

# POLI 231 INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL THEORY: THE MORAL BASIS OF POLITICS

McGill University Winter 2024

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MWF 9:05-9:55, Strathcona Anatomy & Dentistry M-1

Instructor: Arash Abizadeh

Office Hours (Ferrier 472):

Drop in: Monday 10:05-11am

By appointment:

[https://www.supersaas.co.uk/schedule/Abizadeh/Office\\_Hours\\_by\\_Appointment](https://www.supersaas.co.uk/schedule/Abizadeh/Office_Hours_by_Appointment)

**\*\*Please note:** This is a manual note-taking lecture course. The use or display of any mobile computing or communications devices (including computers, recording devices, phones, tablettes, etc.) is strictly banned during class, except with the explicit permission of the instructor in exceptional cases. See “Course Objectives” and “Mobile Computing or Communications Devices” below.\*\*

## Subject Matter:

This course is an introduction to the study of politics that is oriented to the problems of political action. What makes these problems distinctive is the fact that politics is at once the creation of a public authority and a system of power, and the requirements of legitimate authority and the imperatives of power are often in tension with each other. This tension shows up in the questions we will address in the first unit of the course. As a citizen, it seems that I am obligated to obey the laws, but as a moral being, it seems that I must obey my conscience. But what should I do if the dictates of law conflict with the prompting of conscience? How can I be obligated to obey laws I have not made? When—if ever—may I justifiably disobey? When—if ever—am I obligated to disobey?

In the second part of the course, we will consider the character of the political order that claims our obedience. Some kinds of governments may be legitimate, and I may be obligated to obey their laws. But there are certainly some regimes that are illegitimate, and so can make no moral claim against me. We will examine two kinds of answer to the question of what confers legitimacy upon a political order that establishes an authority obligating us to obey its rules. The first is Locke’s “liberal” idea that political authority is legitimate only insofar as it respects the individual rights of those who live under it. The second is Rousseau’s “democratic” idea that legitimate authority can only exist when the laws stem from the collective will of the people who lives under them.

In the third part of the course, we will discuss what is often called the problem of ends and means: even if we have an account of what a legitimate and (relatively) just political order looks like, what kinds of action can we legitimately undertake to bring it about? For the imperatives of power often seem to dictate that one be prepared to dirty one’s hands if one wishes to advance the good in political life. Thus, we must ask, what kind of person must one be, if one is to engage in political activity? Must one, as Machiavelli argued, learn how not to be good, or is there a way, as Gandhi

argued, in which the demands of politics and ethics can be reconciled?

## Course Objectives:

This course has three main pedagogical objectives:

1. to become acquainted with basic concepts, problems, and questions in political theory, with a focus on political obligation, political legitimacy and authority, and the ethics of political action;
2. to develop the capacity to think critically in an analytically rigorous way, to give articulate oral expression to that thinking, and to give articulate written expression to that thinking in a thesis-driven, analytical essay format; and
3. to develop the capacity to focus on and listen to lectures, digest the main points on the spot, and effectively to take hand-written notes that *synthesize* (rather than transcribe) lecture content.

## Prerequisites:

This course has no university prerequisites, but it fulfils the prerequisite/corequisite for 300-level courses in political theory. In particular, it prepares students to pursue the four-semester sequence in the history of political thought (POLI 333, 334, 433, and 434) and/or thematic courses such as POLI 361, 364, 365, 366, and 376 (with themes including global and international justice and radical, democratic, liberal, and feminist political thought.)

## Books:

The following books have been ordered at the Paragraphe Bookstore for your purchase and are on reserve at the library. (The other readings will be made available via MyCourses.)

Sophocles. Antigone. Hackett Publishing. 0-87220-571-1

Plato, The Trial and Death of Socrates. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Hackett Publishing. 0-87220-554-1

Wolff, Robert Paul. In Defense of Anarchism. University of California Press.

also available at: <http://www.ditext.com/wolff/anarchy.html>

Locke, John. Second Treatise of Government. Hackett Publishing. 978-0-915144-86-0

\*Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. On the Social Contract. Hackett Publishing. 0-87220-068-X

\*Sieyès, Emmanuel. Political Writings of Sieyès. Hackett Publishing. 0-87220-430-8

Machiavelli, Niccolò. The Prince. Hackett Publishing. 0-87220-316-6

\*Sartre, Jean-Paul. No Exit and Three Other Plays. Vintage.

