



# Introduction to Political Theory

**Professor Nicholas Tampio**

Hamilton College, Fall 2007, GOV 117W

[ntampio@hamilton.edu](mailto:ntampio@hamilton.edu)

Class Hours: TR 9-10:15, KJ 242

Office Hours: TR 4-5, KJ 135

## Course Overview

Political theory creates conceptual schemes, or lenses, through which to view political events. The aim of this course is to test the lenses of several of the most profound and influential philosophers of Western civilization. The goal is to understand and change the world.

The course begins with Plato. *The Republic* is arguably the most important book in the history of Western political philosophy. Virtually every philosopher in the West ponders Plato's idealist metaphysics and aristocratic politics. The course then jumps to Machiavelli, whose *Prince* initiated modernity. Machiavelli aims to describe how human beings and politics really are, not how they ought to be. The next two philosophers, Hume and Kant, challenge Machiavelli's cynical view of human nature and politics without returning to a Platonic framework. Hume bases his theory on human sensibility, and Kant grounds his theory on human reason, but both advance the Enlightenment project of empowering ordinary people to fashion their own moral and political laws. The subsequent philosophers continue and modify the Enlightenment project. Marx advocates communism based on the logic of historical materialism; Mill defends liberalism on utilitarian grounds; and Ramadan considers how Muslims may fully participate in the modern world. The aim, when reading these philosophers, is to learn how to create political theories appropriate to our time.

For each philosopher, we pose six questions:

1. What is their biography?
2. What philosophical problems do they address?
3. What political problems do they address?
4. A) What is their theory of human nature?  
B) What is their theory of politics?
5. How do they justify their theories?
6. What do we think of their theories?

## Texts

Plato, *The Republic* (Basic Books)

Machiavelli, *The Prince* (University of Chicago Press)

Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Yale University Press)

Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford University Press, ed. Norton and Norton)

Marx, *Communist Manifesto* (Barnes and Noble)

Mill, *On Liberty* (Norton Critical Edition)

Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (Oxford)

## Course Requirements

*First Essay:* “All of Western philosophy,” Alfred North Whitehead once wrote, “is but a footnote to Plato.” This 5-7 page essay should describe Plato’s legacy to Western political philosophy. What is his theory of human nature? What is his vision of politics? What do you think of his theories? See the template at the end of the syllabus for guidance on how to structure this essay. Students are **required** to schedule draft conferences at the Writing Center before turning in the essay. Due **September 11**.

*Second Essay:* For the past two hundred years, philosophers and politicians have been reading Machiavelli, Hume, and Kant. The Enlightenment, in short, shapes our intellectual and political discourse. This 5-7 page essay should describe the political theory of either Machiavelli, Hume, or Kant. What is his theory of human nature? What is his vision of politics? What do you think of his theories? Due **October 30**.

*Third Essay:* Contemporary political theorists consider how to forge political alliances across cultural difference. This 5-7 essay should explore how Marx, Mill, or Ramadan contribute to our thinking about politics. What is his theory of human nature? What is his vision of politics? What do you think of his theories? Due **December 11**, noon, in my mailbox in the Department of Government.

*Research Project:* The last class on each theorist (except Plato) is dedicated to a discussion of what the philosopher would say about a current political debate or controversy. Early in the semester I will assign students to groups. On the day your group leads discussion, each student will turn in to me, and present to the class, a 10 page research project on how the philosopher helps us grasp contemporary politics.

Tips for research project:

- Find a concrete topic, e.g., the Kyoto treaty, 2008 presidential candidates, the *Borat* movie, the Hurricane Katrina recovery, the Alexander Hamilton Center, etc.
- Read recent articles on the topic in *The Economist*, *The Nation*, *The National Review*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Time*, *U.S. News and World Reports*, or other reputable periodicals.
- Research the academic debates on the topic. Read what has been written in *The American Political Science Review*, *The Journal of Politics*, *Political Theory*, or other academic journals. Read relevant academic books. Include a bibliography.

- Insert subheadings.
- Keep reading and incorporating ideas from the philosopher. The point of this exercise is to teach you how to apply theory to a pressing political matter.

Tips for presentation:

- Speak from an outline.
- Practice. Contact James Helmer (jhelmer@hamilton.edu) to schedule an appointment at the Oral Communication Lab.
- Look professional.

*Class Participation:* Students are expected to come to class with the text, notes, and questions on the material. Students are also expected to attend the major political theory lectures at Hamilton this fall, including:

- September 7 – Leslie Paul Thiele, ‘Social Justice’ 9:30 am Science Auditorium
- October 18 – Langdon Winner, “Information Technology and the Dream of Democratic Renewal.” ”, 7:30 pm Science Auditorium
- TBD – Harvey Mansfield

*Final Grade Distribution:*

20 % - First Essay

20 % - Second Essay

20 % - Third Essay

20 % - Research Project

10 % - Research Presentation

10 % - Class Participation

*Note:* Students may rewrite the first or second essay for up to a one letter grade improvement. The deadline for the revised essay is one week after the essays are returned. Include a one page summary of the revisions you have made. Students are encouraged to schedule appointments at the Writing Center and to meet with me during the semester.

## **Class Schedule**

### **1. August 28 – Introduction to the Course, Plato and the Problem of *The Republic***

*The Republic*, Books I, II

### **2. August 30 – Lynn Mayo, the social science research librarian, will discuss research methods.**

### **3. September 4 – Plato on the Soul**

*The Republic*, Books III-VI

### **4. September 6 – Plato on the Good City**

*The Republic*, Books VII-VIII

**5. September 11 – Machiavelli and the Problems of *The Prince***

*The Prince*, Epistle Dedicatory-Chapter XIV

\* First essay due

**6. September 13 – Machiavelli on the Human Animal**

*The Prince*, Chapters XV-XXIV

**7. September 18 – Machiavelli on Real Politics**

*The Prince*, Chapters XXV-XXVI

**8. September 20 – Machiavelli and the Contemporary World**

**9. September 25 – Kant and the Problems of the *Groundwork***

*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Second Section, 4:406-412

**10. September 27 – Kant on Humanity**

*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Second Section, 4:412-427

**11. October 2 – Kant on the Metaphysics of Morals**

*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Second Section, 4:427-445

**12. October 4 – Kant and the Contemporary World**

**13. October 9 – Hume and the Problems of the *Treatise***

*A Treatise of Human Nature*, Introduction; Book 2, Part 3, Sect. 3; Book 3, Part 1

**14. October 11 – Hume on Human Nature**

*A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 3, Part 2

**15. October 18 – Hume on Morality and Justice**

*A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 3, Part 3

**16. October 23 – Hume and the Contemporary World**

October 25 – No class.

**17. October 30 – Marx and the Problems of *The Communist Manifesto***

*The Communist Manifesto*, Introduction, Chapter I

\* Second essay due

**18. November 1 – Marx on Bourgeois and Proletarians**

*The Communist Manifesto*, Chapter II-IV

**19. November 6 – Marx and the Contemporary World**

**20. November 8 – Mill and the Problems of *On Liberty***

*On Liberty*, Introductory

**21. November 13 – Mill on Individuality**

*On Liberty*, Chapters II, III

**22. November 15 – Mill on the Politics of Liberty**

*On Liberty*, Chapters IV, V

**23. November 20 – Mill and the Contemporary World**

**24. November 27 – Ramadan and the Problems of *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam***

*Western Muslims*, Preface, Introduction

**25. November 29 – Ramadan on God, the Human Being, and Revelation**

*Western Muslims*, Ch. 1.

**26. December 4 – Ramadan on the Way**

*Western Muslims*, Chs. 2, 7, 9

**27. December 6 – Ramadan and the Contemporary World**

\* December 11 – Third essay due, Noon, My Mailbox in the Government Department  
A Template for a Political Theory Essay

*A Title that Indicates Your Topic and Thesis*

### 1. Introduction

[State the question or topic that you are going to address and provide a map of your essay's argument.]

### 2. Political Theorist X's Theory of Human Nature

[A political theorist's conception of human nature lays the foundation of his or her political theory. In this section, describe how the political theorist under consideration characterizes human nature. How does he or she differentiate human beings from animals? How does he or she differentiate human beings from one another? How does he or she justify, or defend, his or her conception of human nature? This section should be about 40% of the length of the essay.]

### 3. Political Theorist X's Theory of Politics

[In this section, explicate the main elements of the political theorist's conception of politics. Who or what, according to the political theorist, should govern? What principles (or rules) should political actors follow? How does the political theorist justify his or her conception of politics? This section should be about 40% of the length of the essay.]

### 4. Conclusion

[In the conclusion, evaluate the political theorist's conceptions of human nature and politics. Are they worth endorsing? Why or why not? This section should be about 20% of the length of the essay.]

### Questions to ask yourself before you turn in your essay:

<i>Substantive Questions:</i>	<i>Stylistic Questions:</i>
<input type="checkbox"/> 1. Have I entered the political theorist's thought well? Have I read his or her work at least twice? Have I outlined (preferably by hand) his or her key arguments?	<input type="checkbox"/> 1. Is the essay well organized? Does the introductory paragraph explain what I am going to argue? Does each paragraph have a topic sentence?
<input type="checkbox"/> 2. Have I thought about how the theorist responds to earlier philosophers (e.g., Plato, Machiavelli, Kant, Nietzsche)?	<input type="checkbox"/> 2. Is my interpretation of the theorist supported by evidence from the text? Are there adequate citations and quotations?
<input type="checkbox"/> 3. Have I thought about how the theorist may be criticized by his or her contemporaries or by later generations?	<input type="checkbox"/> 3. Have I read the essay slowly to find spelling and grammatical mistakes?
<input type="checkbox"/> 4. Have I written with passion as well as intelligence?	<input type="checkbox"/> 4. Have I read the essay aloud to determine if the narrative flows?
	<input type="checkbox"/> 5. Have I shown the essay to others and solicited their advice?
	<input type="checkbox"/> 6. Have I inserted page numbers, provided a bibliography, and stapled my essay?