Welcome to the second of our two introductory lectures on ethics and politics. These are just a series of general remarks designed to ease us into this last part of the course before we move on to some specific moral and political theories. Last time I gave a little bit of an overview of ethics and today I'm going to do an overview on political philosophy that will set us up nicely for next time when we will begin talking about Aristotle's ethics.

In political philosophy we ask the question how ought we to live and it's a similar question to the question we ask in ethics. But when we ask it in political philosophy, we're asking it at the social as opposed to the individual level. So the chief question for political philosophy is how ought we to live where the "we" is understood is meaning us in society with one another.

Now, historically the question has been parsed in two ways. This general question has broken down into two smaller questions. The first, A, why ought there to be a civil society, why ought we to accept a common authority over us in the form of a government? That's the first question. The second, what sort of civil society and government ought we to have? And so the question how ought we to live is broken down into two questions: why ought there to be a civil society at all, why ought we to accept common authority over us in the form of a government? That's one question. The second, what sort of civil society, what sort of government ought we to have?

The first question, question A, is a distinctively modern question. It's a question that only arises in the context of modern political philosophy and it is one that would've utterly mystified pre-modern thinkers. As we move forward in this lecture, you'll get a
good sense of why.

The second question arises both in the modern and the pre-modern contexts. And so the second question is one that we'll find as both in Aristotle as well as in the writings of John Locke, who is the primary political philosopher that we'll be reading — the primary modern political philosopher that we'll be talking about.

Before we move on to this, however, let me just sort of give a couple of — define some of the terms that I've just used. I've talked about civil society, I've talked about common authority, and we need to define these terms. The word civil society, if you were to look it up in a dictionary, has many uses. We want to isolate that use that is most common in the philosophical context. It may not be the use that's most common in ordinary speech. In philosophy, at least, civil society refers to the totality of voluntary social and civic institutions that exist amongst a people. So civil society again consists of those institutions, those relationships that we enter into on a voluntary basis. Civil society is predicated on agreement and on compromise. It's predicated on the individual’s willingness to acknowledge that others may have ends different to one’s own.

Civil society is to be contrasted with — and this does not mean that the two exist separately from each other, but they are conceptually to be distinguished from one another. Civil society is to be contrasted with the state where the civil society is ultimately predicated on agreements and on compromises between individuals, and the state in its institutions and structures are ultimately backed by force. The form of life that we currently engage in in this country — we live both in a civil society and within a
Indeed, our civil society exists within the context of the state and there are intimate connections between the civil society that we inhabit and the state under which we live. So so much for defining civil society. This is just a rough definition and, as I said, it’s the definition that speaks to the use of the word as it is most commonly found in political philosophy.

Let’s talk a minute about the word authority. To say that a person has authority is to say that they have the right to rule. When one has authority, one legitimately exercises power over others. So it’s important to understand that the mere exercise of power does not mean that a person has authority. These are two important things to keep distinct. To exercise authority is to exercise power, but it is to exercise it legitimately. Which leaves open the possibility that power may also be exercised illegitimately.

This distinction between mere power, on the one hand, and genuine authority on the other is one of the chief distinctions used to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate regimes, legitimate from illegitimate governments. So, for example, the power, let’s say, the prime minister of England exercises constitutes genuine authority. The prime minister of England has the right to exercise power. His exercise of power is legitimate. The exercise of power, let’s say, by the dictator of North Korea, by Kim Jong Il or by the Iatolans in Iran — these constitute illegitimate exercises in power. These are not instances of authority but mere brute force.

And, of course, this immediately raises the question: well, how is authority acquired? What distinguishes the mere exercise of power which may be illegitimate
from authority which is the legitimate exercise of power? We’ll get some sense of those different — the differences between the two in just a moment. Right now it’s just important to understand that this is a fundamental distinction within political philosophy and that without the distinction between mere power on one hand and authority on the other we could not make the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate regimes and states.

There are any number of possible sources of authority. That is, the way in which one acquires the right to rule — the ways in which one acquires the rights to rule are many. However, there are two general sort of types of sources of legitimate authority. The first is what’s generally called natural authority where the right to rule is a matter of nature. Now, you might say, well, in what way could nature confer the right to rule? Well, there’s some very obvious clear cases of natural authority.

