

**Democratic Theory**  
POLI 613 Graduate Seminar in Political Theory

Winter 2018  
Tue/Thu 10:35-11:55am  
Ferrier Building 422

Instructor: Arash Abizadeh  
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Office Hours: Tues 4-5  
Tel: 514-398-8549  
Voicemail in own voice only

This is a reading-intensive course in democratic theory. Its primary objective is to familiarize students with recent debates about the justification and shortcomings of contemporary democracy.

**Required Texts** on reserve and available for purchase at Paragraphe bookstore:

- Beitz, Charles. R. *Political Equality: An Essay in Democratic Theory*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Green, Jeffrey Edward. *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Krause, Sharon. *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.
- Müller, Jan-Werner. *What is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
- Pettit, P. (2012). *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rousseau. *The Social Contract*. Hackett Publishing.
- Waldron, Jeremy. *Law and Disagreement*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

Syllabus items marked with \* are neither available online nor in any of the required books above. Professor will make arrangements with students beforehand for access.

**Background Texts** you may find helpful:

- Dahl, R. A. (1989). *Democracy and its Critics*. New Haven, CT, Yale University Press.
- Hyland, James L. (1995). *Democratic Theory: The Philosophical Foundations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995.  
[http://www.tcd.ie/Political\\_Science/staff/eddie\\_hyland/Materials/ThePhilosophicalFoundations.pdf](http://www.tcd.ie/Political_Science/staff/eddie_hyland/Materials/ThePhilosophicalFoundations.pdf)
- Manin, B. (1997). *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Przeworski, A. (2010). *Democracy and the Limits of Self-Government*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

## Class Schedule

\*Note: January 9 is cancelled.\*

\*\*NOTE: The first class is substantive. All seminar participants will need to have completed assigned reading before coming to the first class.\*\*

### I. Justifications of Democracy

#### *1. Freedom I: Athenian Republicanism & Collective Self-Government*

Jan 11

##### Required Readings

Rousseau. *The Social Contract*.

Neuhouser, F. (1993). "Freedom, Dependence, and the General Will." *The Philosophical Review* 102(3): 363-395. (32p)

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2185902>

Cohen, J. (1986). "Reflections on Rousseau: Autonomy and Democracy." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 15(3): 275-297.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2265213>

##### Recommended Readings

Gould, C. C. (1988). *Rethinking Democracy: Freedom and Social Cooperation in Politics, Economy, and Society*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Chapter 1, pp. 31-90, esp. pp. 45-85.

Sreenivasan, G. (2000). "What is the General Will." *The Philosophical Review* 109: 545-581. (37p)

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2693624>

#### *2. Public Justification: Discourse Theory of Democracy*

Jan 16

##### Required Readings

Habermas, J. "Three Normative Models of Democracy." *Constellations* 1, 1 (1994): 1-10. (10pp.)

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8675.1994.tb00001.x/abstract>

\*Habermas, J. (1996). "Popular Sovereignty as Procedure." In *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press: 463-490. (28pp)

[reprinted in Bohman, J. and W. Rehg, Eds. (1997). *Deliberative Democracy*, MA, MIT Press.]

##### Recommended Readings

Habermas, J. "On the Internal Relation between the Rule of Law and Democracy." *European Journal of Philosophy* 3, 1 (1995): 12-20. (9pp)

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-0378.1995.tb00036.x/abstract>

Habermas, J. (2001). "Constitutional Democracy: A Paradoxical Union of Contradictory Principles?" *Political Theory* 29, 6 (2001): 766-781. (15pp)

<http://ptx.sagepub.com/content/29/6/766.citation>

Honig, Bonnie. "Dead Rights, Live Futures: A Reply to Habermas's "Constitutional Democracy"." *Political Theory* 29, 6 (2001): 792-805. (14pp)

<http://ptx.sagepub.com/content/29/6/792.citation>

Habermas, J. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.

