

PSC 270: Classical Political Thought

Dr. Aristide Tessitore

Syllabus

Plato on Human Freedom and Civil Disobedience

The starting point for this course is a conflict or paradox that emerges in comparing the kind of arguments made by Socrates in the *Apology* and the *Crito*. In the *Apology*, Socrates emphatically states that if the Athenians were to make a law requiring him to give up philosophy, he would not obey since it would effectively reduce him to a less than fully human life. In the *Crito*, however, Socrates appears to elevate the laws to the highest authority. The two dialogues, taken together, raise a series of questions about the nature and limits of human freedom. Is it possible to reconcile Socrates' unyielding criticism of Athenian politics in the *Apology* with his willingness to submit himself to the laws in the *Crito*? To what extent and in what circumstances can one claim an allegiance to something higher than the political regime? How does one of the most intriguing characters in the Western tradition understand the complexities involved in the problem of civil disobedience?

In order to get at these questions we will back up a bit and look at a dialogue that Plato places in close dramatic proximity to Socrates' trial and execution. The *Gorgias* addresses the growing appeal of rhetoric in fifth-century Athens, an art or skill reputed to win greater political freedom for its practitioners. The dialogue ends with an artfully prophetic anticipation of Socrates' own trial and the kind of rhetorical problem it would pose. On the basis of our study of this dialogue we will turn to the conflicting views of philosophic freedom and political constraint presented in the *Apology* and *Crito*. Our aim is to see whether careful study of these dialogues yields a coherent view of freedom and submission—both intellectual and political. It is also expected that our study will give us occasion to think deeply about some of the ethical dimensions of civil disobedience in its intellectual, religious, and political manifestations.

Somewhat Provisional Timetable

Week One: Introduction

Jan 4: Introduction to Political Thought and Plato

Week Two: *Republic* and *Gorgias*

Jan 7: A Useful Platonic Image, *Republic* 7

Jan 8: Introduction, Socrates and Gorgias (447a-461b)

Jan 9: Socrates and Gorgias (ibid.)

Jan 10: Socrates and Polus (461b-481b)

Jan 11: Socrates and Polus (ibid.)

Week Three: *Gorgias*

- Jan 14: Socrates and Callicles (481b-506e)
- Jan 15: Socrates and Callicles (ibid.)
- Jan 16: Review and Assignment of Brief Paper
- Jan 17: No class (Tessitore conference)
- Jan 18: No class (Tessitore conference)

Week Four: *Gorgias* and Midterm

- Jan 21: Socrates concluding speech (506c-527e); **Paper due**
- Jan 22: Socrates concluding speech (ibid.)
- Jan 23: Study Group One
- Jan 24: Study Group Two
- Jan 25: **Midterm Exam**

Week Five: *Apology*

- Jan 28: *Apology*, Introduction (17a-18a)
- Jan 29: Old Accusations (18a-24b)
- Jan 30: Actual Indictment (24b-28b)
- Jan 31: Final Arguments (28b-35d)
- Feb 1: No Class (Tessitore Conference, again)

Week Six: *Apology*

- Feb 4: Final Arguments (28b-35d)
- Feb 5: Penalty Bargaining (35e-38b)
- Feb 6: Farewell Speeches (38c-42a)
- Feb 7: Debate Group One
- Feb 8: Debate Group Two

Week Seven: *Crito*

- Feb 11: *Crito*: Introduction and Dramatic Context
- Feb 12: *Crito*'s Arguments for Escape
- Feb 13: Socrates' Response
- Feb 14: Socrates' Response
- Feb 15: Untangling the Paradox?

Week Eight: Overview

- Feb 18: Overview and Course Evaluations
- Feb 19: Optional Study Session for Final Exam
- Feb 20: Study Day
- Feb 21: **Final Examination, Thursday 9-11:30 a.m.**

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Winter

Books to be Purchased:

Four Texts on Socrates, edited by West and West
Gorgias, Plato

Requirements:

Regular attendance and participation in class (good participation can raise final grade; three or more *unexcused* absences will lower it.)

Midterm (40%) and Final (40%) examinations

One brief written paper (10%) and one in-class debate (10%)

Office Hours:

As posted: M, Tu, W, Th, F: 3:00 - 4:00 p.m.
Johns Hall 111E; Extension: 3331

Disabilities:

Students with disabilities who need academic accommodations should contact Dr. Sarah Fletcher, Coordinator of Disability Services (2998) in Plyler Hall 1 (basement). After meeting with her, set up a meeting with me during office hours. Please attend to this EARLY in the term.