\*Camus, Albert. The Just. Talonbooks. 9781772011562

\*Fanon, Franz. The Wretched of the Earth. Grove.

Gandhi, Mahatma. Selected Political Writings. Hackett Publishing. 0-87220-330-1

Davis, Angela. Are Prisons Obsolete? Seven Stories Press.

Items marked by asterisk (\*) are translations from the original French. If you are able to read French, you are strongly encouraged to read these works in their original language. To facilitate this, copies of the asterisked texts are also available in French at the bookstore and on reserve:

Rousseau. Du Contrat Social. Éditions Flammarion  
 Sieyès. Qu'est-ce que le tiers état? Presses Universitaires de France.  
 Sartre. Les mains sales. Éditions Gallimard (Folio).  
 Camus. Les Justes. Éditions Gallimard (Folio).  
 Fanon. Les damnés de la terre. Éditions Gallimard (Folio).

## Class Schedule:

Readings should be done by dates shown, before class, since lectures will assume that the associated readings have already been done.

Please heed the following **warning** about the readings for this course: if you do not keep up with the readings, you will not be able in this course to cram everything at the end for the final exam. This for two reasons. First, the materials in this course are cumulative. If you fall behind in one part, you will likely be lost in the next parts. Second, there is just too much material to digest: the readings are meant to be digested over three months, not a few weeks.

(\*\*Class F Jan 5 cancelled\*\*)

1. Introduction: Ethics & Politics (M Jan 8)

### I. Political Obligation, Conscience, and the Claims of Authority

2. Sophocles, Antigone (W Jan 8)
3. Plato, "Apology" and "Crito" (in The Trial and Death of Socrates) (F Jan 12)
4. Thoreau, "An Essay on Civil Disobedience" (M Jan 15)

### II. Legitimate Political Authority: The Moral Foundations of Political Life

#### A. The Illegitimacy of the State as an Organization of Force: Anarchism

5. Wolff, In Defense of Anarchism, Parts I and II (but skip appendix of part II). (W Jan 17)

#### B. Legitimacy via the Protection of Individual Rights: Liberalism

6. Locke, Second Treatise of Government, chapters 1-5, 7, 8(par 95-99, 119-122), 9 (F Jan 19)

**Conferences begin M Jan 22**

7. Locke, chapters 10-12, 13 (par 149-155) (M Jan 22)
8. Locke, chapters 17, 18 (par 199-204), 19 (par 211-229, 240-243) (W Jan 24)

**Round 1 Papers due Sunday, Jan 28, 1:05pm=13h05 via MyCourses**

9. Locke, continued (M Jan 29)

### C. Legitimacy via Collective Self-Determination: Popular Sovereignty

10. Rousseau, Social Contract, Book I (all) and Book II (chapters 1-6) (W Jan 31)

11. Sieyès, “What is the Third Estate?”, selections (Political Writings, pp. 93-111, 115-116, 127-130, 133-144, 148-158). (M Feb 5)

[For those reading Sieyès in French: assigned pages correspond to the entire text (Intro to ch. 6), except: in Ch. 3, Sec. 2, you are only responsible for first two parts of Sec. 2, plus the entirety of the other sections; in Ch. 6 you are only responsible for text between paragraph that begins “Il n’est pas, dit une maxime de droit universel, de plus grand défaut...” and paragraph that begins “Résumons: il est de principe que tout ce qui sort de la qualité commune...”]

12. Sieyès continued (W Feb 7)

### III. Violence and the Ethics of Political Action

#### A. Ends and Means: The Problem of Dirty Hands

13. Machiavelli, The Prince (M Feb 12)

14. Machiavelli, The Prince (W Feb 14)

#### **Round 2 Papers due Sunday, Feb. 18, 1:05pm=13h05 via MyCourses**

15. Kagan, Normative Ethics, chapter 2 (M Feb 19)

16. Kagan, Normative Ethics, chapter 3 (W Feb 21)

17. Sartre, “Dirty Hands” (in No Exit and Three Other Plays) (M Feb 26)

18. Albert Camus, “The Just Assassins” (in Caligula and Three Other Plays (W Feb 28)

#### **Reading Period March 4–8**

#### B. Violence, Conflict, and Political Power

19. Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth: preface by Sartre, plus chapter “Concerning Violence” (including “Violence in the International Context”) (M March 11)