Typically, natural authority takes the — is the result of either some sort of natural fitness or superior endowment. So the most obvious example of natural authority is the authority parents have over children. So I — for example, I have a 4-year-old daughter. I have natural authority over my 4-year-old daughter. Why? Well, because I am naturally more fit to lead my household than my daughter is. My daughter being four has not yet developed her mind and her body to such a degree that she is capable of managing her own affairs. I, however, being a full-grown, mentally largely stable adult, have developed the capacity to manage my life. Thus, given that she is my daughter and that my wife and I both parent her, we have a kind of natural authority over her. Our right to make decisions for her derive from our natural
endowments, from our natural superiority in this case which is a superiority that pertains to fitness to manage one’s life.

Another example of natural authority — although it’s not perhaps as obvious — is that a doctor has natural authority his patients. Now, remember, authority simply means the right to exercise power. It does not necessarily speak to the amount of power that one exercises and obviously a doctor does not exercise the kind of authority over a patient as a parent exercises over a child. The reason I give the example of a doctor is because a doctor is a very clear example of someone who has authority by virtue of special endowment or fitness.

The doctor has expertise that you don’t have, that you the patient typically don’t have. And because of that expertise, the doctor is more fit to make certain decisions than you are. That doesn’t mean the doctor makes all the decisions. A very good doctor, of course, informs the patient as much as possible so that the patient can make decisions. But, for example, if you’re in the middle of an operation. Suppose it’s an operation where you’re awake and simply with a local anesthetic. The doctor makes the decisions about where to make an incision, about what to do once he’s inside. You don’t make those decisions. The reason for the doctor’s authority in that regard is because he has a capacity, a fitness, that you lack. These are both examples of natural authority.

Now, there’s another way in which the right to exercise power, the right to rule, the right to make decisions for others, is acquired and that’s by way of contract. This is known as contractual authority. Here the right to rule is a matter of agreement.
are two or more people and agreement is made between them that one person should exercise power over the others or that some subgroup — some subset of the larger group will exercise power over the larger group. There the legitimacy is conferred because everyone has agreed to this arrangement.

The most obvious example, I think, of an instance of contractual authority is an employer has contractual authority over an employee. So I work for this university. I work for Missouri State University from which this is being broadcast. My department head in the Philosophy Department, Dr. Pam Sailors, and my dean, Dr. Lorene Stone, both have authority over me. They have the right to make me do things. They have the right to exercise power over me, to make decisions for me. But that right is acquired entirely by way of a contract, right? I have agreed to work here. I don’t have to work here. I agreed to work here. And in agreeing to work here, I also agree to submit to the authority of those people who are in the position of being my superiors. So both natural fitness — natural fitness or endowment and agreement by way of contract, both of these are ways in which a person attains the right to exercise power. These are the two most fundamental sources of legitimate authority.

So going back to our earlier example, the prime minister of England’s right to rule over his people, his right to make decisions for his people and his right to sort of exercise power over them is derived by contract. He was elected. The people agreed that he should be the person to exercise power over the others. The example we gave before: my authority to exercise power over my daughter is derived from nature. It’s a matter of natural fitness or endowment. I am naturally suited to make decisions for our
household in a way that she is not.

But, by contrast, we can see now the sense in which a dictator like Kim Jong Il does not have legitimate authority. Think about it. He neither has natural fitness nor endowment. Kim Jong Il is no more able — no more fit to rule than any of the people he rules over. Indeed, his bizarre behavior would seem to suggest that he is particularly unfit to rule. And neither has he acquired the right to rule by any sort of agreement or contract. He is a dictator which means no one elected him, no one agreed to have him rule over them, and so he enjoys neither the legitimacy that's conferred by way of natural fitness nor by way of contractual agreement. Thus, when he rules over his population, he merely exercises power. He does not exercise authority and thus, in a very straightforward sense, his rule is illegitimate — this illegitimacy on which in part is based on our particular foreign policy towards North Korea. We don’t deal with illegitimate regimes the same way that we deal with legitimate ones and you can see now for obvious reasons why that’s the case.

Okay. Let’s go back to this question about pre-modern versus modern political thought. I said that the first question in political philosophy — why ought there to be a civil society, why ought there to be a government — are questions that would’ve mystified pre-modern philosophers. They would never occur to a pre-modern philosopher. We’re now in a position to see why.