### 3. Critique of Self-Government and Public Justification Views

Jan 18

#### Required Readings

\*Christiano, T. (1996). *The Rule of the Many: Fundamental Issues in Democratic Theory*. Boulder, CO, Westview Press. Chapter 1 (15-46). [critique of self-government and public justification views] (32p)

\*\*Note: January 19 is a make-up class. Time to be determined in class.\*\*

### 4. Instrumental Value: Epistemic, Educative, and Responsiveness Functions

Friday, Jan 19

#### Required Readings

Mill, J. S. *Considerations on Representative Government*. Chapter 3. [democracy for epistemic, educative, and responsiveness reasons] (14p)

<http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/234>

Sen, A. (1999). "Democracy as a Universal Value." *Journal of Democracy* 10(3): 3-17. [democracy good for economic development] (14p)

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jod/v010/10.3sen.html>

Cohen, J. (1986). "An Epistemic Conception of Democracy." *Ethics* 97(1): 26-38. [epistemic value of democracy] (13p)

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2381404>

\*Przeworski, A. (1999). Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense. In *Democracy's Value*. I. Shapiro and C. Hacker-Cordón. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 23-55. (33p)

#### Recommended Readings

Nelson, W. N. (1980). *On Justifying Democracy*. London, Routledge. [democracy more likely to produce just legislation / outcomes]

Olson, M. (1993). "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development." *The American Political Science Review* 87(3): 567-576. [conditions of democracy same as economic development]

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/info/2938736>

Grofman, B. and S. L. Feld (1988). "Rousseau's General Will: A Condorcetian Perspective." *The American Political Science Review* 82(2): 567-576.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1957401>

Estlund, D. M., J. Waldron, et al. (1989). "Democratic Theory and the Public Interest: Condorcet and Rousseau Revisited." *The American Political Science Review* 83(4): 1317-1340.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1961672>

List, C. and R. E. Goodin (2001). "Epistemic Democracy: Generalizing the Condorcet Jury Theorem." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 9(3): 277-306. [no great epistemic trade-off to different social decision rules]

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9760.00128/abstract>

### 5. Political Equality I: Procedural Equality, Equal Influence

Jan 23

#### Required Readings

\*Dahl, R. (1979). Procedural Democracy. In *Philosophy, Politics, & Society* (5th Series). P. Laslett and J. Fishkin. Oxford, Blackwell. [equal consideration of interests] (38p)

Brighouse, H. (1996). "Egalitarianism and Equal Availability of Political Influence." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 4(2): 118-141. (24p)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.1996.tb00045.x>

Recommended Readings

Cohen, C. (1971). "The Justification of Democracy." *The Monist* 55(1): 1-27. [equality requires democracy] (27p)

[http://www.pdcnet.org/collection/show?id=monist\\_1971\\_0055\\_0001\\_0001\\_0027&file\\_type=xml](http://www.pdcnet.org/collection/show?id=monist_1971_0055_0001_0001_0027&file_type=xml)

Singer, P. (1974). *Democracy & Disobedience*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. Part I (pp. 13-61). [democracy as fair compromise] (48p)

\*Note: January 25 class cancelled.\*\*

### 6-7. *Political Equality II: Reasonable Acceptability*

Jan 30, Feb 1

Required Readings

Beitz, C. R. (1989). *Political Equality: An Essay in Democratic Theory*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press. [complex procedural equality: not equal power over outcomes, but reasonable acceptability]

### 8. *Political Equality III: For and Against*

Feb 6

Required Readings

Dworkin, R. (1987-88). "What is Equality - Part 4: Political Equality." *University of San Francisco Law Review* 22(1): 1-30. [equality cannot be interpreted in terms of distribution of political power] (30p)

[http://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/usflr22&g\\_sent=1&collection=journal\\_s&id=11](http://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/usflr22&g_sent=1&collection=journal_s&id=11)

(Reprinted as chapter 4 of Dworkin, R. (2000). *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.)

Wall, S. (2007). "Democracy and Equality." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57(228): 416-438. [against the ideal of political equality] (23p)

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-9213.2007.495.x/abstract>

Recommended Readings

Dworkin, R. (2000). *Sovereign Virtue: The Theory and Practice of Equality*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press. Chapter 10.

