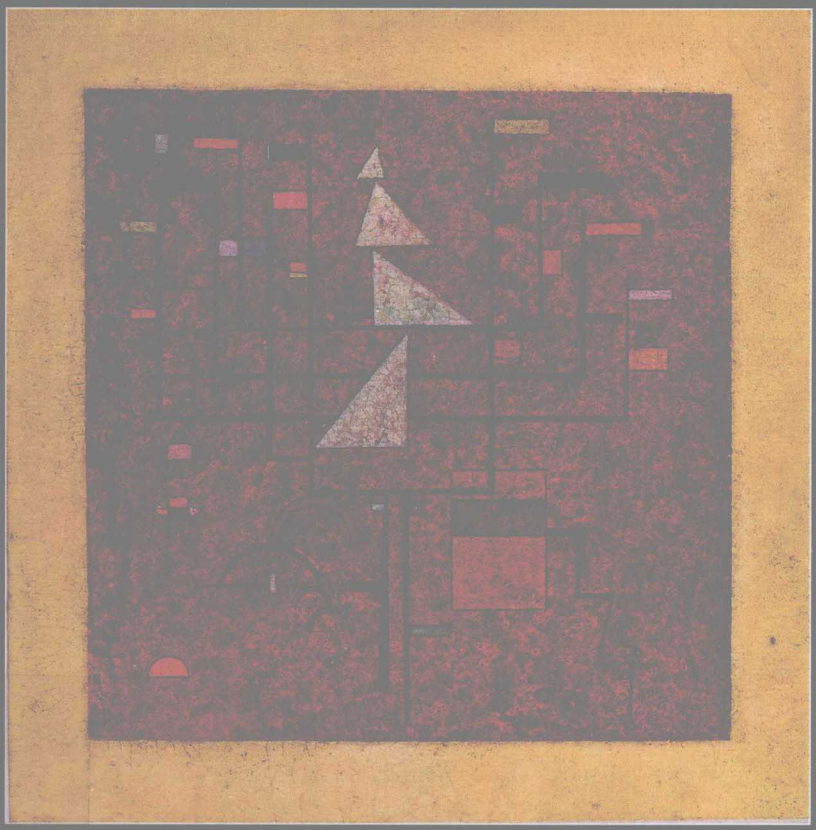
THE KEY TEXTS OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

AN INTRODUCTION



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An Introduction

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32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521185004

First published 2015

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data
Pangle, Thomas L.
The key texts of political philosophy : an introduction / Thomas L. Pangle, University of Texas at Austin, Timothy W. Burns, Baylor University.
pages cm
Includes index.
ISBN 978-1-107-00607-2 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-18500-4
1. Political science – Philosophy. I. Burns, Timothy, 1958– II. Title.
JA71.P3383 2014
320.01–dc23 2014015719

ISBN 978-1-107-00607-2 Hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-18500-4 Paperback

The Key Texts of Political Philosophy

This book introduces readers to analytical interpretations of seminal writings and thinkers in the history of political thought, including Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Bible, Thomas Aquinas, Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Tocqueville, Marx, and Nietzsche. Chronologically arranged, each chapter in the book is devoted to the work of a single thinker. The selected texts together engage with two thousand years of debate on fundamental questions, which include: What is the purpose of political life? What is the good life, for us as individuals and for us as a political community? What is justice? What is a right? Do human beings have rights? What kinds of human virtues are there and which regimes best promote them? The difficulty of accessing the texts included in this volume is the result not only of their subtlety but also of the dramatic change in everyday life. The authors shed light on the texts' vocabulary and complexities of thought and help students understand and weigh the various interpretations of each philosopher's thought.

- Contains accessible interpretive essays on the greatest texts in the history of political thought, from Plato to Nietzsche.
- Includes key passages plus a succinct discussion that glosses the text, examines later-day interpretations, and guides students in forming their own interpretations.
- Allows students to learn from, rather than only about, each thinker, and to apply their thought to the present day.

