

## **PSC Introduction to Political Philosophy**

Fall 2016 – Professor Abraham Singer

Tuesday and Thursday: 2-3:15

Office: Harkness 307

Office Hours: Wednesday 2-4 PM

e-mail: [abraham.singer@rochester.edu](mailto:abraham.singer@rochester.edu)

### **Course description**

This is an introductory course to the canonical texts of political philosophy or political theory, a specialized field within the study of political science. Much of political science deals with “how” questions or “why” questions – “How do voter preferences affect policy outcomes in America?” or “Why do democracies tend not to go to war with one another?” Political theory is unique in asking evaluative and critical questions, “should,” “ought,” or even “what” questions, which can range from the specific to the general: “What role *should* the supreme court play in American politics?” “How free *should* markets be in a democracy?” “*Ought* we as a society prioritize equality or liberty?” “*What* is justice and what does it demand?” And so on. When we register an opinion about affirmative action, *Citizens United*, Hillary Clinton, or Brexit, we assume answers to such questions; the problem is that most people don’t reflect on *why* they think this way, let alone question whether their background assumptions are correct. Political theorists ask these big questions head on, and attempt to answer them using reasoned argument and a knowledge of how political institutions work, and how they have worked through the ages.

This semester we will be reading some of the great texts in the Western tradition of political theory, beginning briefly in Ancient Greece and running through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The organizing theme of this semester is “Liberalism and its Critics.” We will be studying the historical development of “Liberalism,” a broad tradition of political theory that answers the types of questions posed above through an emphasis on individual liberty, private property, and the rule of law. This is the brand of political philosophy that has been most influential in the United States from its founding through the 20<sup>th</sup> century; as a result, in studying the great liberal thinkers we are also studying why our society is shaped the way it is. We will then be reading some of the great thinkers who have levelled strong philosophical criticisms against this tradition. The aim is to understand the ideas that have shaped and underpin our social and political institutions, and to critically assess them.

### **Learning Objectives**

In carefully reading these texts, and thoughtfully writing about them, the aim is to

- 1) enrich our understanding of politics and political history;
- 2) develop our ability to engage in, reconstruct, and assess complex argumentation;
- 3) strengthen our written and verbal communication; and

4) most importantly, cultivate a disposition for using (1) and (2) when reflecting on our own views, and when communicating with others.

## **Evaluation**

Your final grade will be composed of three written assignments, in addition to 10% for attendance/participation. The first assignment will be a take home test featuring a few short answer questions. It will be given on September 22, be due on September 30<sup>th</sup>, and will be worth 20% of your grade. The second assignment will be another take home test, assigned on October 27, due on November 4<sup>th</sup>, and worth 30% of your grade. The final assignment will be an essay 8-10 pages in length. The prompt for the essay will be given on December 1<sup>st</sup>; the essay itself will be due on December 14<sup>th</sup>, and will be worth 40% of your grade. Extensions will only be granted for medical reasons or some other extraordinary set of circumstances, and must be secured prior to the due date (you cannot ask for an extension retroactively). Late assignments will not be accepted.

## **Statement on Academic Honesty**

I operate on the assumption that every student is familiar with and abide by the College policies on Academic Honesty. If you are not familiar with them please make yourself familiar: <http://www.rochester.edu/College/honesty> . I take this seriously; if you are, at any point, unsure of whether what you are thinking of doing would constitute plagiarism or some other compromise of academic integrity, please ask me directly.

## **Readings**

Do note that this is a reading intensive course. You are expected to come to class having thoughtfully read the required readings for that day. By thoughtful I mean noting that something confuses you, or noting that something seems not to fit with previous readings or with recurring themes. These are difficult texts with many interpretations: a thoughtful and careful reader will generally come to class confused, unsure, and with questions. I will generally try to send out questions prior to the lecture that will jog your thinking in this regard, with time in class to discuss.

Many of the readings will be available online through Blackboard. The texts below, however, you will most likely have to purchase, and are avai

John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*. (Harvard)

Jean Jacques Rousseau,