### 9. *Pure Instrumentalism*

Feb 8

Required Readings

\*Arneson, R. J. (2004). Democracy is Not Intrinsically Just. In *Justice and Democracy*. K. Dowding, R. E. Goodin and C. Pateman. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. [democracy valuable insofar as necessary to secure best outcomes] (19p)

Griffin, C. G. (2003). "Democracy as a Non-Instrumentally Just Procedure." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 11(1): 111-121. [Democracy as requirement of justice] (11p)

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9760.00169/abstract>

Arneson, R. J. (2003). "Defending the Purely Instrumental Account of Democratic Legitimacy." *Journal of Political Philosophy* 11(1): 122-132. (21p)

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-9760.00170/abstract>

Recommended Readings

Arneson, R. J. (1995). Democratic Rights at National and Workplace Levels. In *The Idea of Democracy*. D. Copp, J. Hampton and J. Roemer. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 118-148.

*10-11. Disagreement*

Feb 13, 15

Required Readings

Waldron, J. (1999). *Law and Disagreement*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. Chapters 3, 5, 11, 12, 13.

Waldron, J. (2006). "The Core of the Case Against Judicial Review." *The Yale Law Journal* 115(6): 1346-1406.

<http://www.yalelawjournal.org/the-yale-law-journal/content-pages/the-core-of-the-case-against-judicial-review/>

Raz, J. (1998). "Disagreement in Politics." *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 43: 25-52. (28p)

[http://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/ajj43&g\\_sent=1&collection=journals&id=29](http://heinonline.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/ajj43&g_sent=1&collection=journals&id=29)

Christiano, T. (2000). "Waldron on Law and Disagreement." *Law and Philosophy* 19(4): 513-543. (31p)

<http://www.springerlink.com/content/t423242443x451q2/>

*12-14. Political Equality IV: Equal Standing*

Feb 20, 22, 27

Required Readings

\*Viehoff, Daniel. Manuscript to be circulated.

Recommended Readings

Kolodny, Niko. "Rule Over None I: What Justifies Democracy?" *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 3 (2014): 195-229.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/papa.12035>

———. "Rule Over None II: Social Equality and the Justification of Democracy." *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 42, no. 4 (2014): 287-336.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/papa.12037>

*15-16. Freedom II: Roman Republicanism & Non-Domination*

March 1, 15

\*\*Note: Reading period March 5-9; class cancelled March 13\*\*

**Research Proposal Due Monday March 12 at 9:29am (Montreal time)**: electronic attachment in PDF format only (not as a Word file, for example) to be emailed to professor's McGill email address from student's own official McGill email account. Proposals sent after 9:29am will be counted as a day late. Please be proactive and make the necessary arrangements beforehand.

Required Readings

Pettit, P. (2012). *On the People's Terms: A Republican Theory and Model of Democracy*. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press.

Recommended Readings

Laborde, C. and J. Maynor, Eds. (2008). *Republicanism and Political Theory*. Oxford, Blackwell.

Pettit, P. (1999). "Republican Freedom and Contestatory Democratization." In *Democracy's Value*.

I. Shapiro and C. Hacker-Cordón. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 163-190. (28p)

[http://www.princeton.edu/~ppetit/papers/RepublicanFreedom\\_DemocracysEdges\\_1999.pdf](http://www.princeton.edu/~ppetit/papers/RepublicanFreedom_DemocracysEdges_1999.pdf)

17-18. *Freedom III: Non-oppression & Agency*

March 20, 22

Required Readings

Krause, Sharon. *Freedom Beyond Sovereignty: Reconstructing Liberal Individualism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

19-20. *Pessimism*

March 27, 29

Required Readings

Green, Jeffrey Edward. *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Recommended Readings

Achen, Christopher H., and Larry M. Bartels. *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Governments*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016.

21. *Populism*

April 3

Required Readings

Müller, Jan-Werner. *What is Populism?* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

Recommended Reading

John P. McCormick. "Contain the Wealthy and Patrol the Magistrates: Restoring Elite Accountability to Popular Government." *American Political Science Review* 100, 02 (2006): 147-163.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0003055406062071>

**Research Paper Due by 3:59pm Friday, April 6:** electronic attachment in PDF format only (not as a Word file, for example) to be emailed to professor's McGill email address from student's own official McGill email account. Papers sent after 3:59pm will be counted as a day late. Please be proactive and make the necessary arrangements beforehand.

