



Utopianism and Realism in Political Philosophy

Academic Year 2016/2017
2nd Semester

Prof. Doutor William F Hasselberger
5.5 ECTS

Western political philosophy has, since its inception, oscillated between (i) thinkers who articulate ideal conceptions of the perfectly just and good society against which existing social orders can be judged (call them ‘Utopians’) and (ii) thinkers who criticize the former approach and advocate forms of political thinking that are rooted in the messy, unsystematic, and contingent realities of concrete human life and politics (call them ‘Realists’). In this course, we will explore the fascinating philosophical arguments between some of the greatest Utopian philosophers and their greatest Realist opponents.

We will ask questions such as: What role should abstract theories of morality and justice play in political thinking? How should we think about perfectionist *ideals* of the ethical and political virtues—like justice, honesty, generosity, courage, civic solidarity, and wisdom—and their relationship to human nature? Is an account of politics and ethics false if it ignores certain tendencies of human nature and motivation, or if it sets an unattainably high standard for human conduct? Or is human nature sufficiently flexible to be re-shaped in the service of an ideal society? Are there forms of *knowledge*—non-theoretical and non-scientific ‘local’ and ‘practical’ forms of knowledge—crucial to a flourishing human life and a good society, which cannot be accounted for in Utopian political theories? What are we to make of the empirical history of attempts at establishing Utopian social orders, and what can we learn from Utopian, and Dystopian, literature? And what could a non-Utopian ‘realist’ form of political thinking consist in, if not merely a dogmatic and uncritical acceptance of the status quo?

We will read classic texts by Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, Hume, Kant, Marx, Mill, Popper, Hayek, and Berlin, as well as more recent discussions of Utopianism and Realism in moral, political, and economic philosophy.

Tentative Bibliography

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Aquinas, selections

Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, and “Two Concepts of Liberty”

Cary (ed.), *The Faber Book of Utopias*

Dostoyevsky, *Notes From Underground*, selections

Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* and “The Use of Knowledge in Society”

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, selections

Hume, “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth”

Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” and “On the Common Saying: This may be true in theory but it does not apply in practice”

Marx, selections

Mill, *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty*, selections

Plato, *The Republic*

Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, selections

Skinner, *Walden Two*, selections



Course Requirements and Grading Method

The course has the following requirements, each of which represents a percentage of students' final grades:

- (i) a mid-term exam (20%) and
- (ii) a final exam (20%),
- (iii) an essay paper due on the final day of class (30%),
- (iv) attendance, participation, and short reading responses due throughout the semester (30%).

The exams will have a section of short-responses questions and one or two short-essay questions (students will have a number of questions from which to choose).

I will provide some topics for the final paper, which is due on the last day of class, and should be about 10 pages long. I am open to discussing alternative paper topics with students, provided they engage seriously with the principle texts and questions of the class. Students are strongly encouraged to meet with me to discuss their paper topics and ideas throughout the class. The final papers must include *both* (1) a clear and concise explanation of the philosophical views under consideration, *and* (2) independent, critical argumentation of the student's own. We will discuss how to write and structure a good philosophical essay. Plagiarism is absolutely prohibited and will result in failure of the course.

The use of mobile phones—whether for talking, texting, internet—is a major source of distraction for the student and others, and is thus prohibited in during the class (you will thank me later).