It’s characteristic of pre-modern political thought that social relations in political authority are conceived overwhelmingly in natural terms, whereas one of the hallmarks of modern political thought is that social relations and political authority are thought of
almost entirely in contractual terms. So one of the characteristics of pre-modern thought is that pre-modern thinkers, pre-modern political philosophers, and even the ordinary man on the street in the pre-modern era tends to think about social and political relationships as matters of natural relations.

So the ancient Athenian citizen or the subject of a medieval monarchy is much more likely to think about his or her political environment, his political relationships, in the same way that he thinks about his family or extended family than he would to think about it in the way that he would think about, let’s say, a business deal. The overwhelming social and political sensibility of pre-modern man is natural.

In the modern era, however, almost substantial social and political relationship is understood in terms of a contract. Indeed, this is — you know, we can see just how far modern thought goes in this direction by reflecting on the modern conception of familial relations. The family was always sort of the last holdout of this sense of natural relationship and natural authority. Even once we get into the modern era, people still tend to think of the family in terms of a set of natural relations and of authority in the family as deriving from natural fitness or endowment. But if you think about how increasingly we conceive of the family today, I hope it’s sort of obvious that we’re beginning to change that. That we’re more and more beginning to think of familial relations and familial authority as matters of agreement or contract rather than as matters of nature.

Just to give a few examples, a few current hot-button issues which reflect this divide, think about something like no-fault divorce. The very idea of a divorce suggests
that the agreement that exists — that the relationship we’re in is a matter of agreement. Now, why do I say that? Well, because only a relationship that’s a matter of agreement can be terminated. I think about my relationship to my daughter. I can’t cease being her father. Suppose, you know, she decides when she’s 16 — as she probably will — that she can’t stand me. And supposing, you know, heaven forbid, that she even takes off — you know, moves out of the house, goes to California, whatever. She doesn’t cease to be my daughter as a result of that. Indeed, there’s nothing really she can do to, in a sense, de-daughter herself.

On the other hand, we don’t think of marriage like that anymore but we used to. Very religious Roman Catholics still think of the marriage bond is an enviable, unbreakable bond. But for the most part, especially in secular society, we think of marriage as a contract. So unlike in the case of my daughter and I, a husband and wife can de-couple themselves. It’s called a divorce. That divorce is a rendering, a breaking of the contract. So divorce is one example of a way in which what used to be viewed as a natural relationship, the relationship between men and women that we call marriage, now is seen as a contractual relationship as revealed by the existence of something like divorce which is a breaking of a contract.

Another example — another hot-button issue, of course, is gay marriage. I’m not interested here in whatever views we have about this, about the politics of this, but it’s another example. Those who are for gay marriages are working with the conception of marriage that is entirely contractual. If you go back and read Aristotle’s politics, Aristotle argues that the marital relationship arises from nature, out of the
natural necessity of men and women for one another, a) for purposes of procreation and b) for purposes of protection and stability. The fact that today we are even entertaining the possibility that two men may get married or two women may get married, which are relationships that don’t serve those natural functions, the fact that this is even a topic for discussion shows that we no longer think of marriage as arising out of the natural relations between human organisms but that we think of marriage as a form of agreement or contract. And indeed, once one thinks of a marriage as an agreement or contract, it’s very difficult to see how one would justify denying it to any competent adults; that is, denying it to people who are capable of making contracts. Of course we deny children the ability to make contracts but that’s because we think that they’re unable to responsibly make the decisions and agreements that contracts rest upon.

Lastly — and here’s really sort of an instance — example of how far in the contractual direction we’ve moved familiar relations in the modern era. There’s a whole children’s rights movement, one fringe part of which has advocated for children having the ability to divorce their parents. Obviously, this is sort of a fringe movement. This is not anything that’s gained any sort of mainstream acceptance. But it is in many ways a sign perhaps of things to come.

So on this idea, even the parent/child relationship should be conceived of in terms of a contract and parents should be able to — children should be able to divorce their parents. So under such a conception, my daughter would be able to de-father me or de-daughter herself. You know, obviously I don’t think this would be a very good idea. I do think that the question of natural fitness here really raises its head in a very
powerful sort of way. But the fact again that this is even a matter of discussion suggests just how far we’ve moved towards thinking of — even thinking of familial relationships in contractual rather than natural terms, and this is just the edges of what has been a pretty wholesale movement in modern political philosophy from a natural conception of social relations and authority to an entirely contractual conception of social relations and authority.

