

# Phil 410: Special Topics in the History of Philosophy

## *Aristotle's Politics*

Prof. Jeremy Reid

### 1. Course and Contact Information

Zoom meeting times: M W 9:30–10:45am

Email: [jwreid@sfsu.edu](mailto:jwreid@sfsu.edu)

Office hours: M 1–3 (in person, HUM 360), W 1–3 (Zoom), or by appointment

Format: Online, with synchronous Zoom lectures

### 2. Course Description

Aristotle's *Politics* is one of the most foundational texts for studying human social arrangements—it is hard to think of any thinker in political philosophy or political science who has not studied or in some way engaged with Aristotelian thinking about politics. It is, however, a hard text, and many of the ideas may at first glance seem irrelevant to our own (very different) political context; it is also true that Aristotle defends some views in the *Politics* that are morally reprehensible.

The goal of this course is to learn to read and think with Aristotle slowly, critically, creatively, and charitably. There will be some weeks where you will want to throw the book across the room, or you won't be able to get through more than a few pages; there will be some weeks where your jaw will drop at Aristotle's insight about the dynamics of our political lives. That means it is ok not to like this book—what I want is for you to know what it says (and what it doesn't say) and to appreciate why it is important. The *Politics* has inspired and enraged many people, and if you're reading closely, you will likely experience both.

As I see it, Aristotle's *Politics* is important as a work of philosophy because it was written at a time when people were still working out what democracy is, what it's good for, and what's it's bad at. Aristotle hates broad brush-strokes, and so what is characteristic of his method is to appreciate the *complexity* and *variety* of political organizations. We are taught to be pro-democratic, but if there are many different contexts in which democracy can be used and many different ways in which democracy can be applied, we need to think harder about what we mean by democracy and when we should want it. But to answer these kinds of questions, Aristotle thinks we need to take a step back and work out what government as a whole is for, what kinds of life are worth living and worth preserving, and what is appropriate when people have social norms very different from our own. This more abstract perspective means that Aristotle's analyses work not only for city-states but also for businesses and other kinds of social organizations. The *Politics*, then, is essential for understanding how humans function in groups, and how those group dynamics can go well or badly.

### 3. Format

Online with synchronous Zoom sessions. It will be very hard to do well in this course without coming to these meetings.

### 4. Assessment

Syllabus, intro and referencing quiz	10%	Fri Sep 3
Paper 1 (Book III)	30%	Fri Sep 24
Paper 2 (Books VII–VIII)	30%	Fri Oct 29
Paper 3 (Books IV–V)	30%	Fri Dec 17

Letter grades are assigned as follows: A: 93-100; A-: 90-92; B+: 87-89; B: 83-86; B-: 80-82; C+: 77-79; C: 73-76; C-: 70-72; D+: 60-69; D: 63-66; D-: 60-62; F: 0-59.

Papers are due and quizzes close at 11:59pm. There is no extra credit or make up assignments for this course. If you anticipate that you will not complete the assignment on time, you must contact me *at least* 48 hours before it is due to ask for an extension (which I will almost certainly grant). Remember that philosophy is not done well quickly or at the last minute—so plan ahead.

If you want to appeal a grade, wait 24 hours after the grade has been posted, then ask for written feedback why you got the grade you did. If you still think the grade you have received is unfair, I will submit your paper with my justification to another professor. What grade they determine is final—this means *your grade could go up or down*.

### 5. Text

We will be using C.D.C. Reeve's 1998 Hackett translation of Aristotle's *Politics*. For reference, [here](#) is the entry on Amazon. Given that you will be spending quite some time with this text, I recommend that you buy it, but a pdf is supplied. Please ensure you use this translation, because translations vary widely and I want to make sure we are looking at the same English words. If you have questions about the original Greek, I am more than happy to walk you through the translation options.

### 6. Paper topics

Pick a chapter from the specified book of the *Politics*, give a step-by-step analysis of what's going on in the whole chapter, and provide a discussion of what's of interest in that chapter (2000 words).

Aim for about 1000 words of textual analysis, and about 1000 words of discussion.

Discussion could briefly (a) show how this chapter illuminates or raises a puzzle about some other passage in Aristotle, or (b) show how this chapter intersects with a contemporary political issue, or (c) raise a general philosophical objection. You are welcome to check with me if you are not sure whether your discussion is on the right track. Like Aristotle, you should be very concise. Cite regularly, but aim to paraphrase rather than quote (you do not get credit for quotes, because quotes do not show that *you* understand the text; thus papers with large quotes frequently get bad grades). Scholarly sources are better than non-scholarly sources.

## 7. Schedule of Readings

Week 1: Introduction, context, and how to read Aristotle (Aug 23, 25)

Agnes Callard, [“Should we cancel Aristotle?”](#)

*Politics* III.1

Week 2: Citizenship (Aug 30, Sep 1)

*Politics* III.2–5

**Syllabus, intro, and referencing quiz (Fri Sep 3)**

Week 3: Constitutions (Sep 6, 8)

*Politics* III.6–9

Week 4: Authority (Sep 13, 15)

*Politics* III.10–13

Week 5: Kingship (Sep 20, 22)

*Politics* III.14–18

**Paper one (Fri Sep 24)**

Week 6: The Ideal State, ethical background (Sep 27, 29)

*Politics* VII.1–3

Week 7: The Ideal State, general considerations (geography, size, etc.), (Oct 4, 6)

*Politics* VII.4–12

Week 8: The Ideal State, goals of the constitution and early development (Oct 11, 13)

*Politics* VII.13–17

Week 9: The Ideal State, education (Oct 18, 20)

*Politics* VIII.1–7

Week 10: [BREAK] (NO CLASS Oct 25, 27)

**Paper two (Fri Oct 29)**

Week 11: Non-Ideal Theory (Nov 1, 3)

*Politics* IV.1–3

Week 12: Actual States (Nov 8, 10)

*Politics* IV.4–7

Week 13: Good, Achievable States (Nov 15, 17)

*Politics* IV.8–16

**THANKSGIVING BREAK (NO CLASS Nov 22, 24)**

Week 14: Political Change (Nov 29, Dec 1)

*Politics* V.1–7

Week 15: Stability (Dec 6, 8)

*Politics* V.8–12

**Paper three (Fri Dec 17)**

## **8. Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is a form of cheating or fraud; it occurs when a student misrepresents the work of another as his or her own. Plagiarism may consist of using the ideas, sentences, paragraphs, or the whole text of another without appropriate acknowledgment, but it also includes employing or allowing another person to write or substantially alter work that a student then submits as his or her own. Any assignment found to be plagiarized will be given an "F" grade. All instances of plagiarism in the College of Liberal & Creative Arts will be reported to the Dean of the College, and may be reported to the University Judicial Affairs Officer for further action.

## **9. Disability Access**

Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to

contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/415-338-2472, video phone/415-335-7210) or by email (dprc@sfsu.edu).

## **10. Student Disclosures of Sexual Violence**

SF State fosters a campus free of sexual violence including sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and/or any form of sex or gender discrimination. If you disclose a personal experience as an SF State student, the course instructor is required to notify the Title IX Coordinator by completing the report form available at <http://titleix.sfsu.edu>, emailing [vpsaem@sfsu.edu](mailto:vpsaem@sfsu.edu) or calling 338-2032.

To disclose any such violence confidentially, contact:

- The SAFE Place - (415) 338-2208; [http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe\\_plc/](http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe_plc/)
- Counseling and Psychological Services Center - (415) 338-2208;  
<http://psyservs.sfsu.edu/>

- For more information on your rights and available resources:  
<http://titleix.sfsu.edu>