20. Fanon, continued (W March 13)

#### **Round 3 Papers due Sunday, March 17, 1:05pm=13h05 via MyCourses**

21. Gandhi, Selected Political Writings (M March 18)  
 22. Gandhi continued, plus Martin Luther King, “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (W March 20)  
 23. Davis, Are Prisons Obsolete?: chapters 1, 2, 3, 6 (M March 25)

24. Exam Review Session (W March 27)

\*\*Note: No classes April 3, 8, 10, 11\*\*

**Round 4 Papers due Friday April 5, 5:05pm=17h05 via MyCourses**

\*\*Note: Only students who handed in a Round 1 paper are eligible to hand in a Round 4 paper\*\*

## REQUIREMENTS AND COURSE POLICIES

### Distribution of Marks:

1. Conference Attendance	6%
2. Conference Participation	12%
3. Paper 1 (1000-1250 words)	8%
4. Paper 2 (1000-1250 words)	8%
5. Final Exam	66%

*You must receive at least 20% in attendance, and you must pass each of items 2, 3, and 4 in order to receive a grade higher than D in this course. You must pass the final exam to pass the course.*

### Paper Format and Sources

Papers are handed in as a PDF file via MyCourses. The name of the file you upload to MyCourses must be “Your-student-ID#\_PaperRound#.” All papers must be double-spaced, at least 11-point font, proper reference citation, with no separate title page but your title (and TA name) placed at the top of your first page. At the **end** of your paper, put your name and final word count (including footnotes, excluding works cited). (So: do not put your name at the beginning of your paper.) If you are using notes, use numbered footnotes (not endnotes, and Arabic not Roman numerals).

### Sources

I do not care which reference citation system you use, as long as you are consistent and complete. (You may wish to use the Modern Language Association (MLA) system.) Papers that fail to meet these criteria will be penalized by dropping to the next possible letter grade (e.g., from A to A-).

You are not expected to consult secondary sources beyond what you read from the syllabus. Your papers should focus on the primary materials from the syllabus. (However, if you do consult external sources, you should of course acknowledge your references.)

### Word Count

Your paper must fall exactly between 1000-1250 words (including footnotes, excluding works cited); anything below this length will be deemed insufficient; anything beyond this length will not be read past 1250 words.

## Paper Writing Guidance

For guidance on how to write your paper for your introductory course, see my paper-writing guidelines in "[Writing an Essay for an Intro Political Theory Class with Arash Abizadeh.](#)"

See also the extremely valuable guidance provided by Professor Alison McQueen on how to write a political theory paper at: <http://www.alisonmcqueen.info/new-page-1>

Be sure also to look at my guide to "[How \(Not\) to Use ChatGPT in Your Undergraduate Political Theory Class.](#)"

## Paper Assignments and Accommodations

You are required to write two 1000-1250 word papers for this course. But you also have the opportunity to submit a bonus paper (for a maximum of three papers total). If you hand in three papers, I will drop the lowest mark. Furthermore, for those of you who hand in a paper in Round 1, there will a further bonus: if you hand in a paper in Round 1, you will have a Round 4 bonus date to choose from for when to hand in your second (and possibly third) paper. (But please note: if you do not hand in a paper in Round 1, you are not eligible to submit in Round 4: you will have to submit your two papers in Rounds 2 and 3.) In sum, if you hand in a paper in Round 1, you have four opportunities to hand in a maximum of three papers; if you do not hand in a paper in Round 1, you have three opportunities to hand in a maximum of three papers. In either case, only the best two papers will count (we will drop the lowest grade), so if you like the grades on your first two papers you can skip the next rounds.

What is the purpose of all these bonus opportunities? First and foremost, the purpose is to pre-build all accommodations in this course into the syllabus in advance. These measures are designed to accommodate any student who may be facing any difficulties and hardships, including unforeseen hardships such as illness but also foreseeable hardships that may warrant registration with the Office

of Student Disabilities. All these accommodations are pre-built into the syllabus for everyone. This means two things. First, you do not need to explain your particular circumstances to your professor or TA in order to receive these accommodations: everyone in the class gets them no-questions-asked. Second, no one will receive any further accommodations concerning papers under any circumstances whatsoever.

The second purpose of these bonus opportunities is for you to use Round 1 as a way to try out writing a paper for this class and to learn how to do it without worrying about your grade. For many of you, the format and expectations of the paper required for this class will be new. But don't worry: use Round 1 to learn what's expected.

## **Late Work**

Since you have three (and potentially four) opportunities to write three papers of which only two count, no late papers will be accepted for any reason whatsoever. If circumstances arise that prevent you from handing in your paper on time, you will receive an F on that paper.

