

Social and Political Philosophy

Philosophy 320

Fall 2024

Term Paper Assignment

Due: Wednesday, *December 18*

Final Essay Assignment

Write an 7-10 page (double-spaced) paper in which you reflect on the relevance to current events on any topic covered in this course. A good paper will be well written, have a sound exposition of at least one of the texts considered in this course, and some decent reflection about the issues raised in the text. Your paper should respond to some of the issues suggested below:

To what extent was Plato right in his critique of democracy in the *Republic*? Why does he rank democracy next to last in his devolving order of governments in Book VIII, and why does he think democracy can easily devolve into tyranny? Considering the influence of wealth on democracy today, to what extent was Plato right, as he says in Book VI, that democracy is like a drunken pleasure cruise? Considering the level of education that most people have today, and the diverse sources of information available these days, is it too much to expect the majority of people to be wise enough for democracy to succeed? What is the key to democracy in responding to Plato's critique?

Why does Aristotle have a more positive view of democracy than Plato? Whether there is rule by one, the few, or the many, what is the key to good government for Aristotle? Why does he think that *politeia* (a kind of constitutional, limited democracy) may be the best form of government? Why is friendship the key to democracy for Aristotle? Considering the deep divisions within society today, is friendship among the people really possible?

Why is it important for Americans today to understand that our government is not founded on Hobbes's conception of the social contract, that the president is not above the law, and that government requires consent of the people? What was the point of the famous opening line of Rousseau's *The Social Contract*: "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains"? Why did Rousseau regard Locke's social contract as a swindle by the rich that keeps most people still in chains? What was Rousseau's solution to this problem? To what extent is the acceptance of unlimited wealth a problem for democracy today? How can this problem be addressed while also preserving freedom?

What did James Madison mean by the "danger of faction" and what did Alexis de Tocqueville mean by the "tyranny of the majority"? Explain how the remedy for these difficulties, which the government of the United States adopted in its Constitution, is the notion of a Republic, defended by Madison in *The Federalist Papers*, the notion of political rights as defended by Locke and Rousseau, and also the notion of the separation of powers as suggested by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws*. To what extent do you think these remedies are adequate in responding to the problems with democracy?

What did John Stuart Mill mean by the "one simple principle" in his essay *On Liberty*? How does Mill argue for the freedom of thought and expression, and that we thus have good reason to welcome even unpopular views?

Compare Adam Smith and Karl Marx on the role of government in the distribution of wealth. Why did Smith think the division of labor would result in greater wealth? What did Smith mean by "the invisible hand" that guides a free market to promote the good of society? What then are the only three duties the sovereign (the government) has in what he calls the "system of natural liberty"? What is Marx's critique of the "division of labor" in the section "Estranged Labor" from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*? Should there be a larger role for government in addressing the great inequities of wealth and the common good of the people?

In the essay “On the Duty of Civil Disobedience” what did Thoreau regard as the highest form of patriotism? How did he conceive of civil disobedience as a way in which the few, serving the country with their conscience, can be a way of saving democracy from falling into injustice? When does Thoreau recommend breaking the law and how can one break the law and not destroy the state. What are the two keys to civil disobedience? Why does King suggest in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” that those engaging in civil disobedience are like Socratic gadflies? What is the point of civil disobedience? What are the challenges in practicing civil disobedience and to what extent do you think it can be successful today?

What are the three positions in the *Ethics of War and Peace* and which would you most agree with? What are the three divisions of just war theory, *jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello*, and *jus post bellum*? What are the six principles of *jus ad bellum* and the three principles of *jus in bello*? Is it naïve to consider the justice of war as war realists claim, or is it important that our country accept the principles of just war theory? To what extent is an understanding of the *Ethics of War and Peace* essential for the success of democracy?

What is Peter Singer's argument that people in wealthy nations have some moral obligation to help those in destitute poverty in other parts of the world? To what extent would you agree with Singer? Do we have any moral obligations regarding future generations? Should we do our best to preserve a clean environment for those in the future? Do we have an obligation to respond to the problem of climate change? What is Brian Barry's argument that we do have some moral obligation to future generations? To what extent would you agree with Barry's argument?

