Course Description

This course considers ancient works from the Greek world, with a central focus on Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War, Plato’s Republic, and Aristotle’s Politics.

In their discussions, the authors of these works provide keen analysis of human nature, and seek principles by which to order collective life. Greek thought begins with the scientific study of the natural world, as is evident from Presocratic Fragments, and extends into discussion of the social world. The Greeks particularly focused on the role of honor, justice and virtue in attaining “the good life” as well as how this “good” is connected to the state and political life.

In studying ancient political thought, we should consider that the principles we glean, however relevant, are products of a world ordered by different normative frameworks and commitments, as well as conditions which necessarily shaped them. Hence, our task is to ask what the ancients have to teach us and develop an understanding of the context which produced their thought. To what extent are the arguments we read about lasting political principles, and to what extent are they bound to their time?

Some of the earliest arguments, those of the Sophists, suggest that argument is a skill to be cultivated for particular ends, and not necessarily truth or justice. In other words, the better argument may simply be the most successful one. Plato denies this idea in the Republic. However, it is an important consideration for societies like Athens that ordered their political institutions around democratic argument. Which virtues, skills, and character would one need in order to live a good life in such a society? Which ones are needed to build a successful state? Are they the same? Where does justice lie amid these concerns? Aristotle considers these questions directly in the Politics and all authors provide arguments with which to construct answers to these questions.

In addition to these readings, we consider selections from the Presocratics, Sophists, and Augustine’s City of God, which presents a Christian lens through which to discuss honor, virtue, justice, and the “good life.”
Course Requirements

1. **Participation (10%)**. You are required to attend class, with materials in hand, ready to discuss. This means you will need to read slated material prior to each class. Attending lecture is central to understanding the material and assignments. In addition to class discussion, you will participate in discussion boards posted on Blackboard (at least two throughout the course).

2. **Midterm (25%)**. The midterm will consist of short essay answers chosen from a slate of questions. You will need a Blue Book (8.5x11).

3. **In Class Essay (25%)**. You will need a Blue Book (8.5x11 version). Complete analytical essays will be approximately 8 paragraphs. You may write a longer version, however, it should be a minimum of 8 paragraphs.

4. **Final Exam (40%)**. This is a comprehensive essay exam scheduled during Final Exam Week. Check the online schedule for your class date/time.

5. **Essay Guidelines**: Essays will be graded on content as well as organization. You must have a thesis argument at the beginning of your essay, analytical development of this argument, and specific evidence from class texts and lecture (quotes or paraphrase) to bolster and support your argument. Better essays will also include specific examples, counter-arguments, and acknowledge assumptions and weaknesses (i.e. when assumptions fail, if x rather than y…then, etc.).

6. **General Guidelines**:
   a. **You must complete all assignments to receive credit for the course.** Only excused absences or extenuating circumstances (documented illness, hospitalization, or family emergency) will be considered for a make-up of a missed assignment. Excessive absences will result in a grade deduction.
   b. **No laptops or electronics during exams.**
   c. **You may NOT record lecture.**

Course Objectives:

You will learn to identify, define, and critically analyze ancient political concepts and frameworks of thought and discuss their significance. You will learn their relevance within their social context, and how ancient political concepts, frameworks, and ideals have evolved over time from the ancient world to the pre-modern one.

You will write analytically about ancient political frameworks and the history of political thought. This means you will craft arguments with an original thesis and comparative critical analysis of relevant texts covered in class.
POL S 301A: History of Western Political Thought—Ancients

Required Texts


Reading Schedule

T 8/28 Lecture: Introduction to Greek Thought

Th 8/30 Heraclitus, River Fragments.

T 9/4 Presocratics and Sophists: Gorgias, “Encomium of Helen” and Fragments.

Th 9/6 Sophists, Selection from Dissoi Logoi: “Right and Wrong.”


Th 9/20 Thucydides, “Melian Dialogue” in *History*, pp. 102-123.


Th 9/27 Lecture—The Role of Justice in Thucydides.


Th 10/4 Plato, Book 2.

T 10/9 Plato, Books 4 and 5.

Th 10/11 Plato, Books 5 and 6.

T 10/16 Plato, Books 7 and 10.

Th 10/18 Plato, Book 10.
T 10/23 Midterm.

Th 10/25 Aristotle: Selection from Ethics

T 10/30 Aristotle: Selection from Ethics.

Th 11/1 Selection from Ethics.

T 11/6 Aristotle, Politics, Books 1-3.

Th 11/8 Aristotle, Books 1-3 (Review) and Selection from Book 4 (pp.106-114).

T 11/13 Aristotle, Book 5 and 6 (pp.154-160).


T 11/20 In Class ESSAY

Th 11/22 No Class. Thanksgiving Holiday.

T 11/27 Review Lecture: Plato and Aristotle

Th 11/29 Lecture: The Ancients in Perspective; Selection, St. Augustine’s City of God.

T 12/4 Augustine Selection.

Th 12/6 Final Exam Review.