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To Heather and Sophia, Daniel and David

Acknowledgments

A section of Chapter 4, "The Bible," was previously published as "The Hebrew Bible's Challenge to Political Philosophy: Some Introductory Reflections" by Thomas Pangle, in *Political Philosophy and the Human Soul* edited by Michael Palmer and Thomas Pangle. We wish to thank Rowman and Littlefield Publishers for their kind permission to reprint. We also wish to thank the Earhart Foundation for providing generous summer funding during the composition of this book.

Contents

Introduction

What is political philosophy? Why is its study important? And why should political philosophy be introduced as it is in this volume – through a sustained encounter with a very few old books, whose authors lived in civic cultures profoundly unlike our own? Why do we not begin from books and thinkers of our own time? How will we get at the problems that are most important for us today through reading long-dead authors? Are not the important issues of politics those that are pressing, urgent, "the burning issues of the day?" What is in these old books that could be more significant?

The answer is simple. The books that we will be studying embody humanity's most powerful attempts to grapple with the truly fundamental and enduring questions about human existence. What are the ultimate ends or purposes of our lives, as individuals and as political communities? What constitutes human fulfillment and flourishing? Can security, health, prosperity, and entertainment be all that our existence is for? Or must not these goods be understood as, at best, a foundation and means or opportunity, for higher activities and concerns? To speak of the "higher" is to speak of that which has and bestows *dignity*; what is it that gives our existence dignity? What is it that makes this particular life-form – a human life – deserving of special respect or even reverence? What makes us different in rank from the other animals, so that we feel that we are free to eat and to enslave them, but not our fellow humans?

We express our respect for humanity by speaking of "human rights." Respect for human rights is a major dimension of what we call justice, or righteousness. What is the full meaning of *justice*? Most obviously, we discern two massive aspects: Justice means distributing to each and every person what is fairly due; including but going beyond the former – justice means caring for the *common good* of society as a whole. On what basis

does justice, in both these senses, make a claim on us, as individuals, such that we feel obliged (and we think that others ought to feel obliged) to respect and to care for justice, even or especially when this entails substantial personal cost – sometimes even the ultimate sacrifice of one's life? Is not this distinctly human capacity, for deliberately subordinating one's personal good to what one believes to be right, a major dimension of what dignifies human life, as a life that is more than that of a very clever animal? Is justice not a *virtue* – an admirable quality of character, a defining trait of a truly good person and of a healthy soul? But does being just, then, involve not so much self-denial as, instead, self-enhancement: Is being just not a crucial component of one's own truly greatest personal good? Or is there not a puzzle here, at the heart of our conception of the value of justice – a puzzle as to the sense in which justice is good, and for whom it is good? Does not a similar puzzle lurk in our conception of the value of other moral virtues, such as courage and generosity or charity? Do not these virtues entail selflessness or self-transcendence, while yet simultaneously being essential to self-realization in full dignity? What exactly does each of these moral virtues entail, and how are they related to one another and to justice? To what extent should the civic common good entail the communal cultivation of these moral virtues?

We have brought into focus major dimensions of our humanity's self-transcending or self-transfiguring concern for what is beyond narrow self-interest. Yet the most passionate expression of such concern is found in love and friendship. How are the claims made on us by love, and friendship, and family, related to the claims of justice and the other moral virtues? Are there not grave tensions among and between these diverse claims and obligations? How ought we to contend with these tensions?

The self-transcending dimensions and claims of human existence, when they are experienced deeply, lead beyond themselves to a further vast field of questions. For we are aware that we are situated in a larger cosmic whole – of which we humans, as a species, are not the masters, and not necessarily even the peak. We experience an awe for nature, of which we sense that we are the custodians, and not the owners. What is the meaning, and basis, of this awe and sense of responsibility? What is the ultimate source and ground of nature as we thus experience and revere it? Is there a deeper level of reality behind or above what we primarily experience as "nature?" What other beings, deserving equal or even higher respect than us humans, may exist? Does divinity exist? Does it afford us the possibility of an escape from the limits of our apparent natural mortality or finitude? What is the evidence for, and against,

the existence of higher, ruling and redeeming, divinity? If there is such divinity, what claims does that divinity make on us, and how are these claims related to the claims of justice, of friendship, of love and family? How should political life and human laws relate and respond to the possibility that there are supreme divine commandments or divine laws?