To what extent do you think that racism and sexism had a significant effect on the recent presidential election in the United States? To what extent would you agree with Simone de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* that women have always had a secondary role in society? What does Alison Jaggar mean by “socialist feminism” and why does she think that this position is best among feminist standpoints? To what extent is feminist philosophy important for the success of democracy?

To what extent does the environmental crisis and anthropogenic climate change pose an existential threat to the future of human life on earth? In many ways Nietzsche anticipated a great crisis facing humanity in the 20th and 21st centuries. To what extent was he right in emphasizing an overcoming of the values rooted in a longing for another world after death and becoming capable of remaining loyal to the earth? How might his strange thought of the eternal recurrence be catalyst for this reevaluation of values? To what extent would you agree with Naomi Klein's argument that unfettered capitalism is the cause of the climate crisis? To what extent is the message of *Mālama Honua* carried around the world by the *Hōkūle'a* in recent worldwide voyages important for us today? Can our civilization become capable of *Mālama Honua*?

Grading Rubric

1) Writing 20%

Grammar, spelling, composition, and style. Your essay should be well organized. There should be an introduction, development of a theme, and a conclusion.

2) Philosophical Content 50%

The essay should reflect an adequate understanding of the texts. Your exposition of the text should include some quotes from primary texts. All quotes should be properly marked within the text and must include a reference to the text cited.

3) Commentary 30%

Your own thoughtful reflections on the topic.

Handling Citations

There are a number of ways of handling citations in your papers. One could just use footnotes or endnotes. An example of using footnotes is like the following: According to Socrates, “the unexamined life is not worth living.”¹ If you are citing the same text a number of times you can also just include the text reference in the sentence like this: According to Socrates, “the unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato 2000, 38a). Notice the format of the punctuation here. The period goes after the text reference—otherwise the reference is stuck in no-sentence-land between two sentences. If you use this format then you would have to include the text information, which otherwise was included in the footnote, in a bibliography at the end of your paper. Notice the difference in format of the footnote and bibliography. The difference between footnote and bibliography format is not as clear in citing Plato, since he has only one name. Let’s say I wanted to cite our textbook where Magee finds it “doubtful whether any philosopher has had more influence than Socrates.”² If I wanted to include the text reference in the sentence it would look like this: Magee finds it “doubtful whether any philosopher has had more influence than Socrates” (Magee 2001, 23). Then, of course, the reference information goes into a bibliography.

Now let’s say you want to cite a longer quotation. In order to save valuable space, you could then indent the quote and use single spacing. What seems most outrageous is

¹Plato, *The Apology*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: from Thales to Aristotle*, 2nd. ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2000), 38a.

²Bryan Magee, *The Story of Philosophy: A Concise Introduction to the World’s Greatest Thinkers and Their Ideas* (London: Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2001), 23.

Notice in a footnote, first name comes first followed by last name, then the title of the text, and then publisher information (Location: Publisher, publishing date) comes in parentheses.

that Socrates refuses to simply just shut up, which might perhaps have been enough of a counter-penalty to save his life. Socrates, however, has a good reason for this:

Now this is the most difficult point on which to convince some of you. If I say that it is impossible for me to keep quiet because that means disobeying the god, you will not believe me and will think I am being ironical. On the other hand, if I say that it is the greatest good for a man to discuss virtue every day and those other things about which you hear me conversing and testing myself and others, for the unexamined life is not worth living for man, you will believe me even less. (Plato 2000, 37e-38a)

You could, of course, use a footnote for this citation. If you include the reference within the body of the text as illustrated above, then note the difference in punctuation here as opposed to the earlier example. Notice here you don't use quotation marks around the citation because it is obvious what is being cited. Also, the text reference stands outside the period of the last sentence. Here are examples of bibliographic entries:

Bibliography

Magee, Bryan. 2001. *The Story of Philosophy: A Concise Introduction to the World's Greatest Thinkers and Their Ideas*. London: Dorling Kindersley Limited.

Plato. 2000. *The Apology*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy: from Thales to Aristotle, 2nd ed.* Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.

Notice in a bibliography the last name goes first, then a comma followed by first name. Then a period and then year of publication, then the title of the text. Always use italics or underline whenever referring to the title of a book. Notice there are no parentheses in a bibliographic entry. Bibliographies are organized alphabetically.