



SYLLABUS SUMMARY

Contemporary Political Thought

POL 450

Semester Spring 2024
Course Length 16 weeks
Credit Hours 3
Course Location Welder 141
Times MWF, 1-1:15

Instructor Kevin Walker, Ph.D.
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Course Description

Abraham Lincoln referred to the life of civilization as the “mystic chords of memory,” which bound the nation together “from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone” (First Inaugural Address, 1861). So what happens to us when we live without memory – without history or even tradition? Can the future give us the same confidence in how we live, or does a memoryless world only guarantee despair and confusion? This class is a study in this aspect of our modern predicament in political philosophy since the turn of the twentieth century. We will consider the important figures who gave their best assessment of our situation; reactions to it from the major schools of political thought; and how our condition affects the major debates over the issues of our time – particularly human life, sexuality, education, and human happiness. Throughout, we will measure all ideas against the one institution that is supremely dedicated to memory: the Catholic Church. We will measure all contemporary political thought against its vast store of wisdom, and practice “thinking with the Church” when it comes to sorting through and carefully judging the variety of ideas that make up our intellectual scene, our politics, and our daily lives.

Texts

The following texts are *required* (in order of reading):

Readings in Contemporary Political Thought.

Arendt, Hannah. *Between Past and Future*. New York: Penguin Books, 2006 [originally 1961].

Kirk, Russell. *The American Cause*. Wilmington: Intercollegiate Studies Institute Books, 2002 [originally 1953].

Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898.

Pieper, Josef. *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. San Francisco: Ignatius Books, 2009 [originally 1952].

Expectations

- **Participation and Attendance (5%).** Come to class every day and be prepared to discuss the assigned reading based on the Reading Questions that will be passed out each week. Contact the professor as soon as possible for excused absences. Each unexcused or unexplained absence will result in the loss of a percentage point.
- **Discussion Questions and Responses (30% -- Questions 15%; Responses 15%).** Write a short discussion question for an assigned day of class and respond to classmates' questions on the Canvas Discussion forum. There will be a sign-up sheet.
- **Debates (20%).** Present one side or the other of key debates covered in class. There will be a sign-up sheet.
- **Essay (35% -- Phase 1 5%; Phase 2 5%; Final Draft 25%).** This is an 8–10-page essay on a topic of your choice. It will be due in three phases for feedback from the instructor. There will be a prompt.
- **Presentation and Peer-Review Response (10%).** A discussion of your essay at the end of the semester, and a response to your classmates.

Late assignments will receive no higher than a B+ unless other arrangements are made by contacting the professor with a specific explanation.

Academic Honesty

Students are expected to read the [University of Mary's Academic Honor Code and Honor System](#) and abide by all the standards of conduct and requirements contained therein. When a student is in doubt about whether or not an action might constitute an Academic Honor Code violation, s/he should request clarification from the instructor *before* the action in question is undertaken. The Academic Honor Code is available for review on my.umary.edu under the General University Policies link. To clarify: *Cheating* is copying one's own notes (e.g., a cheat-sheet) or someone else's exam. *Plagiarism* is copying text you did not write without proper citation as if it was your own, whether it is from online or from another essay.

Artificial Intelligence

The whole purpose of AI software like ChatGPT is to generate fake text. There is therefore absolutely no reason for using AI software for this course. Use of these tools is strictly prohibited, and all assignments will be carefully screened by TurnItIn.com and ZeroGPT.com. Students will be notified about all incidents and offered a chance to explain, but their submission will be reported to the Vice President of Student Affairs.

Technology

For all its uses, certain attitudes toward technology threaten to overwhelm everything distinctly human in us and replace our best qualities with machine functions. This class is focused on preserving humanity. Everything you need to know will be in the assigned texts, the classroom discussions, and your own reasoning and personal insights, meaning there is no need for laptops in class unless you have an accommodation.

Reasonable Accommodations

The University of Mary, in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and in the spirit of our mission, offers support for disabled students who provide required documentation. Students with disabilities who need accommodations should apply to the [Office of Student Accessibility Services](#). For further information, contact Dr. Lynn Dodge, coordinator of Student Accessibility Services, in the Student Success Center (lower level of Welder Library) at (701) 355-8264 or ljdodge@umary.edu.

Excused Absence Policy

The University has a policy on excused absences related to sponsored/sanctioned activities and events. The policy is available for review online. Students participating in such activities and events are expected to review this policy and comply with it. As long as appropriate prior notification is given according to this policy, students and faculty reach a mutual agreement concerning make-up work, and students complete the work in question, faculty shall not penalize a student for missing a class or exam when they were granted an excused absence from the university. Any questions concerning the policy may be referred to the course instructor who may refer the question to the athletic director, student activities director, or academic affairs for response.

