



Introduction to Political Philosophy

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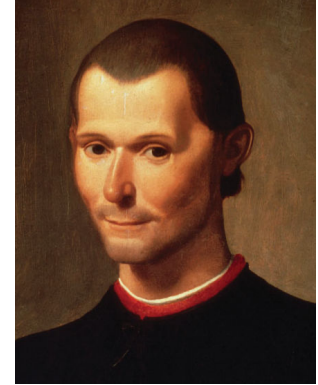
Fordham University

POSC 2401

Class: MR 8:30-9:45 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 ruler 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 2nd Edition (Hackett) ISBN: 0872207803

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 8-10 page research paper on what 2 authors would say about a current event. What would Plato and Confucius say about the Varsity Blues scandal? What would Machiavelli and Han Feizi say about vaccine passports? What would Sextus Empiricus and Zhuangzi say about social credit systems? And so forth. Read and cite 2-3 sources on the current event and each of the authors. Share your own thoughts in the last paragraph. Use the style guide and example of articles in *Comparative Political Theory*. Students may revise the paper for up to a one-letter grade improvement within one week after the first draft is returned.

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	30
Student presentation	10
Midterm	20
Final	30

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

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

1. January 20 – Introduction to the course: What is political philosophy? How does it fit with political science? Why should Americans study Chinese political thought?

- Wolin, S. (1969) “Political Theory as a Vocation,” *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 63, No. 4, 1062-1082. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1955072>
- Freedman, M. (2021). *Comparative Political Thought: What Are We Looking At?*, *Comparative Political Theory*, 1(1), 3-7. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26669773-01010002>

2. January 24 – What is philosophy? Plato’s answer in the *Apology*
Reading: Plato’s *Apology*

3. January 27 – How Plato sets up the problem of justice in the *Republic*
Reading: Plato’s *Republic*

4. January 31 – How Plato defines justice in the *Republic*
Reading: Plato’s *Republic*

5. February 3 – Confucius on the *junzi*
Reading: *Analects*

6. February 7 – The principles of Confucian politics
Reading: *Analects*

7. February 10 – Confucius on learning (*xue*) and thinking (*si*)

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

8. February 14 – Student presentations on Plato and Confucius

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

9. February 17 – Aristotle on human nature and the polis
Reading: *Politics*

10. February 22 – Aristotle on political education

Reading: *Politics*

11. February 24 – The relevance of Aristotle today

Readings:

- Leo Strauss, “What is Political Philosophy?”
- Martha Nussbaum, “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism”

12. February 28 – Mencius on human nature

Readings:

- *Mencius*
- Bryan W. Van Norden, “The second sage,” *Aeon*, October 31, 2016.

13. March 3 – Mencius’s advice to the ruler

Reading: *Mencius*

14. March 7 – Student presentations on Aristotle and Mencius

15. March 10 – Midterm

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

16. March 21 – Han Feizi on the Two Handles

Readings:

- *Han Feizi*
- Tongdong Bai, Preliminary remarks: Han Fei zi—first modern political philosopher?

17. March 24 – Han Feizi on the Power of Position and the Five Vermin

Reading: *Han Feizi*

18. March 28 – Machiavelli on Human Nature

Reading: *The Prince*

19. March 31 – Machiavelli on the principles of politics

Reading: *The Prince*

20. April 4 – Student presentations on Han Feizi and Machiavelli

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

21. April 7 – Sextus Empiricus’s skepticism, part I

Readings: Outlines of Pyrrhonism, Book One

22. April 11 – Michael Oakeshott’s skeptical politics
Reading: Michael Oakeshott, “On Being Conservative”
23. April 21 – Zhuangzi, Chapter One: Wandering Round and About
Reading: The *Zhuangzi*
24. April 25 – Zhuangzi, Chapter Two: On Equalizing Things
Reading: The *Zhuangzi*
25. April 28: The debate about Zhuangzi, skepticism, and liberalism
Readings:
- Bryan W. Van Norden, Zhuangzi’s Ironic Detachment and Political Commitment
 - Dorothy Kwek, “Critique of Imperial Reason: Lessons from the Zhuangzi”
26. May 2 – Student presentations on Sextus Empiricus and Zhuangzi

Final exam