

History of Western Political Thought II: Medieval/Renaissance: Poli 334 / Phil 344

Winter 2018
TTh 8:35:-9:55am
Burnside Hall 1B36

Instructor: Arash Abizadeh
Office: Ferrier 472
Office Hours: T 4-5pm
Contact by phone, not email please
Tel: 514-398-8549
Voicemail in own voice only

****Please note:** This is a manual note-taking lecture course. The use or display of any mobile computing or communications devices (including computers, recording devices, phones, iPads, or iPods) is strictly banned during class, except with the explicit permission of the instructor in exceptional cases. See “Course Objectives” and “Mobile Computing or Communications Devices” below.

Subject Matter

This course covers western political thought from the fall of the Western Roman Empire through the Renaissance. This era is marked by intellectual and political struggles among the legacies of the ancient world: Christianity, especially the papal Catholicism that succeeds the western Empire; the Empire and the pre-imperial Republic as aspirational models for political organization; the rediscovered Roman law; and rediscovered Greek philosophy. Prominent themes include the relationship between religion and politics: conflicts between the Catholic Church and worldly kingdoms or the Holy Roman Empire; the relationship between the good Christian and the good citizen. The majority of our reading will be devoted to the major canonical figures—Augustine, Aquinas, and Machiavelli—but we will also read other authors, some in depth and some quickly, to illustrate intellectual trends of one era or another. Lectures will routinely include historical background.

Course Objectives:

This course has three main pedagogical objectives:

1. to become acquainted with key concepts, problems, and questions of medieval and renaissance political theory;
2. to develop the capacity to think critically in an analytically rigorous way, to give articulate oral expression to that thinking, and to give articulate written expression to that thinking in a thesis-driven, analytical essay format; and
3. to develop the capacity to focus on and listen to lectures, digest the main points on the spot, and effectively to take hand-written notes that *synthesize* (rather than transcribe) lecture content.

Prerequisites:

Students will normally have taken POLI 333 or PHIL 345 (or be taking one of them simultaneously as a corequisite). Students who have taken a different course with significant exposure to Plato’s and Aristotle’s political writings should e-mail the professor outlining the details to receive special permission. All students are expected to have facility with major ideas from Plato’s *Republic* and Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics*.

Required Texts Available for Purchase at Paragraphe Bookstore

Augustine. *Political Writings*. Trans. Tkacz & Kries. Hackett.
John of Salisbury. *Policraticus*. Ed. Nederman. Cambridge University Press.
Thomas Aquinas. *Aquinas: Political Writings*. Ed. Dyson. Cambridge University Press.

Dante. *Monarchy*. Ed. Prue Shaw. Cambridge University Press.
 Marsilius of Padua. *The Defender of the Peace*. Ed. Brett. Cambridge University Press.
 Francisco de Vitoria. *Vitoria: Political Writings*. Ed. Pagden & Lawrence. Cambridge University Press.
 Niccolo Machiavelli. *Discourses on Livy*. Trans. Bondanella. Oxford University Press (Oxford World Classics).
 Niccolo Machiavelli. *The Prince*. Ed. Skinner & Prince. Cambridge University Press.

Resources

A good resource is the Internet Medieval Sourcebook at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>, which has chronologies, maps, primary texts, etc. Wikipedia is fine as a resource for unfamiliar history and names—it is usually reliable about basic facts like dates and institutions, etc.—but it is not reliable as a guide to ideas and philosophies. A valuable resource is the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://plato.stanford.edu>. It is especially useful for refreshing on the course's prerequisite material (Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*.)

Class Schedule:

~ = readings available via mycourses

Note: class January 9 is cancelled.

Note: the first class, January 11, is a substantive class. You are expected to have done the reading for the class beforehand.

1. Miscellaneous: Roman Background *

January 11: selections from:

Cicero, *On Duties* (44 BCE) ; *On the Laws* (c. 44 BCE); *On the Republic* (c. 51 BCE)

Seneca, "On Leisure" (62 CE)

Justinian, Institutes (533 CE)

2. Miscellaneous: Christian Background ~

January 16:

Bible excerpts: Old Testament: 1 Samuel 8:1-22. New Testament: Matthew 5-7, Romans 13:1-7,
 Luke 12:1-53, Matthew 22:15-22, Matthew 16:13-28

Nicene Creed

3-6: Augustine

January 18: Augustine, *Political Writings*, pp. 1-57

Note: Monday, January 22 we will hold a make-up class at a time to be determined in class; it is tentatively scheduled for 8:35am-9:55am.

January 22 (Monday make-up class): Augustine, *Political Writings*, pp. 58-129

January 23: Augustine, *Political Writings*, pp. 130-201

Note: January 25 class cancelled

January 30: Augustine, *Political Writings*, pp. 202-256

7. Miscellaneous Legal documents ~

February 1:

Magna Carta, 1215

Authentica Habita, 1158
 Customs of Saint-Omer c. 1100
 Customs of Lorris c. 1155
 Statutes of Volterra, 1244
 Bernard of Clairvaux, "Letter to Pope Eugenius III," c. 1146
Short reading; get a head start on Policraticus for next time

First paper due: 10:29am Monday February 5, 2017

8. John of Salisbury

Feb 6: John of Salisbury, *Policraticus* 1159 , pp. 9-78, 81-109, 129-143, 190-210

9-12. Aquinas

February 8: Aquinas, *Political Writings*, pp. 1-75
 February 13: Aquinas, *Political Writings*, pp. 76-157
 February 15: Aquinas, *Political Writings*, pp. 158-219
 February 20: Aquinas, *Political Writings*, pp. 220-278

13. Miscellaneous ~

February 22:
 Giles of Rome, *On Civil Government*, c. 1280
 Pope Boniface VIII, *Unam Sanctam*, 1302
 John of Paris, *On Royal and Papal Power*, 1302

14. Miscellaneous ~

February 27:
 William of Ockham, "Whether a Ruler Can Accept The Property of Churches For His Own Needs...", 1337
 John Wyclif, *On the Duty of the King*, 1379
 Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the Body Politic*, c. 1407
 Bartolus, *On the Conflict of Laws* (1471)

15. Dante

March 1: Dante, *Monarchy* (1312).

****Reading period March 5-9****

Second paper due: 10:29am, Monday March 12, 2017

****No class March 13****

16-17. Marsilius of Padua

March 15: Marsilius of Padua, *Defender of the Peace*, (1324), pp. 3-136
 March 20: Marsilius of Padua, *Defender of the Peace*, pp. 152-241, 309-318, 367-90, 432-73

18-19. Vitoria

March 22: Vitoria, *Political Writings*, pp. 17-18, "On Civil Power," 1528 pp. 231-92: "On the American Indians," 1539
 March 27: Vitoria, *Political Writings*, pp. 205-230: "On Dietary Laws, or Self-Restraint," 1537; 293-307: "On the Law of War," 1539; 331-33, letter to de Arcos, 1534; 82-108, "On the Power of the Church (I)," 1532

20-24. Machiavelli

March 29: Machiavelli, letter to Vettori in *The Prince* (Appendix A)
 Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Books I-II (Warning: more reading than usual.)

April 3: Machiavelli, *Discourses*, Book III.
 April 5: Machiavelli, *The Prince*
 April 10: Machiavelli, *The Prince*.

****Class April 12 cancelled****

REQUIREMENTS AND COURSE POLICIES

DISTRIBUTION OF MARKS:

2 Papers (1900-2200 words each)	31% each
Participation	6%
Final Exam	32%

To receive a final grade of C or above in the course as a whole, you must receive a passing grade for each paper and for the final exam.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

STUDENT RESPONSIBILITIES

Paper Assignments

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Your papers must have:

1. an explicit thesis
2. explicit arguments in support of your thesis
3. good explicit objections to your thesis and/or arguments; you must of course deal with these objections and show that they do not undermine your thesis

Papers that fail to have a clear thesis cannot get a grade higher than C, but will typically fail. Papers that fail to provide arguments cannot get a grade higher than C+, but will typically do worse. Papers that fail to deal with an objection cannot get a grade higher than B-, but will typically do worse.

For very basic guidance on how to write a good political theory paper, see my "Tips" sheet. That sheet is for an introductory political theory class, not for an upper level course, so I certainly don't expect you to follow the advice there mechanically, but it may help you organize your thoughts.

Papers are handed in as a PDF file via mycourses. All papers must be double-spaced, at least 11-point font, proper reference citation, with no separate title page but your title, name, TA name, and final word count (including footnotes) placed at the top of your first page. If you are using notes, use numbered footnotes (not endnotes, and Arabic not Roman numerals). I do not care which reference citation system you use, as long as you are consistent and complete. (You

may wish to use the Modern Language Association (MLA) system.) Papers that fail to meet these criteria will be penalized by dropping to the next possible letter grade (e.g., from A to A-).

On the word count: you need to observe the word count. If you find yourself going over the word limit, go back and edit, trying to cut out every single sentence or word that is not absolutely necessary to make your point and to defend your thesis. At each point in the paper, you should honestly be able to answer “yes” to the question: is this bit here really necessary for the defence of my thesis? You will not be penalized if you go over the word limit only if it is clear to the reader that the extra length was crucial to your argument and so warranted. Otherwise, cut.

Late Work

Papers and proposals must be completed on time. Late work will be penalized by dropping each day (including Saturday and Sunday) by one third of a grade (i.e., from A+ to A to A- to B+ etc.), unless you have secured explicit permission in advance to turn in your paper late. Late make-up essays will not be accepted.

Be proactive. If there are any foreseeable problems, come talk to me early, rather than waiting until after the fact. I will not grant extensions a couple of days before the due date.

Mobile Computing or Communications Devices

To facilitate the realization of course objectives, this course is organized as a manual note-taking lecture course. Mobile computing or communications devices (including computers, recording devices, phones, iPads, or iPods) are not permitted to be used or displayed in class (unless a student has received explicit permission from the instructor). If you bring such devices to class, they must be off and out of view.

There are three basic reasons for why this course is structured as a manual noted-taking course:¹

1. There is increasing evidence that mobile computing and other devices pose a significant distraction for both users and fellow students during class, inhibiting the ability to focus on and digest classroom material.
2. There is increasing evidence linking the use of such devices in class to poorer overall course performance.
3. Taking notes by hand is generally slower than typing into a computer. While it may be possible to transcribe a lecture almost verbatim when typing, this is impossible by hand. To take effective notes manually, one must simultaneously digest and synthesize the main points of a

¹ For evidence of the first two points, see, for example, C.B. Fried, “In-class Laptop Use and Its Effects on Student Learning,” *Computers & Education* 50.3 (2008): 906-914, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2006.09.006> ; F. Sana, T. Weston, and N. J. Cepeda, “Laptop Multitasking Hinders Classroom Learning for Both Users and Nearby Peers,” *Computers & Education* 62 (2013): 24-31, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2012.10.003>. For further discussion, see also Josh Fischman, “Students Stop Surfing After Being Shown How In-Class Laptop Use Lowers Test Scores,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 16, 2009), available at <http://chronicle.com/blogPost/Students-Stop-Surfing-After/4576> . For a more general discussion of the issue of computers in the classroom, see the interesting article by Laura Mortkowitz, “More colleges, professors shutting down laptops and other digital distractions,” *The Washington Post* (April 25, 2010), available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/24/AR2010042402830.html>

lecture. Not only is digesting and synthesizing on the spot an important skill in its own right (the development of which is an objective of this course), the process can itself play a crucial role in learning the material.

Exceptions: Explicit permission for the use of a computer may be granted by the professor in the case of a justifiable reason. Speak to me directly about this.

Participation: Readings & Talking Points:

Since this is a lecture/discussion course, it is essential that readings be completed before class, and that everyone participate actively in class discussions. Besides reading each assigned text, you are expected to prepare three sets of talking points on *each* assigned text for class:

1. be prepared to state and explain the key *concepts* used by the author
2. be prepared to state the main thesis (in the case of articles or excerpts) or main theses (in the case of a longer assignment such as a book) in two or three concise sentences
3. be prepared to give your own evaluation of the persuasiveness of the main thesis/theses

You are *not* expected to hand in your talking points in writing; you *are* expected to be able to speak about them orally in class.

Academic Integrity

McGill university values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures. (See www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information.)

MARKING CRITERIA

Papers will be marked according to the following criteria:

1. analytical rigour (logic, precision, clarity of argument, consideration of counterarguments, etc.)
2. originality / creativity
3. essay mechanics (structure of essay clear and logical, clear thesis, etc)
4. sentence mechanics (quality of prose, grammar, spelling, etc.)
5. scholarship (accurate representation of author's cited, other works engaged with when appropriate, quality of research if a research paper, etc)
6. miscellaneous (proper citation of sources, meets purposes of assignment, etc)

Each paper will be returned with a grade corresponding to each of these 5 or 6 items, in addition to your overall paper grade. Please note that (with the exception noted in the next paragraph) these 5 or 6 itemized grades are purely meant to provide you with feedback, so that you have an idea of what areas require improvement in future work. Your final grade is NOT an average of these itemized grades.

However, an F on any one of the six criteria will result in an F on the written assignment as a whole. In particular, a minimum level of originality (criterion 2) and knowing when and how to provide proper references to works that you have used in crafting your essay (criterion 6) are substantive requirements for all written assignments, without which the maximum grade is an F.

Explanation of Grades

Grades for papers will range from F to A+. Since I do not believe in grade inflation, and since I use the whole range of grades, to help you interpret your performance in the course, I provide

here a very rough idea of what grades in the C to A ranges mean. A grade in the **C** range indicates some basic problems that require immediate attention and perhaps some pedagogic help. I take a **B-** to be a below average grade which suggests some problem that needs attention. A **B** reflects average work; it is a respectable though perhaps unhappy grade. It indicates a need for improvement in future work. Usually there are no major errors, and there is a good, above-average comprehension of the material – though there may be problems of written expression, or of precision, or the work amounts to a regurgitation of texts or class discussion, etc. I consider a **B+** to be a very good grade reflecting above-average and promising work. General qualities usually include an excellent comprehension of the material, excellent organization of paper, excellent written expression, no major errors, meeting all basic requirements of assignment, attaining a basic level of analytical rigour, and going beyond a mere regurgitation of texts and class work. Moving into the A-range requires not just comprehending the material and presenting it well, but a critical engagement with the material that captures its subtleties and displays some spark of creative originality and/or superior analytical rigour. (All of this means that an excellent paper that is also excellent because it was a “safe” paper to write will probably end up with a B+. And, in fact, sometimes, depending on where you are at with the material, that is exactly the kind of paper you need to write.) An **A-** is an excellent grade reflecting a paper that is almost flawless in the basic requirements (excellent comprehension of material, organization of paper, written expression, etc.); there is also a critical engagement that captures the complexities and subtleties of the material, and that displays some combination of superior analytical rigour and/or creative original insight. A grade of **A** reflects a top-notch work that is flawless in the basic requirements and that reflects an outstanding comprehension of the material in all its complexities and subtleties and displays a combination of superior analytical rigour and creative original insight. The writer had likely set themselves up with an intellectually challenging project (which of course sometimes carries with it some risk) and was able to pull it off. The very rare **A+** is similar; the plus comes from the fact that the reader was saying “wow!” while reading your paper.

What Grades are Not

Although it takes intelligence to write good papers, at the end of the day grades are NOT an evaluation of your intelligence. And grades are certainly not an indicator for how much the professor or TA likes you or how smart he or she thinks you are. To write well, you have to take risks, and often those risks will not pay off. If you do poorly on your paper, remember that many very smart people write papers receiving poor grades. Sometimes it's simply because you have not learned the relevant skills yet. Sometimes it is a matter of sheer luck (you got unlucky and picked a topic or line of argument that turned out to be a dead-end, and you had no way of knowing in advance!) University is an opportunity for you to take risks from which you can learn.

Tips for Writing an Essay for your Intro Political Theory Class with Arash Abizadeh

1. **Know the difference between a thesis, an argument, and the premises of an argument.** A thesis is a claim you wish to defend in your essay. An argument is what you say in order to defend the thesis; it provides reasons in support of your thesis. Premises are claims used in your argument. An argument consists in a series of premises.

For example, one of the key theses in Wolff's book is that there can exist no legitimate authority (except for unanimous direct democracy). An argument he gives for this thesis is the following:

- 1 (premise). Authority is legitimate only if it is compatible with the autonomy of those over whom it is exercised.
- 2 (premise). Autonomy is incompatible with being subject to authority.
- Therefore:
- 3 (conclusion). No authority can be legitimate.

Steps 1 through 3 all together comprise the argument for the conclusion 3. The conclusion 3 is the thesis Wolff wishes to defend. 1 and 2 are premises in the argument for his thesis.

