

Introduction to Political Philosophy

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Fordham University

POSC 2401

Class: Dealy Hall 101 TF 8:30am-9:45 am

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Journalists cover day to day political events—the waves of political life. Political scientists collect and analyze empirical data about political behavior—the currents of political life. But there is a deeper layer of politics, one that eludes measurement but that moves all political events—the ocean flows of politics. Political philosophy is the study of the ocean flows of politics, the quest to understand the deepest causes of political events. This course brings European and Chinese political philosophers into conversation to shine a light into the darkness of the political ocean.

The course will proceed by staging conversations between European and Chinese thinkers. Plato and Confucius discuss who should rule, and both agree that the answer is “the wise.” One thing that we must decide is what are the significant differences, if any, between the philosopher and the *junzi*. Is it appropriate to call Confucius’s teaching a philosophy?

The next conversation is between Aristotle and Mencius over how the state may cultivate moral virtues in political subjects. Aristotle thinks that a wise legislator gives citizens a chance to participate in politics; whereas Mencius maintains the rulers is responsible for taking care of the moral and physical needs of his subjects. Is it fair to say that these competing interpretations of soul craft shape contemporary politics in the West and China?

The third conversation is between Machiavelli and Han Feizi about how the prince maintains power. For Machiavelli, the ruler rules through cultivating love and fear in his subjects; for Han Feizi, the ruler issues laws (*fa*) and punishes anyone who disobeys them. They are both realists, but Machiavelli’s prince acts in public and adjusts to fortune, whereas the Han Feizian prince is a recluse whose main responsibility is using the two handles of reward and punishment to keep people in line. Which technique is more effective? Which one creates conditions of freedom?

The final conversation is between Sextus Empiricus and Zhuangzi on what it means for politics that our knowledge always is shaped by our perspective. Both Sextus Empiricus and Zhuangzi note that animals (dogs, eels, monkeys, butterflies) experience the world in different ways, and we have no grounds for saying that the human way is closer to the truth. Human beings also disagree with each other about the nature of reality or what constitutes a good life. Sextus Empiricus influenced Montaigne who in turn influenced European liberals who promote tolerance of different ways of life. Today, political theorists are reading Zhuangzi to advocate a kind of liberalism, pluralism, and democracy for China. But can you generate a politics out of skepticism?

Course learning objectives:

By the end of the semester, students should be able to:

- Understand important authors, books, and arguments in classical Chinese political thought.
- Understand important authors, books, and arguments in classical and modern Western political thought.
- Stage a conversation between Chinese and Western political thinkers between issues such as who should rule, how rulers may practice soul craft, how rulers may maintain their power, and the political ramifications of skepticism.
- Connect the history of ideas with contemporary political debates.

Required Texts

Princeton Readings in Political Thought: Essential Texts from Plato to Populism-Second Edition (Princeton) ISBN: 9780691159973

Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy 3rd Edition (Hackett) ISBN: 1647921082

Sextus Empiricus: Selections from the Major Writings on Scepticism, Man, and God 2nd edition (Hackett Classics) ISBN-10: 087220006X

Additional class readings available in the Content folder on Blackboard

Course Requirements

Students will write and present a 5-7 page research paper on what an author would say about a current event. What would Confucius say about the US college admissions process? What would Machiavelli say about attempts to steal elections? What would Zhuangzi say about the One China Policy? And so forth. Read a few sources about the author and the current event. Make connections to other things you've read in the course or elsewhere. Share your own thoughts in the last paragraph.

This is a No-AI course. Students need to learn how to think and research on their own while in college. AI is a tool, but it also lets an algorithm assemble other people's words for you. I see more dangers than benefits for college students using AI.

Midterm and final. I will distribute a few questions a few days ahead of the midterm and randomly select two on the day of the exam.

Class participation. Do the reading before class and be prepared to raise questions, even simply asking what a passage means. Expect to participate at least once or twice every class.

Grade Distribution

Student research paper

20

Student presentation	10
Midterm	30
Final	30
Class participation	10

To understand university policies on academic rights and responsibilities, sexual harassment, services for students with disabilities, and other important topics, please see the [undergraduate faculty handbook](#).

Class schedule

No class on September 1. I'll be at the American Political Science Association conference in Los Angeles.

Who should rule? Plato and Confucius on rule by the wise

1. September 5 – Introduction to the course: What is political philosophy? Should the pre-Qin masters be called philosophers?

- Carine Defoort, “Is there such a thing as Chinese Philosophy? Arguments of an Implicit Debate,” *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2001)

2. September 8 – What is philosophy? Plato's answer in the *Apology*

Reading: Plato's *Apology*

3. September 12 – How Plato sets up the problem of justice in the *Republic*

Reading: Plato's *Republic*

4. September 15 – How Plato defines justice in the *Republic*

Reading: Plato's *Republic*

5. September 19 – Confucius on the *junzi*

Reading: *Analects*

6. September 22 – The principles of Confucian politics

Reading: *Analects*

7. September 26 – Confucius on learning (*xue*) and thinking (*si*)

- Reading: *Analects*
- Sor-hoon TAN, “Three corners for one: Tradition and creativity in the *Analects*”

8. September 29 – Student presentations on Confucius

How should the state train citizens? Aristotle and Mencius on moral cultivation

9. October 3 – Aristotle on human nature and the polis

Reading: *Politics*

10. October 6 – Aristotle on political education

Reading: *Politics*

Martha Nussbaum, “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism”

11. October 10 – Student presentations on Aristotle

12. October 13 – Mencius on human nature

Readings:

- *Mencius*
- Bryan W. Van Norden, “[The second sage](#),” *Aeon*, October 31, 2016.

13. October 17 – Mencius’s advice to the ruler

Reading: *Mencius*

14. October 20 – Student presentations on Mencius

15. October 24 – Midterm

How should the ruler govern? Machiavelli and Hanfeizi on fear, love, and rules (fa)

16. October 27 – Han Feizi on the Two Handles

Readings: *Han Feizi*

17. October 31 – Han Feizi on the Power of Position and the Five Vermin

Reading: *Han Feizi*

18. November 3 – Student presentations on Han Feizi

19. November 7 – Machiavelli on Human Nature

Reading: *The Prince*

20. November 10 – Machiavelli on the principles of politics

Reading: *The Prince*

21. November 14 – Student presentations on Machiavelli

Can skepticism point the way to a more humane future? Sextus Empiricus and Zhuangzi on skepticism and politics

22. November 17 – Sextus Empiricus on the Ten Modes

Readings: *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Book One

23. November 21 – Sextus Empiricus’ politics

Readings: *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, Book One

24. November 28 – Zhuangzi, Chapter One: Wandering Round and About

Reading: The *Zhuangzi*

25. December 1 – Zhuangzi, Chapter Two: On Equalizing Things

Reading: The *Zhuangzi*

26. December 5 – Butcher Ding story

Readings:

- The *Zhuangzi*
- Bryan W. Van Norden, “Zhuangzi’s Ironic Detachment and Political Commitment”
- Dorothy Kwek, “Critique of Imperial Reason: Lessons from the *Zhuangzi*”

27. December 8 – Student presentations on Sextus Empiricus or Zhuangzi

Final exam -

Tuesday, December 19, 2023	9:30 AM	10:30 AM
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