Up to this point we have stressed fundamental questions about our senses of dedication or obligation to what is beyond ourselves. But another key constituent of human dignity is personal liberty. What is *genuine* liberty? Is it merely freedom from physical and other constraints? Is it living as one pleases? How does one distinguish liberty from license? Does not full liberty require participation in republican self-government – taking on a responsible and meaningful share in shaping the common life of one's society? Is not civic liberty closely akin to the virtue of justice, as an intensely active virtue?

But is not the fullest human liberty a liberation of our *minds*, to and through *thinking*, for ourselves, and acting in accordance with our *independent* judging? Does this not entail a critical *questioning* of our society's beliefs, demands, customs, even its laws? But if so, how does this intellectual liberation fit together with political liberation, entailing law-abiding citizenship dedicated to the common good? How may one seriously question society's laws and customs and culture, while still remaining a loyal, dedicated citizen? What is the relation between such intellectual virtue and moral or civic virtue? Is there not here a gravely tension-ridden challenge? Can most people rise to this challenge – or is true freedom of the mind possible only for a few, very strong and unusually independent, even solitary, souls? Is this rare wisdom and strength of soul the truest meaning of *intellectual* virtue or excellence?

Yet *equality*, and respect for others as equals, is also a demand of justice. What exactly is the morally compelling meaning of equality, and how is this meaning of equality related to virtue and to liberty? Is it not very problematic to suppose that people are equal, in many important respects – in intelligence, in artistic talent, in capacity to love, in their moral care and civic zeal? In what sense then can everyone deserve equal respect, let alone equal treatment?

This leads on to another big set of questions: What kind of political order or regime most completely fulfills and lends dignity to its members? We have been raised in a mass liberal democracy, and of course have had bred into us, from early childhood, the claim that ours is the best, or even the sole legitimate, form of government and society. But is that true? What are the proof, the arguments, and the evidence? Have

not other, very different, forms of government bred citizens who believed with equal passion and conviction that theirs was the best, or even the sole legitimate, form of government and society? Have not other forms of government implicitly or explicitly claimed to be based on notions of human dignity, of happiness, of excellence, of divinity, of love, and of justice or the common good that are decisively superior to our notions? What are the arguments for those claimants, and how do they measure up against the arguments that can be marshaled for the rightness and goodness of our liberal democracy? Until we hear or engage in such debate, will we really have more than a merely dogmatic, inbred opinion as to the superiority of our democracy?

In raising these last questions, we begin to sense what is so controversial about political philosophy. Authentic political philosophy, as the sustained pursuit of questioning of the sort we have begun to sketch, is an unsettling and disturbing enterprise. Political philosophy was initiated by Socrates, who was tried and executed by the Athenian democracy as an impious corrupter of the young. And this was no accident, Plato teaches, in the first work that we shall examine. For citizens naturally become upset when they hear these fundamental questions pursued seriously and relentlessly. All human beings, not only citizens of democracies, are born and raised in one or another specific political and social culture that inculcates fundamental opinions that give the official answers to life's most basic questions. These answers tell citizens what they are supposed to think about all the important issues: what is right and wrong, just and unjust, good and bad, noble and base; who and what they ought to love; what friendship is, what a good family is, what divinity is; what one ought to admire and to strive for. The official answers constitute the very foundations of each society, and of its people's attachments – to their families, to their jobs, to their religions, to their friends, to their country. Political philosophy arises out of the awareness that these authoritative answers, until they are critically scrutinized, are held as mere opinions: They, and the culture or way of life they constitute, can be questioned, doubted, challenged to give a justification. Political philosophy began in earnest when Socrates became the first philosopher to make his central focus the striving for genuine *knowledge* about these most important matters – about what is truly right, good, noble, and just; about what constitutes true love and friendship; about what god or the gods might truly be. But when his fellow citizens sensed that these questions were being pressed and pursued intransigently, and that this meant that the respectable, traditional answers were

being severely interrogated, the citizenry became – for understandable reasons – alarmed.

