INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

This course provides an introduction to some of the basic debates and dilemmas surrounding the nature and aims of politics, and explores how these controversies can help us understand problems in contemporary political life. We will examine and analyze powerful arguments and perspectives on such issues as human nature and the role of political communities, the role of religion in politics, the nature and limits of liberty, the meaning and justifications of equality, the central role of power in politics and its relationship to law, authority, justice, and obligation, and the ends to which power is used in politics. Along the way, we will examine how these classical arguments can help illuminate contemporary questions in American political life, such as immigration, inequality, affirmative action, gay marriage, and the relationship between government and business. We will engage and evaluate these arguments through a combination of a stimulating text and close readings of some of the most influential works in the history of political philosophy, but with an emphasis on contemporary debates in this tradition. Reading philosophical work is not easy, but this is a case where effort and commitment is definitely rewarded.

Through their reading and work on the various course assignments, by the end of the course students should be able to:

- Demonstrate a basic understanding of some of the major views of politics that have been elaborated in the “western” tradition, and of the ways in which these views are shaped by their foundations in fundamental philosophical and religious orientations.

- Use these approaches and perspectives to explore and illuminate some of the fundamental questions of contemporary political life, especially through their application to some pressing political conflicts and struggles.

- Begin to figure out their own political philosophies, and how to defend them.

COURSE READINGS:

The following books are required for this course and are available at the College bookstore:

Jonathan Wolff, An Introduction to Political Philosophy, rev. ed. (Oxford)
Andrew Bailey, et al., The Broadview Anthology of Social and Political Thought. (Broadview)

Additional short readings may be assigned over the course of the semester.
COURSE OUTLINE:

The course readings are organized as a “back and forth” between Wolff’s analysis and some of the original writings he discusses. At different points over the semester, we will emphasize one or the other, but ultimately the goal is to have a dialogue between the original sources and their application to contemporary debates. I have tried to be as specific as possible concerning the readings we will be discussing each class, but in some cases I have provided only general guidance, and will be more specific when we get to that section. The readings in italics refer to those in the Anthology of Social and Political Thought text. If I list only the title, you are responsible for the whole selection; if I list specific pages or sections of the selection, those are all you will be responsible for.

1) An Introduction to Political Philosophy. What is it? Why should we bother with it? What are the key questions in political philosophy?

   January 15 – Course Introduction.
   Reading: Wolff, Introduction.
   Thucydides, Pericles Funeral Oration.

   January 17-22 – Challenges to Political Philosophy.

2) Is Political Community Natural for Human Beings? What is our “natural state” as human beings? Is it peaceful or warlike? Do we need a State? If so, Why?

   Reading: Wolff, Chapter 1.
   Aristotle, Politics, selections.

   January 29 – Locke.

   January 31 – Rousseau.
   Reading: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Discourse on Inequality.

3) How to Justify the State? If we need a State, what kind should it be? Why should we obey it, and when should we resist? Does the idea of a “social contract” make sense?

   February 5-7 - Hobbes and Locke (Cont.)
   Reading: Wolff, Chapter 2.
   Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, pp. 276-283.
   Martin Luther King, Jr., Letter from Birmingham Jail.
February 12 – Hume’s Critique and a “Conservative” Alternative.  
Reading:  David Hume, Of the Original Contract.  
E. Burke, Reflections on the Revolution in France.

Thursday, February 14 – First Exam.

4) Is Democracy the Best Way to Organize a State?  What is Democracy?  Are most human beings capable of democratic citizenship?  What is at stake in the debate between participatory and representative democracy?

February 19-21 – Plato’s Critique of Democracy.  
Reading:  Wolff, Chapter 3.  
Plato, Apology (of Socrates).  


February 28-March 5– Madison’s Synthesis of Liberal, Representative Democracy.  
Reading:  James Madison, The Federalist # 10 and #51.

5) Why is Liberty Valuable, and What are its Limits?  Why is liberty important for human beings, and how should it be justified?  What are its proper limits, and how can these be discerned?

Reading:  Wolff, Chapter 4.  
John Locke, A Letter Concerning Toleration.

March 9-17 – Fall Break.

March 19-21 – Mill’s Defense of Liberty.  
Reading:  John Stuart Mill, On Liberty.

Tuesday, March 26 – Second Exam.

6) What is Property?  Why is it important for individuals to have the right to own property?  Or, should property be collectively owned?  Either way, is there any guide to how property should be distributed?  What are the implications of inequality in income, wealth, and property?

March 28 – Locke’s Argument on Property.  
Reading:  Wolff, Chapter 5.  

April 2 – The Socialist Critique of Property.  
Reading:  Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto, pp. 717-
April 4-9 – Rawls’ Modern Liberal Synthesis.

