

Phil 410: Special Topics in the History of Philosophy

Aristotle's Politics

Prof. Jeremy Reid

1. Course and Contact Information

Class meeting times: Tuesday & Thursday, 12:30–1:45pm

Format: In-person, Humanities Building, Room 213

Email: jwreid@sfsu.edu

Office hours: HUM 360; by appointment—arrange a time by writing on the sign-up sheet on my office door.

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 is for, what kinds of life are worth living, what institutions 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 many 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. Assessment

Syllabus, intro and referencing quiz	5%	Fri Sep 1
Paper 1 (Book III)	25%	Fri Sep 22
Paper 2 (Books VII–VIII)	30%	Fri Oct 27
Paper 3 (Books IV–V)	40%	Fri Dec 15

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, contact me *at least* 48 hours before it is due to ask for an extension, which I will almost certainly grant. Because I am on a university deadline to submit grades and have given you as much time as I can, I cannot give you an extension for Paper 3. 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*.

4. Text

We will be using C.D.C. Reeve's 2017 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 strongly recommend that you buy it, but a pdf is supplied. Please ensure you use this translations; 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.

5. Papers

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 in office hours 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.

6. Schedule of Readings

Week 1: Introduction, context, and how to read Aristotle (Aug 22, 24)

Politics III.1

Callard, "Should We Cancel Aristotle?"

Week 2: Citizenship (Aug 29, 31)

Politics III.2–5

Hursthouse, "Two Ways of Doing the Right Thing", in Annas & Reid (eds), *Virtue and Action: Selected Papers by Rosalind Hursthouse*, pp. 173–192.

Syllabus, intro, and referencing quiz (Fri Sep 1)

Week 3: Constitutions (Sep 5, 7)

Politics III.6–9

Brennan, *Against Democracy*, Chapter 2: "Ignorant, Irrational, Misinformed Nationalists", pp. 23–53.

Week 4: Authority (Sep 12, 14)

Politics III.10–13

Waldron, "The Wisdom of the Multitude"

Nguyen, "Expertise and the Fragmentation of Intellectual Autonomy"

Week 5: Kingship (Sep 19, 21)

Politics III.14–18

Macedo, "Meritocratic Democracy: Learning from the American Constitution", in Bell & Li (eds), *The East Asian Challenge to Democracy*, pp. 232–256.

Paper one due (Fri Sep 22)

Week 6: The Ideal State, ethical background (Sep 26, 28)

Politics VII.1–3

Annas, *The Morality of Happiness*, Chapter 1, "Making sense of your life as a whole"

Week 7: The Ideal State, general considerations (geography, size, etc.) (Oct 3, 5)

Politics VII.4-12

Lockwood, "Aristotle's *Politics* on Greeks and Non-Greeks"

Week 8: The Ideal State, goals of the constitution and early development (Oct 10, 12)

Politics VII.13-17

Ezra Klein & Danielle Allen, "This Philosopher Wants Us To Take Political Power Seriously" ([podcast](#))

Week 9: The Ideal State, education (Oct 17, 19)

Politics VIII.1-7

Wong, "Political Meritocracy in Singapore: Lessons from the PAP Government", in Bell & Li (eds), *The East Asian Challenge to Democracy*, pp. 288-313.

Week 10: BREAK – NO CLASS Oct 24, 26

Paper two due (Fri Oct 27)

Week 11: Non-Ideal Theory (Oct 31, Nov 2)

Politics IV.1-3

Valentini, "Ideal vs. Non-Ideal Theory: A Conceptual Map"

Week 12: Oligarchy & Democracy (Nov 7, 9)

Politics IV.4-6; all of *Politics* VI

Hamilton & Madison, *Federalist Papers*, #62-64, 68, 71-73, 76.

Week 13: Good, Achievable States (Nov 14, 16)

Politics IV.7-16

Landauer, "Six Parts on Political Wholes, Aristotelian Political Community and the Idea of a Well Mixed Constitution"

THANKSGIVING BREAK (NO CLASS Nov 21, 23)

Week 14: Political Change (Nov 28, 30)

Politics V.1-7

Michels, *Political Parties*, "Part 6: The Oligarchic Tendencies of Organization", pp. 218-245

Week 15: Stability (Dec 5, 7)

Politics V.8–12

Plato, *Republic*, Book VIII, 555b–569c

Levitsky & Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, Introduction + Chapters 1, 2 & 5 (pp. 8–47, 83–98 of the pdf).

Paper three due (Fri Dec 15)

7. Plagiarism and AI-generated papers

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.

AI-generated papers will also receive an F. Scholarship in the history of philosophy requires accuracy, conceptual precision, extensive citing of primary texts, and critical engagement with common views that are not supported by historical evidence. Currently, large-language model AIs are terrible at all of these things. So you are wasting your time and money if you use AIs to write your paper, and you will receive a bad grade if (against all odds) I manage not to spot it. Aristotle thinks that humans are characterized primarily by our ability to speak, reason, and communicate. This is a chance for you to grow in your humanity—take it.

8. 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).

9. 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 or calling 338-2032.

To disclose any such violence confidentially, contact:

- The SAFE Place - (415) 338-2208; 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>