theory • Spring 2025

POL 260 090W • Writing Intensive • Tuesdays & Thursdays, 9:30 – 10:45 am • Murray 1001

Borough of Manhattan Community College • The City University of New York
Department of Social Sciences, Human Services, and Criminal Justice

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Drop-in conversation times (office hours): Tuesdays, 1:00-4:00pm

Description

Political theory is the practice of thoughtfully observing a community's common life. This course sketches the tradition of political theory in the Western world through the ancient, medieval, and modern eras. We will read, talk about, and write about several classic works of political thought in which great writers try to clarify what they see in their communities' lives or try to argue for particular visions of how human communities ought to order themselves.

Texts and resources

You will need to buy six books for this class, all of them available at the BMCC Bookstore. Be sure to get the specific editions listed here.

- Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Hackett Publishing, ISBN 9780872200166)
- Benedict, *The Rule of St Benedict*, trans. Carolinne White (Penguin Classics, ISBN 9780140449969)
- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, trans. Simon Armitage (author anonymous) (W.W. Norton, ISBN 9780393532494)
- Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (Penguin Classics, ISBN 9780140449150)
- John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government* (Broadview Press, ISBN 9781554811564)
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Oxford University Press, ISBN 9780199537075)

I will supply a few additional shorter required texts as handouts or through Brightspace. We may at times make use of Brightspace for other purposes, too. If you're not familiar with Brightspace, I suggest that you look at this introduction: <https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/academics/digitaleducation/student-support/brightspace-for-students/>.

Assignments and evaluation

Your work for this class will include readings, class participation, frequent reading response writings, four essays, and participation in two in-class reflection writing days.

READINGS

Reading assignments and the dates by which they should be completed are indicated on the course schedule at the end of this syllabus. The readings for this class will be challenging. No one reads complex texts like these and understands all their layers of meaning on the first try, or even the twentieth. Your goal when reading should be simply to stay engaged and attentive, noticing (and preferably taking notes on) both what you understand and what you find difficult, what you can easily relate to and what feels alien to you. It may help to make a list of questions as you read.

CLASS PARTICIPATION

Class participation takes many forms: attending class sessions, being attentive and studious during class sessions, asking questions or sharing ideas during class, and asking questions or sharing ideas during my office hours. Since this is a writing intensive class, ungraded in-class writing activities are also essential. It's fine if different students prefer different forms of participation, although consistent class attendance is a baseline that everyone should meet. Class participation helps you better understand the course's subject matter and helps us all by making our class more of a scholarly community.

READING RESPONSES

Every day of class for which we have a reading assignment (which is almost but not quite every day), bring with you to class a reading response: a piece of writing about one page long, either handwritten or typed, responding to that day's reading assignment. Each reading response should begin by quoting a short passage (one or two sentences) from the assigned reading for that day. This can be any passage that seems important or noteworthy to you. After quoting the passage, your reading response should present your thoughts and questions about that passage and the issues it raises. Note that a reading response should *not* be a summary of the reading assignment; it should be your reaction to something specific in what you've read. I will give full credit for reading responses that fulfill the assignment and partial credit for those that partially fulfill the assignment. At the end of the semester, I will assign you a grade for your reading responses reflecting the number that you have successfully completed.

ESSAYS

You will write four essays, each about four pages long. In these assignments, you will be able to develop your thoughts about our course readings, reflecting on how those texts can help us understand politics. I'll provide detailed instructions for each essay when the time comes. Essay due

dates are indicated on the course schedule at the end of this syllabus. At the end of the semester, you will have the opportunity to revise and resubmit one of your essays. If you take that opportunity, the grade I assign to your revised essay will replace the original grade for that essay.

REFLECTION WRITING DAYS

Once around the middle of the semester and once toward the end, we will devote a day of class to a set of writing activities. These activities will resemble in-class essay exams in the sense that they will involve several writing prompts asking you to look back at and reflect on our previous readings. They will be different from exams in that you will not need to do anything in particular to prepare for them, other than being up to date with all your other work for the class. Your grades on these writing activities will be based on the extent to which your work demonstrates familiarity with our course readings and engagement with the course's themes.

GRADES

Your essays will contribute 50% of your course grade, your reading responses 25%, and your participation in the reflection writing days 25%. Excellent class participation can raise your grade above what it would otherwise be. Frequent lateness, cell phone use during class, or other unstudious behavior can lower your grade below what it would otherwise be. Excessive absences—missing one third of the semester or more—will make it impossible for you to receive a passing grade.

Miscellany

This is a Writing Intensive (WI) course. BMCC defines WI classes in this way:

Writing intensive courses pay special attention to developing critical reading, writing, and analytic skills to prepare students for college-level coursework in general. Both informal and formal writing will be designed to maximize your understanding of the subject matter. Formal writing assignments, at least 10-12 pages total, account for a significant portion of your grade and will include opportunities for revision.

Here are some BMCC and CUNY policy statements of which you should be aware.

Class Participation Participation in the academic activity of each course is a significant component of the learning process and plays a major role in determining overall student academic achievement. Academic activities may include, but are not limited to, attending class, submitting assignments, engaging in in-class or online activities, taking exams, and/or participating in group work. Each instructor has the right to establish their own class participation policy, and it is each student's responsibility to be familiar with and follow the participation policies for each course.