2. **State your thesis clearly at the beginning of your paper.** The claim you will defend in your paper should be clear to your reader at outset. You don't need to say, "I will defend the claim that XYZ". But you do need to state XYZ clearly. Your thesis is your view, the claim you want to defend. You need to take a position on the question you are addressing and state it clearly. "This paper explores issues related to..." is not a thesis.

3. **Provide arguments for your thesis.** Once you have decided on your thesis, you must defend it with arguments. How many arguments you provide will depend on how much space you have. But once you state your thesis, the next thing your reader expects is an argument for it.

4. **Know what it means to critically evaluate an argument.** Sometimes your thesis is about other persons' claims or arguments. For example, your thesis might be that Creon's arguments for the thesis that an individual has a duty to obey the law are stronger than Socrates's arguments for the same. If that's your thesis, then you need to state it clearly, state Creon's thesis and his argument(s) for it, state Socrates's thesis and his argument(s) for it, and then critically evaluate the arguments.

To critically evaluate an argument is to (a) determine whether the premises of the argument are true and (b) determine whether the conclusion follows logically from the premises.

Consider the following argument for the thesis that Socrates is a man.

- 1. Socrates is a philosopher.
- 2. All philosophers are monkeys.
- Therefore:
- 3. Socrates is a man.

This is an invalid argument: the conclusion does not follow logically from the premises. If 1 and 2 were true, then Socrates would be a monkey, not a man. Even if the conclusion 3 is true, this is not a good argument for it. Someone who was critically evaluating the argument could say "The argument is illogical."

Now consider a different argument for the thesis that Socrates is a man.

- 1. Socrates is a philosopher.
- 2. All philosophers are men.
- Therefore:
- 3. Socrates is a man.

This is a logically valid argument. If 1 and 2 are true, then 3 must be true too. But someone critically evaluating this argument could now dispute the truth of its premises. Someone might say, for example, that premise 2 is false, because some philosophers are women. If premise 2 is false, then the argument for the conclusion/thesis is not a good one. The thesis may be true, but it has not been adequately defended.

In general, if you want to evaluate an argument for a thesis critically, you must state the thesis, state the argument, and then ask two questions: (a) does the conclusion follow logically from the premises? and (b) are the premises true?

5. Make sure the arguments for your thesis are good, strong arguments. This means that someone who critically evaluates your argument would not find obvious problems with it. (See 4 above).

6. Make sure your thesis is an interesting thesis. Let's say you read the *Apology* and came up with the thesis "Socrates is a man." I am very certain you will be able to provide very good arguments for this thesis, but it is a rather uninteresting thesis. The reason why it is uninteresting is that it is difficult to see what the counterarguments to your thesis would be. If you can't think of any good, strong counterarguments to your thesis or any objections to your own argument, *then it's not a thesis worth writing a paper about.*

7. In your paper, you must seriously consider and respond to (a) counterarguments to your thesis or (b) objections to your argument. This is what makes the difference between an ok paper and a good paper. The stronger the counterarguments or objections that you consider and refute, the stronger your own position. A weak counterargument or objection against your own thesis or argument will leave your reader wondering why you even bothered considering it. If you cannot think of any counterarguments or objections, pick a different thesis.

8. Use your limited space wisely. Any argument for a thesis relies on premises. In political theory (or political philosophy), some premises will be normative and some empirical/descriptive. Now, let's say there is a claim you want to defend in your essay – in other words, your paper's thesis. For a political theory paper, you must defend your thesis by providing an argument. The problem with providing an argument for your thesis is that the premises you use in your argument are *themselves* claims with which someone may or may not agree. A premise in one argument can always become the thesis of another argument. So, for example, recall Wolff's argument:

1 (premise). Authority is legitimate only if it is compatible with the autonomy of those over whom it is exercised.

2 (premise). Autonomy is incompatible with being subject to authority.

Therefore:

3 (conclusion). No authority can be legitimate.

If someone disagreed with premise 1, and provided a good argument for why it is false, Wolff would be forced to provide an argument for premise 1. But then the premise of the argument above would become the thesis of another argument.

This means that the potential length of your paper is infinity. Since you have word limits, you need to make choices. For example, you may wish to provide an argument with premises that are relatively uncontroversial. Or if you employ a controversial premise, then you may want to briefly defend the premise too (i.e., provide an argument for it). But at some point you have to stop defending yourself and hope that the premises you use will carry your reader. There is no formula here; you have to exercise your own judgement.