22-23. *Samuel Bagg*

April 5, 10

Required Readings

\*Bagg Manuscript to be circulated

\*\*Class April 12 cancelled\*\*

## REQUIREMENTS AND COURSE POLICIES

### **DISTRIBUTION OF MARKS:**

In-class presentation 15-20 minutes	20%
Research Paper Proposal	20%
Research Paper (7000-8000 words)	50%
In-class Participation	10%

*You must pass each portion of the class to receive a grade of C or above in the class as a whole.*

### **Notes**

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information)

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

### **Participation, Reading, Talking Points and Weekly Writing Assignment**

Since this is a seminar course, it is essential that readings be completed before class, and that everyone participate actively in class discussions.

Besides reading each assigned text, you are expected to prepare three sets of talking points on each assigned text for each class:

1. be prepared to state and explain the key *concepts* used by the author
2. be prepared to state the main thesis (in the case of articles or excerpts) or main theses (in the case of a longer assignment such as a book) in two or three concise sentences
3. be prepared to give your own evaluation of the persuasiveness of the main thesis/theses

### **Research Paper Proposal:**

Your research paper proposal will comprise 5 sections, which must strictly conform to the indicated word counts. Each section should be numbered, and introduced with the appropriate heading (the underlined words below).

1. A statement of the problem and of your overriding thesis (100-200 words)
2. An explanation of your research methods, i.e., the methods you have used to find the literature that is relevant to your thesis. (For example, you should indicate which library resources, citation databases, search words, bibliographies, etc. you have used.) If you have not written a research paper of this kind before, I strongly recommend that you make an appointment with a research librarian to learn the research methods available to you. The quality of the literature review and of your annotated bibliography (and, as a consequence, of your research proposal) will depend heavily not just on the quantity of items you find, but more importantly on the quality of the items. The quality of the literature review will also depend on your bibliography not having a random quality to it, i.e., not seeming like the principle of selection was simply "those texts I happened to come across." Remember not to ignore more general books about Hobbes that may have a section or chapter

specifically on your topic – you won't necessarily find these through bibliographic searches, but, once you figure out what the most important books on Hobbes are, you need to actually go to the library and skim their tables of contents. (90-110 words)

3. A review of the literature relevant to your thesis. This section needs to (a) give the reader a sense of what work has already been done in your topic, and (b) make the case that, given what is out there in the literature, the problem you raise and the thesis you advance is an interesting one about which more should be said. You can consider this section to be an introduction of sorts to your annotated bibliography. (400-500 words)
4. A prose outline of the main arguments *for and against* your thesis (400-500 words)
5. An annotated research bibliography, which will supplement (and to some extent overlap with) your review of the literature
  - a. Format:
    - i. Each annotation should be preceded by a full bibliographic citation.
    - ii. For articles, the annotation should be between 50 and 100 words. It should summarize the main thesis of the article, the main arguments, and very briefly indicate the article's importance to your paper.
    - iii. For books, you need to be selective. Not everything that is in the book needs to be annotated. You should choose all the chapters or issues that are relevant to your paper and, in an introductory sentence, indicate what these chapters or issues are (i.e., tell the reader what you are selecting from the book to annotate). Then provide one or more annotations, each of which is in the same format as that for articles (e.g. 50-100 words) and each of which is either be focussed on a particular section of the book (e.g. a chapter), or on one particular issue/theme running through the book. Remember, you do not need to cover every chapter or every theme.

b. Length:

There is no magic number for how many books and articles you need to consult. (You should have a balance of books and articles.) The length of your bibliography will depend on the topic you choose and the literature that is available. However, there is a straightforward principle that you must use in figuring out how much to put in. The principle is this: when you write your research paper, you must safeguard yourself from the objection "But if you had only read such-and-such a paper or book, you would have known that your argument faces the following obvious objection..." You do not necessarily need to have read ALL the secondary literature on the issue that you are dealing with – given how much has been written on Hobbes, that would be impossible – BUT you do need to have covered enough of it so that you have a sense of the lay of the land, enough so that you are confident that you have covered your back. The less likely it is that a reader could come back to you and say, Oh, but you missed this article/book which is crucial to your argument, the better.

**Research Paper:**

In general, there are two kinds of papers you might write in a political theory class: a paper driven by a substantive philosophical thesis, or a paper driven by an exegetical, interpretive thesis. Please note that in either case your paper must have:

1. an explicit thesis
2. explicit arguments in support of your thesis
3. good explicit objections to your thesis and/or arguments; you must of course deal with these objections and show that they do not undermine your thesis

For very basic guidance on how to write a good political theory paper, see my "Tips" sheet. That

sheet is for an introductory political theory class, not for an upper level course, so I certainly don't expect you to follow the advice there mechanically, but it may help you organize your thoughts.

