

History of Western Political Thought II: Medieval/Renaissance: Poli 334 / Phil 344

Winter 2021

Instructor: Arash Abizadeh

Officially allotted time: Wed/Fri 11:35am-12:55pm

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(Due to the unmanageable volume of email I receive, the subject of your email must be "POLI 334 / PHIL 344:" followed by your subject.)

Prerequisites:

Students will normally have taken POLI 333 or PHIL 345 (or be taking one of them simultaneously as a corequisite). Students who have taken a different course with significant exposure to Plato's and Aristotle's political writings should e-mail the professor outlining the details to receive special permission. (Please note that a course in which you were exposed to Plato's or Aristotle's ideas but did not actually read and study their writings is insufficient.) All students are expected to have facility with major ideas from Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*.

Subject Matter

This course covers major intellectual currents that helped create the very notion of the "West" and "Western political thought." We do so by examining the texts that have been deemed to be part of that tradition from the fall of the Western Roman Empire through the Renaissance. This era is marked by intellectual and political struggles amongst various legacies of the ancient world: Christianity, especially the papal Catholicism that succeeds the western Empire; the rediscovery of ancient Greek philosophy in Roman Catholic lands; and the pre-imperial Roman Republican and Western Roman Empire as aspirational models for political organization in Europe, including as informed by the rediscovery of ancient Roman law. Prominent themes include the relationship between religion and politics; conflicts between the Catholic Church and worldly kingdoms or the Holy Roman Empire; and the relationship between the good Christian and the good citizen. The majority of our reading will be devoted to major canonical figures such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Machiavelli, but we also read other authors, some in depth and some quickly, to illustrate intellectual trends of one era or another. Lectures will routinely include historical background.

Course Objectives:

This course has two main pedagogical objectives:

1. to become acquainted with key concepts, problems, and questions of medieval and renaissance political theory;
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.

Pandemic Format: Due to the pandemic, this seminar will be conducted using several alternative formats, to enable both those who are in Montreal and those who are away, in different time zones, to participate as they can. Each week has assigned readings. You are expected to have finished the readings for each session prior to our Zoom session. Whether you first do the readings or first listen to my audio lecture for that week is up to you. If you are writing a Reaction Piece that week, you are expected to have finished the readings for that whole week prior to posting your Reaction Piece (on Tuesday). Aspects of this seminar:

1. The **default assumption** for our officially allotted class period (Wednesday and Friday at 11:35am-12:55pm) is that we will meet for a live **Zoom session** for its duration (with a break in between). (With a five minute break, we would be meeting for a total of 1h 15

