POLT 251: Political Responsibility

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Course Description

In this course we will carefully examine several approaches to political responsibility. Each of them offers different answers to questions like: “who is responsible for political outcomes, for the shape of the political world, to whom, and why? How can we hold others responsible and assume our own political responsibilities? We will critically examine the responsibility of political leaders and bureaucrats; social responsibility, and existential responsibility in political theory, philosophy, and literature.

Course Objectives

First Objective: Get excited. In an age of corruption, of illegal wars, of vast global inequality and terrible injustice and suffering, the question of how we hold others responsible and how we ourselves assume responsibility is an especially urgent one. One goal of this course is to convey that urgency: Questions of political responsibility go to the core of what it means to share a world with others. In addition to the urgency of these political questions, I want us to discover together the thrill of grappling with important texts and ideas, and of arguing about politics in a theoretically informed way.

Second Objective: Think dangerously, not recklessly. One of my favorite undergraduate professors said this to me, and I have never forgotten it. In this course you will learn to cultivate your analytic skills: You will learn to read carefully, to think critically, and to speak and write thoughtfully and clearly about difficult and controversial topics. Together I hope that we will come to appreciate the subtlety and intricacy of these texts, their arguments, their ambiguities, their tensions and contradictions. And I hope that we will also learn how to treat texts respectfully, but not reverently; to engage thoughtfully and constructively with their arguments; but also to seek out actively those moments where the arguments seem to falter, and to try to understand how and why. We will learn, that is, to think dangerously, but not recklessly.
**Expectations**

**What you can expect of me:**

This class depends on the quality of our discussions. You will not “learn” political theory by listening to me talk at you about it. These texts are much more interesting than I am. You should treat these texts as invitations to discussion, not as subjects for lectures. I will not lecture except where some context seems appropriate, and never for long. I am here to help guide the conversations, and to participate in it when and as it seems important to do so.

Outside of the classroom, I will hold regular office hours which you are encouraged to attend. This can be a useful time to bring up questions or confusions that we do not address in class, or to discuss any concerns about your progress in the course.

You can also expect assignments to be graded and returned promptly, with comments and questions about what you’ve written, and suggestions about how to improve.

**What I expect of you:**

This course is both reading-intensive and writing-intensive. It is reading-intensive because I want to strike a balance between, on one hand, allowing us to probe beneath the surface of these texts, to uncover questions, problems, and inspirations in them; and, on the other, to give you a broad sense of problems of political responsibility. The course is writing-intensive because writing is a discipline best improved through regular practice. You will learn it best by doing it.

This class demands regular, thoughtful and constructive participation. I expect you to come to each class having read and thought about the material for that session. You may find it helpful to take notes on the readings, and to jot down questions to pose in class as they occur to you.

In addition, you will be responsible for three kinds of writing assignments: Essays, response papers, and a course reflection.

* **Essays:** You will write two essays, a shorter one of 6-8 double-spaced pages, and a final essay of 10-12 double-spaced pages. These will be in response to questions that I will provide.

* **Response Papers:** You will write three response papers, due where indicated. These will be shorter papers of 2-3 pages. You will pick an incident or issue that is currently receiving public attention and that involves questions of political responsibility. You will identify that question, and respond to it from the perspective of the readings for that section. The purpose of these assignments is twofold: To apply theories of political
responsibility to real-world affairs; and to reflect on how the real world might make us think differently about responsibility.

Course reflection: The purpose of this assignment is more “therapeutic” than pedagogical. Did this course challenge how you think about yourself and the political world you inhabit? If so, how? If not, what is the most surprising idea or argument that you encountered during the course? Has your response to it changed over the course of the semester?

Grading

There are three components to your course grade: Participation, essays, and course reflection. They will be weighed as follows:

- Participation—25%
- Response Papers—25%
- Essays—40%
- Course Reflection—10%

Plagiarism

The use of other people’s words or ideas without proper acknowledgment is a serious academic offence, for which you may be subject to a range of sanctions by me and by the College. Do not bother trying—I will catch you. If you are unclear about what constitutes plagiarism, please see Page 2 of the document “Students’ Rights and Responsibilities:


If you still have questions, please discuss them with me.

Late submission policies: Missing deadlines creates a lot of headaches for you and for me. Don’t do it. Late assignments will be penalized ONE HALF LETTER GRADE PER DAY, INCLUDING WEEKENDS.

Disability: If you require specific accommodations because of a disability, you must come speak to me and provide a letter from Disability Services by February 13.
Books for Purchase

Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*
Barnett, *Eyewitness to Genocide*
Coetzee, *Waiting For the Barbarians*
Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*
Schmitt, *Political Theology*

Course Schedule

February 5
  Introduction

**What Do We Mean When We Talk About Responsibility?**

February 7
  Aristotle (trans. Rackham), *Ethics* Book II [to 99(2)] (pp. 71-99), Book III
  François Raffoul, *The Origins of Responsibility*, Introduction

Feb 12
  Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, Introduction, Scheme of Distinctions (pp. 25-40), pp. 45-69
  Feinberg, “Collective Responsibility”
  Arendt, “Collective Responsibility”

**Responsibility as Liability**

February 14
  Feinberg, “Action and Responsibility”
  Feinberg, “Problematic Responsibility in Law and Morals”

February 19
  Fletcher, “Punishment versus Treatment,”
  Feinberg, “Justice and Personal Desert,” “Expressive Function of Punishment”

Feb. 21
  Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment”
  Connolly, “Freedom and Resentment”

Feb. 26
  Connolly, “Responsibility for Evil”
  Connolly, “The Desire to Punish”

**Response Paper Due**
Responsibility of Leaders

Feb. 28
   Schmitt, Political Theology

March 5
   Schmitt, Political Theology

March 7
   Weber, “Politics as a Vocation”

March 12

   Article II of the Constitution of the United States
   Locke, Second Treatise of Government, chs. 12-14
   Federalist, 67-70
   Antifederalist, 67-70

Response Paper Due

Responsibility and Bureaucracy

March 14

March 19
   Bauman, Modernity and The Holocaust, Introduction, chs. 4 and 6

March 21
   Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem

April 2
   Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem

April 4
   Bovens, The Quest For Responsibility, chs. 3, 4, 8

April 9
   Bovens, ch. 9, 11

April 11
   Barnett, Eyewitness to Genocide, Introduction, chs. 1-3
April 16  
Barnett, *Eyewitness to Genocide*, chs. 4-6  

**First Essay Due**  

**Responsibility and Structural Injustice**  

April 18  
Young, *Responsibility for Justice*, chs. 1, 2 and 4  

April 23  
Coetzee, *Waiting for The Barbarians*  

April 25  
Dyson, *Come Hell or High Water*, chs. 1, 8, 9, Afterword  

**Response Paper Due**  

**Absolute Responsibility**  

April 30:  
Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, pp. 17-39  
Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 86-96  

May 2  
Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 96-117  

May 7  
Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, pp. 1-80  

May 9  
Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, the rest.  

**Final Paper due Thursday May 16, 4:00 via email**