9. Again, use your limited space wisely. Since you only have limited space to state your thesis, provide your arguments, and consider counterarguments or objections, you can't waste any words. Don't say anything that is not necessary to clarify or defend your thesis. Don't start off your essay, for example, with grandiose pronouncements about how important the question is or how many great thinkers have for

centuries and millennia thought about it. This is not a history class, so it's very unlikely that such claims would matter one way or the other to your thesis. Every sentence counts: with each paragraph, and with each sentence in each paragraph, ask yourself: why am I telling my reader this? If you can honestly say "because saying this is necessary for defending my thesis," leave it in. If not, think again.

10. Use the key concepts in your essay in a clear, precise, and consistent fashion. Key concepts in this course, for example, might be obligation, right, authority, etc. When you use a fancy word, make sure its meaning is clear to you and to your reader. For every word you use in your essay, be sure that you can define it. If you can't, either figure out what it means, or don't use it. If the meaning of the word is clear to you, but it's a word used in different ways by different people, then define it for your reader so that it's clear what you mean by it. (Words like "objective," for example.)

11. Spelling, grammar, and style count. For grammar, pay special attention to a common pitfall. You already know that nouns and verbs must agree with each other (so if it's a plural noun, you need a plural verb: not "we talks"). But don't forget that pronouns must also agree. This is ungrammatical: "One must always retain the right to make his own judgements." This is also ungrammatical: "One must always retain the right to make their own judgements." If your pronoun is "one" in the first part, it should be "one" in the next part. Thus: "One must always retain the right to make one's own judgements." On the one hand, for a similar reason, many have traditionally considered this ungrammatical: "A person must never give up their own freedom." "Person" is singular, "their" has traditionally been plural. According to many, the pronoun that goes with "person" should be third-person singular, i.e., either "she" or "he." On the other hand, it is good to avoid gender-specific language when gender is irrelevant to the point. So today some people accept the use of "they" or "their" in the singular. If you choose to adopt this recent style, that's fine, but be careful: many mistakenly think this gives license for a pronoun free-for-all. It does not. You must be consistent (see previous points about "one"). A safer gender-neutral alternative is often available. You can often substitute the plural throughout: "Persons must never give up their own freedom."

For style, try your best to avoid the passive voice ("It has been argued that..."), in favour of the active voice ("Socrates argued that" or "I argue that..."). (It is perfectly OK to use the word "I" or "my" in your essays, especially since you will often need to assert *your* thesis; you just don't want to distract your reader's attention by gratuitously inserting yourself into your essay.)

12. Take a look at the marking criteria outlined on the syllabus.

Addendum for your Upper Level Political Theory Class

For an advanced political theory class there are, broadly speaking, two kinds of papers you might choose from: papers that advance a philosophical thesis, and papers that advance an exegetical thesis. (The guide above assumes we are dealing with the first kind.) A philosophical thesis advances a substantive claim on some philosophical question: for example, that democracy is the best form of government, that Locke is wrong to think that there is a right to revolution, that tacit consent does not ground any political obligations, that there is a human right to subsistence, etc. An exegetical thesis, by contrast, advances a claim of interpretation about a particular text, for example, that Hobbes's theory of the social contract actually commits him to freedom of conscience, that Hobbes is a proto-liberal, that Locke would defend the government's right to redistribute wealth, that Rousseau is an enemy of participatory democracy, etc. Of course these two kinds of paper can overlap, but they are in principle distinct.

If you choose a substantive philosophical thesis, you can still engage texts in the history of political thought, by using these texts as a source of arguments, theses, etc., with which you may agree or disagree.

If you choose an exegetical thesis, you will need to pick a thesis about which there is some plausible controversy. For example, a paper defending the thesis that Hobbes is a social contract theorist is not very interesting at all. (The contrary thesis would of course be very interesting, but I'm not sure how you could possibly defend it.) A good source for exegetical (or interpretive) disagreement is obviously the

secondary literature, and of course you are welcome to use it to deepen your understanding of a text. But you should always be sure that your paper remains a paper *about* the primary text, not the secondary literature. You should never give a secondary piece of literature as a reference to show that Hobbes, Rousseau, etc. believe X. You need to give evidence from the primary text for that. Your reference to the secondary literature only serves as evidence for what such-and-such interpreter of the primary text believes.