

Smoky Mountain Bible Institute

Philosophy 105 Ethics & Politics

Let's examine Ethics and Political Philosophy. If you wanted to become a real expert in this topic, you could apply to the Political Science Department of Manchester University which offers a Master of Arts in Ethics and Political Philosophy. If, however, you are only interested in a cursory overview of the topic, you have come to the right place!

Political philosophy is the study of topics such as politics, liberty, justice, property, rights, law, and the enforcement of a legal code by authority. It also studies what these things are, why (or even if) they are needed, what, if anything, makes a government legitimate, what rights and freedoms it should protect and why, what form it should take and why, what the law is, what duties citizens owe to a legitimate government, if any, and when it may be legitimately overthrown, if ever.

Political philosophy asks the question, "what ought to be a person's relationship to society?" The subject seeks the application of ethical concepts to the social sphere and thus deals with the variety of forms of government and social structures that people could live in – and in so doing, it also provides a standard by which to analyze and judge existing institutions and relationships.

The term "political philosophy" is synonymous with the term "political ideology", and often refers to a general view, or specific ethic, political belief, or attitude, about politics. Some consider it to be a sub-discipline of political science. We have in this topic scientific theory and philosophical ideas covering some of the same ground. For example, theoretical fields in the social sciences like economic theory, are better handled scientifically, but they are still valid fields for philosophical questions.

The two are intimately linked by a range of philosophical issues and methods, but political philosophy *can* be distinguished from political science. Political science predominantly deals with existing states of affairs, and insofar as it is possible to be amoral in its descriptions, it seeks a positive analysis of social affairs – for example, constitutional issues, voting behavior, the balance of power, the effect of judicial review, and so forth. Political philosophy generates visions of the good social life: of what ought to be the ruling set of values and institutions that combine men and women together. The subject matter is broad and connects readily with various branches and sub-disciplines of philosophy including philosophy of law, and of economics. Political philosophy is where one would seek to define terms like Liberalism, Conservatism, Socialism, Anarchism, and Environmentalism.

Historically speaking, the political philosophies that exist today are a product of thousands of years of trial and error. We can see by looking at the cultures, individuals, and eras of history that they are all foundational to the political philosophies that exist today. For example, the ancient Hebrew, Chinese, Greek, and Indian cultures, medieval Christianity, individuals like Saint Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, Islamic culture as it dominated during its golden age, medieval Europe, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, Niccolo Machiavelli, and John Locke, just to name a few.

What the framers of modern day governments have tried to do is to learn from the past in a very utilitarian way, seeking to use what works best. However, with respect to the life of a given civilization or government, a roughly 200-year cycle noted by an 18th century Scottish scholar seems to hold true: "bondage, to spiritual faith, to courage, to liberty, to abundance to selfishness, to complacency, to apathy, to dependence, then starting over with bondage." And because of human sin tempered by the grace of God, we can see the perpetual motion of the sociological machine in various stages throughout the modern world's civilizations.

I feel that our society is somewhere between the abundance and apathy part of the cycle. But we as Christians always have reason to be confident and thankful for God's gift of provision in our lives. Some say our society suffers from a case of "influenza". But even though our high court has sacrificed children and families on the altar of personal rights over and against God's truth, we can and should still strive to be good citizens of the land we call home.

We must keep in mind however, that we are citizens of two kingdoms. We thank God for the gift of the kingdom on Earth of which we are citizens, and as long as that kingdom functions in line with God and his truth, we gladly submit and obey as good citizens should. However, when our earthly kingdom makes laws that are contrary to God's, we must obey God rather than men, and be prepared to pay the price of that stand for God's truth. Enough about politics, though. The next lesson will be on specialized branches of philosophy.