

Justice and Community from Plato to Machiavelli (DRAFT)

GESM 120g (section 35326D). *University of Southern California, Spring 2025*

Seminar: Mondays and Wednesdays 8:30–10:00am

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Office hours: TBD, in PED 132C

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What does it mean to live as a citizen in a community? How should communities and societies organize and cooperate, and to what end? What are the foundations and limitations of political and economic power in human society? What is right, fair, just?

In this GE seminar for first-year students, we will consider and critique a range of answers to such questions proposed by authors living in western Eurasia from the 4th century BCE to the 16th century CE. Our primary (though not exclusive) focus will be on the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, that is, authors who were reading and responding, at least in part, to the works of Plato and Aristotle. These will include pagans, Jews, Christians, and Muslims writing in Greek, Latin, Arabic, and Italian, all grappling in one way or another with the question which Socrates was not the first to pose: what is justice?

COURSE OBJECTIVES (GE-B OBJECTIVES ITALICIZED)

Through reading and writing assignments and in-class discussions about the construction and evaluation of political communities in democratic Athens, the Greco-Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic empires, and in medieval kingdoms and republics, we will *reflect on what it means to be human*.

We will read primarily political-philosophical treatises, but also scriptures and commentaries, in the process *cultivating a critical appreciation for various forms of human expression*.

You will be asked to *engage with some of the lasting ideas and values that have animated humanity in Western Eurasia throughout the centuries for a more purposeful, more ethical, and intellectually richer life*.

You will *learn to read and interpret actively and analytically, to think critically and creatively, and to write and speak persuasively* by grappling with these challenging texts, their ideas, your peers' ideas, and your own.

In seminar discussions and written assignments especially, you will *learn to evaluate ideas from multiple perspectives*. Giving and receiving peer feedback, will help you *learn to collaborate effectively*.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING

The overarching aim of this class is a community centered around reading, thinking, and writing about pre-modern texts on politics in the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition.

To this end, it has the following components (all written assignments should be formatted with 1-inch margins, 12-point Times New Roman or equivalent, and double-spaced):

- **Reading.** You are required to do all the assigned reading before each meeting. This means reading the texts closely and with your full attention, taking notes (with pen/pencil and paper) on each text's structure, arguments, passages that stand out to you, and your own thoughts and questions as you read.
- **Posts on the Readings.** Posts (50–100 words) on the appropriate [Brightspace forum](#) are *due at noon the day before each class* (after the first). For each reading there is a single “thread.” Post under that thread after reading all posts previously posted. Posts should discuss the reading for that class, thoughtfully continuing the conversation of the previous posts on that thread.
- **Participation.** Active, respectful participation is required. Some basic rules: come to class on time, turn all phones to silent (not vibrate), don't use electronics (phones, computers, etc.), and in general do not disrupt the class. The only way a seminar like this works is if everyone comes to all meetings, does all the reading before class, makes thoughtful comments, listens attentively to others in turn, and generally contributes to an environment in which everyone is comfortable putting their own ideas and interpretations to the test.
- **Presentation.** Each student will give a concise presentation (5–7 minutes) on one of the assigned authors/texts. Presentations should cover the author's life and work (or the text's origins and context), as well as a recent scholarly argument made about the author/text (search the library catalog or JSTOR). A *bibliography for the presentation* (listing all sources you consulted using the [Chicago Manual of Style](#)) is *due at the beginning of class* on the day of the presentation (**as a post** on the [course site](#) on the same thread where you posted your post on the reading for that week). For biographical information, use the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2nd edition, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, or another scholarly reference.
- **Two Short Papers** due during the semester, 4–5 pages each. Prompts will be provided. Successful essays will be built around close readings of the texts, displaying creativity and originality, and will be expressed in clear, strong prose. Aim for a straightforward, succinct style that is clear and to the point. *Make sure to read through your entire essay before submitting it.*
- **Pop-Quizzes.** There will be 5 pop-quizzes throughout the semester on the reading assigned for the day of the quiz. (Quiz dates will be determined by a random number generator.) The lowest grade will be dropped. Each quiz will ask you to give a one-paragraph answer to a question about the reading, graded on how well it demonstrates that you did and understood the reading, using a 10-point scale.¹
- **Final Paper.** In your final paper (7–8 pages), you will be asked to grapple with the issues and problems discussed in the seminar in an essay long enough to provide depth of analysis alongside close reading of primary texts. Prompts will be provided. The aim is to engage thoughtfully with the readings and big questions of the course.

