

**Political Studies Program, Summer 2017**  
**WHAT IS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY?**  
**Instructor: Peter Berkowitz**  
**Washington, D.C.**

In this opening week, led by Program Dean Peter Berkowitz, we introduce the study of politics by exploring the work of Leo Strauss, one of the twentieth century's most consequential teachers and scholars of political philosophy. Students will read Strauss' famous essay, "What Is Political Philosophy?" and excerpts from the autobiographical preface to the English language translation of his first book, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. We will examine key topics in his work including the quarrel between classical and modern political philosophy; the critique of social science positivism, historicism, moral relativism, and Heideggerian existentialism; the conflict between reason and revelation; and the defense of liberal democracy.

All readings will be provided and should be completed before the class discussion.

### **Resources**

To learn more about the ideas and figures discussed in this course, we encourage you to explore a project supported by the Hertog Foundation: **The Great Thinkers** (<http://thegreatthinkers.org/>) and **Contemporary Thinkers** (<http://contemporarythinkers.org/>) websites. These sites are aimed at introducing important thinkers in Western thought, with a particular emphasis on politics and philosophy.

Relevant pages include Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Spinoza, Hegel, and Heidegger (on The Great Thinkers), and Leo Strauss (on Contemporary Thinkers).

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## **Monday, June 19, 2017, 9:00 am to Noon**

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### ***Introduction***

#### **Readings:**

- Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?"

#### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What does Jerusalem stand for (pp. 9–10), and how is it related to the problem of political philosophy?
2. What is political philosophy, and how does it differ from political theory, political theology, and political science?
3. What is positivism, and what are its limitations?
4. What is historicism, and why is it "the serious antagonist of political philosophy" (p. 26)?

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## Tuesday, June 20, 2017, 9:00 am to Noon

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### Session 2

#### Readings:

- Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?"

#### Discussion Questions:

1. What are the distinguishing characteristics of classical political philosophy?
2. What are the "two very common objections" (p. 36) to classical political philosophy, and how might classical political philosophy reply?

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## Wednesday, June 21, 2017, 9:00 am to Noon

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### Session 3

#### Readings:

- Leo Strauss, "What is Political Philosophy?"

#### Discussion Questions:

1. What are the distinguishing characteristics of modern political philosophy?
2. What is the first wave of modernity?
3. What is the second wave of modernity?
4. What is the third wave of modernity?

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## Thursday, June 22, 2017, 9:00 am to Noon

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### Session 4

#### Readings:

- Leo Strauss, Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, pp. 1–15 (ending with "only if Spinoza were wrong in every respect"), and pp. 28–31 (beginning with "The results of this examination").

#### Discussion Questions:

1. What is the theologico-political predicament?
2. What about Weimar made liberal democracy in Weimar weak? What about liberal democracy made liberal democracy in Weimar weak?
3. How was Zionism a response to the weakness of liberal democracy in Weimar? What are the limits of the Zionist response?

4. How was a return to Judaism a response to the weakness of liberal democracy in Weimar? What are limits of the return-to-Judaism response?

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**Friday, June 23, 2017, 9:00 am to Noon**

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***Session 5***

*Readings:*

- Leo Strauss, Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*

*Discussion Questions:*

1. What is Heidegger's challenge?
2. What is Nietzsche's challenge?
3. What are the practical and theoretical implications of the challenges of Heidegger and Nietzsche?
4. What are the implications of Nietzsche's failure "to escape from the evidence of the Biblical understanding of man" (pp. 12–13, and 30–31)?