- minutes each class period). Attendance at the Zoom sessions is not mandatory: they will be recorded and made available on MyCourses for you to access afterwards.
2. However, on most weeks, I will post an **audio lecture** in MyCourses on the material assigned for a given class period before the officially allotted time. (I will aim to post the audio lecture by the evening of the previous day). I will do this to help minimize the amount of time you must stare at a screen listening to lectures. When an audio lecture is posted, we will subtract the equivalent amount of time from our Zoom sessions. So, for example, if for a given Wednesday session I post a 45 minute audio lecture on Tuesday, we will meet on Zoom from 12:25-12:55 for thirty minutes on Wednesday (instead of 1h15m). Or, if for a given week I have posted 1h15m of audio lectures, then we will not meet on Zoom on the Wednesday, but will meet on Friday for the full duration. You are of course always free to listen to the audio lecture during the allotted class period right before the live Zoom session, but this way you also have the option of listening to it earlier at your own convenience. When I post an audio lecture, I will at the same time announce the exact times we will be meeting to follow up the audio lecture with our Zoom session. You are of course responsible for listening to the audio lecture **prior** to a scheduled Zoom session.
 3. The result is that I hope primarily to use our live Zoom sessions for **question and answer** and **class discussion**, rather than straight lecturing.
 4. There are two ways in which you can **participate** in this course. The default way is to participate live in our Zoom session in the Q&A and discussion.
 5. However, instead of the Zoom sessions, you may instead choose to participate in the online written **Discussion Forums** on MyCourses. Online participation has three components: Reaction Pieces, Responses, and Written Questions. Each course module will have its own Forum. Each Forum will have at least two Topics: one for Reaction Pieces, one for Questions & Answers.
 - a. **Reaction Pieces:** Each Reaction Piece is a 300-500 word critical reflection on the readings for that week, posted to our online Discussion Forums on MyCourses. To substitute for Zoom participation, your written online participation requires posting at least three eligible Reaction Pieces in the semester. (Your Reaction Piece starts a thread to which others may respond. For details, see below.) Each Reaction Piece is on the readings assigned for that week. Only one Reaction Piece per thinker is eligible to count towards your participation grade. In addition, to count towards your participation grade, a Reaction Piece must be posted by noon Tuesday during the week for which the readings are assigned on an eligible date. The eligible dates are: Jan 19 or 26 (for Augustine); February 9 or 16 (for Aquinas); March 9 (for Marsilius); March 16 (for Vitoria); and March 23 or 30 (for Machiavelli). You can of course post more than three Reaction Pieces; I will only count your three best eligible Reaction Pieces towards your participation grade.
 - b. **Discussion Responses:** To substitute for Zoom participation, you must also post a response to at least one other student's Reaction Piece in at least four different modules. You can of course respond to more, and your responses can vary in length. Up to you.
 - c. **Written Questions:** Each module will have a Q&A thread on our MyCourses discussion board. You are free to post any questions you have about the readings or audio lecture in writing on that thread. I will begin each Zoom session's Q&A with the written questions that were posted online at least one hour prior to the session's start. I will therefore not respond in writing, in the discussion board, to your questions; instead, I will address them live in our Zoom sessions. However, I encourage others to provide their own answers in the discussion board to any of the questions in the thread. There is no fixed number of questions or answers you are required to post.
 6. Students opting to participate in the live Zoom sessions are at liberty to supplement their

oral participation via written Reaction Pieces, discussion responses, and posted questions on the online discussion board. So online posts can also be used as a bonus for boosting your Zoom-based participation grade.

7. Please note: there is no grade for attendance. So if you have opted to participate via live Zoom sessions but are absent from a particular Zoom session, your absence in itself is not a problem. The problem is just that you won't have participated in the discussion. You may compensate for your lack of live participation in one session by responding to Reaction Pieces for that module. If you know beforehand that you'll be missing a session, you may compensate by posting questions for that module and/or posting a Reaction Piece beforehand. There is no formula for how much you need to do here, because, as I say, you are not graded on presence/absence per se.
8. You are responsible for checking MyCourses regularly, where I will communicate with you regarding the course.

Required Texts Available for Purchase at Paragraphe Bookstore

Please note: Paragraphe has a new eCommerce website where you can purchase the books online, at: <https://paragraphbooks.com/collections/textbooks>

You also have the option of going to the store in person to purchase; or you can place phone orders to arrange curbside pick-up. I also recommend reading as many of the books in hardcopy, rather than in digital format, as you can. Not only have studies shown that hardcopy reading facilitates better retention, reading the hardcopy will also help minimize screen fatigue during the pandemic.

Augustine. *Political Writings*. Trans. Tkacz & Kries. Hackett.

John of Salisbury. *Policraticus*. Ed. Nederman. Cambridge University Press.

Thomas Aquinas. *Aquinas: Political Writings*. Ed. Dyson. Cambridge University Press.

Dante. *Monarchy*. Ed. Prue Shaw. Cambridge University Press.

Marsilius of Padua. *The Defender of the Peace*. Ed. Brett. Cambridge University Press.

Francisco de Vitoria. *Vitoria: Political Writings*. Ed. Pagden & Lawrence. Cambridge University Press.

Niccolo Machiavelli. *Discourses on Livy*. Trans. Bondanella. Oxford University Press (Oxford World Classics).

Niccolo Machiavelli. *The Prince*. Ed. Skinner & Prince. Cambridge University Press.

Resources

A good resource is the Internet Medieval Sourcebook at

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>, which has chronologies, maps, primary texts, etc.

