



Enlightenment and its Critics

Yeshiva College

Fall 2020

Dr. Neil Rogachevsky

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MW: 6:45pm-8:00pm

Course Introduction

To what extent can reason inform political life? How far can science guide morality and politics? Does religion help or hinder political improvement or progress? To what extent is human nature fixed? How much political improvement or progress can and should we expect?

Though always addressed by the greatest political thinkers, these questions became the subject of vigorous public debate beginning especially in the seventeenth century. Around that time, a political movement emerged that sought to advance a politics based on the natural rights of individuals, religious toleration, and the progress of science and reason. This movement came to be called the Enlightenment. From its very early days, however, the Enlightenment project was met by both theoretical and political backlash and criticism. Thinkers raised key doubts about central tenets of Enlightenment and questioned, especially a) whether scientific progress and moral and political progress go together and b) whether reason can be a sufficient guide in political life. Debates about these questions continue down to our own day.

This course will consider the deepest and most important political thinkers who shaped the terms of the Enlightenment and debated the project. Thinkers to be studied include Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Jewish perspectives on the Enlightenment and enlightenment will be considered along the way. Through careful study of the works of these political philosophers, students should come away with an appreciation of the major political-theoretical tensions and problems that have defined modern life.

Expectations

Students will be expected to carefully read between 100 and 150 pages a week. Prior to every class, students will be expected to have read and reflected upon the readings of that week, and to participate in class discussions about them. Students will write two short papers [3 pages], and one longer paper [7-9 pages]. A take-home final exam will ask for comparisons between thinkers covered and general and specific reflection on the themes addressed in the course.

Attendance

Active attendance and participation are essential for the functioning of the course and learning experience, especially given the reality of our reliance on ZOOM [TM]. Covid-19 demands greater flexibility with absences, and excuses will be judged with lenience. But all absences are to be cleared in advance with the instructor. Any more than two unexcused absences will result in a docked grade.

Grading

20%: Class Attendance and Participation

20%: Two Short Papers

30%: Long Papers

30%: Final Exam

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who are enrolled in this course and who will be requesting documented disability-related accommodations should make an appointment with the Office of Disability Services, (646) 592-4280, akelsen@yu.edu during the first week of class. Once you have been approved for accommodations, please submit your accommodation letter to ensure the successful implementation of those accommodations.

Course Materials

The course will proceed through careful exegetical analysis of major texts. Some texts will be distributed via PDF or online resource, but students should buy the following books *in the following editions*, as indicated. Please speak to the instructor if you have financial constraints and we will arrange for books to be sent to you.

Required:

- 1) Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan The Wise*, [Translated by Ronald Schechter]
- 2) Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, [Cambridge edition, Ed. Richard Tuck]
- 3) John Locke, *Two Treatises on Government*, [Cambridge edition, Ed. Richard Laslett]
- 4) Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and other Early Political Writings*, [Cambridge edition, Translated by Victor Gourevitch]

Other readings will be distributed

Schedule

Week 1 (August 26): **Introduction. What is Enlightenment?**

Week 2 (August 31 & September 2): **Enlightenment in Debate**



Readings: Yoram Hazony, *What is Conservatism?*, Patrick Deneen: *Why liberalism failed* [Chapter 1], Haydn Mason: “The European Enlightenment: Was it Enlightened?”

Week 3 (September 9): **Gotthold Lessing: The Promise and Peril of Religious Toleration**

Readings: Lessing, *Nathan the Wise* [Act I and II]

Week 4 (September 14 – 16): ***Nathan the Wise, Continued***

Readings: Lessing, *Nathan the Wise* [Act III and IV]

Week 5 (September 23): ***Nathan the Wise, Concluded***

Readings: Lessing, *Nathan the Wise* [Act V], George Washington, “Letter to the Hebrew Community of Newport”

Week 6 (October 14): **The Modern Project: Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan***

Readings: Hobbes, *Leviathan* [TBA] **FIRST PAPER DUE**

Week 7 (October 19 – 21) ***Leviathan Continued***

Readings: Hobbes, *Leviathan* [TBA]

Week 8 (October 26 – 28) **From Hobbes to Locke**

Readings: Hobbes, *Leviathan* [TBA], Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* [TBA]

Week 9 (November 3 – 5) **John Locke and Liberty**

Readings: Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* [TBA]

Week 10 (November 9 – 11) **From Locke to Rousseau**

Readings: Locke, *Two Treatises*, Rousseau, *First Discourse* [TBA] **SECOND PAPER DUE**

Week 11 (November 16 – 18) **Rousseau’s Critique of Enlightenment**

Readings: Rousseau, *First Discourse* [TBA]

Week 12 (November 23 – 25) **Rousseau’s Alternative**

Readings: Rousseau, *Second Discourse* [TBA]

Week 13 (November 30 – December 2) **Rousseau Concluded**

Readings: Rousseau, *Second Discourse* [TBA]

Week 14 (December 7 – 9) **Rights of Man and Woman**

Readings: Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* [TBA], **LONG PAPER DUE**

Week 15 (December 14 – 16): **Conclusion and Review**

Take-Home Exam Distributed