I strongly recommend that you not frivolously use up your bonus paper opportunity in the first two rounds, since no exceptions will be made for late papers under any circumstances. If circumstances in the first two rounds have led you already to miss a paper assignment or to write a paper whose mark you were not happy about, I strongly suggest that you plan on submitting your next paper(s) the week before it is due, so that you are not foiled by regular life problems such as a computer crash, poor internet connection, illness, family difficulties, etc., when the due date arrives. To repeat: since no exceptions will be made, if you have already missed a paper, you should plan to hand in your next paper one week in advance in order to avoid any unforeseeable circumstances, such as an illness, that may prevent you from being able to hand in your paper on its due date.

## **Communicating with the Professor and TAs**

Office hours with the professor will be posted on MyCourses. Office hours with the TAs will be determined by each TA.

Please come and see me or your TA during office hours to discuss any matter of an intellectual nature concerning the materials in this course. Please see class announcements about how to sign up for an appointment at my office hours. If you have a conflict with my office hours, please send me an email with the subject "POLI 231 Office Hours" and I'd be happy to schedule an alternative time with you.

Questions of an administrative kind concerning the course should initially be addressed to your own TA. If your TA is unable to help you, or if you are not satisfied with the response, please make an appointment at my office hours and come see me. If there is a personal matter about which you are uncomfortable speaking to your TA, you should of course always feel free to speak with me directly about it during my office hours.

Please note that in general I receive an overwhelming number of emails per day and cannot respond to all emails I receive. The best way to speak to me about a matter is by making an appointment at office hours.

## **Conference Participation: Readings & Talking Points**

Conferences will be structured to permit a high level of discussion and the close analysis of texts. It is essential that readings be done before your conference in order to make an effective discussion possible. You are expected to come to conferences prepared to discuss each assigned text; you may wish to prepare talking points for yourself.

## **Conference Attendance**

You get one free conference absence, no questions asked. Use it wisely.

(Please note that if you are absent from the first conference, you are absent from the first conference.)

For each conference that you miss after the first, your absence will be reflected in the attendance component of your conference mark by dropping 20%, unless you have made up for your absence in one of two ways. Either you can make up for the absence by attending, with the permission of your TA, another conference the same week by the same TA. Or, if not, then you must write a brief reflection essay of 500-750 words, due at the beginning of the next conference, on the material from the missed conference. This all your responsibility; do not expect your TA to chase you down for make-up reflection papers.

## **Bilingual Conference**

If possible, there will be a designated bilingual (French-English) conference for this course. The conference will be conducted in French by the TA, but students are welcome to participate in either French or English.

## **MyCourses**

You are responsible for checking class announcements made via this course's MyCourses page, and for any course content made available to you via MyCourses.

## **Mobile Computing or Communications Devices**

To facilitate the realization of course objectives, this course is organized as a manual note-taking lecture course. Mobile computing or communications devices (including computers, recording devices, phones, iPads, or iPods) are not permitted to be used or displayed in class (unless a student has received explicit permission from the instructor). If you bring such devices to class, they must be off and out of view.



There are three basic reasons for why this course is structured as a manual noted-taking course:<sup>1</sup>

1. There is increasing evidence that mobile computing and other devices pose a significant distraction for both users and fellow students during class, inhibiting the ability to focus on and digest classroom material.
2. There is increasing evidence linking the use of such devices in class to poorer overall course performance.
3. Taking notes by hand is generally slower than typing into a computer. While it may be possible to transcribe a lecture almost verbatim when typing, this is impossible by hand. To take effective notes manually, one must simultaneously digest and synthesize the main points of a lecture. Not only is digesting and synthesizing on the spot an important skill in its own right (the development of which is an objective of this course), the process can itself play a crucial role in learning the material.

Exceptions: Explicit permission for the use of a computer may be granted by the professor in the case of a justifiable reason. Speak to me directly about this.