Wikipedia is fine as a resource for unfamiliar history and names—it is usually reliable about basic facts like dates and institutions, etc.—but it is not reliable as a guide to ideas and philosophies. A valuable resource is the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

<http://plato.stanford.edu>. It is especially useful for refreshing on the course's prerequisite material (Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*.)

Class Schedule:

~ = readings available via MyCourses

****Note:** class on January 8 is cancelled.**

****Note:** our first scheduled class for January 13 will be covered by an audio lecture. Our first Zoom session will be January 15. You are expected to have done the readings for the week before our first Zoom session.**

1. Miscellaneous: Roman Background ~

January 13: selections from:
 Constitution of Rome (graph)
 Polybius, *Histories*, book 6 (c. 150 BCE)
 Cicero, *On Duties* (44 BCE) ; *On the Laws* (c. 44 BCE); *On the Republic* (c. 51 BCE)
 Seneca, "On Leisure" (62 CE)
 Justinian, Institutes (533 CE)

2. Miscellaneous: Christian Background ~

January 15:
 Bible excerpts: Old Testament: 1 Samuel 8:1-22. New Testament: Matthew 5-7, Romans 13:1-7,
 Luke 12:1-53, Matthew 22:15-22, Matthew 16:13-28
 Nicene Creed

3-6: Augustine

January 20: Augustine, *Political Writings*, pp. 1-57
 January 22: Augustine, *Political Writings*, pp. 58-129
 January 27: Augustine, *Political Writings*, pp. 130-201
 January 29: Augustine, *Political Writings*, pp. 202-256

First paper due: 10:29am Monday February 1, 2021

7. Miscellaneous Legal documents ~

February 3:
 Magna Carta, 1215
 Authentica Habita, 1158
 Customs of Saint-Omer c. 1100
 Customs of Lorris c. 1155
 Statutes of Volterra, 1244
 Bernard of Clairvaux, "Letter to Pope Eugenius III," c. 1146
Short reading; get a head start on Policraticus for next time

8. John of Salisbury

February 5: John of Salisbury, *Policraticus* 1159 , pp. 9-78, 81-109, 129-143, 190-210

9-12. Aquinas

February 10: Aquinas, *Political Writings*, pp. 1-75
 February 12: Aquinas, *Political Writings*, pp. 76-157
 February 17: Aquinas, *Political Writings*, pp. 158-219
 February 19: Aquinas, *Political Writings*, pp. 220-278

13. Miscellaneous ~

February 24:
 Giles of Rome, *On Civil Government*, c. 1280
 Pope Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam*, 1302
 John of Paris, *On Royal and Papal Power*, 1302

William of Ockham, "Whether a Ruler Can Accept The Property of Churches For His Own Needs...", 1337
 John Wyclif, *On the Duty of the King*, 1379

Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the Body Politic*, c. 1407
 Bartolus, *On the Conflict of Laws* (1471)

14. Dante
 February 26: Dante, *Monarchy* (1312).

****Reading period March 1-6****

Second paper due: 10:29am, Wednesday, March 3, 2021

- 15-16. Marsilius of Padua
 March 10: Marsilius of Padua, *Defender of the Peace*, (1324), pp. 3-241 [heavy reading: you have part of reading period to do it]
 March 12: Marsilius of Padua, *Defender of the Peace*, pp. 242-318, 367-90, 432-73

- 17-18. Vitoria
 March 17: Vitoria, *Political Writings*, pp. 17-18, "On Civil Power," 1528 pp. 231-92: "On the American Indians," 1539
 March 19: Vitoria, *Political Writings*, pp. 205-230: "On Dietary Laws, or Self-Restraint," 1537; 293-307: "On the Law of War," 1539; 331-33, letter to de Arcos, 1534; 82-108, "On the Power of the Church (I)," 1532

- 19-24. Machiavelli
 March 24: Machiavelli, letter to Vettori in *The Prince* (Appendix A)
 Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book I
 March 26: Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book II
 March 31: Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book III

April 2 is a holiday

April 7: Machiavelli, *The Prince*
 April 9: Machiavelli, *The Prince*

****Class April 14 and 16 cancelled****

Third paper due: 11:29pm, Thursday, April 15, 2021

REQUIREMENTS AND COURSE POLICIES

DISTRIBUTION OF MARKS:

Paper 1 (1700-2000 words)	25%
Paper 2 (1900-2200 words)	30%
Paper 3 (2000-2300 words)	35%
Participation	10%

To receive a final grade of D or above in the course as a whole, you must receive a passing grade for each paper. To receive a final grade of C or above in the course as a whole, you must receive a passing grade and for participation.

