

PHIL. 033: POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Fall 2025: M&W 1:15–2:30

Bernard 103

Kyle Scott

Email: kyle_scott@pitzer.edu

Office Hrs: W 5:45–6:45pm and by appt., in Broad Hall 212 & via Zoom

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course introduces students to political philosophy, the branch of philosophy that asks fundamental questions about the nature, justification, and purpose of human social and political arrangements. Whereas other politics-oriented disciplines often focus on how political society functions in practice, political philosophy is largely concerned with how it *ought* to function, or what would be required for a political arrangement to count as just. Alongside this inquiry, political philosophy often also seeks to explain why existing institutions so often fail to meet their ideals, as well as to diagnose and describe novel forms of social injustice and dysfunction. While much of our discussion will center on the state and its institutions, we will also examine political forms and practices that extend both beyond and beneath the state—ranging from questions of global justice to the dynamics of local communities and interpersonal relations. Over the semester, we will pursue this question by reading and engaging with a number of influential texts in modern political thought. Although the syllabus traces a historical trajectory—from Hobbes through later modern and contemporary philosophers—our aim is not simply to survey past ideas but to clarify and refine our own views about issues that remain pressing today. Among the questions we will consider are: What is the best form of government, and who should rule? What may the law rightly compel us to do? What is freedom? Why are existing social relations often marked by domination and inequality, and how might they be improved? And ultimately: What is the point of living in organized political society at all?

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Beyond introducing students to core questions in political philosophy, this course is designed to cultivate the fundamental skills of philosophical inquiry. Students will gain practice in analyzing and evaluating arguments, developing their own positions, and communicating ideas clearly and persuasively in both writing and discussion. By the end of the course, students should be able to:

- **Formulate and communicate arguments clearly** — producing cogent arguments and expressing them with clarity and precision in both oral and written form.

- **Engage opposing views constructively** — identifying and articulating objections to one's own views, applying the principle of charity to others' positions, and responding to disagreement respectfully and effectively.
- **Interpret and analyze philosophical texts** — reading primary sources (both historical and contemporary) with care, extracting their central arguments, and situating them in broader debates.
- **Refine ideas through writing** — transforming initial insights into polished, well-structured pieces of philosophical prose.
- **Develop and defend original positions** — constructing one's own informed and reasoned responses to enduring problems in political philosophy.

TEXTS

All readings will be made available on the course website, which you can access here:
<https://pitzer.instructure.com/courses/2240>.

However, if you are interested in purchasing hard copies of some of the longer texts we will be reading, which I do recommend, here are the editions of those text, which can be found in most online bookstores:

- Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley. 1994: Hackett Publishing Company. ISBN 978-0872201774.
- John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett. 2015: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0-521-35730-2.
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings* (Second Edition), ed. Donald A. Cress. 2012: Hackett Publishing Company. ISBN 978-1603846738.
- John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Second Edition), ed. John Gray. 2015: Oxford University Press. ISBN 978-0199670802.
- Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (Second Edition), ed. Robert C. Tucker. 1978: W. W. Norton & Company. ISBN 978-0393090406.
- W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1994: Dover. ISBN 978-0486280411
- Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. 2011: Vintage Books. ISBN 978-0307277787.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The course requirements are designed to help you build three types of skills relevant to philosophy (and general life): (1) how to clearly and productively discuss a difficult text or complex topic, (2) how to read a difficult text, and (3) how to clearly and compellingly express yourself in writing.

Attendance and Participation (20%).

Philosophy is not simply a set of facts or questions that one could passively memorize; it is rather a way of approaching important problems and thinking them through. As such, philosophy is something that is “done.” It is thus crucial to learning philosophy that it be actively practiced. Your attendance and informed participation in the class is therefore expected and required. This generally entails regular attendance and engagement in discussion during class, but can also be accomplished by taking part in other fora, such as office hours. More specifically, all of the following counts as active participation:

- Asking questions and engaging with the instructor and other class participants in a courteous and charitable dialogue about the week’s required reading.
- Asking a classmate to clarify or repeat a point they made or asking them a question about something they said.
- Explaining that you are confused or unsure about some aspect of the course material.
- Visiting office hours or scheduling an appointment with me to discuss the material.

