

GVPT 741, Ancient Political Philosophy
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Office Hours, Spring 2010, Tuesday 4:30-5:30, Thursday 4:30-5:30, & by appointment. Try to make an appointment, as undergrads also meet with me during this time. I can often meet with you the in half-hour before class on Tuesdays, but this time is by appointment only. If these hours do not work, we can make an appointment for another time.

Weeks 2-3: Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War. "Necessity works through fear and honor," says Thucydides. I think that's about right, and the key to history.

Week 4: Sophocles, Oedipus the King. Confidence in reason is the most dangerous thing in the world.

Week 5: Plato, The Symposium. What's love got to do with it?

Weeks 7-9. Plato, Republic, almost all. Be aware of a basic theme of this course: how best to deal with what the Greeks called tuche, sometimes called fate, but better translated as everything that happens to a man or woman. In general, Americans are control freaks. So were most of the ancient philosophers, including Plato, at least the Plato who wrote the Republic. This distinguishes them from poets like Sophocles, and the historian Thucydides.

Paper #1: How to reconcile Plato of The Symposium and The Republic? They seem so different. Are they?

Week 10. Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics. Pay particular attention to the first two books. Think about why Aristotle's Ethics is often held to be his finest work in political, not just moral, philosophy. In fact, Aristotle drew no distinction.

Week 11. The Book of Job. I did not order Job. You can find it in the Old Testament, as Christians call it, or the Tanakh, the Hebrew acronym for the Hebrew Bible, based upon the initial letters of its three parts. There are dozens of free on line versions 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. Or as Simone Weil puts it, "The great enigma of human life is not suffering but affliction." The book of Job was likely written at a couple of hundred years before Plato, though it is set in an earlier mythic time.

Week 12: Epictetus, The Handbook. Epictetus, a Roman, popularized stoicism. We shall consider the meaning of the philosophy, and whether it is still relevant today.

Paper #2: How to deal with the limits of human existence, above all that we and those we love are fated to die, and most of us to suffer along the way? A really good paper will look for answers to this question not just in Job and Epictetus, but in the other authors we have studied, especially Plato.

Weeks 13 & 14. Saint Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics, ed. Sigmund. We will read a number of selections from this book, and perhaps a handout.

Week 15: Class discussion of the themes of the course.

Paper #3: The third paper has two distinct parts, each about 3-4 pages long.

Part A: What is the relevance of natural law today?

Part B: What distinguishes ancient political theory? For example, what themes do you see running through it? What surprised you about it? What pleased you? What displeased you? What remains relevant? What not?

Organization and grading of the course

Students present course material

Since this is a graduate seminar, students will take the major responsibility for presenting the material. Each student, working with a partner, will take responsibility for presenting the evening's reading. No major outside research is expected. It is expected that you will have worked with your partner, and have prepared discussion questions, some background material, perhaps a handout, and so forth. Since this is a relatively small graduate seminar, each student can expect to do this several times. A sign up sheet will be passed around during the first class. All your presentations will together constitute 30% of your final grade.

Three ten page papers

Each student will write 3 ten page (typed, double spaced) papers on the topic assigned for that night. The paper will be due the night under which the assignment is located—that is, weeks 9, 12, 15. Each paper will constitute 20% of your final grade, for a total of 60%

Informed, thoughtful class participation will constitute the final 10% percent of your grade. This is the difference of one letter grade in the course. It's not how much you talk. It's what you say. Of course, first you have to show up every time.

Required books

Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War (I ordered Woodruff's abridged version, Thucydides on Justice, Power, and Human Nature. It has a great introduction, but if you have an unabridged edition, we can work with that.)

Sophocles, Oedipus the King
Plato, Symposium
Plato, The Republic (I ordered the Lee edition)
Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics
Epictetus, The Handbook
The Book of Job (find your own version)
St. Thomas Aquinas on Ethics and Politics, ed. Sigmund.

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. Let me know if I need to accommodate religious holidays that the university does not recognize, or that I might just have overlooked.

Please be aware of the Code of Academic Integrity. I will assume that you know it. I should not have to say this in a graduate seminar, but it appears that I do. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please visit <http://www.shc.umd.edu>.