Notes

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 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.

All slides, video recordings, lectures, etc. remain the **instructor's intellectual property**. As such, you may use these only for your own learning (and research, with proper referencing/citation) ends. You are not permitted to disseminate or share these materials; doing so may violate the instructor's intellectual property rights and could be cause for disciplinary action.

By enrolling in a remote course, you accept that **fixed sessions will be recorded**. You must consent to being recorded if you are attending a lecture or participating in a component of a course that is being recorded. You will be notified through a "pop-up" box in Zoom if a lecture or portion of a class is being recorded. If you are not comfortable being in a class that is recorded, you may decide to not take part by logging off Zoom. Students who log off will be able to later watch the video recording in MyCourses.

For pedagogical reasons and for the enrichment of the experience of all students, attendance may be monitored and/or active participation may be expected or required during fixed (synchronous) class time. As such, you may be asked to turn on your camera and audio. If you do not have the necessary resources (e.g., adequate Internet bandwidth or equipment) to do so, inform your instructor *at the beginning of term* so that appropriate accommodations can be made. In addition to the recording of your image and voice, your name (or preferred name) may be displayed on screen, and your instructor may call your name during the lecture. As such, this personal information will be disclosed to classmates, whether during the lecture or in viewing the recording. By remaining in classes that are being recorded, you accept that personal information of this kind may be disclosed to others, whether during the lecture or in viewing the recording.

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Paper Assignments

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.

Your papers must have:

1. an explicit thesis
2. explicit arguments in support of your thesis
3. good explicit objections to your thesis and/or arguments; you must of course deal with these objections and show that they do not undermine your thesis

Papers that fail to have a clear thesis cannot get a grade higher than C, but will typically fail. Papers that fail to provide arguments cannot get a grade higher than C+, but will typically do worse. Papers that fail to deal with an objection cannot get a grade higher than B-, but will typically do worse.

For very **basic guidance** on how to write a good political theory paper, see my “Tips” sheet. That sheet is for an introductory political theory class, not for an upper level course, so I certainly don’t expect you to follow the advice there mechanically, but it may help you organize your thoughts.

For **extended guidance** on how to write a good political theory paper, please see the wonderful advice provided by Professor Alison McQueen at Stanford University, available here: <http://www.alisonmcqueen.info/new-page-1>

Papers are handed in as a PDF file via mycourses. All papers must be double-spaced, at least 11-point font, proper reference citation, with no separate title page but your title, name, TA name if applicable, and final word count (including footnotes) placed at the top of your first page. If you are using notes, use numbered footnotes (not endnotes, and Arabic not Roman numerals). 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-).

On the word count: you need to observe the word count. If you find yourself going over the word limit, go back and edit, trying to cut out every single sentence or word that is not absolutely necessary to make your point and to defend your thesis. At each point in the paper, you should honestly be able to answer “yes” to the question: is this bit here really necessary for the defence of my thesis? You will not be penalized if you go over the word limit only if it is clear to the reader that the extra length was crucial to your argument and so warranted. Otherwise, cut.

Late Work

Papers and proposals must be completed on time. Late work will be penalized by dropping each day (including Saturday and Sunday) by one third of a grade (i.e., from A+ to A to A- to B+ etc.), unless you have secured explicit permission in advance to turn in your paper late. Late make-up essays will not be accepted.

Be proactive. If there are any foreseeable problems, come talk to me early, rather than waiting until after the fact. I will not grant extensions a couple of days before the due date.

Reaction Pieces

If you write a Reaction Piece, it must meet the following requirements to count towards your participation grade. It is due by noon on Tuesday for an eligible week.

- You will post each Reaction Piece on MyCourses in the discussion board, under the category linked to that week’s reading. Each Reaction Piece will start a new thread.
- The Reaction Piece should be between 300-500 words on the readings for that week
- You should set out a *critical* account or exploration of the text to which you are reacting. Assume your reader is as familiar with the text as you are: *no summary of the text is necessary or desirable*. You could, for example, pick some aspect of the text you disagree with, agree with, or want to interrogate, and then defend your view.
- Only your best three Reaction Pieces will count towards your grade (i.e., I’ll drop your lowest grade).
- A maximum of one Reaction Piece per thinker will count towards your participation grade.
- Reaction Pieces for participation credit are due by noon on the following dates: January 19 or 26 (Augustine); February 9 or 16 (Aquinas); March 9 (Marsilius); March

16 (Vitoria); and March 23 or 30 (Machiavelli).

Participation

See Pandemic Format section above.

Zoom Discussions

Our Zoom discussions will take as their starting point (a) my introductory audio lecture posted earlier, and (b) the Reaction Pieces, responses, and questions posted to the discussion forum up to that point.

Besides reading each assigned text, you should prepare three sets of talking points on each assigned text for each class:

1. be prepared to state and explain the key *concepts* used by the author
2. be prepared to state the main thesis (in the case of articles or excerpts) or main theses (in the case of a longer assignment such as a book) in two or three concise sentences
3. be prepared to give your own evaluation of the persuasiveness of the main thesis/theses

MARKING CRITERIA

Papers will be marked according to the following criteria:

1. analytical rigour (logic, precision, clarity of argument, consideration of counterarguments, etc.)
2. originality / creativity
3. essay mechanics (structure of essay clear and logical, clear thesis, etc)
4. sentence mechanics (quality of prose, grammar, spelling, etc.)
5. scholarship (accurate representation of author's cited, other works engaged with when appropriate, quality of research if a research paper, etc)
6. miscellaneous (proper citation of sources, meets purposes of assignment, etc)

Each paper will be returned with a grade corresponding to each of these 5 or 6 items, in addition to your overall paper grade. Please note that (with the exception noted in the next paragraph) these 5 or 6 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 six criteria will result in an F on the written assignment as a whole. In particular, a minimum level of originality (criterion 2) 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 above-average and promising 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 the reader 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 or TA 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.

Note: *The following provides very basic guidance. But for extended guidance on how to write a good political theory paper, you should also consult the text provided by Professor Alison McQueen at Stanford University, available here: <http://www.alisonmcqueen.info/new-page-1>*

Tips for Writing an Essay for your Intro Political Theory Class with Arash Abizadeh

1. **Know the difference between a thesis, an argument, and the premises of an argument.** A thesis is a claim you wish to defend in your essay. An argument is what you say in order to defend the thesis; it provides reasons in support of your thesis. Premises are claims used in your argument. An argument consists in a series of premises.

For example, one of the key theses in Wolff's book is that there can exist no legitimate authority (except for unanimous direct democracy). An argument he gives for this thesis is the following:

Thesis: No authority can be legitimate.

Argument:

1 (premise). Authority is legitimate only if it is compatible with the autonomy of those over whom it is exercised.

2 (premise). Autonomy is incompatible with being subject to authority.

Therefore:

3 (conclusion). No authority can be legitimate.

Steps 1 through 3 all together constitute the argument for the conclusion 3. The conclusion 3 is the thesis Wolff wishes to defend. 1 and 2 are premises in the argument for his thesis.

2. **State your thesis clearly at the beginning of your paper.** The claim you will defend in your paper should be clear to your reader at outset. You don't need to say, "I will defend the claim that XYZ". But you do need to state XYZ clearly. Your thesis is your view, the claim you want to defend. You need to take a position on the question you are addressing and state it clearly. "This paper explores issues related to..." is not a thesis.

3. **Provide arguments for your thesis.** Once you have decided on your thesis, you must defend it with arguments. How many arguments you provide will depend on how much space you have. But once you state your thesis, the next thing your reader expects is an argument for it.

4. **Know what it means to critically evaluate an argument.** Sometimes your thesis is about other persons' claims or arguments. For example, your thesis might be that Creon's arguments for the thesis that an individual has a duty to obey the law are better than Socrates's arguments for the same. If that's your thesis, then you need to state it clearly, state Creon's thesis and his argument(s) for it, state Socrates's thesis and his argument(s) for it, and then critically evaluate the arguments.

To critically evaluate an argument is to (a) determine whether the premises of the argument are true and (b) determine whether the conclusion follows logically from the premises.

Consider the following argument for the thesis that Socrates is a man.

1. Socrates is a philosopher.

2. All philosophers are monkeys.

Therefore:

3. Socrates is a man.

This is an invalid argument: the conclusion does not follow logically from the premises. If 1 and 2 were true, then Socrates would be a monkey, not a man. Even if the conclusion 3 is true, this is not a good argument for it. Someone who was critically evaluating the argument could say "The argument is illogical."

Now consider a different argument for the thesis that Socrates is a man.

1. Socrates is a philosopher.
 2. All philosophers are men.
- Therefore:
3. Socrates is a man.

This is a logically valid argument. If 1 and 2 are true, then 3 must be true too. But someone critically evaluating this argument could now dispute the truth of its premises. Someone might say, for example, that premise 2 is false, because some philosophers are women. If premise 2 is false, then the argument for the conclusion/thesis is not a good one. The thesis may be true, but it has not been adequately defended.

In general, if you want to evaluate an argument for a thesis critically, you must state the thesis, state the argument, and then ask two questions: (a) does the conclusion follow logically from the premises? and (b) are the premises true?

5. Make sure the arguments for your thesis are good, strong arguments. This means that someone who critically evaluates your argument would not find obvious problems with it. (See 4 above).

6. Make sure your thesis is an interesting thesis. Let's say you read the *Apology* and came up with the thesis "Socrates is a man." I am very certain you will be able to provide very good arguments for this thesis, but it is a rather uninteresting thesis. The reason why it is uninteresting is that it is difficult to see what the counterarguments to your thesis would be. If you can't think of any good, strong counterarguments to your thesis or any objections to your own argument, *then it's not a thesis worth writing a paper about.*

7. In your paper, you must seriously consider and respond to (a) counterarguments to your thesis or (b) objections to your argument. This is what makes the difference between an ok paper and a good paper. The stronger the counterarguments or objections that you consider and refute, the stronger your own position. A weak counterargument or objection against your own thesis or argument will leave your reader wondering why you even bothered considering it. If you cannot think of any counterarguments or objections, pick a different thesis.

8. Use your limited space wisely. Any argument for a thesis relies on premises. In political theory (or political philosophy), some premises will be normative and some empirical/descriptive. Now, let's say there is a claim you want to defend in your essay – in other words, your paper's thesis. For a political theory paper, you must defend your thesis by providing an argument. The problem with providing an argument for your thesis is that the premises you use in your argument are *themselves* claims with which someone may or may not agree. A premise in one argument can always become the thesis of another argument. So, for example, recall Wolff's argument:

- 1 (premise). Authority is legitimate only if it is compatible with the autonomy of those over whom it is exercised.
 - 2 (premise). Autonomy is incompatible with being subject to authority.
- Therefore:
- 3 (conclusion). No authority can be legitimate.

If someone disagreed with premise 1, and provided a good argument for why it is false, Wolff would be forced to provide an argument for premise 1. But then the premise of the argument above would become the thesis of another argument.

This means that the potential length of your paper is infinity. Since you have word limits (and a limited lifespan), you need to make choices. For example, you may wish to provide an argument with premises that are relatively uncontroversial. Or if you employ a controversial premise, then you may want to briefly defend the premise too (i.e., provide an argument for it). But at some point you have to stop defending

yourself and hope that the premises you use will carry your reader. There is no formula here; you have to exercise your own judgement.

9. Again, use your limited space wisely. Since you only have limited space to state your thesis, provide your arguments, and consider counterarguments or objections, you can't waste any words. Don't say anything that is not necessary to clarify or defend your thesis. Don't start off your essay, for example, with grandiose pronouncements about how important the question is or how many great thinkers have for centuries and millennia thought about it. This is not a history class, so it's very unlikely that such claims would matter one way or the other to your thesis. Every sentence counts. With each paragraph, and with each sentence in each paragraph, ask yourself: why am I telling my reader this? If you can honestly say "because saying this is necessary for defending my thesis," leave it in. If not, think again.