For further examples of effective participation, please see **“But How Do I Participate? A Sampling of Ways to Contribute to a Philosophical Conversation,”** by Olivia Bailey, which is posted to the course website.

Having said that, I do of course understand that life sometimes gets in the way of attending class. Each student will thus be permitted **three absences from the course, no questions asked**. You do not need to email me or provide any excuse for missing any of those three classes. However, if you miss *more* than three classes (for any reason), then we may need to determine some way to make up for the missed class time, since attending class is an integral part of the learning process for this course.

Protocols (20%)

A protocol is a 1–2 page (double-spaced) reading response, which should be submitted to the course website within two weeks of the day that reading is due. The protocol can take various forms including:

- A summary of key points in the reading with one or more critical questions
- A working through of one or two issues in the reading
- A close reading of one or more quotes from the reading with analysis of the argument
- A reflection on the reading in relation to personal experience, beliefs, current events, or examples from media
- Any combination of the above

Grading of the protocols will depend on effort, depth of the engagement with the text, and stylistic clarity. The grading scale is:

- ✓+: “Excellent,” 20/20 (100%)
- ✓: “Satisfactory,” 17/20 (85%)
- ✓: “Unsatisfactory,” 14/20 (65%)
- 😞: “Incomplete,” (you didn’t submit a protocol), 0/20 (0%)

You must submit at least **4 protocols throughout the semester**. *When* you choose to submit them is up to you. The only requirement is that any protocol must be submitted within two weeks of the class session for which the reading was assigned. For example, if the reading is due on September 3, you may submit a protocol on it any time up to September 17.

Moreover, you *may* submit more than 4 protocols. If you do, then I will only count the four highest grades towards your overall protocol grade.

Three Essays

The majority of your grade will be determined by how well you do on the three required papers you must complete for the course. Having to explain our ideas to others in writing forces us to be clear, and to be thoughtful and honest about the positions we hold. We will talk about what is expected of the problem essays, and discuss tips for writing well in philosophy, at a number of points before the papers are due.

First essay (15%). Your first essay will be a short paper of 2–3 double-spaced pages with 1-inch margins and 12 pt. font. It will ask you to address a question concerning readings we have discussed in class. You will be able to select from among a choice of different questions.

Second essay (20%). The second essay will be a slightly longer and somewhat more complex paper of 3–4 double-spaced pages (with the same formatting as above). It will ask

you to address a question concerning readings or thinkers you have not yet written on. Again, you will be able to select from among a choice of different questions.

Third essay (25%). The third essay will be a paper of 5–6 double-spaced pages (with the same formatting as above) that will ask you to address the arguments of two or more theorists you have not yet written on. Because the third paper will be longer and more complex than the others, you will have more time to complete it, and it will be worth a higher portion of your overall course grade. Again, you will be able to select from among a choice of different questions.

Extra Credit Opportunities

At various points in the course, I may offer extra credit assignments. These will typically involve short writing exercises that connect a reading or idea from class to another medium (such as a news article, film, or current event). I'll announce these opportunities as they become available.

Summary Grade Breakdown and Paper Due Dates

Assignment	Length	Due	Percent of Grade
Participation	-----	-----	20%
Protocols (4)	1–2 pages each	-----	15%
First Essay	2–3 pages	9/24	15%
Second Essay	3–4 pages	11/01	20%
Third Essay	5–6 pages	12/12	25%

GRADING AND LATE POLICY

Unless otherwise stated, all assignments will receive a letter grade based on the Pitzer 4.0 scale. Papers and presentations are due at the time and date specified. Work turned in late is considered to have been turned in the next day and will be penalized 1/3 of a grade (A to A-, B- to C+, etc.) for each day late (including weekend days). Email submissions will not normally be accepted. Under appropriate circumstances, short extensions on papers may be granted so long. To arrange an extension please email me at least 36 hours in advance of the due date. In some rare instances, such as in last-minute emergencies, an extension may be granted after the deadline has passed.