April 11 – Nozick’s Libertarian Critique of Rawls.
Reading: Robert Nozick, Anarchy, State, and Utopia.

7) The Challenge of Feminism. What has Feminism contributed to or challenged political philosophy? How relevant is Feminism to contemporary life?

April 16-30 – Classic and Contemporary Statements of Feminism.
Reading: Wolff, Chapter 6.
J.S. Mill, The Subjection of Women.
Susan Moller Okin, Justice, Gender, and the Family.

April 18-22 – Easter Break.

Thursday, April 25 – Paper Due.

May 2- Final Exam Review.

ASSIGNMENTS:

Your grade for this course will be based upon your work on the following assignments:

1. A short answer and essay exam, covering the introduction and the material on human nature and the justification of the state, will be given in class on Thursday, February 14. Your grade on this exam will count for 25% of your course grade.

2. A short answer and essay exam, covering the material on democracy and liberty, will be given in class on Tuesday, March 26. Your grade on this exam will count for 25% of your course grade.

3. A 4-5 page essay in which you will be asked to evaluate a very specific argument made by one of our philosophers in one of (or a particular section of) their writings we read for class. I will provide sample topics, and discuss the format of the essay, early on during the semester. The essay will be due in class on Thursday, April 25, and your grade on this essay will count for 20% of your course grade.

4. A final exam, which will both cover the last third of the course and have a cumulative element. This will also be a short answer and essay exam, and will be given on Thursday, May 9 from 11:30 am – 2:00 pm. Your grade on this exam will count for 30% of your course grade. [NOTICE: You should note this date and time NOW and make sure to plan any vacations, etc. around that date. “Leaving early from campus” will not be an acceptable excuse for rescheduling the final exam.]
NOTE: The major assignments of the class will ask you to explore in essay form the course readings, and to pursue the analysis of particular current issues in light of one or more of the arguments presented in these readings. In grading your work, I will be looking primarily at the quality and persuasiveness of your arguments, your ability to clearly support your opinions and conclusions. I am most concerned with your success in understanding some of the perennial problems of politics, and in presenting your own ideas and conclusions concerning these problems. As a result, the quality of your writing, in addition to the quality of your arguments, will be weighed in determining your grade on each assignment.

GRADING SYSTEM:

Each assignment will be graded on a point system, with 100 points being the maximum possible. You will then be given a letter grade that matches the score. I will use the following grading scale on each assignment:

- A    = 100-93
- A-   = 92-90
- B+   = 89-87
- B    = 86-83
- B-   = 82-80
- C+   = 79-77
- C    = 76-73
- C-   = 72-70
- D+   = 69-67
- D    = 66-63
- D-   = 62-60
- F    = 59 and below

In figuring your final grade, I will average and weight the numerical totals, and assign the appropriate letter grade.

NOTES ON CLASS PARTICIPATION:

1. As much as possible, the class will be based around discussion of the readings, the questions they raise, and their applications to problems of contemporary political life. You should always read the assigned material before class, think through its implications, and come to class with questions and criticisms of the reading and/or its possible implications.

2. I will take attendance regularly over the semester, and all students are expected to attend all classes. I do realize that emergencies happen, and so will enforce the following policy: All students will be allowed three absences over the semester. However, if you are absent more than three times, your final grade for the course will be reduced by 5 points for each day over three. (This policy does not apply to dates when exams are given or assignments are due.)

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY AND HONESTY:

All students should note and consider carefully the following policies:
- Absences from Exams: “Absence from an announced examination results in a failing grade for the examination, unless suitable arrangements are made for a special examination.” (Westminster College Undergraduate Catalog, pp. 71) For this course, a make-up exam will be arranged only if I am notified more than 12 hours in advance of the scheduled exam, and the reasons for missing the exam are sufficiently compelling.

- Plagiarism and Cheating: These and any other forms of academic dishonesty and theft will not be tolerated in this class. They are a violation of the norms of mutual respect, individual integrity, and the open exchange of ideas, and are subject to severe penalties, including automatic failure in the class. We will discuss the meaning and importance of academic honesty early in the class, and you can also consult the Westminster College Undergraduate Catalog, pages 71-75, for more details on the Westminster College Academic Integrity Policy, which will be in force in this class. One specific element of this policy is worth emphasizing right now. Whenever you submit a piece of writing, it must include the proper citations for all of your sources, including readings used in the course. Failure to appropriately cite your sources will result in a reduction of your grade on the assignment.

HOW TO FIND ME:

Office – 228 Old Main
Office Phone - 724-946-7304
E-Mail – cohenes@westminster.edu

Office Hours – Wednesday – 10 am – 3 pm. And by Appointment.