In all cases include a title page, word count, proper citations, and works cited. Any complete system of citation may be used as long as it is complete and consistent. Failure to meet these requirements will result in a mark reduction.

On the word count: you need to observe the word count. If you find yourself going over the word limit, go back and edit, trying to cut out every single sentence or word that is not absolutely necessary to make your point and to defend your thesis. At each point in the paper, you should honestly be able to answer "yes" to the question: is this bit here really necessary for the defence of my thesis? You will not be penalized if you go over the word limit only if it is clear that the extra length was crucial to your argument and hence warranted. Otherwise, cut.

### **Participation, Reading, Talking Points and Weekly Writing Assignment**

Since this is a seminar course, it is essential that readings be completed before class, and that everyone participate actively in class discussions.

Besides reading each assigned text, you are expected to prepare three sets of talking points on each assigned text for each class:

1. be prepared to state and explain the key *concepts* used by the author
2. be prepared to state the main thesis (in the case of articles or excerpts) or main theses (in the case of a longer assignment such as a book) in two or three concise sentences
3. be prepared to give your own evaluation of the persuasiveness of the main thesis/theses

### **In-Class Presentation**

Since everyone is expected to have studied the material beforehand, the goal of your presentation is not to summarize the readings for the class. Presentations are not expository, but critical analyses. Your goal is to spark discussion by arguing for a thesis, critically engaging with the literature, and raising issues and objections that you think will be of interest to the class. So you may of course need to summarize some points, but only to serve the fundamentally critical, analytical goals of your presentation.

### **Attendance**

You get two free absences, no questions asked. Use them wisely.

(Please note that if you are absent from the first class, you are absent from the first class.)

For each class you are counted absent after the free absences, you will be required to write one 1000 word make-up essay, due at the beginning of the next class, on the material from the missed class. Each time that you fail to hand in the make-up essay at the next class, or each time your make-up essay is of below B level quality, your final course mark will drop down by one third of a grade (i.e., from A to A- to B+ etc.), unless you have made arrangements with me beforehand. This is all your responsibility; I will not be chasing you down for make-up papers.

The ONLY exception to this is if you have a note from a doctor indicating you had a communicable disease. Please do not attend class if you have symptoms of such a disease.

Make-up essays are not "punishments" for missing class: you are adults and what you do with

your time is really none of the professor's business, and you will no doubt sometimes have extremely valid reasons for not coming to class. But it is the professor's business to ensure a successful seminar, and this depends on all of us being on the same page. The purpose of the make-up essay requirement is to provide you the opportunity to digest the material for the class you missed. Our discussions in subsequent classes will build on our previous classes; it is absolutely imperative for a successful seminar that everyone be on the same page.

### **Late Work**

Your paper must be completed on time. **Late work** will be penalized by dropping each day (including Saturday and Sunday) by one third of a grade (i.e., from A+ to A to A- to B+ etc.), unless you have secured explicit permission in advance to turn in your paper late. Late make-up essays will not be accepted.

Be proactive. If there are any foreseeable problems, come talk to me early, rather than waiting until after the fact. I will not grant extensions a couple of days before the due date.

### **Teaching Assistant Extension**

Teaching assistants will receive a 2 week extension on their final paper upon request. However, to receive the extension, you must officially request in writing, by email, by March 15, 2017.

### MY END OF THE BARGAIN

I commit to:

- being accessible in and outside of the classroom
- marking your papers within a reasonable amount of time
- giving you constructive feedback on your work
- being a demanding marker
- giving you a look at why I think this material is so interesting

### MARKING CRITERIA

Papers will be marked according to the following criteria:

1. analytical rigour (logic, precision, clarity of argument, consideration of counterarguments, etc.)
2. originality / creativity
3. essay mechanics (structure of essay clear and logical, clear thesis, etc)
4. sentence mechanics (quality of prose, grammar, spelling, etc.)
5. scholarship (accurate representation of author's cited, other works engaged with when appropriate, quality of research if a research paper, etc)
6. miscellaneous (proper citation of sources, meets purposes of assignment, etc)

Each paper will be returned with a grade corresponding to each of these 5 or 6 items, in addition to your overall paper grade. Please note that (with the exception noted in the next paragraph) these 5 or 6 itemized grades are purely meant to provide you with feedback, so that you have an idea of what areas require improvement in future work. Your final grade is NOT an average of these itemized grades.

However, an F on any one of the six criteria will result in an F on the written assignment as a whole. In particular, a minimum level of originality (criterion 2) and knowing when and how to provide proper references to works that you have used in crafting your essay (criterion 6) are substantive requirements for all written assignments, without which the maximum grade is an F.

### **Explanation of Grades**

Grades for papers will range from F to A+. Since I do not believe in grade inflation, and since I use the whole range of grades, to help you interpret your performance in the course, I provide here a very rough idea of what grades in the C to A ranges mean. A grade in the **C** range indicates some basic problems that require immediate attention and perhaps some pedagogic help. I take a **B-** to be a below average grade which suggests some problem that needs attention. A **B** reflects average work; it is a respectable though perhaps unhappy grade. It indicates a need for improvement in future work. Usually there are no major errors, and there is a good, above-average comprehension of the material – though there may be problems of written expression, or of precision, or the work amounts to a regurgitation of texts or class discussion, etc. I consider a **B+** to be a very good grade reflecting above-average and promising work. General qualities usually include an excellent comprehension of the material, excellent organization of paper, excellent written expression, no major errors, meeting all basic requirements of assignment, attaining a basic level of analytical rigour, and going beyond a mere regurgitation of texts and class work. Moving into the A-range requires not just comprehending the material and presenting it well, but a critical engagement with the material that captures its subtleties and displays some spark of creative originality and/or superior analytical rigour. (All of this means that an excellent paper that is also excellent because it was a “safe” paper to write will probably end up with a B+. And, in fact, sometimes, depending on where are you are at with the material, that is exactly the kind of paper you need to write.) An **A-** is an excellent grade reflecting a paper that is almost flawless in the basic requirements (excellent comprehension of material, organization of paper, written expression, etc.); there is also a critical engagement that captures the complexities and subtleties of the material, and that displays some combination of superior analytical rigour and/or creative original insight. A grade of **A** reflects a top-notch work that is flawless in the basic requirements and that reflects an outstanding comprehension of the material in all its complexities and subtleties and displays a combination of superior analytical rigour and creative original insight. The writer had likely set themselves up with an intellectually challenging project (which of course sometimes carries with it some risk) and was able to pull it off. The very rare **A+** is similar; the plus comes from the fact that I was saying “wow!” while reading your paper.

### **What Grades are Not**

Although it takes intelligence to write good papers, at the end of the day grades are NOT an evaluation of your intelligence. And grades are certainly not an indicator for how much the professor likes you or how smart he or she thinks you are. To write well, you have to take risks, and often those risks will not pay off. If you do poorly on your paper, remember that many very smart people write papers receiving poor grades. Sometimes it's simply because you have not learned the relevant skills yet. Sometimes it is a matter of sheer luck (you got unlucky and picked a topic or line of argument that turned out to be a dead-end, and you had no way of knowing in advance!) University is an opportunity for you to take risks from which you can learn.

Tips for Writing an Essay for your Intro Political Theory Class with Arash Abizadeh

1. **Know the difference between a thesis, an argument, and the premises of an argument.** A thesis is a claim you wish to defend in your essay. An argument is what you say in order to defend the thesis; it provides reasons in support of your thesis. Premises are claims used in your argument. An argument consists in a series of premises.

For example, one of the key theses in Wolff's book is that there can exist no legitimate authority (except for unanimous direct democracy). An argument he gives for this thesis is the following:

- 1 (premise). Authority is legitimate only if it is compatible with the autonomy of those over whom it is exercised.
  - 2 (premise). Autonomy is incompatible with being subject to authority.
- Therefore:
- 3 (conclusion). No authority can be legitimate.

Steps 1 through 3 all together comprise the argument for the conclusion 3. The conclusion 3 is the thesis Wolff wishes to defend. 1 and 2 are premises in the argument for his thesis.

2. **State your thesis clearly at the beginning of your paper.** The claim you will defend in your paper should be clear to your reader at outset. You don't need to say, "I will defend the claim that XYZ". But you do need to state XYZ clearly. Your thesis is your view, the claim you want to defend. You need to take a position on the question you are addressing and state it clearly. "This paper explores issues related to..." is not a thesis.

