PSCI 550.01: Approaches to Political Theory

Ramona Grey
University of Montana - Missoula, ramona.grey@umontana.edu

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Political Theory Seminar:  
Approaches to Political Theory

Course Description:
Beginning in the late 1950s, many commentators wondered whether political theory (or political philosophy—I shall not distinguish between them), as it had been traditionally practiced and taught, was “in abeyance.” Whether we have reached ‘the end of political theory,’ is a question that continues to plague political theorists. Political theory’s impeding demise is, however, complicated by the fact that political theorists have never agreed on what it is they do, or should be doing, and their disagreements affect the way they approach political questions. But rather than rehashing an old debate, one that resurrects what John Gunnell has called ‘the myth of the tradition of political theory,” perhaps we ought to consider applying a different conceptual framework for understanding political theory, one that does not focus on the causes that political theorists have championed or condemned, or on how political theory has been affected by specific events (real or imagined). Instead, I propose this semester that we raise an even more fundamental question: what is the purpose of political inquiry? A fundamental question precisely because what people take to be the purpose of political theory determines what they study, who they study, and how they study it.

Course Objectives: after successfully completing the course work, the student should be able to:
1. Distinguish between a normative, a scientific/historical, and an analytical approaches, and recognize how political theorists often combine each of these approaches in their work.
2. Develop concise, analytic essays on the assigned readings. Specifically with regards to an analytic perspective, students will consider their own position with respect to different approaches to studying political theory (for instance, what consequences follow when one emphasizes text over context when studying political theory?)
3. Evaluate a political theory in terms of its analytic, empirical, and normative claims, and its strengths and/or weaknesses.

Course Grading:
PS 550 will be taught as a seminar. Short essays of 4-5 double-spaced pages (about 6 essays per student) will be assigned and critiqued in class (50% of course grade.) Class participation (20% of course grade) will evaluated according to each student's contribution to discussions on reading assignments. The final paper (30%) will be 10-12 pages.

In addition, students will be expected to assess the merits and weaknesses of their colleague's essays. To give us time to prepare questions, copies of your essay must be distributed before you are scheduled to orally present it (please see schedule). Late essays will not be accepted. Each Political Science M.A. graduate student must also complete a political theory field exam. All students will complete a take-home final. The final & field exams will be take home & due on Tuesday May 12th by 5 pm.
Accessibility and Students with Disabilities

The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction by supporting collaboration between students with disabilities, instructors, and Disability Services for Students. If you have a disability that requires accommodation, please present the instructor with a letter from Disability Services for Students (DDS), Lommasson Center 154 (243-2243), indicating the existence of a disability and suggested accommodations.

The instructor has attempted to make all course materials accessible. If you find course material that has barriers to accessibility, please notify the instructor as soon as possible so the oversight can be corrected as quickly as possible.

Required Tests:

Joseph Wood Krutch, **The Modern Temper**
Leo Strauss, **Natural Right & History**
B.F. Skinner, **Beyond Freedom & Dignity**
Erich Fromm, **The Sane Society**
John Gunnell, **Political Theory & Interpretation**
Isaiah Berlin, **Liberty**
Wendell Barry, **Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community**
Arendt, **The Human Condition**
M. Ignatieff, **The Needs of Strangers**
* Classical works of: Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Locke, Burke, Rousseau, Hobbes, J.S. Mill, Marx—to be assigned on an individual basis.

John Rawls, **Political Liberalism** selected readings
Quentin Skinner, **Visions of Politics**, selected readings

January 26th  Introduction to the Course: Approaches to Political Theory


Recommended Readings:
Alfred Cobban, “The Decline of Political Theory,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 68, no. 3 (September 1953), 321-337

February 2nd  “Classical” & “Theory & Justice-Seeking: Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas


Essays (due Sunday 2/1 by 12 pm): Please describe what constitutes ‘justice’ for one of these theorists, and how and where does he suggest we might find a standard of justice? Taking his work as one example, what do it suggest are some characteristics of a justice-seeking approach in classical theory?

Essays (due Sunday 2/8 by 12pm): Please describe what constitutes ‘knowledge’ for one of these theorists, and how and where does he suggest we might gain political knowledge? Taking his work as one example, what do it suggest are some characteristics of a knowledge-seeking approach in “modern” theory?

