

**Code:**

<b>Term:</b>	Spring
<b>ECTS credits:</b>	6
<b>Lessons per week:</b>	2×90 mins
<b>Language:</b>	English
<b>Instructor:</b>	Adam Bence Balazs
<b>Form of study:</b>	Lecture + Seminar

## Prerequisites

The course aims to introduce Western political thought from the Ancient Greeks to the beginnings of Modernity. There is no other prerequisite than to refresh our dim memories about the previous semesters, i.e., Plato's *Apology*, Greek tragedy, and the Peloponnesian War.

## Course Objectives

The course will develop the students' political eye. The main goal is to learn how to sense political stakes in different types of texts, starting with classics in the political philosophy field – but not exclusively. We will proceed chronologically from the Ancient Greeks to early Modernity to understand the origins of political thought. Regarding textual understanding, we will improve our means and tools in text analysis and proper quoting and start learning to mobilize great classics to address contemporary political challenges.

Methodologically, students will:

- ✓ Learn the skills required to develop an analysis of *short* excerpts from classic political philosophy – this exercise is quite different from 'hunting' for information through more extended readings
- ✓ Learn how to organize their thoughts in consecutive points (structure)
- ✓ Practice the basic skills required to debate a political topic, especially the art of pros and cons in shaping their own opinion
- ✓ Learn how to identify political stakes in classics – in the literal meaning of texts and also between the lines
- ✓ Learn to better orient themselves in texts and the contemporary world – textual understanding being one of the common denominators between texts and political reality

## Contents

The origins of Western political thought go back to Ancient Greece. Ancient Greek thought also originates in its long-term evolution from the Minoan to the Mycenaean civilization, the 'Greek Dark Ages,' the Archaic and the Classical period, followed by Hellenistic times and beyond. Antiquity is a long-term history: there is more time between the beginnings of the Minoan civilization and Plato

than between Plato and us. The challenge is understanding why it is relevant for us, in this early 21st century, to go back to the Greeks and focus on their relation to wisdom, political institutions and experiences, and achievements and shortcomings. To grasp this relevancy, two-thirds of the course will be dedicated to highlights from Ancient Greek culture. The Greeks and us: despite the considerable distance in time, we access the origins and the specificities of Western political thought in the light of our most pressing contemporary challenges. The Greeks offer a genuine perspective on our own struggles around democracy, rationality, morals, freedom, and equality.

The Greeks and us: we need to be surprised about the structural differences between the Greeks and our times first to then build bridges between their multi-layered time and our contemporary world.

In the last third of the semester, we will focus on the Medieval origins of Western political thought. Most things we call 'European' (cities, institutions, political concepts) were born in the Middle Ages. With the Greeks, significant differences are surprising; when it comes to Medieval times, it is instead similitudes and continuities that are striking. The focus on the Middle Ages will call for a reflection on historiography: between the history of philosophy and the philosophy of history, can we say, following our findings in Greek and Medieval times, that history is an objective science?

## Readings

Here is a non-exhaustive list of the core readings, the 'backbone,' to be completed by secondary readings in and around political philosophy:

### **The Greeks**

Plato: *Gorgias*; secondary readings: *Protagoras*; *Meno*; *Symposium*

Aristophanes: *The Clouds*

Aristotle: *The Nicomachean Ethics* (excerpts)

Epictetus' *Handbook* and *Dialogues* (excerpts)

Marcus Aurelius: *Meditations* (excerpts)

Pierre Hadot: *What is Ancient Philosophy?*

### **The Middle Ages and historiography**

Jacques Le Goff: *The Birth of Europe in the Middle Ages*

Marc Bloch: *The Royal Touch: Monarchy and Miracles in France and England*

Johan Huizinga: *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*

Umberto Eco: *The Name of the Rose*

## Requirements

The main challenge is to develop our ability to sense political stakes through textual understanding; we will mostly rely on text analysis.

1. We will practice short text analysis through the weekly readings. Every week, students will have to do **small tasks** on the readings to learn how to build up the **commentary of a short excerpt** from a classic work. This is different from 'hunting' for information through more extended readings. The technique will be acquired progressively throughout the semester. The idea is to reorganize the content of a short text into **three consecutive points** (instead of just commenting on the text as it goes) and then develop these three points with additional references from the excerpt's context and other sources. Such a commentary appropriates the text's content, logic, and meaning. In theory, this might sound more challenging than reality once the basic means and tools are well-understood.
2. There will be **2 to 3 tests** about the **keywords** explained in class. The keywords are always duly highlighted. The tests take **15 minutes** each.
3. To take stock of these skills and the basic concepts at work in the studied political philosophy classics, the mid-term assignment will consist of a text commentary in which students can use the keywords and structure their thoughts. This mid-term test will not be graded (see the 'Evaluation criteria' section). Instead, this will help us map the skills to develop and improve for the end-term assignment. The text: a more extended excerpt from Plato's *Gorgias* or the *Symposium*.
4. The **end-term assignment** is a short excerpt's developed analysis and commentary. The commentary should be a **minimum of three pages**. The text: students can choose between a brief excerpt from Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, or Epictetus.

## Evaluation Criteria

### Quantitative evaluation

30% Tests (2-3) and weekly assignments

15% Mid-term essay

15% End-term essay

15% Weekly assignments

25% Attendance and participation

## **Progress**

I first and foremost evaluate your individual progress. You do not get actual grades for the mid-term test, only an indication (let's say C+/B-). What I look at is the progress you make throughout the semester. For example, if your first weekly assignments are weak (let's say E+/D) but the mid-term test is better (let's say C+), and then the final text commentary is even more consistent and has integrated lessons and advice, then chances are you are close to an A or B.

This way of evaluation is not easy to quantify, and students do need some signposts to orient themselves. For the sake of transparency in evaluation:

- ✓ A mid-term evaluation will be provided to help students signpost their progress.
- ✓ In case this is not enough, you can ask for a consultation anytime to see where you are – to see where you think you are in terms of progress, find out what I think of it, and discuss how to proceed from there.
- ✓ Although this student-oriented approach is based on individual follow-up, there are cases at the end of the semester where I need to compare students to each other as well, in terms of efforts and diligence to bring delicate nuances to the final grades.

## **Behaviour and communication**

The following points might play a role when it comes to comparing efforts and achievements at the end of the semester:

- Please respect deadlines and schedules (e.g., the agreed time slots of consultations).
- Passing a course assumes that the student was not absent for more than four lessons.
- Please use email for communication, following the basic rules. Be polite and friendly; the two do not exclude each other. Unpolite, impatient, or demanding communication is counterproductive from all points of view.
- Active class participation is highly appreciated.
- However, a student who does not talk but pays attention and shows evidence of it in written tasks or consultations is considered actively participating (you have the right to be shy).
- Obviously, this does not work if we are all shy in the classroom. That's already a thorny political question about freedom and equality...

## Course Evaluation (%)

A – excellent:	100-93%,
B – very good:	92-84%,
C – good:	83-74%,
D – satisfactory:	73-63%,
E – sufficient:	62-51%,
Fx – fail:	50-0%.

Aware of the previous section on Evaluation Criteria, this percentage quantification is purely indicative. However, it has the advantage of showing that B or C are *not* bad grades.