

Davidson College
Department of Political Science

Political Science 208: Classical Political Theory
Fall 2009

Time: TR 11:30-12:45
Location: Chambers 3068

Office Hours: W 11:00-12:30; 1:30-3:00
(and by appointment)

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GOALS OF THE COURSE

The purpose of government, as we understand it today, is to protect the individual's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Its only role is to provide the ordered and peaceful conditions that make it possible for people freely to satisfy their own interests. This familiar description of politics, which began to take hold in the 16th and 17th centuries, self-consciously rejected the classical view of government as, in some sense, responsible for the formation of virtuous citizens and the education of the soul. The practical consequence of this rejection has been that the higher aspirations of man, classically understood as at the same time a rational and a political animal, are given no direction; the result being that man is reduced to a materialist animal. The possibility that man might be something more than this can best be seen by returning to the work of those thinkers who first articulated the classical alternative to the modern view of politics, a view which we accept today for the most part without reflection.

This course will introduce students to some of the most important writings of classical political philosophy. Beginning with the dramatic work, *Antigone*, by Sophocles, we will consider in detail Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* and *Nichomachean Ethics*, as well as the primary political writings of the Roman politician and orator, Marcus Tullius Cicero. We will conclude with Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which dramatizes the classical critique of the modern political option. The intent of the course is to analyze the central principles and themes of classical political philosophy — including justice, virtue, the human good and the human soul, and the relation between the active life of politics and the contemplative life of the philosopher. We will examine the ways in which classical thinkers both anticipated and offered a radical challenge to the modern and contemporary understanding of political life.

TEXTS

Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays* (Robert Fagles, tr.; Viking Penguin, 1982)

Plato, *The Republic* (Desmond Lee, tr.; Penguin Classics, 1955)

Aristotle, *The Politics* (R.F. Stalley, ed., Ernest Barker, tr.; Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 1998)

Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On the Commonwealth and on the Laws* (James E.G. Zetzel, tr.; Cambridge University Press, 1999)

William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* (Arthur Humphreys, ed.; Oxford University Press, 2009)

REQUIRED WORK

1. Attendance and Participation. This course is structured around students' careful reading of the assigned texts and active participation in the class discussions relating to those texts. **Students must be sure to keep up with the readings, come to class having read the day's assignment, and be prepared to ask questions and make substantive comments related to the readings. Active contribution to discussion, making full use of the texts, is the basis for the participation portion of each student's grade.**

Students' grades will be affected by their attendance. **Two unexcused absences are allowed. Students who are excessively absent will receive an "F" for class participation.** For the purposes of this attendance policy, **a student who is late to class by ten minutes or more will be considered absent.**

2. Presentation of the Readings. Each class, one or two students will be chosen to make an initial presentation (in the form of a concise summary) of the reading material for the following class. These presentations will be graded primarily on the student's ability to identify and articulate clearly the central ideas of the reading assignment, as well as to raise questions designed to initiate discussion. Presentations should be between five to ten minutes, and **no outside material should be used.**

For those who need assistance in preparing these presentations, Davidson College has a speaking center.

In order to facilitate the contribution of all students to the discussion, others will be called upon at random to help clarify or to challenge the interpretation of the presenters.

3. Reviews. There will be three open-book, take-home reviews requiring students to answer specific questions about the reading material, in a short-essay format. These reviews will be considered as equivalent to in-class exams. Questions will be handed out one week before the assignment is due. Students will be expected to refer directly to and cite extensively from the texts. More details about the format of the essay will be available as the date of the assignment approaches. **Outside sources should not be used.**

All reviews should be **typed, double-spaced, with an 11- or 12-point font.** For those who need writing assistance, Davidson College has a writing center. This center should be used by students who have questions about grammar or style. **No outside help should be sought for questions having to do with the substance of the review.**

The first two reviews will be penalized one letter grade for each class day they are late. Final reviews will be penalized one letter grade for each calendar day they are late.

All provisions of the Davidson Honor Code are in effect, and all written work will be pledged in accordance with it.

GRADING

The grades for the course will be calculated on the following basis: general participation (15%); presentations (15%); first review (20%); second review (25%); final review (25%).

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

The following schedule is subject to change. Reading assignments for each class will be confirmed in the class period prior to the class in which they are due and posted on Blackboard.

I. Introduction (August 25)
General Discussion

II. Sophocles (August 27 to September 1)
Antigone (all)

III. Plato (September 3 to October 6)
The Republic (all)

FIRST REVIEW DUE: TUESDAY, OCTOBER 6 (by e-mail or posted on Blackboard)

FALL BREAK (October 13)

IV. Aristotle (October 8 to November 10)
The Politics (all)
The Nichomachean Ethics (selections)

SECOND REVIEW DUE: TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 10 (by e-mail or posted on Blackboard)

V. Cicero (November 12 to November 24)
The Republic (selections)
The Laws (selections)

THANKSGIVING BREAK (November 26)

VI. Shakespeare (December 1 to December 3)
Julius Caesar (all)

FINAL REVIEW DUE: THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10 (by e-mail or posted on Blackboard)