

# Western Political Philosophy

Adam F. Gibbons

[adamgibbons@ln.edu.hk](mailto:adamgibbons@ln.edu.hk)

HSH 215, Department of Philosophy, Ho Sin Hang Building

Office Hours: Tuesday 3pm-5pm; Thursday 3pm-5pm

## Course Outline

This course will explore several of the most important topics in western political philosophy, both historical and contemporary. Topics covered include: the problem of political authority; competing theories of justice; the nature of freedom; gun rights and immigration, democracy, epistocracy, and lottocracy; and the concepts of market failure and government failure. The goal throughout is to engage critically with the various authors and texts. We are focusing more on refining *how* we think about politics and political philosophy, less on *what* we think about them.

## Course Requirements

Attendance and participation 15%

Discussion pieces 25%

Take-home exams 30% each (60% total)

### *Attendance and Participation*

I expect students to come to class with papers read in advance, ready to discuss the relevant issues. The class will be far more engaging for all involved when you actively participate—raise objections, express confusion, discuss your ideas and arguments, bring up current examples that may help make the relevant issues concrete, and more. Throughout the term, I will be taking note of who contributes, ultimately factoring such contribution into the overall grade. If you need to be absent, try to contact me in advance to let me know.

### *Discussion Pieces*

Once we begin reading the assigned papers (listed below under ‘Course Schedule’), students must submit **at least one** reflection per week on the readings. If writing about the reading for Monday’s class, please submit your piece by **6pm on the Sunday before class**; if writing about the reading for Friday’s class, please submit your piece by **6pm on the Thursday before class**. This is so I have

enough time to read everyone's submissions. You can choose which reading to write a reflection on. You don't need to write something on both, though you may do so if you wish.

These reflections should be around **5-10 lines** long. You will get marks for submitting, and none otherwise. Only one contribution per week will go towards your overall grade. Reflections do not need to be extremely polished. The idea is simply to get your thoughts out on paper. You can write about your own criticisms or concerns, you can talk about things that you found puzzling, you can create your own arguments, and so on. The reflections will help me gauge what sort of things students find interesting, what to focus on during class, as well as whether people are keeping up with the readings. They may also help structure in-class discussion.

### *Take-home Exams*

There will be two take-home exams comprised of short essay questions. The first exam will include questions on the **first three units**, while the second exam will include questions on the **last three units**. Questions on any of the course topics could feature in the exams.

The first exam is due by **October 31<sup>st</sup>** and the second exam is due by **December 12<sup>th</sup>**.

### **Course Schedule**

*(Note: no textbook is required for this course. All readings will be made available online.)*

#### ***Unit 1: The Problem of Political Authority***

September 2<sup>nd</sup>: Introduction

September 5<sup>th</sup>: Huemer, 'The Problem of Political Authority'

September 9<sup>th</sup>: Huemer, 'The Traditional Social Contract Theory'

September 12<sup>th</sup>: **no class**

September 16<sup>th</sup>: Huemer, 'The Hypothetical Social Contract Theory'

September 19<sup>th</sup>: Huemer, 'What If There Is No Authority?' (excerpts)

#### ***Unit 2: Justice***

September 23<sup>rd</sup>: Driver, 'Classical Utilitarianism'

September 26<sup>th</sup>: Driver, 'Contemporary Consequentialism'

September 30<sup>th</sup>: Rawls, 'A Theory of Justice' (excerpts)

October 3<sup>rd</sup>: Nozick, 'The Entitlement Theory of Justice'

### ***Unit 3: Freedom***

October 7<sup>th</sup>: Mill, 'On Liberty' (excerpts)

October 10<sup>th</sup>: Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty'; Burgis and McManus, 'Why Everyone Values Freedom'

October 14<sup>th</sup>: Pettit, 'Republican Political Theory' (**Take-home exams distributed**)

### ***Unit 4: Rights***

October 17<sup>th</sup>: Wenar, 'Rights' (Sections 1-2.1.6; 2.2)

October 21<sup>st</sup>: Huemer, 'Is There a Right to Own a Gun?'

October 24<sup>th</sup>: Dixon, 'On Philosophers and Handguns'

October 28<sup>th</sup>: Huemer, 'Is There a Right to Immigrate?'

October 31<sup>st</sup>: Joshi, 'For (Some) Immigration Restrictions'

### ***Unit 5: Democracy, Epistocracy, Lottocracy***

November 4<sup>th</sup>: Graham, 'What is so Special About Democracy?'; Landemore, 'Why the Many are Smarter than the Few and Why It Matters'

November 7<sup>th</sup>: Brennan, *Against Democracy* (excerpts)

November 11<sup>th</sup>: Reiss, 'Against Epistocracy'; Hannon, 'Are Knowledgeable Voters Better Voters?'

November 14<sup>th</sup>: Gibbons, 'Is Epistocracy Irrational?'

November 18<sup>th</sup>: Guerrero, 'The Lottocracy'

November 21<sup>st</sup>: Landa and Pevnick, 'Is Random Selection a Cure for the Ills of Electoral Representation?'

### ***Unit 6: Political Economy***

November 25<sup>th</sup>: Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (excerpts)

November 28<sup>th</sup>: Wolf Jr., 'Market Failure'

December 2<sup>nd</sup>: Simmons, 'Pathological Politics: The Anatomy of Government Failure' (**Take-home exams distributed**)

## **Intended Learning Outcomes**

On completion of this course, a successful student will be able:

- (1) To demonstrate understanding of several important topics in political philosophy
- (2) To be able to read and write critically, and to construct philosophical arguments

and

- (3) To demonstrate an ability to apply the lessons learned to contemporary social and political issues.

### **Measurement of Learning Outcomes**

Class participation will assess (1) and (3).

Discussion pieces will assess (1), (2), and (3).

Take-home exams will assess (1) and (2).

### **Important Notes**

- (a) Students are expected to spend a total of 9 hours (i.e., 3 hours of class contact and 6 hours of personal study) per week to achieve the course learning outcomes.
- (b) Students shall be aware of the University regulations about dishonest practice in course work, tests and examinations, and the possible consequences as stipulated in the Regulations Governing University Examinations. In particular, plagiarism, being a kind of dishonest practice, is “the presentation of another person’s work without proper acknowledgement of the source, including exact phrases, or summarised ideas, or even footnotes/citations, whether protected by copyright or not, as the student’s own work”. Students are required to strictly follow university regulations governing academic integrity and honesty.
- (c) Students are required to submit writing assignment(s) using Turnitin.
- (d) To enhance students’ understanding of plagiarism, a mini-course “Online Tutorial on Plagiarism Awareness” is available on <https://pla.ln.edu.hk/>.