

GVPT 441, Ancient Political Theory, Fall `08

Professor Alford, 1151 Tydings. Office Hrs, Tu. and Thur., 5:15-6:30, and by appointment. Call x54169 and leave a message. Email works even better: falford@gvpt.umd.edu. **Note: please make an appointment if you can, even during regular office hours.** Sometimes these are the only hours I can schedule appointments with graduate students, hold comprehensive exams, etc. Of course, I will see you any time during my office hours when I am free. With an appointment (!), I can often see you before class.

E-mail me with comments, questions, suggestions, and gripes. During the semester I read and respond to my e-mail 4-5 days per week. I'd love to hear from you.

This is a course in ancient political theory. We read the ancients not because they are just like us, but because they are different. Maybe smarter. Science and technology progress, but some things remain the same, or even go backwards. We are, I think, distracted by scientific and technological progress, convinced that it can solve basic problems of human nature faced by the ancients. It can't.

Political theory is the study the best possible way for humans to live, given humans as they truly are. Thus, political theory is intensely concerned with human nature, and has been for over 2,500 years. Once people believed in human nature. Today few academics do. But that doesn't mean human nature doesn't exist. Partly it depends on how we define the term.

With ancient texts we read slowly and carefully. To make sure you do that, I will give you a number of **pop quizzes**. They are not difficult, but they require careful reading. Please be aware of this policy, including how heavily the pop-quizzes are weighted (see below for details). There is nothing more important in this class than reading the books carefully. Please bring your text to class every day.

I won't give quizzes on official religious holidays. If you celebrate other religious holidays, I will work hard to make an arrangement with you, but this must be done well in advance. Don't come to me for the first time after you miss the quiz.

Note on dates: Everything we read and consider in this course (with the exception of Epictetus' Handbook) took place within a relatively brief span, between about 500BCE-300BCE, about two hundred years, in a small part of the world, best represented by her three capitol, so to speak, Athens, Sparta, and Jerusalem.

Note on class schedule: I will tell you every day where you should be in the readings, and over exactly what you are responsible should you have a quiz. I do it this way in order to let the class discussion set the pace.

Note on the structure of the course: be aware of the centrality of Greek tragedy in my account of ancient political thought. You should try to think about what tragedy is trying to tell you about life: not just life then, but about your life now. Then compare what tragedy has to say about life, including your life, with what the historian Thucydides, the stoic Epictetus, and the famous philosopher Plato have to say. My point: they are not just talking about people there and then; they are talking about you, here, right now, in this class, in this life.

What are they talking about? Is it possible to gain some control over what the Greeks called tuche, sometimes called fate, but the term is better translated as everything that happens to a man or woman? In general, Americans are control freaks, and it is an illusion you had best get rid of.

Part 1: Tragedy and History

Weeks 1-3: Aeschylus, Oresteia. Justice, Conflict, and the Idea of Tragedy

The Oresteia is a trilogy by Aeschylus. We will read all three plays. It is about the founding of the polis, about the source and nature of justice. We will also see video excerpts from the play. We will, with the aid of handouts (or web postings), try to define the idea of tragedy. This is important for the rest of the course.

Weeks 4-6: Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War [Woodruff, On Justice, Power and Human Nature, is the abridged version]

We move from one of the world's first tragedies to the world's first history. The question is whether the Peloponnesian War is a tragedy, and what it means to say that it is.

Week 7: Euripides, Orestes

From the grand and glorious Greek tragedy of Aeschylus we go to the farcical tragedy of Euripides, in which gods and men alike are corrupt fools. Between these two plays was the Peloponnesian war, which explains much. The Oresteia and Orestes cover much the same mythical background, but the tone is remarkably different.

Part 2: How Do You Suffer?

Week 8-and half of week 9 (3 lectures): The Book of Job. I did not order this text. You can find it in the Old Testament, as Christians call it, or the Tanakh, the Hebrew acronym for the Jewish Bible, based upon the initial letters of its three parts. There are dozens of free on line versions of the book of Job. One that does not try to sell you anything is at the University of Virginia <etext.lib.virginia.edu/rsv/browse.html> The question raised by the Book of Job is whether the suffering that life inflicts upon us is meaningful. The book of Job was likely written at roughly the same time the other books we are studying, even as it is set in an earlier mythic time, much like the Greek tragedies.

Week 10: Epictetus, The Handbook. Writing a little later than the other authors we are considering, Epictetus (a Roman) popularized stoicism. We shall consider whether Job was a stoic, or the opposite of a stoic. Is it good to be a stoic?

Take home midterm: Your take-home midterm will be given at this point, a little late in the semester. The question will be follows, so you have the entire semester to think about it, especially weeks 8-10. (I will officially give you this question on one class day, and the answer will be due the next.) "Job and Epictetus are not Greeks (even as Epictetus was deeply influenced by the Greeks). Compare and contrast the worldviews of Job and Epictetus. Focus on how each deals with the pain of life. Second, consider whether the views of Job or Epictetus, or possibly both, differ significantly

from that of the ancient Greeks, as expressed in their tragedies, or in their history. Is this difference good or bad?"

Part 3: What If You Had a Magic Ring?

Weeks 11-14: Plato, The Republic

The greatest book in the history of Western thought, or so it is said. We will try to figure out why.

Note: we will read most, but not all, of The Republic. I'll give you a handout with the reading assignment for each day.

Week 15: Euripides, Alcestis. A wonderful tragedy, with a profound lesson, its tone is nonetheless quite different from the others we have read. If we fall too far behind, it is this book we will drop.

The **final** will be scheduled during the final exam period. I will give you the question in advance. It will focus on Plato and what you would do with a magic ring.

Course requirements and standards

I will give 6 **pop-quizzes** (that is, surprised, unannounced quizzes) throughout the course of the semester. I will record the best 4. You may miss or fail two quizzes with impunity. Each quiz is worth 10% of your final grade, for a total of 40%. That is a lot, more than any other component of the course. The pop quizzes are to see if you have read the material carefully. They are about what happened, what did the author say, and so forth. They do not require much interpretation. "Tell me how the play `Orestes' ends?" would be a good pop-quiz question. I will not ask questions such as "What is the meaning of tragedy?"

I will tell you every class day what reading you will be responsible for should you have a pop quiz the next class.

Each pop quiz will take about 15-20 minutes of class time.

Since you have two freebies, pop-quizzes cannot be made up, except in the case of extended illness, about which I will have to consult your doctor.

The **take home midterm** is worth 25% of your final grade, as is your **final** exam. I will give you both questions in advance. Each exam will have only one question.

Since the course is limited to thirty students, I will be able to learn your names (it will take a while), and evaluate your attendance and participation in class discussion. Regular attendance and informed participation are worth 10% of your final grade.

The grading structure of this class is designed to persuade you to come to class regularly and read thoroughly. If you do this, you should do well.

My **grade computing formula** is simple: an "A" on a quiz is worth ten points toward your final grade, a "B" is worth 8 points, a "C" 7 points, a "D" 6 points. The same goes for your attendance/participation grade.

An "A" on the midterm or final is worth 25-23 points (depending upon whether it is an A+, A, or A-), A "B" on the midterm or final is worth 22-20 points, and so forth. To get your final grade, convert letters into numbers and add them up. A "F" receives no credit, and no points.

We will see videos of parts of The Oresteia trilogy

Required books

Thucydides, *On Justice, Power and Human Nature*, ed. Woodruff (Hackett)
Aeschylus, *The Oresteia* (U. of Chicago Press)
Plato, *The Republic*, ed. Lee (Penguin)
Euripides, *Orestes* (Oxford)
Euripides, *Alcestis* (Oxford)
Epictetus, *The Handbook* (Hackett)
The Book of Job (find your own edition)

You may use other editions of the tragedies, but I highly recommend the editions of Thucydides and Plato that I have chosen.

If you have a learning disability or other problem that needs my attention, let me know and I will make every effort to accommodate you.

The Student Honor Council has asked that I place the following statement on this syllabus. I think that it's a good idea.

The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please visit <http://www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/whatis.html>.