

Teaching Philosophy Simon Cotton

My approach to teaching political theory is guided by three priorities. The first is practical relevance. Along with other fields of the humanities, political theory is increasingly regarded with a degree of skepticism, especially as higher education becomes more expensive. Regards of whether one is surveying the canon or teaching a topic-oriented course, therefore, political theory must reflect its close connection to professional fields like law and bioethics. This means it must be taught through *cases*. References to abstractions like ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘tolerance’, and ‘recognition’ are unavoidable at the level of broad principle, but unless students are provided with illustrative examples, they are unlikely to understand these principles, and unlikelier still to appreciate the reasons they invoke. Further, in political theory as much as comparative politics, testing and honing principles standardly requires that we *contrast* specifically selected cases, as in the familiar, if hypothetical, Trolley Problem. When I teach, therefore, I engage examples whenever possible. In a current course, for instance, I contrast conscription in democratic Sweden with non-democratic Singapore to both illustrate and test the claim that states might legitimately compel their citizens into obedience.

My second priority is ‘reasonableness’. We live in a culture of vigorous political dispute. Indeed, with the advent of social media, disagreement is penetrating the consciousness of even the most politically detached. However, most of this debate is adversarial rather than reasonable. As such, any means is fair game. If you can convince your opponent through argument, all to the good. But if victory requires misrepresentation, or even that you silence your opponent, then you will employ these techniques instead. Whatever the merits of adversarialism, however—at least in a more limited form—it is simply not possible to approach political theory in this way. Even *comprehending* opposing arguments requires that you are disposed to change your mind as, without this disposition, it is all too easy to miss their nuances. I strive to foster reasonableness in the classroom, therefore, in two ways. First, I do my best to model it myself. Students can easily be thrown back into adversarial mode if they detect partisanship on the part of their instructor. Second, I set clear guidelines to differentiate respectful from disrespectful dialogue. If students worry that they are being personally attacked, or fear that their good-faith views will be interpreted as such, reasonable debate can quickly become unproductive.

My third and final priority is that political theory integrate social science. Normative inquiry commonly culminates with conditional principles. For illustration, the social contract tradition is often thought to imply that we have an obligation to obey the laws of the state of which we are a member *provided* life would be worse under ‘anarchy’. Even when the principle derived is not conditional—consider Rawls’s demand that states maximize the wealth of their poorest members *no matter what*—it is invariably the case that the best way to *instantiate* the principle depends on circumstances. If political theory is to fulfil its potential, then, it cannot stop at this point. Whether life would be worse without the state is clearly an empirical question, and one, too, whose answer may vary. If we accept James C. Scott’s (2009) argument in *The Art of Not Being Governed*, for instance, many of the residents of highland Southeast Asia, at least, have no obligation to their respective states. What policies would in fact maximize the wealth of the poorest poses a similar challenge. Any definitive answer to this question requires not only that we engage the scholarship on inequality and poverty represented by such figures as Thomas Piketty, but also that we investigate the possibilities of path dependency and institutional complementarity associated with the varieties of capitalism literature. When teaching political theory, therefore, I include empirical scholarship wherever relevant. Indeed, I have found that doing helps enthuse your average undergraduate. Only a small percentage of people will ever be interested in abstract normative inquiry, whereas virtually everyone cares about concrete policy prescriptions.