

**The Responsibility of Thinking: Tocqueville, Heidegger, Strauss, &
Levinas
POLITICAL SCIENCE 309R - - Fall 2007**

Ralph C. Hancock
750 SWKT
422-3302

MWF 10-10:50, 793 SWKT

Office Hours: Wednesday 3-4pm, Thursday 10-11am, or by appt.

Course Themes

Can reason guide us in ethics and politics? As the confidence of modern rationalism wears thin (even at its shrilly proclaimed), it is well to consider with utmost care the question of the competence and limits of reason, even of the very meaning of the term.

This course undertakes an in-depth exploration of the problem of theory (reason, philosophy, thinking) and practice (ethics, politics). How does thinking – including the most rigorous and self-critical thinking – relate to the assumptions or insights that frame and guide moral and political life? Can philosophy give the rule to practical life? Where would it get such a rule? Can reason discern standards of “natural right”? Are these in any way independent of political and historical circumstances? Or is reason itself dependent on practical life for its own governing norms? Or on divine revelation? Is practice (or faith) in this sense prior to theory? Does the very meaning of reason perhaps depend upon practical commitments or orientations that always precede reason’s own self-assertion?

In sum, what would be a reasonable, self-critical and responsible understanding of the competence as well as the limits of reason? And how would such an understanding of reason address the most fundamental political-ethical issues of our times?

Course Objectives

This course aims to contribute to all four of the officially articulated “Aims of a BYU Education.” (Find these, in connection with the specific aims of the Department of Political Science, at <http://fhss.byu.edu/polsci/assessment/Default.aspx> .) In particular, it aims at “intellectual enlargement” through careful and rigorous engagement with texts, and thus at the development of capacities in critical, analytical, and synthetic thinking. Students who apply themselves in this class are expected to experience great growth in their ability to understand and critically to address the fundamental moral and political issues of our time. This implies as well significant growth in the students’ self-understanding as moral and political beings whose very sense of right and wrong is bound up with fundamental intellectual commitments that can be made explicit only through painstaking reflection. Such growth of course spills over into the other principal aims of the university, since honest self-understanding is indispensable to full moral and spiritual maturity and provides a sure foundation for the richest lifelong learning and for wise service to others.

Required Texts:

Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*

Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics* (trans. Fried & Polt)

Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*

(Selections from Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, articles and drafts by Prof. Hancock, and other occasional sources to be distributed.)

Graded Assignments:

Weekly Reading Summaries. 800-1200 word summaries of and responses to the readings and discussions of the week, *including reading assigned for the day the summary is due.* Summaries are due in class; students will be divided into groups submitting either Mondays, Wednesdays, or Fridays. Heading of summary must clearly indicate date and readings covered.

Students should be prepared to read from their summaries and responses in class. Each of the 14 summaries is worth 10 points. Two weeks' summaries may be forgone or forgiven. Of the twelve remaining, the two lowest passing grades (6 or better) will be dropped. 100 points total possible.

Midterm Exam 50 points.

Final Exam 100 points.

Optional Research Paper. 4000-6000 words. May develop and refine discussions from weekly summaries. Must include discussion of a book or number of articles not otherwise required for the class. Students must demonstrate excellence on weekly writing assignments in order to qualify for this optional paper. 100 points.

Provisional Schedule of Readings and Assignments

Sep 5 Course Introduction (Mansfield: "Atheist Tracts")

Sep 7 Tocqueville, *DA* Introduction. RCH, "Tocqueville on ... Moral Analogy"

Sep 10 Strauss, "German Nihilism"

Sep 12 (cont.)

Sep 14 Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology."

Sep 17 (cont.)

Sep 19 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Intro 1,2.

Sep 21 (cont.)

Sep 24 (cont.)

Sep 26 Heidegger, *IM* 1(1-32)

Sep 28 Heidegger, *IM* 1 (32-54)

Oct 1 Strauss, NRH Intro, ch. 1
Oct 3 Strauss, NRH ch. 2
Oct 5 (cont.)

Oct 8 Heidegger, *IM* 79-122
Oct 10 Heidegger, *IM* 122-155
Oct 12 Heidegger, *IM* 155-186

Oct 15 Strauss, NRH ch 3.
Oct 17 (cont.)
Oct 19 **MIDTERM EXAM**

Oct 22 Heidegger, *IM* 186-210
Oct 24 Heidegger, *IM* 210-221
Oct 26 Strauss, NRH 4

Oct 29 (cont.)
Oct 31 Strauss, NRH 5a
Nov 2 (cont.)