Essays (due Sunday 2/2 by 12pm): Please describe what constitutes ‘justice’ for one of these theorists, and how and where do they find this justice? Please identify at what point the theorist shift from questions of ‘justice-seeking’ to questions of ‘knowledge-seeking’?

* * * * * February 17th  President’s Day No Class * * * * *

February 23rd  Strauss: the Conservative Justice-seeker?
Read: Strauss, *Natural Right & History*; Choose one of the recommended readings as well.

Essays (due Sunday 2/22 by 12pm): What for Strauss is the purpose of political theory? According to Strauss, what is ‘historicism’ and how has it harmed political theory? What does he identify as genuine “justice-seeking” and what does it assume about meaning & nature of justice?

Essays (due Sunday 2/22 by 12pm): It’s argued that the Bush administration neo-conservatives are students of Leo Strauss. In what sense, can we say they understand and/or misunderstand Strauss’s conception of “natural right”?

Recommended Readings:
Q. Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*
Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?*, see title chapter

Herbert Storing (ed.) *Essays on the Scientific Study of Politics*
A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*
Drury, *Leo Strauss and the American Right* (1997);
George Bruce Smith, “Leo Strauss and the Straussians: An Anti-democratic Cult?”, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, vol. 3 No. 2 (June 1997);
Seymour Hersh, “Selective Intelligence,” *The New Yorker*, 12 May 2003;
March 2nd  

**Liberal Justice-Seeking**

Read: J.W. Krutch, *The Modern Temper*, Choose one of the recommended reading as well; and Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, lecture I all; lecture II all; lecture IV all; lecture VI, §6-7; lecture VIII, §3-5, §13-14

Essays (due 2/23): What does Krutch's account of modern art, modern science and modern knowledge suggest about human dignity? Does it make sense, according to Krutch, to speak of individual "freedom" or "rights" or "justice" given what we’ve learned from modern science, history, and philosophy?

Essays (due 2/23): Rawls could be characterized as the contemporary theorist and a ‘liberal justice-seeker.’ How does his form of justice-seeking contrast with, say, a Plato? What aspects of Krutch’s account of ‘modernism’ does Rawls appear to embrace and what does he reject?

**Recommended Readings:**
Cowley, *Exile’s Return*, 1959
Diggins, *Up From Communism: Conservative Odyssey In American Intellectual History*, 1975
Frankel, *The Case for Modern Man*, 1955
Goodwin, *The Lottery State*
Perry, "The Modern Distemper," *Saturday Review of Literature*, June 1929
Kateb, *Utopia & Its Enemies*, 1963
Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*

March 9th  

**Justice Seeking & Empirical Inquiry: Scientific Approach**


Essays (due 3/2): Is Skinner a political theorist?, and if he is, what makes him so?

Essays: (due 3/2): What claims (findings/hypothesis/laws/arguments) does Skinner make that may be called scientific? What claims (etc.) does he make that he calls scientific, but are anything but?

**Recommended Readings:**
Steven Smith, “Political Science and Political Philosophy: An Uneasy Relation,” *PS: Political Science and Politics*, vol. 33 (June 2000): 189-91
March 16th  

Justice Seeking & Empirical Inquiry cont.

Read: Fromm, *The Sane Society*; Choose one of the recommended readings as well.

Essays (due 3/9): "What is good or bad for man is not a metaphysical question, but an empirical one that can be answered on the basis of an analysis of man's nature and the effect which certain conditions have on him." (266 - *Escape From Freedom*) What difficulties are involved in making an "empirical" view of human nature the basis of a political theory?

Essays (due 3/9): Both Fromm and B.F. Skinner seek “a science of man,” but they mean very different things by it. Discuss with reference to what each thinker hopes such a “science” will achieve for society (for us?)

Recommanded Readings:
Fromm, *Man For Himself; Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*
Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*
Schaar, *Escape From Authority: The Perspectives of Erich Fromm*, 1961
Wells, *The Failure of Psychoanalysis: From Freud to Fromm*, 1963
Briggs, "From Slaves to Robots," *New Statesman and Nation*, 23 June 1956
Ellul, *The Political Illusion; The Technological Society*

March 23rd  

Wendell Berry & Justice-Seeking

Read: Wendell Barry, *Sex Economy, Freedom & Community*; Choose one of the recommended readings as well.

Essays (due 3/16): “There are two kinds of freedom: the freedom of the community and the freedom of the individual. The freedom of the community is the more fundamental and the more complex.” What Barry understands here, Carter takes for granted.