ELECTRONICS POLICY

Phones, tablets, laptops, and other electronic devices are not permitted in class, unless prior permission has been arranged. Our classroom is meant to be a space for sustained, focused engagement. Research consistently shows that taking notes by hand improves comprehension compared to laptop note-taking, and that multitasking not only lowers academic performance but also increases susceptibility to distraction. In short, even though we may feel adept at multitasking,

the evidence is clear: we learn better when we give our full attention to the task at hand. Respect for each other's focus and presence is also an important part of our shared classroom environment.

Recording class sessions (audio or video) is likewise not permitted.

If you are concerned about keeping track of everything discussed in class without a device, keep in mind two things. First, this course has no midterm or final exam, and no assignment will test rote memorization of facts. Detailed transcripts of our discussions will thus not be necessary for such purposes. Second, while I do not plan to record class sessions (except when pedagogically necessary), I will frequently provide handouts on the day's readings. These will serve both to guide our discussions and to give you a record to take away, so you can focus your energy on participating rather than transcribing.

You should bring all assigned readings to class in hard copy, either printed out or as the physical book itself. If printing is a challenge for you, please let me know and we can find a solution.

If you require accommodations or if this policy poses difficulties for personal reasons, I encourage you to meet with me so we can work out an arrangement that supports your participation.

ACCOMMODATIONS

If you are a student with academic accommodation needs based on learning differences, chronic illness or other needs please contact the Pitzer Office of Academic Support Services (PASS) at academicsupport@pitzer.edu or (909) 607-0213. In cases where a need may conflict with the course policies, students are also invited to discuss this with me.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

All student work must be of original creation. It is always better to turn in an essay of your own creation than to plagiarize. Cases of plagiarism will be reported to the administration for disciplinary action. Please review the Academic Policies and Procedures, as well as the Guide to Student Life, for information on what counts as plagiarism. <https://www.pitzer.edu/tlc/academic-integrity/>

If you have any question about what counts as a violation of academic integrity or how to cite your sources, please consult with me. Err on the side of caution. Any standard citation style will do (Chicago, APA, MLA, etc.). If you aren't sure which to use, consider Chicago style author-date format: https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-2.html

AI POLICY

The use of generative AI systems, such as ChatGPT, Gemini, or Copilot, for completing written assignments in this course is not permitted. This is not simply because I am “old-fashioned.” Rather, it is because the central purpose of these assignments is to help you develop your own skills in philosophical thinking and writing. Outsourcing these skills to a machine undermines that goal.

I recognize that AI can sometimes be used in less direct ways, such as for correcting grammar or refining your writing. But learning to write clearly, which is itself an extension of learning to *think* clearly, is a key objective of this course. If you rely on AI to perform that work for you, you deprive yourself of an essential part of the learning process. (Note as well that you will not lose points for grammatical or spelling errors, so there is little need to worry on that front.)

That said, there *may* be justified uses of AI that do not conflict with these aims: for example, brainstorming ideas or mapping out possible directions for a paper. If you are unsure whether a particular use is acceptable, I encourage you to ask me. To be clear: what is not permitted is the use of AI to generate or refine any portion of the written work you submit for credit.

If I suspect that AI has been used, I may compare your work with your in-class writing assignments or employ AI-detection tools. I hope not to do this. I have no interest in policing your work. But I will do so if it becomes a problem.

Finally, note that the assignments are deliberately designed to be poor fits for AI. For instance, you may be asked to incorporate insights from our in-class discussions or to develop an original philosophical argument, which are things an AI system cannot do particularly well on your behalf. So, in addition to violating course policy, relying on AI is far from a sure-fire way of earning a strong grade.

WRITING CENTER

I strongly encourage you to utilize the Pitzer Writing Center, which is an invaluable resource for this course and beyond. The Writing Center is located in 131 Mead Hall, just across from the fountain, and offers virtual and in-person consultations with peer Fellows trained to work with writers on assignments in any discipline and at any stage of the writing process, from brainstorming ideas to polishing a final draft. The Writing Center is one of Pitzer’s most popular academic resources, holding close to 2,000 one-on-one consultations per year. To book a 50-minute session or learn more about workshops and other resources and events, visit <https://www.pitzer.edu/writing-center>. All Pitzer students may use the Writing Center for any writing need. Students from the other 5Cs are welcome to book appointments for courses taken at Pitzer.