Nov 5 Strauss, NRH 5b
Nov 7 (cont.)
Nov 9 Strauss, NRH 6a

Nov 12 (cont.)
Nov 14 Strauss, NRH 6b
Nov 16 Heidegger (Holderlin)

Nov 19 (cont.)
Nov 20 Strauss, *On Tyranny*, "Restatement"

Nov 26 (cont.)
Nov 28 Levinas, 1
Nov 30 Levinas, 2

Dec 3 Levinas, 3 (38-59)
Dec 5 Levinas, 9
Dec 7 Levinas, 10

Dec 10 Tocqueville,
Dec 12 Tocqueville

17 DECEMBER (MONDAY), 11-2: FINAL EXAM, IN REGULAR CLASSROOM

Appendix 1: Writing Guidelines for Papers:

[Note: This was stolen from Prof. Christensen – I find that it contains much good advice.]

In political science, our goal is to convey information succinctly and clearly in our writing. The following guidelines will help you to write better and in accordance with my expectations.

Paper presentation.

The paper must be typed and double spaced. There should be no spelling, typographical, or grammatical errors.

Avoid the passive voice.

Do not say “The box was shown to us by the professor” Say instead “The professor showed us the box.” You can identify the passive voice if you notice that the subject is missing “it is argued that short people are cranky” (who is doing the arguing is missing), or if the subject follows the verb “it is argued by some that short people are cranky.” There are some times when the passive voice should be used, but most writers use it too much. Unless you have a good reason to say something in the passive voice, revise the sentence to eliminate the passive voice.

Cut out all unnecessary words.

Do not say “It is my opinion that the United States is a democracy” In a paper that you write the reader knows that everything that you say is your opinion. Just say “The United States is a democracy.” Similarly, do not say “The Russians were unaware and did not have knowledge with regards to the fact that . . .” Say instead “The Russians did not know that . . .”

Avoid colloquial language.

Papers should not read like a telephone conversation. Do not say “It really stinks that government is so big” Say instead “Government has grown too big” Do not say “The prisoners flew the coop” Say instead “The prisoners escaped.” You should try to avoid slang words or words that are common in informal speech. Using more formal speech does not mean, however, that you have to use big or complex words. Use the best word for the situation. It may be short or it may be long, but use the best word.

Do not use jargon or vague language.

If I read “the transcendent modalities of bureaucratic reifications” I will have no idea what you are trying to say unless you have previously defined what these terms mean in your context. It is also better to use concrete or specific language rather than abstract or general terms.

Use active verbs whenever possible.

Rather than saying “A third proposal put forth by the committee is that courses should only be taught on Tuesdays” say instead “The committee also proposed that courses be taught only on Tuesdays” The first sentence’s verb is “is” the second sentence’s verb is “proposed.” “Proposed” is an active verb in contrast to a state of being verb such as “is.” A good test of active verbs is to circle every state of being verb in your paper (is, are, was, were, be, being, been). If most of your verbs are state of being verbs, there is probably a need to revise some of them to more active verbs.

Know grammar rules.

For example, “it’s” means “it is.” The possessive form of “it” is “its.” Two independent clauses are usually joined by a semicolon or ,and ,nor ,for ,but ,so ,yet ,or. “i.e.” is used for exhaustive lists; e.g. is used for examples. Compound subjects and predicates require parallel structures.

Use the best word.

If you say “economic growth is reverberating,” I will suggest that you reword the phrase. A better choice of words might be “growth rates are fluctuating.” Good writing is not just using correct grammar. It is using the best words and phrases to convey your message unambiguously.

Avoid chopiness in paragraphs and between paragraphs.

It is important to use transitions to link paragraphs. It is also necessary to link the sentences in a paragraph with transitions. Though the repetition of words is usually undesirable, sentences in a paragraph can be linked together by repeating a key word. Another way to link sentences in a paragraph is to use transition words. Some examples are and, also, besides, further, furthermore, in addition, moreover, next, too, first, second, for example, for instance, to illustrate, in fact, specifically, also, in the same manner, similarly, likewise, but, however, on the other hand, in contrast, nevertheless, still, even though, on the contrary, yet, although, in other words, in short, in summary, in conclusion, to sum up, that is, therefore, after, as, before, next, during, later, finally, meanwhile, then, when, while, immediately, above, below, beyond, farther on, nearby, opposite, close, if, so, therefore, consequently, thus, as a result, for this reason, since.¹ If your writing is choppy, consider using some of these or other transition words to link your sentences together better.

Back up your claims or arguments with examples (real or hypothetical) or sound logic.

Without support you are “arguing by assertion.” For example, a person could claim that affirmative action programs are bad because that person doesn’t like them. Most people are not persuaded by such arguments. Use analogies, examples, and logic to support your points.

Writing grammatically correct sentences is not necessarily good writing. A paper could be written without any errors but still be marked down to a C grade because phrasing is awkward or paragraphs are unstructured or wordy. Do not be offended because I tell you that you can write better. Every semester I have students who tell me that they have always received A grades on their papers and I am the first professor to give them a B. I had the same experience when I was a student at BYU, and I am grateful to the professor who forced me to improve my writing by pushing me beyond simply writing grammatically correct sentences.