Essay (due 3/16): Both Arendt and Barry associate ‘justice-seeking’ with identifying a ‘genuine’ community of citizens. They do not, however, necessarily agree on what constitutes a genuine community. Compare and contrast what for each of them characterizes a genuine community, and what benefits they claim that an individual gains from living in it. Finally, is it
Arendt or Barry who most closely follows the teachings of Aristotle, and explain why.

**Recommended Readings:**
W. Barry, *What Are People For*
Lewis Mumford, *The Human Condition*

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**April 6th**

**Arendt's Justice-seeking Inquiry into Political Theory**

Read: Arendt, *The Human Condition*; Choose one recommended reading below.

Essays (due Sunday 4/5 by 12pm): Arendt argues that in the beginning of the modern period, work had displaced both contemplation and action in the hierarchy of men's activities; but by the nineteenth century labour had replaced work as the supreme activity. How did this triumph of *animal laborans* come about according to Arendt?

Essays (due Sunday 4/5 by 12pm): What would Quentin Skinner make of Arendt’s interpretation of the ancient Greek polis? Would he find that her diagnosis of *modern alienation* is prone to certain analytic &/or empirical weaknesses? Explain

**Recommended Reading:**
Special Issue on Hannah Arendt, *Social Research*, 1977
Kateb, *Hannah Arendt*
Arendt, *On Revolution*  
*Between Past and Future*  
*The Life of the Mind*  
Whitfield, *Into The Dark: Arendt and Totalitarianism*  
Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*  
Raafraub, "Democracy, Oligarchy and the Concept of the Free Citizen in Late Fifth Century Athens," *Political Theory*, November 1983
Canovan, "A Case of Distorted Communications," *Political Theory*, February 1983
April 13th

**Arendt’s Justice-seeking Inquiry cont.**

Read: *The Human Condition*

Essays (**due 4/6**): How does Arendt’s distinction between public and private relate to her distinction between work and labor...or does it?

Essays (**due 4/6**): What do you see as the analytical weaknesses of Arendt’s *distinction between public and private*? On the other hand, what do you find are the strengths of her distinction?

**Recommended Readings:**

April 20th

**Quentin Skinner & Historical Inquiry in Political Theory**

Read: Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 2004 (available as ebook at UM library webpage) *Regarding Method*, vol. 1, Chaps. 3-4; *Renaissance Virtues*, vol. 2, Chaps. 6-7.

Essays (**due 4/13**): What does Quentin Skinner suggest is purpose of studying political theory? What does he find wrong with the justice-seeking and analytical approaches? Please describe Quentin Skinner’s *historical* approach to political theory. What are its strengths and weakness?

Essays (**due 4/13**): Does he avoid blending his historical approach with justice-seeking into his own studies of Machiavelli? What ‘analytical’ problems to you find in his interpretation of Machiavelli’s political ideas?

**Recommended Readings:**
April 27th

Analytical Inquiry & the Critical Critic: Isaiah Berlin
Read: Berlin, "Introduction" and "Two Concepts of Liberty"; Choose one of the recommended readings as well.

Essays (due 4/20): Berlin’s contribution to our understanding of freedom, as many have noted, is to demonstrate the error of assimilating liberty to morality, and of supposing that morality forms a coherent system. But while it seems dangerous and paradoxical to attach freedom to a particular ‘moral’ end, yet it seems trivial and hopelessly incomplete to leave it purely negative.

Essays (due 4/20): What is Berlin’s analytical critique of positive liberty? Does his analysis of the two concepts of liberty lead him into the position of defending the status quo? Explain

Recommended Readings:
Crowder, G. "Negative and Positive Liberty, Political Science, Dec. 1988
Kristjansson, K. "What Is Wrong with Positive Liberty?," Social Theory and Practice, Fall 1992

May 4th

Analytical Inquiry & Contemporary Theory: A Moderate Justice-seeking?
Read: M. Ignatieff, The Needs of Strangers & John Gunnell, Political Theory & Interpretation; Choose one of the recommended readings below.

Essays (due 4/27): While are the key characteristics do you find in Gunnell analytical approach to political theory? What, if any, kind of ‘justice’ or moral values can be derived from his theory?

Essays (due 4/27): Ignatieff appears to move between all three approaches to political inquiry. How so? Also what kind of ‘justice’ does Ignatieff appear to be seeking and where does he propose we look for it?
Recommended Readings: