

Note: This course fulfills the political theory requirement for non-theory GVPT majors. It also fulfills the requirement that political theory majors take GVPT 743. The course is aimed at both groups.

GVPT 743, Contemporary Political Theory, Fall 2008

Professor Alford, 1151 Tydings, 405 4169 Office hrs: Tue, Thur 5:15-6:30, and by appointment. Leave message with voice mail. I can also be reached by e-mail at falford@gvpt.umd.edu. Email is generally better. Since my office hrs are often taken up with scheduled meetings with honors students, regular undergrads, and so forth, it is best to always make an appointment, but I will of course meet with you any time I am free during my office hrs. Generally we can talk briefly after class.

Contemporary Political Theory begins with Nietzsche (1844-1900), and ends with the latest author to capture the fancy of academia. Contemporary political theory is a reaction to the Enlightenment, and an encounter with mass democracy.

Required Readings

Friedrich Nietzsche, The Portable Nietzsche, ed. Kaufmann
Keith Ansell-Pearson, Introduction to Nietzsche as a Political Thinker
Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish
Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue
Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus
Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization

John Rawls, Political Liberalism
Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity
Jürgen Habermas, Inclusion of the Other
Hannah Arendt, The Portable Hannah Arendt, ed. Baehr
Jacques Maritain, Man and the State
In addition, there is a web-based reading assignment on the natural law.

I. Encounter with the Enlightenment

Week 2.

Selections from Nietzsche, The Portable Nietzsche, ed. Kaufmann.
Read: The Dawn, 76ff
Gay Science, 93ff
Zarathustra, part 1-4, 103ff
Beyond Good and Evil, 443ff

Week 3.

Gay Science, 447ff
Genealogy of Morals, 450ff
Twilight of the Idols, 463ff
The Antichrist, 565

While you are reading Nietzsche, also read Ansell-Pearson, Introduction to Nietzsche as a Political Thinker. Try to read as much of Ansell-Pearson as you can for the first week; he is very helpful.

Your intellectual task: reasoning backwards, so to speak, figure out the leading characteristics of the Enlightenment, using Nietzsche, the great critic of the Enlightenment. How much does Nietzsche depend upon the Enlightenment he criticizes?

Quick definition of the Enlightenment, from Wikipedia. (I recommend the entire article, “Age of Enlightenment”)

In his famous 1784 essay "What Is Enlightenment?" Immanuel Kant defined it as follows:

Enlightenment is man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. Such immaturity is self-caused if its cause is not lack of intelligence, but by lack of determination and courage to use one's intelligence without being guided by another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: Sapere aude! Have courage to use your own intelligence! The Enlightenment began then, from the belief in a rational, orderly and comprehensible universe—then proceeded, in stages, to form a rational and orderly organization of knowledge and the state, such as what is found in the idea of Deism. This began from the assertion that law governed both heavenly and human affairs, and that law invested the king with his power, rather than the king's power giving force to law. The conception of law as a relationship between individuals, rather than families, came to the fore, and with it the increasing focus on individual liberty as a fundamental right of man, given by "Nature and Nature's God," which, in the ideal state, would encompass as many people as possible. Thus The Enlightenment extolled the ideals of liberty, property and rationality which are still recognizable as the basis for most political philosophies even in the present era; that is, of a free individual being mostly free within the dominion of the state whose role is to provide stability to those natural laws.

Week 4, Foucault, Discipline and Punish. Foucault applies Nietzsche's concept of power to politics. How?

Week 5, Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue. How might one retain an Aristotelian concept of virtue in the contemporary world? By telling stories. Is MacIntyre a defender of the Enlightenment? The surprising answer is no. Why?

Week 6, Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus (entire book). Why not suicide? If you can't answer that, you have no business doing philosophy. In fact, Camus thinks there is a very good answer. So do I.

Week 7, Herbert Marcuse, Eros and Civilization. His greatest book, Eros can be read in so many ways. Later we will look back on it as the foundation of a new natural law. Now we shall consider it as a critique of the Enlightenment.

Paper topic #1: What remains of the Enlightenment after Nietzsche, Foucault, MacIntyre, Camus, and Marcuse are done with it? Be sure and define the Enlightenment you are talking about.

II. Rethinking Reason's Relationship to Democracy and Public Life

Weeks 8, John Rawls, Political Liberalism. Rawls' project did not end with A Theory of Justice. That was just the beginning. But what's he saying now, and is it anything special?

Week 9, Richard Rorty, Contingency, Irony and Solidarity. Rorty is a liberal ironist. What does that mean? Is it good? Relativistic? But what's relativism, anyway? It's not a simple question.

Week 10, Jürgen Habermas, Inclusion of the Other. Can the Enlightenment's ideals of democracy be saved?

Week 11, Selections from The Portable Hannah Arendt, ed. Baehr, including sections of The Human Condition, Eichmann in Jerusalem, and The Life of the Mind. A woman with a mind of her own.

Paper topic #2: Need democracy have anything to do with reason and rationality? Should it? Is that not the Enlightenment's great delusion? But, if so, then what remains? Where does Arendt fit?

III. From Natural Law to Universal Human Rights

Week 13 & 14, Jacques Maritain, Man and the State, all and web-based reading assignment on the natural law (tba). Maritain had a great deal of difficulty reconciling natural law with liberal democracy. Until, that is, Hitler made it clear to him that there was no alternative. He seems never to have quite understood America. Nevertheless, Maritain has much of interest to say about the natural law, and we will try to determine if the natural law makes any sense today.

Paper topic # 3: What remains of natural law today, and does it owe anything to the Enlightenment? Is natural law a child of the Enlightenment, or an alternative? This paper will draw upon your reading of MacIntyre, Habermas, Rorty, Nietzsche, as well as Maritain.

Course Requirements

Presentations: This is a graduate seminar. This means that students will take a leading role in presenting the material to their fellow students. During the course of the semester each student, working with another student, will present the material for that week's discussion to the class. Raising the basic issues and guiding class discussion are your task. No additional research is expected. Each student will make 2-3 presentations for a total of 25% of your final grade.

Papers: Three questions are asked. You are to answer each in the form of a paper, about 7-10 pages, typed, double-spaced. Each is worth 25% of your final grade, for a total of 75%. The paper is due the week we read the last book or reading for that section.

In addition, regular attendance and informed participation is expected from every student. To repeat myself: this is a graduate seminar, which means that students take the lead.

If you have a disability or other problem I can help you with, let me know. If the class falls on what is for you a religious holiday, we can make arrangements, but you must let me know in advance. I've noticed in recent years that more and more graduate students are missing several classes per semester for reasons unrelated to religion or health. Your regular attendance is expected.

You should reacquaint yourself with the university's policy on plagiarism. See: <http://www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/whatis.html>.