The relative weight of each of these components in determining the final grade is as follows:

¹10 = excellent, 9 = good, 8 = satisfactory, 7 = vague sense of what reading was about, 6 = guessing.

- Participation: 15%
- Posts on the Readings: 10%
- Presentation: 10%
- Pop-Quizzes: 15%
- Paper 1: 15%
- Paper 2: 15%
- Final Paper: 20%

BOOKS (REQUIRED)

The following **required books** are available from the USC Bookstore:

- Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, revised by C. D. C. Reeve (Hackett, 1992).
ISBN [9780872201361](#)
- Aristotle, *Politics: A New Translation* (Hackett, 2017).
ISBN [9781624665578](#)
- *The Qur'an*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford U.P., 2008).
ISBN [9780199535958](#)
- Ibn al-Jawzi, *The Life of Ibn Hanbal*, translated by M. Cooperson (NYU Press, 2016).
ISBN [9781479805303](#)
- Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses* (Penguin, 1984).
ISBN [9780140444285](#)

Make sure to get **these specific editions** (check the ISBN).

These same books are also on 3-hour reserve at Leavey Library.

All other readings can be found on the Brightspace [course site](#). You are required to **print out all readings double-sided** and bring each assigned reading to class so you can have it in front of you as we discuss it. You may choose to print out all readings at once; download the PDF at the top of the list of files on the [course site](#) entitled `_Complete_Set_of_Supplementary_Readings.pdf`.²

ACADEMIC HONESTY

It is a firm expectation that in all participation and submissions you will only represent as your own work, ideas, and writing that which is entirely your own. Any words that are not your own (including those generated by a Large Language Model a.k.a. “AI”) must be enclosed in quotation marks and clearly attributed to the source where you obtained them.

This is not only crucial for fair evaluation of all students’ work but also lies at the core of the human intellectual and ethical endeavor embodied by the University. Plagiarizing, cheating, and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated.

If in doubt, ask me or your TA.

USC’s statement on Academic Conduct:

²Printing on a library printer (e.g., in Leavey Library), should **cost** 16 cents per double-sided sheet (US Letter paper), or about \$13 for the complete PDF.

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

DISABILITY-RELATED ACCOMMODATIONS

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations, students must first be registered with the [The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#). Faculty must be notified of registered students’ accommodations before accommodations can be provided.

SCHEDULE

What is Justice?

- 1) M 1/13: Introduction
- 2) W 1/15: Plato (429–347 BCE), *Republic* (ca. 380 BCE), Books I–II

The ideal city

M 1/20: NO CLASS: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

- 3) W 1/22: Plato, *Republic*, Books III–V
- 4) M 1/27: Plato, *Republic*, Books VI–VII

The imperfect city

- 5) W 1/29: Plato, *Republic*, Books VIII–X
- 6) M 2/3: Aristotle (384–322 BCE), *Politics*, Book I
- 7) W 2/5: Aristotle, *Politics*, Books III.6–13, IV.1–2, VII.1–3, VIII.1–3

Friday 2/7: Paper 1 due via email by 5pm

Moses and the Greeks

- 8) M 2/10: Hebrew Bible: *Exodus* (ca. 1000–500 BCE), 1–7, 11–14, 18–24 | [course site](#)
- 9) W 2/12: Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE–50 CE), *On the Life of Moses* (before 50 CE), selections | [course site](#)

Radicals and reformers in the 1st and 7th centuries

M 2/17: NO CLASS: President’s Day

- 10) W 2/19: *The Gospel of Matthew*, chapters 5–7 | [course site](#).

11) M 2/24: John Chrysostom (d. 407), *Homilies on Matthew*, homily 15 (on Matthew 5:1–2)³ | [course site](#)

12) W 2/26: *Quran* (610–632 CE), trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, Suras 96, 68, 73, 1, 89, 107, 113, 114, 112, 50, 19, 12, 30, 2:246–256, 5:11–86, 4:150–175, 25:30–32, 6:1–10, 6:146–157, 17:106, 7:52 (in that order).⁴

Reason and revelation: Islamicate political visions

13) M 3/3: Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1201), *The Life of Ibn Hanbal*, preface (pp. 3–8), chapters 1–4, 6, 15, 19, 21, 28–31, 40, 49–51, 54–55

14) W 3/5: Ibn al-Jawzī, *The Life of Ibn Hanbal*, chapters 66–69, 77, 80, 86, 92

15) M 3/10: al-Fārābī (10th century), *Principles of the Opinions of the People of the Virtuous City*,⁵ summary (look it over quickly before reading the rest); chapters 1.1, 15, 18 | [course site](#)

