

Western Political Thought: Classical/Medieval

This course is an introduction to classical and medieval political thought. It will consist of a close reading of works by some of the most influential and penetrating political thinkers of the classical and medieval worlds and will include an examination of the political thought of the Bible. Plato, and Aristotle had a major role in the founding of political philosophy or political science, Augustine and Aquinas have had enormous influence on Christian political thought, and Machiavelli began the long modern attempt to overthrow both classical and medieval thought.

The works we will examine have been studied by various people in many different cultures and times; they have an enduring power and message. But our study is made especially urgent by the challenge raised by leading thinkers of our time against the very possibility of science or philosophy, including and perhaps above all against political science. The first two thinkers that we will study can help us to understand and assess that challenge. For they did not take for granted the possibility or desirability of science. In fact, a recognition of the need to justify the philosophic or scientific life may even have moved Socrates and his students to become the first philosophers to turn from physics—the study of the natural world—to “the human things” or politics. We aim to uncover the reasons for and the results of this turn in the works of Plato, and Aristotle.

We then turn to the Bible and to two of the greatest Christian political thinkers in an effort to understand, first, the alternative to science or rationalism posed by divine revelation, in its political, economic, and familial teachings, and second, the great synthesis of reason and revelation undertaken by St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, in their political writings.

We conclude with an examination of a short work by the thinker who launched the great political/philosophic effort that has come to be called modernity. Steeped in the study of ancient and medieval thinkers, Machiavelli rejected both, initiating a new understanding of philosophy or science and a new understanding of the purpose of political life, both of which were taken up by subsequent political philosophers whose writings helped to bring into being the modern world that we now inhabit.

At the end of the course students should be able to speak and write thoughtfully and clearly about the following themes: the human good, justice, virtue, and human nobility; the roots of political idealism; what makes human beings political; the aims of political life, the tensions among these aims, and the limits of political life; the various political regimes and their respective strengths and weaknesses; the tension between philosophy and political life; the call of faith and its effect on political life; the doctrine of the fall; the beatitudes; conscience and natural law; the challenge posed to classical and medieval political thought by the new modes and orders of modernity.