Each paragraph must have a clear, internal structure.

Develop one idea per paragraph, and tell the reader what that idea is in the first sentence of the paragraph, the topic sentence. The rest of the paragraph should be related to that first sentence. For example, if a paragraph begins with “Public opinion in France made it difficult for the French government to send large numbers of troops in support of the Chad government in its dispute with Libya,” then everything else in the paragraph should deal with public opinion in France. Half way through the paragraph do not switch and start talking about how aid to the Chad government was being wasted by official incompetence or corruption. If you want to put both ideas in the paragraph, change the leading sentence to “Corruption in Chad and public opinion in France both made it difficult for the French government to assist Chad in an effective manner.”

Your audience is an educated reader.

Do not expect them to know all the details of the events that you are writing about. On the other hand, you can just make simple reference to historical or international events that the educated reader should know about. It would be appropriate to say “just as the Weimar Republic failed because of electoral instability, so also do some fear that electoral instability will threaten Russian democracy.” You do not need to explain what the Weimar Republic was.

Use a consistent and acceptable style of citation.

In most cases there will be no need to cite in your papers, but if you use a quote or paraphrase someone else’s ideas, use a proper citation style. In the political science department, Turabian is the standard. Turabian allows for using footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetical citations with a works cited page at the end of the paper. I prefer the use of parenthetical citations but any of the three styles is acceptable.

¹Diana Hacker, *A Writer’s Reference*, 4th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 1999),

Do not plagiarize.

You must cite anytime you use someone's words or ideas. Arguments borrowed from other writers (even if they are paraphrased in your own words) and disputed statements of fact must be cited to their sources. You should also cite facts that are not common knowledge. You do not need to cite when an author makes an argument that many others make or cites a fact that could be found in many other books. For example, you would not cite someone who claimed that war causes suffering or someone who pointed out that China is the most populous country in the world.

Avoid the excessive use of quotations.

You should use quotations when (1) you are examining the exact text, such as an analysis of the wording of a treaty, or (2) the author's wording is so superior that a paraphrase of the author's point would be inferior. In all other situations you should paraphrase the author's point with a citation. For example, your original quotation may say "The Chinese have long felt superior to their neighbors even though China has often been conquered by those same neighbors." There is nothing spectacular about this quote, so don't quote it. Paraphrase the information in your own words— *China retains its attitude of superiority to its neighbors even when those neighbors have defeated China in battle* (Hoople 1997, p. 26). Your paper will read better if it isn't just a string of quotations put together.

Check your writing style by following these tips.

- (1) Count the number of words in each of your sentences. You should have sentences of varied lengths. If this is not the case, revise the length of some of your sentences to give some variety to your writing.
- (2) Count the number of state of being verbs in your sentences (is, are, was, were, be, being, been). If most of your verbs are state of being verbs, revise.
- (3) Read your paper aloud. As you read it you will stumble across awkward or garbled sentences or sentences that are too long. Revise those sentences.

Avoid packing your paper with fluff in order to lengthen the paper.

The paper should be tight and organized. If I come across a paragraph, a sentence, or a page that could be deleted without detracting from your arguments, I will indicate that on your paper. You should anticipate such comments from me and revise your paper accordingly before you turn it in. Similarly, do not try to include all of your research just because you have spent the time doing the research. You will come across many interesting and important facts, but they may not be directly relevant to your thesis. Do not make the mistake of including discussion or argument that does not fit into the overall structure of your paper.

Anticipate and address counterarguments

Your arguments will be stronger if you anticipate counter arguments and try to deal with them in your paper. After you have written your paper, ask yourself what would someone say who disagrees with me? Consider each of those arguments and then consider including a response to at least some of those arguments in your paper. You can say "Some may claim that I am wrong because I have not considered the cost of these proposals. (The counterargument) However, what price can we put on peace and human dignity? Are we willing to condemn a whole class of people to a life of suffering in order to lower our tax rate by a few percentage points?" (your response). By including a response to possible a possible criticism of your argument, you will have made your argument more persuasive.

Appendix 2

Writing in Political Philosophy – With Some Criteria for Evaluation of Student Papers

Ralph Hancock

June 2003

The tradition of western political philosophy is a conversation that has been carried on for more than two thousand years. This conversation is by no means limited to the mechanics of political institutions; in fact it begins with the questions how one should live, a question which proves to be inseparable from an exploration of the political and ethical dimension of our existence. The classic texts of the tradition of political philosophy raise the most fundamental human questions by engaging arguments made in earlier texts. To learn about this tradition is to begin to participate in this conversation.