Channel for Communication Relating to this Course

Aside from the instructor, students may report or appeal decisions to: Dr. Mark Springer, Department Chair (mmspringer@umary.edu), and the Dean of SOAS Dr. Diane Fladland (dflade@umary.edu).

Benedictine Values

Each of the Benedictine values – hospitality, service, community, moderation, respect for persons, and prayer – are emphasized at different points throughout the course in discussing the pursuit of the common good. Still, a political philosophy course is focused on two:

- **Community.** All human communities are political in some way or another. As Aristotle taught, we are “political animals,” meaning that whenever any group of people tries to live together, they will get political. Like all aspects of our human nature – our bodies, our minds, our relationships, our fine art, etc. – politics is meant to be a glorious reflection of the image of God in us; like all of those things, it too is corrupted by sin. Our response should be to discern its original glory and become agents of redeeming our political life. This class will offer the tools to help us do that, whether as public officials or as private citizens.
- **Respect for Persons.** Any just political order depends entirely on the acceptance of the dignity of the human person. It is the standard we appeal to every time we get angry: complaints about injustice are themselves revelations of justice that exists by nature. It is Jesus Christ’s maxim to “do under others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7:12); the Declaration of Independence’s claim that it is “self-evident that all men are created equal”; Abraham Lincoln’s statement that “as I would not be a slave, so I would not be a master” (Fragment from c. 1858); or Martin Luther King’s observation that “[a]ny law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust” (Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963).

Course Outline

Students are required to read the following readings for each day of class. If classes get behind schedule, we will just continue in order of the readings. (“Readings” is the packet, *Readings in Contemporary Political Thought*.)

I. Modern Times and How we Got Here

January 10

Readings – Henry Adams, Prayer to the Virgin of Chartes and the Dynamo (1900)

January 12

Readings – Bertrand Russell, The Free Man’s Worship (1902)

January 15

John Dewey, “The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy” (1910)

January 17

Community Learning Day

January 19

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930)

Essay Topic Chosen – January 19

January 22

Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* – Preface

January 24

Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* – Chapter 1

January 26

Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* – Chapter 3

January 29

Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* – Chapter 4

January 31

Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* – Chapter 5

February 2

Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* – Chapter 7

II. Reactions

February 5

Russell Kirk, *The American Cause* – Chapter 1

February 7

Russell Kirk, *The American Cause* – Chapters 2-3

February 9

Russell Kirk, *The American Cause* – Chapters 4-5

February 12

Herbert Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” from *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (1969)

February 14

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971)

February 16

John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (1971)

February 16 – Essay Phase I Due

February 19
President's Day

February 26
Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* – Introduction and Chapter 3

March 4
Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* – Introduction and Chapter 8

March 11
Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* – Preface and Chapter III

March 18
Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* – The Philosophical Act, Chapter II

February 21
Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* – Introduction and Chapter 1

February 28
Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* – Introduction and Chapter 4

March 6
Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* – Introduction and Chapter 9

March 13
Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* – Preface and Chapters IV-V

March 20
Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* – The Philosophical Act, Chapter III

February 23
Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* – Introduction and Chapter 2

March 1
Spring Break

March 8
Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* – Preface and Chapters I and II

March 15
Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* – The Philosophical Act, Chapter I

March 22
Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* – The Philosophical Act, Chapter IV

March 22 – Essay Phase II Due

III. Political Philosophy on the Issues

March 25
Judith Jarvis Thompson, “Defense of Abortion,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* (Fall 1971)

April 1
Easter Break

April 8
Michel Foucault, Morality and the Practice of the Self, from *History of Sexuality*, Volume 2 (1984)

April 15
Charles Murray, The Happiness of the People, Irving Kristol Lecture, March 11, 2009

April 23
Presentations, 1-3pm

March 27
Patrick Lee and Robert George, “The Wrong of Abortion,” from *Contemporary Debates in Applied Ethics* (2014)

April 3
Julian Huxley, “Transhumanism,” *New Bottles for New Wine* (1957)

April 10
Mary Eberstadt, “Is Food the New Sex?” from *Policy Review* (January 2009)

April 17
Pope Benedict, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), Part I

March 29
Easter Break

April 5
Leon Kass, “L’Chaim and its Limits: Why Not Immortality?” from *First Things*, May 2001

April 12
E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy* (1988); James A. Banks, “Multicultural Education: Development, Dimensions and Challenges,” from *The Phi Delta Kappan* (September, 1993)

April 12 – Essay Phase III Due

April 19
Pope Benedict, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), Part II