In every age and culture where it has appeared, political philosophy has meant questioning what is sacred, doubting what one is not supposed to doubt. This means that the questioning that is at the heart of political philosophy is a dubious and even a dangerous enterprise. It can do vast harm; it can undermine society; it can leave individuals bewildered and weakened. We are thus confronted with one of the most agonizing problems of human existence: There is no simple harmony between what is good for social or personal stability, for civic commitment and attachment, and what is good for genuine freedom of the mind.

This problem persists in our own, liberal democratic, society and culture, but the problem takes on a distinctive new character. Like every other culture, ours has its own set of authoritative answers to all the big questions of human existence. Our civic society stands or falls with respect for tolerance, for freedom of religion and of expression, for the free market, for majority consent as the sole legitimate basis of government, for human rights – conceived as each individual's freedom to pursue happiness as he or she wishes, so long as this does not prevent anyone else from enjoying the same freedom. Yet as the adjective "liberal" connotes, our civic culture, more than any that ever came before, prides itself on being open to, and in some measure encouraging of, critical and even radical questioning or doubt. How far, and how truly philosophically, we ought in public life to press this doubt is a very big, very serious, very fraught question.

But we cannot today avoid political philosophy in some form and degree. We are spurred toward the radical self-doubt, the self-critical questioning, that is political philosophy by more than simply our liberal ethos. For we are haunted by the awareness that there are many reasons for viewing our present-day civic culture with unease, not to say alarm. To be sure, we have major sources of satisfaction and pride. At least in North America and Europe, modern democracy has achieved unprecedented security, prosperity, technological power, rule of law, and liberation from oppression. These benefits have been spread to more and more previously subordinated or exploited groups, including, notably, women and all sorts of downtrodden or marginalized minorities. But it is much less clear that we have progressed in virtue, civic or moral or intellectual; and in our efforts to continue our progress in more basic respects, we constantly encounter the obstacles thrown up by a grave deficit in our civic and personal virtues – and more generally, in the spiritual elements of

culture. Our lives are largely given over to working for a living, in jobs that have little civic dimension; to attending to our immediate families; and to relaxing or entertaining ourselves in rather mindless ways that allow escape and recuperation from the toil or narrowness of our jobs. The concept of true "leisure," communal and personal, has almost disappeared from our consciousness. The concept of true leisure is developed by Aristotle at the end of his *Politics*. Aristotle contrasts "leisure" with both work and play (as relaxation or entertainment). Entertainment and relaxation are unserious and restorative, even escapist: They give us pleasures that afford recuperation from, and for, the burdensome work that we make the serious business of life. Business (work) and play (entertainment) thus form a life cycle of seriousness without pleasure and pleasure without seriousness. Leisure breaks out of that cycle. Leisure is *serious pleasure or joy*. Leisure means the energetic, passionate, and freely chosen engagement in spiritually enlarging, uplifting, and fulfilling activity, reaping the profound joys of the soul. In our culture, however, the time and effort spent on studious reading, thoughtfully reflective conversation, religious worship, philosophic inquiry, artistic production, and, last but not least, sustained political participation, has not grown in any proportion to the growth in our more basic achievements. Is this the way it has to be? Does modern democracy have to purchase its manifest, basic benefits at the cost of a populace that tends toward becoming politically apathetic and childlike, socially atomized, and spiritually shallow? We are forced to wonder: Could there be something truly defective about, something important that is missing from, our liberal democracy's basic principles? Or, on the other hand, could it be that our culture has developed historically in such a way that it has lost sight of major rich dimensions of what our original liberal principles mean or imply? Have we as peoples over time forgotten key aspects of the spiritual depths and aspirations belonging to liberal republicanism, properly understood?

These daunting questions intensify, for us here and now, the centuries-old needs to which authentic political philosophy is the response, in all times and places. We today experience, if in a distinctive way, the age-old hunger to liberate our minds from simple submission to our present civic culture and its breeding of us. We are impelled in our own way to ask: What are the cogent reasons for, the decisive justifications of, the underlying aims or purposes that animate our form of government and cultural way of life? Is there no need or possibility for far-reaching reform of what we have been given in the way of answers to these basic questions about our historical existence?