Plagiarism and Academic Integrity Plagiarism is the presentation of someone else's ideas, words or artistic, scientific, or technical work as one's own creation. Using the idea or work of another is permissible only when the original author is identified. Paraphrasing and summarizing, as well as direct quotations, require citations to the original source. Plagiarism may be intentional or unintentional. Lack of dishonest

intent does not necessarily absolve a student of responsibility for plagiarism. Students who are unsure how and when to provide documentation are advised to consult with their instructors. The library has guides designed to help students to appropriately identify a cited work. The full policy can be found on BMCC's Web site, www.bmcc.cuny.edu. For further information on integrity and behavior, please consult the college bulletin (also available online).

Gender Inclusivity BMCC community members have the right to use and be referred to according to their preferred name, title, and/or personal pronouns. Everyone also has the right to use all spaces according to their self-identification, including restrooms and locker rooms. To learn more about how to change your preferred name and affirm your gender identity at CUNY (including requesting a new ID card and/or email address), go here: <https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/student-affairs/lgbtq/>. Anyone who has experienced harassment related to gender or sexual identification, who needs assistance, or who wishes to file a complaint, can contact the Office of Compliance and Diversity: <https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/about-bmcc/compliance-diversity/>.

Also, please note the following BMCC information related to the health and well-being of students.

Advocacy and Resource Center (www.bmcc.cuny.edu/student-affairs/arc, 212-220-8195): Students can receive assistance to address barriers affecting their abilities to succeed in college. The Advocacy and Resource Center offers services that include food assistance, finance consultation, health insurance, and other services that may address challenges students experience. All of the services that are offered at the Center are free. Assistance is also available through the Office of Student Affairs, S350, 212-220-8130.

Counseling Center (www.bmcc.cuny.edu/counseling, 212-220-8140): Counselors assist students in addressing psychological and adjustment issues (i.e., depression, anxiety, and relationships) and can help with stress, time management and more. Counselors are available for walk-in visits.

Office of Compliance and Diversity (www.bmcc.cuny.edu/aac, 212-220-1236): BMCC is committed to promoting a diverse and inclusive learning environment free of unlawful discrimination/harassment, including sexual harassment, where all students are treated fairly. For information about BMCC's policies and resources, or to request additional assistance in this area, please visit or call the office, or email olevy@bmcc.cuny.edu, or twade@bmcc.cuny.edu. If you need immediate assistance, please contact BMCC Public safety at 212-220-8080.

Office of Accessibility (www.bmcc.cuny.edu/accessibility, 212-220-8180): This office collaborates with students who have documented disabilities, to coordinate support services, reasonable accommodations, and programs that enable equal access to education and college life. To request an accommodation due to a documented disability, please visit or call the office.

Schedule

Texts marked with “*” are those I will provide as handouts or on Brightspace. All other reading assignments are from the books you should purchase, listed on the first page of this syllabus.

DATE READING ASSIGNMENT OR CLASS ACTIVITY

Tu 1/28 Introductory discussion: What is political theory?

PART 1. ANCIENT IDEALS

Th 1/30 * Plato, *Apology*
Tu 2/4 Plato, *Gorgias*, pp. 1-26 (up to line 466b)
Th 2/6 Plato, *Gorgias*, pp.27-50 (up to line 481b)
Tu 2/11 Plato, *Gorgias*, pp. 51-79 (up to line 501d)
Th 2/13 Plato, *Gorgias*, pp. 79-107 (up to line 523a)
Th 2/20 Plato, *Gorgias*, pp. 107-113 (finish the book) → **Essay 1 due**

PART 2. MEDIEVAL HARMONIES

Tu 2/25 Benedict, *Rule of St Benedict*, pp. 1-26 (Prologue & Chapters 1-7)
Th 2/27 Benedict, *Rule of St Benedict*, pp. 27-71 (Chapters 8-47)
Tu 3/4 Benedict, *Rule of St Benedict*, pp. 72-104 (Chapters 48-73)
Tu 3/11 * Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship* (read at least the first half)
Th 3/13 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (read as far as you can)
Tu 3/18 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (finish the book)
Th 3/20 **Reflection Writing Day 1 → Essay 2 due**

PART 3. MODERN REBELLIONS

Tu 3/25 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 1-32 (“Letter” and Chapters 1-8)
Th 3/27 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 32-58 (Chapters 9-18)
Tu 4/1 Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 58-85 (Chapters 19-26)
Th 4/3 John Locke, *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, pp. 27-43 (Preface & Chapters 1-4)
Tu 4/8 John Locke, *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, pp. 43-67 (Chapters 5 & 6)
Th 4/10 John Locke, *Second Treatise on Civil Government*, pp. 68-93 (Chapters 7-9)
Tu 4/22 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 1-24 (Preface & “On the Prejudices of Philosophers”)
Th 4/24 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 25-42 (“The Free Spirit”)
Tu 4/29 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 151-180 (“What is Noble?”) → **Essay 3 due**

(OVER)

PART 4. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

- Th 5/1 * Hannah Arendt, from *The Origins of Totalitarianism*
Tu 5/6 * Jacques Ellul, from *The Technological Society*; Lewis Mumford, “Authoritarian and Democratic Technics”
Th 5/8 * Ignazio Silone, “Visit to a Prisoner”
Tu 5/13 **Reflection Writing Day 2 → Essay 4 due**
- Th 5/15 Concluding discussion: What is political theory for?

Last day to submit revised essays: **Tuesday, May 20**