## Notices

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information)

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

© Instructor-generated course materials (e.g., handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions, slides, video recordings, lectures, etc.) remain the instructor's intellectual property and are protected by law

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<sup>1</sup> For evidence of the first two points, see, for example, C.B. Fried, "In-class Laptop Use and Its Effects on Student Learning," *Computers & Education* 50.3 (2008): 906-914, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2006.09.006> ; F. Sana, T. Weston, and N. J. Cepeda, "Laptop Multitasking Hinders Classroom Learning for Both Users and Nearby Peers," *Computers & Education* 62 (2013): 24-31, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2012.10.003>. For further discussion, see also Josh Fischman, "Students Stop Surfing After Being Shown How In-Class Laptop Use Lowers Test Scores," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 16, 2009), available at <http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Students-Stop-Surfing-After/4576> . For a more general discussion of the issue of computers in the classroom, see the interesting article by Laura Mortkowitz, "More colleges, professors shutting down laptops and other digital distractions," *The Washington Post* (April 25, 2010), available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/24/AR2010042402830.html>

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## GRADES

### Marking Criteria

Papers will be marked according to the following criteria:

1. Written Expression: spelling, punctuation, grammar, style, quality of prose, etc.
2. Structure and Organization: sensible use of paragraph breaks, sensible order of paragraphs, smooth transitions, etc.
3. Format: consistent system for references, word count indicated, etc.
4. Analytical Rigour: clarity of thesis and argument, logic, precision, consideration of counterarguments, etc.
5. Originality / Creativity
6. Scholarship: proper citation of sources, accurate representation of authors cited, other works engaged with when appropriate, quality of research if a research paper, etc.
7. Miscellaneous: meets purposes of assignment, etc.

Each paper will be returned with a grade corresponding to each of these 6 or 7 items, in addition to your overall paper grade. Please note that (with the exception noted in the next paragraph) these itemized grades are purely meant to provide you with feedback, so that you have an idea of what areas require improvement in future work. Your final grade is NOT an average of these itemized grades.

However, an F on any one of the seven criteria (except criterion 3) will result in an F on the written assignment as a whole. In particular, a minimum level of originality (criterion 5) and knowing when and how to provide proper references to works that you have used in crafting your essay (criterion 6) are substantive requirements for all written assignments, without which the maximum grade is an F.

### Explanation of Grades

Grades for papers will range from F to A+. Since I do not believe in grade inflation, and since I use the whole range of grades, to help you interpret your performance in the course, I provide here a

very rough idea of what grades in the C to A ranges mean. A grade in the **C** range indicates some basic problems that require immediate attention and perhaps some pedagogic help. I take a **B-** to be a below average grade which suggests some problem that needs attention. A **B** reflects average work; it is a respectable though perhaps unhappy grade. It indicates a need for improvement in future work. Usually there are no major errors, and there is a good, above-average comprehension of the material – though there may be problems of written expression, or of precision, or the work amounts to a regurgitation of texts or class discussion, etc. I consider a **B+** to be a very good grade reflecting promising and above-average work. General qualities usually include an excellent comprehension of the material, excellent organization of paper, excellent written expression, no major errors, meeting all basic requirements of assignment, attaining a basic level of analytical rigour, and going beyond a mere regurgitation of texts and class work. Moving into the A-range requires not just comprehending the material and presenting it well, but a critical engagement with the material that captures its subtleties and displays some spark of creative originality and/or superior analytical rigour. (All of this means that an excellent paper that is also excellent because it was a “safe” paper to write will probably end up with a B+. And, in fact, sometimes, depending on where you are at with the material, that is exactly the kind of paper you need to write.) An **A-** is an excellent grade reflecting a paper that is almost flawless in the basic requirements (excellent comprehension of material, organization of paper, written expression, etc.); there is also a critical engagement that captures the complexities and subtleties of the material, and that displays some combination of superior analytical rigour and/or creative original insight. A grade of **A** reflects a top-notch work that is flawless in the basic requirements and that reflects an outstanding comprehension of the material in all its complexities and subtleties and displays a combination of superior analytical rigour and creative original insight. The writer had likely set themselves up with an intellectually challenging project (which of course sometimes carries with it some risk) and was able to pull it off. The very rare **A+** is similar; the plus comes from the fact that I was saying “wow!” while reading your paper.

## What Grades are Not

Although it takes intelligence to write good papers, at the end of the day grades are NOT an evaluation of your intelligence. And grades are certainly not an indicator for how much the professor likes you or how smart he or she thinks you are. To write well, you have to take risks, and often those risks will not pay off. If you do poorly on your paper, remember that many very smart people write papers receiving poor grades. Sometimes it’s simply because you have not learned the relevant skills yet. Sometimes it is a matter of sheer luck (you got unlucky and picked a topic or line of argument that turned out to be a dead-end, and you had no way of knowing in advance!) University is an opportunity for you to take risks from which you can learn.