3. **Provide arguments for your thesis.** Once you have decided on your thesis, you must defend it with arguments. How many arguments you provide will depend on how much space you have. But once you state your thesis, the next thing your reader expects is an argument for it.

4. **Know what it means to critically evaluate an argument.** Sometimes your thesis is about other persons' claims or arguments. For example, your thesis might be that Creon's arguments for the thesis that an individual has a duty to obey the law are stronger than Socrates's arguments for the same. If that's your thesis, then you need to state it clearly, state Creon's thesis and his argument(s) for it, state Socrates's thesis and his argument(s) for it, and then critically evaluate the arguments.

To critically evaluate an argument is to (a) determine whether the premises of the argument are true and (b) determine whether the conclusion follows logically from the premises.

Consider the following argument for the thesis that Socrates is a man.

1. Socrates is a philosopher.
  2. All philosophers are monkeys.
- Therefore:
3. Socrates is a man.

This is an invalid argument: the conclusion does not follow logically from the premises. If 1 and 2 were true, then Socrates would be a monkey, not a man. Even if the conclusion 3 is true, this is not a good argument for it. Someone who was critically evaluating the argument could say "The argument is illogical."

Now consider a different argument for the thesis that Socrates is a man.

1. Socrates is a philosopher.
  2. All philosophers are men.
- Therefore:
3. Socrates is a man.

This is a logically valid argument. If 1 and 2 are true, then 3 must be true too. But someone critically evaluating this argument could now dispute the truth of its premises. Someone might say, for example, that premise 2 is false, because some philosophers are women. If premise 2 is false, then the argument for the conclusion/thesis is not a good one. The thesis may be true, but it has not been adequately defended.

In general, if you want to evaluate an argument for a thesis critically, you must state the thesis, state the argument, and then ask two questions: (a) does the conclusion follow logically from the premises? and (b) are the premises true?

**5. Make sure the arguments for your thesis are good, strong arguments.** This means that someone who critically evaluates your argument would not find obvious problems with it. (See 4 above).

**6. Make sure your thesis is an interesting thesis.** Let's say you read the *Apology* and came up with the thesis "Socrates is a man." I am very certain you will be able to provide very good arguments for this thesis, but it is a rather uninteresting thesis. The reason why it is uninteresting is that it is difficult to see what the counterarguments to your thesis would be. If you can't think of any good, strong counterarguments to your thesis or any objections to your own argument, *then it's not a thesis worth writing a paper about.*

**7. In your paper, you must seriously consider and respond to (a) counterarguments to your thesis or (b) objections to your argument.** This is what makes the difference between an ok paper and a good paper. The stronger the counterarguments or objections that you consider and refute, the stronger your own position. A weak counterargument or objection against your own thesis or argument will leave your reader wondering why you even bothered considering it. If you cannot think of any counterarguments or objections, pick a different thesis.

**8. Use your limited space wisely.** Any argument for a thesis relies on premises. In political theory (or political philosophy), some premises will be normative and some empirical/descriptive. Now, let's say there is a claim you want to defend in your essay – in other words, your paper's thesis. For a political theory paper, you must defend your thesis by providing an argument. The problem with providing an argument for your thesis is that the premises you use in your argument are *themselves* claims with which someone may or may not agree. A premise in one argument can always become the thesis of another argument. So, for example, recall Wolff's argument:

- 1 (premise). Authority is legitimate only if it is compatible with the autonomy of those over whom it is exercised.
  - 2 (premise). Autonomy is incompatible with being subject to authority.
- Therefore:
- 3 (conclusion). No authority can be legitimate.

If someone disagreed with premise 1, and provided a good argument for why it is false, Wolff would be forced to provide an argument for premise 1. But then the premise of the argument above would become the thesis of another argument.

This means that the potential length of your paper is infinity. Since you have word limits, you need to make choices. For example, you may wish to provide an argument with premises that are relatively uncontroversial. Or if you employ a controversial premise, then you may want to briefly defend the premise too (i.e., provide an argument for it). But at some point you have to stop defending yourself and hope that the premises you use will carry your reader. There is no formula here; you have to exercise your own judgement.