10. Use the key concepts in your essay in a clear, precise, and consistent fashion. Key concepts in this course might be (for example) obligation, right, authority, etc. When you use a fancy word, make sure its meaning is clear to you and to your reader. For every word you use in your essay, be sure that you can define it. If you can't, either figure out what it means, or don't use it. If the meaning of the word is clear to you, but it's a word used in different ways by different people, then define it for your reader so that it's clear what you mean by it. (Words such as "objective," for example.)

11. Spelling, grammar, and style count. For grammar, pay special attention to a common pitfall. You already know that nouns and verbs must agree with each other (so if it's a plural noun, you need a plural verb: not "we talks"). But don't forget that pronouns must also agree. This is ungrammatical: "One must always retain the right to make his own judgements." This is also ungrammatical: "One must always retain the right to make their own judgements." If your pronoun is "one" in the first part, then use "one" in the next part. Thus: "One must always retain the right to make one's own judgements." In addition, it is good to avoid gender-specific language when gender is irrelevant to the point. One strategy, when singularity is not important, is to replace a singular noun with a plural one: for example, rather than writing "An individual must never compromise his dignity," you might write "Individuals must never comprise their dignity." Another strategy, increasingly accepted in English usage, is to use "they" as a gender-neutral or non-gendered singular pronoun: for example, "An individual must never compromise their freedom." This has the disadvantage of not explicitly marking singular versus plural. (It's less explicit whose dignity the person must never compromise: the individual's own dignity or other people's?) But often context can make up for that; you just have to be more careful, making sure that context does the job for you. So be careful: using "they" as a gender neutral pronoun is entirely acceptable, but doing so is not license for a pronoun free-for-all. You must be consistent (see previous points about "one").

For style, try your best to avoid the passive voice ("It has been argued that..."), in favour of the active voice ("Socrates argued that" or "I argue that..."). (It is perfectly OK to use the word "I" or "my" in your essays, especially since you will often need to assert *your* thesis; you just don't want to distract your reader's attention by gratuitously inserting yourself into your essay.)

12. Take a look at the marking criteria outlined on the syllabus.

Addendum for your Upper Level Political Theory Class

For an advanced political theory class there are, broadly speaking, two kinds of papers you might choose from: papers that advance a philosophical thesis, and papers that advance an exegetical thesis. (The guide above assumes we are dealing with the first kind.) A philosophical thesis advances a substantive claim on some philosophical question: for example, that democracy is the best form of government, that Locke is wrong to think that there is a right to revolution, that tacit consent does not ground any political obligations, that there is a human right to subsistence, etc. An exegetical thesis, by contrast, advances a claim of interpretation about a particular text, for example, that Hobbes's theory of the social contract actually commits him to freedom of conscience, that Hobbes is a proto-liberal, that Locke would defend the government's right to redistribute wealth, that Rousseau is an enemy of participatory democracy, etc. Of course these two kinds of paper can overlap, but they are in principle distinct.

If you choose a substantive philosophical thesis, you can still engage texts in the history of political thought, by using these texts as a source of arguments, theses, etc., with which you may agree or disagree.

If you choose an exegetical thesis, you will need to pick a thesis about which there is some plausible controversy. For example, a paper defending the thesis that Hobbes is a social contract theorist is not very interesting at all. (The contrary thesis would of course be very interesting, but I'm not sure how you could possibly defend it.) A good source for exegetical (or interpretive) disagreement is obviously the secondary literature, and of course you are welcome to use it to deepen your understanding of a text. But you should always be sure that your paper remains a paper *about* the primary text, not the secondary literature. You should never give a secondary piece of literature as a reference to show that Hobbes, Rousseau, etc. believe X. You need to give evidence from the primary text for that. Your reference to the secondary literature only serves as evidence for what such-and-such interpreter of the primary text believes.