Let’s talk a little bit more about pre-modern political philosophy. Our first question regarding the justification of civil society and government, as I’ve said, would’ve been incomprehensible to the pre-modern mind. Unsurprisingly, the question does not arise in ancient political philosophy. So if you read Aristotle, if you read Plato, the question why ought there to be a state, why ought there to be a civil society — this question does not arise. The existence of civil society and of the state is simply assumed. The ancient philosophers go immediately to the second question which is what form of civil society, what form of government is best?

Let’s talk a little bit more about why this is the case, get into a little more detail. As already mentioned, for the pre-modern man the relationships on which civil society and government are based arise from nature rather than from agreement. So ancient political philosophy conceives of human beings as naturally social. That is, the pre-modern philosophers think of human beings as being, in a sense, designed by nature for social life. We are not designed by nature for solitude. We are designed by nature to live with others, the two main reasons being procreation and safety. All right. So Aristotle says, look, if men and women don’t live together, don’t couple, then the
human race will go extinct and this obviously is true. Although with technology increasingly this has become — even this is no longer necessarily true and that raises all sorts of interesting questions about whether in a sense — with technology, we can finally break away from the last strings that tie us to nature. But that goes way beyond the scope of this course, although it’s a very interesting question.

So procreation is one natural basis for human social relations and safety is another. This idea that it is in conjunction with others that one lives the most stable, safe life — these are the two natural grounds: the grounds of natural necessity, in which ancient and medieval political philosophers saw so all social and political relations as inhering in.

So one thing in the pre-modern view human beings are naturally social and for another — for the pre-modern thinker, authority is believed to derive — political authority is believed to derive from natural fitness. So in the case, you know, of an emperor, the idea is, well, this person is naturally fit to rule because of their greatness, because of their power, because of their intelligence, because of their greatness on the battlefield, and so on and so forth. Or authority is thought to derive from a person’s occupying a certain place in the hierarchy, and that place in the hierarchy is supposed to reflect one’s superior endowments. This is why pre-modern societies tend to be hierarchical and pre-modern governments tend to take either an imperial, monarchical or oligarchical form.

I want you to understand how deeply ingrained this idea of natural sociability was in the pre-modern mind. Indeed, it’s so deeply ingrained that it is not an exaggeration
to say that for the pre-modern man and woman, the individual self as we understand it today did not exist. So I want you for a few minutes while we’re talking about this to cast your mind back to the beginning of the course when we talked about self and identity. That conception of self that we find in Descartes and in John Locke, this idea of the interior self, this idea of the individual as defined by personality, private beliefs, desires and aspirations, this conception of the individual did not exist in the pre-modern era. This is a modern notion. A person in ancient Greece or medieval Europe did not think of themselves in this way at all.

By contrast, the pre-modern person’s identity was determined almost entirely by his external relations. So the individual today is defined in terms of internal qualities, beliefs, personality, aspirations, desires. The pre-modern person defines him- or herself entirely in terms of their relationship to others, in terms of external characteristics. Specifically, external relations to one’s profession, one’s family, one’s social rank, one’s religion and one’s citizenship, the state that one belonged to. You take these external relationships away from the pre-modern man and he literally ceases to exist. Obviously, not as a physical being. But there is no interior individualistic conception of self as we understood it today. For the ancient and for the medieval man, the entire identity of the individual is defined in terms of social relationships. That’s how deeply ingrained the idea of natural sociability is in the pre-modern mind.

So it’s for all of these reasons that our first question would’ve been incomprehensible to a pre-modern man.

All right. To ask, well, why ought there be a civil society, why ought there to be
a government, this presumes that one could possibly live without civil society or government. That the social political life is a matter of conscious decision or choice. This is something that the pre-modern man simply does not believe. Indeed, the pre-modern man cannot conceive of himself as existing at all in the absence of social and political relationships.