**9. Again, use your limited space wisely.** Since you only have limited space to state your thesis, provide your arguments, and consider counterarguments or objections, you can't waste any words. Don't say anything that is not necessary to clarify or defend your thesis. Don't start off your essay, for example, with grandiose pronouncements about how important the question is or how many great thinkers have for centuries and millennia thought about it. This is not a history class, so it's very unlikely that such claims would matter one way or the other to your thesis. Every sentence counts: with each paragraph, and with each sentence in each paragraph, ask yourself: why am I telling my reader this? If you can honestly say "because saying this is necessary for defending my thesis," leave it in. If not, think again.

**10. Use the key concepts in your essay in a clear, precise, and consistent fashion.** Key concepts in this course, for example, might be obligation, right, authority, etc. When you use a fancy word, make sure its meaning is clear to you and to your reader. For every word you use in your essay, be sure that you can define it. If you can't, either figure out what it means, or don't use it. If the meaning of the word is clear to you, but it's a word used in different ways by different people, then define it for your reader so that it's clear what you mean by it. (Words like "objective," for example.)

**11. Spelling, grammar, and style count.** For grammar, pay special attention to a common pitfall. You already know that nouns and verbs must agree with each other (so if it's a plural noun, you need a plural verb: not "we talks"). But don't forget that pronouns must also agree. This is ungrammatical: "One must always retain the right to make his own judgements." This is also ungrammatical: "One must always retain the right to make their own judgements." If your pronoun is "one" in the first part, it should be "one" in the next part. Thus: "One must always retain the right to make one's own judgements." On the one hand, for a similar reason, many have traditionally considered this ungrammatical: "A person must never give up their own freedom." "Person" is singular, "their" has traditionally been plural. According to many, the pronoun that goes with "person" should be third-person singular, i.e., either "she" or "he." On the other hand, it is good to avoid gender-specific language when gender is irrelevant to the point. So today some people accept the use of "they" or "their" in the singular. If you choose to adopt this recent style, that's fine, but be careful: many mistakenly think this gives license for a pronoun free-for-all. It does not. You must be consistent (see previous points about "one"). A safer gender-neutral alternative is often available. You can often substitute the plural throughout: "Persons must never give up their own freedom."

For style, try your best to avoid the passive voice ("It has been argued that..."), in favour of the active voice ("Socrates argued that" or "I argue that..."). (It is perfectly OK to use the word "I" or "my" in your essays, especially since you will often need to assert *your* thesis; you just don't want to distract your reader's attention by gratuitously inserting yourself into your essay.)

12. Take a look at the marking criteria outlined on the syllabus.

Addendum for your Upper Level Political Theory Class

For an advanced political theory class there are, broadly speaking, two kinds of papers you might choose from: papers that advance a philosophical thesis, and papers that advance an exegetical thesis. (The guide above assumes we are dealing with the first kind.) A philosophical thesis advances a substantive claim on some philosophical question: for example, that democracy is the best form of government, that Locke is wrong to think that there is a right to revolution, that tacit consent does not ground any political obligations, that there is a human right to subsistence, etc. An exegetical thesis, by contrast, advances a claim of interpretation about a particular text, for example, that Hobbes's theory of the social contract actually commits him to freedom of conscience, that Hobbes is a proto-liberal, that Locke would defend the government's right to redistribute wealth, that Rousseau is an enemy of participatory democracy, etc. Of course these two kinds of paper can overlap, but they are in principle distinct.

If you choose a substantive philosophical thesis, you can still engage texts in the history of political thought, by using these texts as a source of arguments, theses, etc., with which you may agree or disagree.

If you choose an exegetical thesis, you will need to pick a thesis about which there is some plausible controversy. For example, a paper defending the thesis that Hobbes is a social contract theorist is not very interesting at all. (The contrary thesis would of course be very interesting, but I'm not sure how you could possibly defend it.) A good source for exegetical (or interpretive) disagreement is obviously the secondary literature, and of course you are welcome to use it to deepen your understanding of a text. But you should always be sure that your paper remains a paper *about* the primary text, not the secondary literature. You should never give a secondary piece of literature as a reference to show that Hobbes, Rousseau, etc. believe X. You need to give evidence from the primary text for that. Your reference to the secondary literature only serves as evidence for what such-and-such interpreter of the primary text believes.