COURSE READINGS AND SCHEDULE

As you may already know, reading philosophy is challenging. Here are some resources students report they've found useful in improving their reading experience (but feel free to contact me for more guidance about reading):

- <https://www.blogs.ppls.ed.ac.uk/2017/02/28/read-philosophy-step-step-guide-confused-students>
- <https://philosophy.arizona.edu/sites/philosophy.arizona.edu/files/Rosati%20C%20How%20to%20Read%20a%20Philosophical%20Article%20or%20Book.pdf>
- <http://melissajacquart.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/How-to-Read-Philosophy-Handout.pdf>

You will see that some readings below are marked as “optional.” These are truly optional—you are not expected to read them, and if I reference them in class, I will do so without assuming prior familiarity. That said, they can enrich your understanding of the material and deepen class discussions, and I encourage you to explore them if you have the time and interest. Optional readings may also play a role in extra credit assignments offered during the semester, and they are fair game for you to reference in your own assignments and papers if you find them helpful.

M 8/25 Introduction

Unit 1: Hobbes, the State of Nature, and the Covenant

W 8/27 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chs. 13–14

Optional: David Lay Williams (*The Washington Post*), “What Would Hobbes Say About the Pandemic?”

M 9/01 *Labor Day, No Class*

W 9/03 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chs. 15, 17

M 9/08 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chs. 18–19

W 9/10 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chs. 20–21

Unit 2: Locke's State of Nature and Justification of Private Property

M 9/15 Locke, *Second Treatise*, chs. 1–4

W 9/17 Locke, *Second Treatise*, ch. 5

Optional: Brewer, “Slavery-Entangled Philosophy: Does Locke’s Entanglement with Slavery Undermine his Philosophy?”

FIRST PAPER DUE WEDNESDAY 9/24

M 9/22 Locke, *Second Treatise*, chs. 7, 8

W 9/24 Locke, *Second Treatise*, ch. 9

Unit 3: Rousseau, Inequality, and the General Will

M 9/29 Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, Preface, Part 1

W 10/01 Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, Part 2

M 10/06 Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, Book I; Book II, chs. 1–7

W 10/08 Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, Book III, chs. 1, 12–18; Book IV, chs. 1–2

M 10/13 *Fall Break, No Class*

Unit 4: Critical Perspectives on Social Contract Theory

W 10/15 Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*, pp. 1–6, 44–54, 96–99

Optional: Fraser, “Beyond the Master/Subject Model: Reflections on Carole Pateman’s *Sexual Contract*”

M 10/20 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Introduction and ch. 1 (pp. 9–31)

Optional: Garcia, “The Racial Contract Hypothesis”

W 10/22 Mills, *The Racial Contract*, ch. 2

Unit 5: Free Speech, Individuality, and Liberty

M 10/27 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, selections

W 10/29 Mill, *On Liberty*, chs. 1–2

Optional: Michele Moody-Adams, “Is There a Safe Space for Academic Freedom?”

SECOND PAPER DUE SATURDAY 11/01

M 11/03 Mill, *On Liberty*, chs. 3–4

Unit 6: Capitalism and Communism

W 11/05 Marx, “On the Jewish Question”

M 11/10 Marx, “On the Jewish Question”

W 11/12 Marx, “Wage Labour and Capital”

M 11/17 Marx, “Wage Labour and Capital”

Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*

W 11/19 Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*

Unit 7: Race, Gender, and Social Oppression

M 11/24 Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Forethought, ch. 1

James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village”

Optional: Cole, “Black Body: Rereading James Baldwin’s ‘Stranger in the Village’”

W 11/26 *Thanksgiving Break, No Class*

M 12/01 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Introduction

W 12/03 Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (selections)

FINAL PAPER DUE FRIDAY 12/12