The Ideals of Politics: Political Order, History, and Man’s Search for Meaning
Political Science 4090 – Section 1

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Office Hours: M 10:00-12:00, W 10:00-12:00, Th 1:30-3:30, and by Appointment

Course Themes

In his Inaugural Address, President Barack Obama drew a distinction between national security and the ideals of American life, asserting, "As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals." Such an assertion presupposes that our political system is ordered for the sake of a higher purpose than the mere preservation of the animal existence of its citizens. Plato was perhaps the first to make this distinction explicit, arguing in the Laws that the true statesman does not look “first and only to external wars” when making laws, but instead “legislates the things of war for the sake of peace rather than the things of peace for the sake of what pertains to war” (628d-e). Nevertheless, the distinction between “our safety” (or “the things of war”) and “our ideals” (or “the things of peace”) leaves several fundamental questions unanswered: Whence do we derive our ideals? If not for the sake of security and self-preservation, what is the organizing principle of political order? Does political order really have a purpose beyond the mere preservation of order itself? When Plato and Obama assert the existence of ideals beyond security, do they have the same ideals in mind? In short, if not national security, what is the ultimate standard against which the legitimacy of governmental actions should be measured, and how has this standard changed through history? In this course, it will be argued that all forms of political order can be understood in terms of humankind’s search for meaning. Students, however, will be expected to use assigned readings to critically evaluate the strength of this argument and the validity of its underlying premise – namely, that human beings are the only beings concerned about the meaning of their existence. Students will also be encouraged to offer their own interpretations of the nature of “our ideals” and the consequent limits of legitimate governmental action.

Student Expectations

1. Students will attend all classes, will be attentive during class lectures, and will actively participate in seminar discussions.
2. Students will complete all assigned readings (approximately 30 pages per class/150 pages per week).
3. Students will bring assigned readings to class.

Course Objectives

1. To investigate the purpose of political order and its relationship to humankind’s ongoing search for meaning.
2. To provide students with an opportunity to critically examine competing paradigms of political order.
3. To engage in sophisticated reflection on the origin and nature of American political ideals.
4. To provide students with knowledge of the history of political order and the teachings of various political thinkers, with the specific goal of providing students with a theoretical framework and a set of key concepts for the empirical investigation of political phenomena.
5. To prepare students who are planning to pursue advanced degrees in political science for graduate-level seminars.
6. To encourage students to critically examine their own beliefs and to formulate their own arguments concerning the best and/or actual foundations of political order.
Texts

Required Texts – Available for Purchase at the University Bookstore


Other Selections, Made Accessible by the Instructor, Will Be Taken From:

- Plato. *Seventh Letter.*
- St. Augustine. *City of God.*

Grading

Participation: 650 Points

- Daily Seminar Participation (10 Points Per Day/350 Points Total)
- Six Reaction Papers (50 Points Each/300 Points Total)
  - Approximately One Page, Double-Spaced
  - Reaction Papers Must Be Posted on Moodle by 11 PM the Evening Prior to the Class Period In Which They Are Submitted

Exams: 350 Points

- Two Midterm Exams (100 Points Each), With Each Exam Consisting of Two Essay Questions
- One Final Exam (150 Points), Consisting of Three Comprehensive Essay Questions
- Students Will Be Permitted to Take a Missed Exam at an Alternative Date or Time, Agreed Upon by Both the Student and the Instructor, if Adequate Documentation of a “Valid Reason” for Absence – as Defined by University Document PS-22 – is Provided

Grades: Grades Will Be Assigned According to the Following Formula on the Basis of the Number of Points Accumulated by Each Student During the Course of the Session:

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<tr>
<th>Points Range</th>
<th>Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>900 – 1,000</td>
<td>A</td>
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<td>800 – 899</td>
<td>B</td>
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<td>700 – 799</td>
<td>C</td>
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<td>600 – 699</td>
<td>D</td>
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Course Schedule

I. POLITICAL ORDER

Monday, June 8 – Introduction to Course: Rodrigue’s Blue Dog and Hemingway’s Marlin

Tuesday, June 9 – Xenophanes, *Fragments*, pp. 10-43 (odd numbered pages only).

Wednesday, June 10 – Parmenides, *Fragments*, pp. 48-91 (odd numbered pages only).


Tuesday, June 16 – Plato, *Phaedrus*, pp. 42-75.


Thursday, June 18 – Plato, *Seventh Letter*, pp. 519-565 (odd numbered pages only).

Friday, June 19 – FIRST MIDTERM EXAM

II. IMPERIAL ORDER


Friday, July 10 – SECOND MIDTERM EXAM
III. AUGUSTINIAN AND POST-AUGUSTINIAN ORDER


Tuesday, July 14 – Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, pp. 103-126.

Wednesday, July 15 – Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, pp. 127-158.


Friday, July 17 – Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, pp. 188-227.


IV. FINAL EXAM: THURSDAY, JULY 30, 7:00-9:00 PM