

## POSC 232

### POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE ART OF READING

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Winter 2024  
Office hours: M 5-7, Th 3-5,  
and by appt.

#### I. Purpose and Scope

Have you ever spoken ironically? How about sarcastically? Have you ever seen fit to withhold some of what you know or believe from certain people you were talking to—maybe from a parent or teacher or assistant principal, or from a small child? Have you ever lied to protect yourself or another? Have you ever known others to do any of these things? If so, and I trust that you have, you're already acquainted with the arts of partial, indirect, and even esoteric communication. What you may *not* be acquainted with is that writers of great books, particularly great works of political philosophy, have sometimes written in just these ways, employing a rhetoric that communicates some of their teachings in such a way as to make them accessible only to readers who are tenacious enough to uncover them while providing a different, surface teaching for general readers. Why would they have done so? To address this question well, which will be the main thrust of our inquiry together, is to plunge into the depths of political philosophy.

Perhaps I have already spoken a bit disingenuously myself in saying that political philosophers have *sometimes* written in the way I've indicated. In fact this way of writing was the norm among political philosophers, not the exception, from antiquity through the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Nor has this kind of writing vanished from the world—it persists particularly among certain non-Western peoples—even if, strangely, it has vanished from the awareness of many Western scholars. Why scholars have been lost sight of this phenomenon and even derided the very idea of it promises to be another revealing question. But the greatest revelation that awaits us is a new understanding of our intellectual traditions, including books and ideas that we already “know.”

#### II. Course Requirements

By far the most important requirement is that you complete all assigned reading carefully and before class. Grades will be based on two take-home exams (each of which will count for 30% of your course grade), one or more brief written exercises (20%), and class participation (20%).

#### III. Academic Honesty

Strict standards of academic integrity will be upheld in this class. Your submission of written work means that your work is your own, that it is in accord with Carleton's regulations on academic integrity, and that you have neither given nor received unauthorized aid. Be sure you are familiar with Carleton's principles and policies on Academic Honesty: if you haven't done so already, review the website found at <https://apps.carleton.edu/campus/doc/honesty/>. I take

academic honesty very seriously: students who are found to have violated these standards should expect severe sanctions.

#### **IV. Readings**

In the first six weeks of the course we will explore the phenomenon of “esoteric writing” in general—what it is, why it is (or was), and what is at stake if we aren’t aware of the phenomenon. Our chief text during these weeks will be Arthur Melzer’s magisterial book, *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (available for purchase at the bookstore). Shorter readings may also occasionally be assigned. In the remaining weeks we will explore the phenomenon of esoteric writing in the case of a particular political philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. We will explore two of Rousseau’s books. The first, the *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts*, was Rousseau’s first major work. In it he not only engages in esoteric writing, he also reflects on the reasons for it. The second is Rousseau’s final work, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. The *Reveries* was published posthumously, and most readers (though not this reader) believe the work to be incomplete. The *Reveries* appears to be casual, meandering, and deeply personal, not serious, coherent, or political. We’ll investigate whether this appearance is true to reality.

Here is a *provisional* reading schedule; we are apt to alter the schedule as we proceed. Please note that after first week, all meetings will be on Tuesdays unless circumstances intervene:

January 4: Introduction: read Melzer Preface and Introduction

January 9: Melzer chapters 1 and 2

January 16: Melzer chapters 3 and 4

January 23: Melzer chapters 5 and 6

January 30: Melzer chapters 7 and 8

February 6: Melzer chapters 9 and 10

#### **Mid-term exam, due Friday, February 9, 11:59 PM**

February 13: Rousseau, *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (aka *First Discourse*)

February 20: Rousseau, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* (entire)

February 27: TBA

March 5: TBA

#### **Final exam, due Wednesday, March 13, 6:00 PM**