Now, let’s finish up with a brief discussion about modern political philosophy. Modern political philosophy typically begins with the first question -- why ought there to be a civil society, why ought there be a government — and only moves on to the second question when the first question has been answered. Indeed, the answer to the second question tends to follow from the answer to the first. And this is perfectly comprehensible. You see, to the modern mind, the individual is defined by what I’m calling the interior self. The individual is defined in the way that Locke defines the self. Locke defines a person. And consequently, on the modern view, the individual is self-sufficient. What I mean by self-sufficient is that we can conceive of it as logically possible that we might live on our own in a complete state of anarchy. That is, in the complete absence of social, civil and political relationships. We don’t view out social and civil and political relationships as essential to our identity as individuals. So the individual self in the modern era is in principle self-sufficient. It is a self-sufficient notion. It can be defined independently of the existence of any social, civic or political institution.

The pre-modern individual is not self-sufficient in this way. There is no way to define the pre-modern man in the absence of his social, civic, and political relationships.
So for the modern mind, the individual is the primary starting point and the individual has no natural relations to anyone else except for perhaps familial ones. But certainly no social, civic or political relations are natural for the modern philosopher. Thus, all substantial social, civic and political relations are conceived as forms of contract.

So the first question — why ought there to be a civil society, why ought there to be government — what the question is really asking is why is it in anyone’s interest to compromise and to submit to authority? If the natural condition of a human being for modern philosophy is individual autonomy, the private interior self, the question that arises — why ought I to compromise with anyone, why ought I to submit to anyone else’s will — that’s the first question of political philosophy for the moderns. And remember, for the moderns, because all social and political relations are understood as forms of contract, the question — why ought I to enter it — is primarily a question of self-interest. Why is it in my interest to enter into this contractual relation?

Now, typically — and let’s switch over to how the moderns will tend to answer the second question — typically with any contract the individual tries to get as much benefit from the contract as possible with the least amount of compromise. That is, giving up the least amount of personal prerogative. So the best contract for me is always gonna be the one where I gain the most from it but give up the least of my individual autonomy and freedom. This is why the modern answer to the second question tends to be some form of liberal democracy. So if the second question in political philosophy is what is the best form of civil society, what is the best form of government, the modern answer has tended to be liberal democracy. Why? Because in a liberal democracy one gives
up the least personal prerogative. A liberal democracy requires the least amount of
giving up for the most benefit. It’s one in which the private prerogative, the interior self,
is most left alone of all the other forms of civil society and politics. Of course anarchy is
the ultimate state of being left alone. But if we’re talking about justifying civil society
and government, the modern mind says, well, we want to justify it but with as little giving
up of personal prerogatives as possible.

So you have a little bit of a sense now of a) what the chief questions of political
philosophy have been and b) how those questions have broken down as per this divide
I’m making between the modern and the pre-modern which we always must keep in
mind as an over-simplification of the history. But for our purposes here, I think it is a
useful distinction to make. And we understand a little bit more about the relationship
between the kinds of political questions that are asked, the kinds of answers that are
given, and the more basic conceptions of human nature and of the individual that
dominate the pre-modern and the modern eras.

And so now with this complete, we’ve had both a nice little introduction to ethics
and a nice little introduction to political philosophy, and now we can really dive into the
specifics and into the details and paint this very — take this very general sketch — this
very general story arc and fill it in in greater detail.

So next time we’re gonna start our discussion of Aristotle’s ethics. Two things to
think about — well, more than two things. The first thing, I want you to pay attention to
Aristotle’s conception of human good and its relationship to his conception of human
nature. That is, I want you to be able to explain what does he think a human being is.
Given what he thinks a human being is, why does he think that this is the human good, that this constitutes human fulfillment. That’s the first thing I want you to consider.

The second is, is Aristotle’s conception of moral virtue viable in today’s world? That is, is it a notion that we could use? If so, why? If not, why not? And what this is gonna force you to do is to contrast Aristotle’s conception of human nature — of persons, of the individual, of the good — with our modern notions. Now, we haven’t done modern political philosophy yet, but you’ve had a very good exposure to the modern conception of the individual and the modern conception of the self in the first part of the course in personal identity.

And so you should be at least equipped to give a sketch of an answer to the second cluster of questions — is Aristotle’s conception of virtue viable in today’s world? If so, why? If not, why not? So without anything else to talk about today, I will leave you and we’ll pick up next time with Aristotle’s ethics. Thank you very much.