

Introduction to POL 340

~~August 22, 2000~~ 8/21/01

Phi 224 #01
is an updated version
of PL 35

I. Introductory questions

- What do you think of when you think of political theory, or political philosophy?
- How important is it in the world today?
- What is power? Justice? Equality? Freedom?
[Challenge all of their definitions]
- What's the *purpose* of politics? [Challenge their answers] Is it to achieve the good life? What is the good life?
- The purpose of political theory is to answer these questions.
- Who practices political theory? Elites? Academics? Revolutionaries?
- The point: **You are all already political theorists.** You make decisions on political and moral matters based on your fundamental beliefs about these concepts. This philosophy may be more or less examined. Theory is a part of everyday life, not an elite or academic thing. The purpose of this class is to study basic themes of political theory, in part so that you can better understand, justify, and/or change your own philosophical underpinnings.

II. Introductions

- A. Introduce yourself, *introduce themselves to each other*
- B. Hand out survey questions, *syllabus, Blackboard materials*

III. Syllabus

A. Description of the course:

Emphasize that this is a *Western* political theory class.

*Emphasize the testing of CLR
James's philosophy hypothesis*

B. The readings

1. Where to buy them; also on reserve
2. Buying different translations
3. The skinny on the web site and First Class
4. Cost: around \$50 used
5. On the readings: Make sure you have the assignment read *before* class.

Read the texts *thoroughly* and *critically*. The goal is to a) understand the argument, and b) to be able to criticize, or evaluate it. Read them as if you're in a conversation. Don't take nothing for granted, even the stuff you like.

6. You will be expected to have read the day's reading every class. We will discuss the books most class periods, so be prepared.

C. Attendance

D. Assignments

1. All papers and participation. No exams.
2. No outside reading is required for the papers. Explain the basics of the papers.
3. Anyone who hasn't written a college paper before? We'll go over it later in the course.
4. Discuss the **response papers** and the **presentations**

E. Schedule of readings

F. web site

IV. What is political theory?

[from Alisdair MacIntyre, *The Indispensability of Political Theory*]

A. Political theories are simply **systematic and detailed versions of the political ideas, interpretations, and philosophies of ordinary people**. It's a means of better understanding the ideas of others and of your own in a more systematic, structured format amenable to rational analysis and criticism.

1. Think of **poly theory as a "map"** for our ideas on politics, the good life, etc.

2. If, as Aristotle said, man is a "political animal," then political theory, as the study of politics, is one of the most important kinds of human activity.

B. **The distinction between action and thought.**

1. Nowadays **we tend to separate ideas and action**. "Think before you act," "he's all talk," etc. In this view, philosophy is a kind of thinking that eventually leads toward action.

2. **Criticize** this as a false dichotomy. The theorists we are reading were also political actors, esp. Mach, Marx, Locke, Du Bois, Malcolm X, hooks, etc. Only Socrates urges political abstention.

C. **Trajectory of Western phil**

1. Ancient Greece (450-300 B.C.), Rome, Medieval Christendom/Europe, Renaissance, Enlightenment, Modernity, Postmodernity (?)

2. Nothing natural about this trajectory. The Greeks didn't see themselves as "Europeans." To the Romans, Britain was a wilderness populated by tribes of pasty barbarians. Aristotle, etc. are important to Arab and African philosophy as well. We see the Greeks as "Western" because philosophers from about the Renaissance on have claimed them.

V. The importance of political theory

A. What you will learn in this class: **How to think critically**

1. Criticism is not necessarily a negative evaluation of something. **Criticism is the art of evaluating** or analyzing an argument or theory.

2. Purpose of criticism:

a. **understand** an argument

b. determine the **assumptions** that underly it.

c. **evaluate the evidence** used to back it up.

d. **judge** the overall persuasiveness of the argument.

B. **Three elements** to thinking critically:

1. **Reading**: reading a text critically, looking for underlying assumptions, following the logic of their argument.

2. **Writing**: Processing information you've read and presenting it in your own words, organizing your own ideas, making arguments and defending them, incorporating others' ideas into your own, criticizing others' ideas.

3. **Speaking**: Presenting your ideas coherently, thinking on your feet.

C. It's about not taking everything you see at face value, but it's also more than that. It's also being able to look beneath the surface to examine the workings of an argument—its logic, its assumptions, its biases. If you don't do that, your skepticism isn't critical thinking, it's just cynicism.

esp. Aristotle.

D. Theory isn't easy

1. Lot of reading, some of it hard. Writing can be more difficult than an exam. Simple arguments are more complex than you think. Thinking, not memorization.
2. **This class will take effort on your part.** Everyone who wants to can succeed in it, if you put the effort into it. If you want an easy class, this isn't it.
3. But all of this is in keeping with the fact that **education is uncomfortable**
 - a. Education makes you think about new things, challenges old beliefs, forces you to reevaluate the world, and makes you do work you ordinarily wouldn't do.
 - b. Think of how uncomfortable **Socrates** makes his interlocutors feel when he questions them.

VI. Basic terms

- A. **Assumption:** Things we believe to be true without giving evidence or reasons for why we think they're true. We just assume it to be true. Assumptions are usually not spoken. Thus we have to dig them up and uncover them from the text. Assumptions usually lie beneath the main point the author is making.
 1. Eg. "All men are created equal." "Men," it was assumed, meant white males who owned property (i.e. it excluded 90% of this class). "Created equal" assumes that human beings are by nature (or by God's will) of equal moral worth. The Greeks would never have made this assumption. (Plato's myth of the metals)
- B. **Criticism:** Here it does not mean to blame or find fault with. It means to evaluate or judge something carefully, not assuming what it claims is automatically true but not simply dismissing it out of hand either.
- C. **Argument:** Here it does not mean a fight or even a conflict or difference of opinion, necessarily. It means an explanation for one's position on a matter.

skip

VII. Other stuff about the class

feel free to challenge this by politics

- A. **Ask questions.** All the time, any time. ~~Also, feel free to challenge me about what I'm saying. If you think my politics are creeping into a lecture, let me know and let's debate it. I'm not ashamed.~~
- B. **Be prepared.** This class will only work if you do. I'm not interested in lecturing to you all semester.

nothing is settled.
objectivity is impossible.

- C. ~~On the relationship between politics, political science, and "the facts"~~
- C. **Politics is about controversy, struggle, debate, and power.** So is the study of politics. Lots of debates and arguments over everything.
- D. **Facts exist, but what counts is how they are interpreted.**
Example: Lewinsky scandal. Interpreting the facts is partly a product of study, but it's also partly a product of your beliefs. Can't separate the two and be totally "objective," especially not when you're studying politics.

Bring your politics to class. Don't suppress them (you can't anyway). Expressing your opinion, backing it up with *evidence*, and listening to other opinions is the only way to learn how to think critically. Also only way to defend or change your beliefs. Use class (discussions, lectures, texts) as a laboratory to test, defend, and alter your political beliefs.

is (hi) in the new world

E. Comprehension must come before critique. Don't have to agree w/ a phil., but you do have to understand her argument before you reject it. Must understand what you critique

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3. Education is uncomfortable

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B. Criticism

C. Argument

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B. Be prepared.

C. On the relationship between politics, political science, and "the facts"

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