16) W 3/12: Ibn Ṭufayl (d. 1185–6), *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān* (before 1186), selections | [course site](#)

SPRING RECESS: No class on 3/17 or 3/19

17) M 3/24: Maimonides (1135–1204), *The Guide of the Perplexed* (ca. 1190), selections | [course site](#)

W 3/26: NO CLASS: work on paper

Friday 3/28: Paper 2 due via email by 5pm

Kings and philosophers, paupers and princes: Byzantine and Latin political visions

18) M 3/31: Two eleventh-century scholars, excerpts translated with comments by E. Barker, pp. 130–141⁶ | both on [course site](#):

- Psellos, excerpts on philosophy and the active political life
- Michael of Ephesus (ca. 1070–1080), *Commentary on Aristotle's Politics*

19) W 4/2: Anna Comnena (early 12th century), *Will and Testament*, preface⁷ | [course site](#)

20) M 4/7: Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–1274), *On Kingship* (before 1274), selections | [course site](#)

21) W 4/9: Alexios Makrembolites (14th century), *Dialogue between the Rich and Poor*⁸ | [course site](#)

³Translated by George Prevost, NPNF, 1st ser., 10, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/200115.htm> (revised version for New Advent).

⁴The Suras of the Quran are arranged roughly in order of length (for example, Sura 2 is the longest). The Muslim tradition also records a chronological order of revelation (http://tanzil.net/docs/revelation_order).

⁵Translated by R. Walzer, *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

⁶This reading includes two introductions by Barker, one on Psellos (pp. 130–132) and another on Michael of Ephesus (pp. 136–137).

⁷Translated with introduction and commentary by Stratis Papaioannou, “Anna Komnene’s Will,” in *Byzantine Religious Culture: Studies in Honor of Alice-Mary Talbot*, ed. Denis Sullivan, Elizabeth Fisher, and Stratis Papaioannou (Leiden: Brill, 2012), translation on pp. 104–107.

⁸Translated by Ihor Ševčenko, “Alexios Makrembolites and his ‘Dialogue between the rich and poor,’” *ZRVI* 6 (1960): 216–228.

22) M 4/14: George Gemistos Plethon (ca. 1360–1452), selections from the *Address to the Despot Theodore* (ca. 1407–1415), the *Memorandum to the Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus* (before 1418), and the *Laws*, translated by E. Barker, pp. 196–219⁹ | [course site](#)

W 4/16: NO CLASS: work on Final Paper

Early Roman history as a guide to politics

23) M 4/21: Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), *Discourses on Livy*, I.Preface–6 (pp. 97–124)

24) W 4/23: Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, I.7–13, 16–18, 29, 32, 34, 42, 55, 58; II.Preface–3, 29; III.1, 3, 7–9, 22, 34, 43

25) M 4/28: Final discussion (no new assigned reading)

W 4/30: NO CLASS: work on Final Paper

Final Paper

Monday 5/5: Final Paper due via email by 5pm

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

[Counseling and Mental Health](#) - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call.

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

[988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) - 988 for both calls and text messages – 24/7 on call.

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline (formerly known as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline) provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, across the United States. The Lifeline is comprised of a national network of over 200 local crisis centers, combining custom local care and resources with national standards and best practices. The new, shorter phone number makes it easier for people to remember and access mental health crisis services (though the previous 1 (800) 273-8255 number will continue to function indefinitely) and represents a continued commitment to those in crisis.

[Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services \(RSVP\)](#) - (213) 740-9355(WELL) – 24/7 on call.

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender- and power-based harm (including sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and stalking).

[Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title IX \(EEO-TIX\)](#) - (213) 740-5086.

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants.

[Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment](#) - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298.

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity, and Title for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

[The Office of Student Accessibility Services \(OSAS\)](#) - (213) 740-0776.

OSAS ensures equal access for students with disabilities through providing academic accommodations

⁹The first part, pp. 196–198, is an introduction by Barker.

and auxiliary aids in accordance with federal laws and university policy.

[USC Campus Support and Intervention](#) - (213) 740-0411.

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

[Diversity, Equity and Inclusion](#) - (213) 740-2101.

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

[USC Emergency](#) - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call.

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

[USC Department of Public Safety](#) - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call.

Non-emergency assistance or information.

[Office of the Ombuds](#) - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC).

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.

[Occupational Therapy Faculty Practice](#) - (323) 442-2850 or otfp@med.usc.edu.

Confidential Lifestyle Redesign services for USC students to support health promoting habits and routines that enhance quality of life and academic performance.