Essential to this learning is writing. Writing is not a mere artifact of thinking or a simple reporting of already existing thought. Writing is essential to thinking, perhaps indeed its consummation. You have not thought a thought completely until you have clearly articulated it in language available to other thinkers – until you have written that thought, and probable re-written it.

A key challenge of this class is therefore learning to respond in writing to the great texts of political philosophy. What makes this difficult as well as rewarding is that no method or formula can spare you the individual effort of finding a thread in this conversation that is meaningful to you. There is no simple and clear starting point where all the answers or even the shape of the questions is defined and settled in advance; there is no way to know just where the conversation will lead you before you take the risk of entering into it. This is to say that you cannot expect to know just what you are going to write before you actually begin to write, before you engage this conversation.

Of course, before you jump into the conversation you must ‘listen’ to it intently (that is, read the texts very carefully) for a while, until you are ready to venture a question or comment of your own. You will learn to hear the author’s response in the text(s) you are studying, and then develop in turn your next question or proposition. This question or proposition might in turn provide the occasion for another engagement with the text. Your papers should thus reflect this kind of conversation with the great authors of the Western tradition of political philosophy; you should strive both to give faithful accounts of their views and to develop your own in disciplined response to these texts. Finally, you will see that there is no clear division between explaining and interpreting Plato’s or Augustine’s thoughts and developing your own.

The best student papers in this class will demonstrate just this kind of thoughtful engagement with texts. And they will do so in writing that is clear, correct in grammar, spelling and punctuation, interesting, and well-organized. An “A” paper must not only fulfill the formal requirements of the assignment; in it the author must take the initiative to use the assignment as a framework for real thinking, for the articulation of fresh (if not absolutely original) ideas. A superior paper will thus not only be careful and rigorous in arguing within given categories and assumptions. It will go further, indicating and perhaps beginning to develop possibilities beyond the obvious.

To bring to light such fresh possibilities of course involves imagination, but it is not simple “creative” or “subjective” in the usual – that is, loose – sense of these terms. On the contrary, such writing requires very careful organization (at the level of the whole paper as well as within paragraphs); artful transitions between paragraphs and other parts in order to convey a sense of structure; and precise, resourceful diction (word choice).

I like to compare a well-crafted paper to a well-told joke. The writer must know what the punch line is and why it is “funny” (why the point of the paper matters), and

then must arrange everything (organization, tone, pace, phrasing) to build up to and give maximum effect to that punch line.

This description of student writing no doubt appears a bit daunting, but keep in mind that I am trying to describe for you the truly superior paper, the one I would gratefully award an “A+.” I have been evaluating student papers for many years now and do not expect your writing to fulfill my every fantasy. So it is possible to pass and even to earn praise and good grades without proving that you are both an original, profound thinker and accomplished in the craft of writing. In fact it is possible to reach the “A” or at least the “A-“ range by excelling in just one of the main dimensions I have outlined, without necessarily showing distinction in the other. I might as well confess that my grader’s conscience has a particular soft spot for any paper that seems to express a real idea, to demonstrate thinking that is at once authentically personal and actually engaged with the classic text we study. If you demonstrate this, you will find me quit forgiving of minor mistakes or weakness in the formal qualities of your paper. On the other hand, if you fail to find inspiration to give wings to your writing in a particular assignment (believe me, I know as an author that the gift of conceiving new possibilities is not something that you can turn on and off with a switch), I am quite able to appreciate earthbound writing (at least to the level of a B+ or perhaps an A-) when it demonstrates careful reading of the text(s) at hand, and is careful, clear, and correct.

Papers in the “B” range are those that fulfill the assignment conscientiously, showing some substantial, analytical familiarity with the texts being considered and some reasonable attempt to make connections. The writing is clear and competent, and makes a plausible (if not necessarily profound or exciting) argument; such writing must of course be unmarred by formal errors or weaknesses that detract seriously from the comprehensibility and flow of the writing.

“C” papers are generally those judged adequate to fulfill the assignment, but without much to praise either in terms of the quality of the thinking or of the writing. Such papers cannot be perfunctory; they must give evidence of substantive familiarity (if not necessarily careful analysis) of the text(s) under consideration. They must have a point, even if it is not a very interesting one (or even, to the experienced reader – me, that is – a very plausible one). Again, virtues in thinking can sometimes redeem (up to a point) vices in writing (and vice versa? – an open question): badly written paper that somehow convinces me that an actual idea is lurking there somewhere may win me over and cause to append a “+” to a C. I’m vulnerable that way.

Perfunctory, non-serious papers are “Fs.” If I’m pretty sure the paper is perfunctory, but you manage to make me think that you might have actually tried to read and explain the texts but just could not adequately fulfill the assignment, then you might get a “D.”

Deliberately plagiarized papers (cheating, that is) deserve and will be rewarded with a failing grade for the whole class, and whatever additional sanctions the University will allow me to impose.