PSC 5343 Classical Political Thought: The Problem of Socrates

Professor Mary Nichols

Books to be purchased:

Goals and Objectives:
The principal aims of this course
1. to understand the fundamental questions that have defined and animated classical political thought, through a study of Socrates and the origin of political philosophy
2. to learn how to read a Platonic dialogue, with attention to the drama as well as the arguments
3. to develop the power of analysis of texts and issues essential to original work in political thought
4. to prepare students for comprehensive exam in the history of political thought

Description of the course:
Socrates was the first political philosopher, the first philosopher to investigate not simply the natural world but to make questions of the best form of rule, justice, virtue, and the good life for human beings central to philosophic investigation. His political thought, which we know primarily through Plato’s Socratic dialogues, offers an alternative approach to political inquiry than found either in modern “scientific” attempts to understand politics, or in creative narratives of different cultures or peoples. Socrates takes his bearings from the good, or from the human soul. But what is the basis or the justification for such an enterprise? Is there any philosophic understanding that can sustain Socratic political philosophy?

This course will begin with two modern challenges to Socrates, a short selection from Nietzsche’s *Twilight of the Idols*, “The Problem of Socrates,” and Kierkegaard’s exposition of the limits of Socrates as teacher in his *Philosophic Fragments*. These two critiques of the philosophic enterprise of rational inquiry will set the stage for our exploration of Socrates as teacher, as presented by Plato in his dialogues, beginning with the two dialogues most important to Kierkegaard’s critique, the *Meno* and the *Theaetetus*. Do these dialogues confirm the views of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, or do they provide an alternative understanding of classical rationalism? To what extent is Socrates as teacher inseparable from Socrates as learner? And what is the place of political philosophy within classical rationalism?
The second half of the course will explore the relation between Socrates as teacher and Socrates as a student, and how the latter sheds light on the former. Specifically, we shall examine Plato’s account of Socrates’ early education and philosophic journey. That is, we will examine Plato’s portrayal of the “young” Socrates and his development as a “political” philosopher. Specifically, we will discuss: 1) Socrates’ account in the *Phaedo* of his early perplexities, his reading of Anaxagoras, and his development of the hypothesis of the Ideas; 2) his inability to defend that hypothesis before Parmenides; and 3) the lessons about Love from Diotima that he recounts in the *Symposium*. The course will conclude with consideration of the *Phaedrus*, which allows us to revisit Kierkegaard’s theme of faith and reason in the context of a Socratic understanding of the soul and its culmination in an art of rhetoric.

Requirements for the course:
1. (25%) two papers (5-6 pages); topic suggestions will be placed on blackboard; other topics are possible with consent of the instructor
2. (40%) one paper (10-12 pages); topic suggestions will be placed on blackboard; other topics are possible with consent of the instructor
3. (10%) Class participation.
4. Attendance: In accordance with Baylor University policy, any student missing more than 4 scheduled class meetings (i.e., 25%) will fail the course, regardless of performance. Your attendance will likewise factor into my evaluation of participation in the course.

Grade Scale:

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Assignments:
(Jan. 10, 17, 24)

I. Two Criticisms of Socrates and of Philosophy: Nietzsche and Kierkegaard


Kierkegaard, *Philosophic Fragments*

Recommended Reading:

II. Socrates as Teacher
(Jan. 31)

Plato’s *Meno* (teaching as reminding)

(Feb. 7, 14, 21, 28) (first paper due on Feb. 14)

Plato’s *Theaetetus* (Socrates as midwife)
142a-162a
162a-187a
Recommended Reading:
Jacob Howland, *The Paradox of Political Philosophy: Socrates’ Philosphic Trial* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998); ch. 2 and ch. 3, pp. 23-93.

III. Socrates as Student
(March 7 and 21 [March 14 is Spring break])
Plato’s *Phaedo*, 57a-70c; 72e-77b; 88c-91d; and 95b-100e
(Socrates’ account of his philosophic turn)
Plato’s, *Parmenides*, 126a-137c
(Socrates’ examination by Parmenides)
(March 28, April 4, and 11) **(second paper due on April 4)**
Plato’s *Symposium*
172a-201c (Socrates’ encounter with the leading intellectuals and poets of Athens) 201d-212c (Socrates’ praise of love)
212d-223d (Socrates and Alcibiades)

Recommended Reading:

IV. Socrates as Political Philosopher
(April 18 and 25) **(final paper due on April 25)**
Plato’s *Phaedrus*

Recommended Reading: