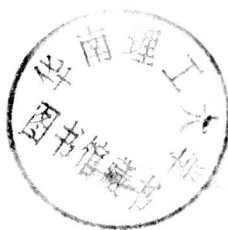




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# Western Political Thought

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# **Western Political Thought**

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## Preface

Political philosophy is the study of the fundamental questions about the state, government, politics, property, law and the enforcement of a legal code by authority: what they are, why they are needed, what makes a government legitimate, what rights and freedoms it should protect and why, what form it should take and why, what the law is, and what duties citizens owe to a legitimate government, if any, and when it may be legitimately overthrown. Western political thought has been dominated, since the beginning, with an interest in the procedures by which political power is applied. Theorists as early in the history of the field as Aristotle were primarily concerned not with what a state does, but how a state once entrusted with power will make decisions. Perhaps even more dominant than political theory has been the example of the semitic tradition of submission of magistrarial authority and citizens alike to *ex ante*, written law.

This book is an introduction to western political thoughts, spanning from the ancient to the modern times. It aims to give students the opportunity to study a range of thinkers who are considered to be key in the 'canon' of western political thought. Written simply and directly, it presents the basic ideas and dilemmas of western political thought through an in-depth analysis of a limited number of major thinkers— from Plato to Karl Marx. It views the thinkers in historical context and examines them in terms of the changing relationships of ethics and politics in western political thought.

*Editor*

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## **Chapter One**

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# **Introduction**

Western thought is our only possible gateway for the exploration of other ways of life and thinking. It is irrevocably ours. Even if we take flight from it in pursuit of another way, the access to that other way-be it the wisdom of the East or the simplicity of aboriginal peoples-will necessarily and unavoidably be from within our Western understanding of those ways of life. We cannot absolve ourselves of our heritage and find some pristine point of departure for such journeys. There is no objective language or neutral methodology that can open up an immediate and unobstructed relationship to other cultures in which their ways of disclosing the world become transparent to us.

Such knowledge only comes to us through the mediation of our own language and horizon of understanding. For example, anthropologists who study aboriginal peoples in far away places. No doubt, such scholars will exhibit the most sincere and rigorous desire to distance themselves from their own backgrounds in order to allow the host culture to appear as clearly and authentically as possible. They often integrate themselves into the fabric of the society they study, working alongside the people, learning their language, listening to how the "native population" discloses its environment, and observing the practices that characterise its daily activity.

Still, despite good will and precautions and no matter how honestly and carefully their researches were carried out, the

perspectives of these observers cannot help but be “contaminated” by the mediations of their own culture and their own time’s way of disclosing the world. The methodology they bring to the research site expresses all the prejudices of the modern social sciences about how to conduct and verify research, as exemplified in the anthropologist’s struggle to achieve objectivity, maintain neutrality, and secure untainted data.

Beyond this, the theoretical language that specifies what that data should be and how it ought to be obtained and processed will work within a discourse common to the modern social science disciplines that have grown out of the Western intellectual tradition. Not surprisingly, the conclusions of the anthropologist will be warranted by Western thinking and its interests and its criteria. In fact, findings of anthropological field studies will be compared and contrasted in order to arrive at broader conclusions. Of course, these correlations are only possible because of the common concepts and criteria specified by the theory and method of comparative anthropology, again a Western discipline.

### **Multiculturalism**

Multiculturalism is a Western value. Ironically, the call to respect cultural differences and the high regard that the foregoing critics have for diversity represent Western values and works within a certain tradition of tolerance that both respects and is intrigued by the “strangeness” of other ways of doing things. But more than this, even the most revolutionary modes of thinking, those that are the most disparaging of the West, denounce imperialism and capitalist exploitation, and call for radical change inevitably involve an unavoidable recycling of ideas that are already long rooted in Western understanding, a tradition as critical of itself as it is optimistic about its quest.

In a certain sense, one must agree that the West has mastered the world, since only in the most remote areas does



one find ways of life that have not been transformed in some significant manner by Western concepts, ideas, and practices. Of course, this dialectic of change is not without reciprocity. Western understanding is continually redefining itself, and in so doing, it necessarily reappropriates itself in different terms, reflecting the influence of the very cultures it has come in contact with.

Indeed, the horizon of the West involves the continuous becoming of ever-moving and transmuting networks of understanding that are complex and diverse, filled with discontinuities and oppositions ceaselessly in process. The very concept of a horizon reminds us of a kind of movement in which a given culture and its way of life, practices, institutions, thought and language are perpetually underway. Their apparent fixity and uniformity are an illusion grounded in the desire for absolute understanding and mastery.

And this unbounded change and diversity are compounded and transformed by the ebb, flow, and overlap of the West with other peoples and historical traditions of the world such that the horizon of the West is also irrevocably altered. Such relationships between cultures can be understood as voices in a continuing dialogue. These voices become both intermeshed and transformed to the point that, as they historically unfold, it becomes seemingly impossible to articulate a set of categories that can distinguish one culture from all others in some final and uncontaminated way. Rather, we seem increasingly to have in hand a world of nominally different cultures with very significant overlap—cultures that have come to an awareness of who they presently are in counter-distinction to a West they are already inextricably involved with.

Indeed, the preconceptual and conceptual contexts within which that awareness works will likely be Western, however much might have been adapted along the way. Thus from a cultural perspective, if not in every other way, the concepts of inside and outside, or, said another way, interior and exterior, become nominal boundaries that are not only moving but are

never absolutely airtight. This should be obvious, for without our common possibility for language and for "translation across languages", would not these cultural differences be unbridgeable? Would not the differences of language and meaning be incommensurable, partitioning human experience in airtight and inescapable cultural compartments? And if so, how is it that we do seem to end up communicating with and understanding each other, more or less, even across the greatest divides of cultural difference?

Hans Georg Gadamer points out that this melting of horizons into each other at their boundaries does not reduce everything to the "same." The translation inevitably involves both a loss and a gain, but it is always over against a backdrop of those very differences that a common understanding becomes possible.

Therefore, what is called "the West" is not a fixed heritage reflecting some static way of thinking, but a rather, rich, internally diverse, yet interrelated networks of understanding that are perpetually underway, reconstituting themselves and, in the process, becoming open to "new" possibilities. It is a past without absolute origin that involves a way of thinking that cannot be reduced to a pristine beginning or set of objective underlying determinations. It is never complete. It moves ahead, opening up new possibilities at the same time that it leaves other directions gradually behind, forgotten and abandoned, to recede into oblivion.

Yet because it is this Western horizon within which our world is always disclosed, it can never be a neutral horizon. Since our understanding and even our attentiveness to other ways of life are conditioned in advance and indeed made possible by our horizon's everunfolding but not random network of organising concepts and ideas, our judgements of different cultures will never be truly disinterested. They will work within the motivations, ideas, values, and commitments (the interests) that have historical claim upon us.

While those judgements will vary, depending on what more specific Western tradition is engaged, there are certain practices and beliefs that will be almost universally judged unacceptable. For example, the value of tolerance, which has already been referred to, has its limit. It is not, an absolute value that yields to some form of cultural relativity. We can find practices such as slavery, racism, and cannibalism intolerable, wherever they exist. We call for changes in countries where women are considered mere chattel, and we impose trade restrictions on regimes where practices are sanctioned that we deem a violation of human rights. Nor would we be dissuaded by arguments that such “violations” are actually legitimate practices that work within a culture that has a long venerable genealogy.

The “prejudice” of the West-the way of thinking and judging which is our opening onto different cultures and traditions-is, therefore, not an empty space, devoid of ethical content and conceptual power. Rather it is the inescapable medium within which we disclose the world and struggle to overcome or at least make sense of differences. Consequently, it is productive to reflect upon and question this legacy and its everdeveloping categories, its language, i.e., its logic in order to make clear its meaning and make transparently the limit within which Western thought works.

Although preferably done with honesty and good will, such reflection, as already noted, cannot be done without prejudice. It cannot be arrived at from the outside or from an external or neutral perspective for there is no outside available to us beyond our Western inheritance. It is this mycegenous opening, this so-called Western tradition of careful thinking that deconstructs and reassembles its own concepts in pursuit of the truth that is the enabling precondition of our meaningful encounter of other cultures.

### **Philosophical Ambition**

Philosophy means the love of wisdom. It reveals a desire to

know the truth and pursues this goal in a particular manner. When students of modern thought try to draw a line between tendencies they understand as modern as opposed to those they define as contemporary or possibly postmodern, they frequently look to Friedrich Nietzsche. During the last part of the 19th century this iconoclast challenged the basic tenets of modern thinking and at the same time brought to question the entire enterprise of philosophy. He stands as a solitary figure looking back on the history of thought where he finds few kindred spirits beyond possibly Schopenhauer and Machiavelli. Nietzsche seems to delight in provoking his readers.

Unflinchingly, he writes Socrates off as an old fool. He criticizes Plato and Aristotle at almost every point, accusing them of inventing a form of thought that throughout history has been a curse to people of superior capacity. Nietzsche argues that such thinking encourages people to live outside themselves, betraying the passions that define who they authentically are. He excoriates the Judeo-Christian tradition for celebrating weakness and mediocrity. But most of all he finds it guilty of being the Trojan Horse of Platonic thinking. Nietzsche announces the death of God, not that he ever believed in the divine, but rather because he claimed that belief in God had passed away as a determining power in the lives of 19th century Europeans.

Some of Nietzsche's sharpest barbs are reserved for modern philosophy and its extravagant belief in reason and reason's power both to resolve moral and political issues and sustain the growth of scientific knowledge. Nietzsche finds this to be simply optimistic trash. Rather than leading to some heavenly city on earth, modern philosophy only nurtures a tedious and base social order, boring in every detail, and ruled over by the vulgar and unimaginative.

Certainly equalitarian Democracy stands as no high idea, being little more for Nietzsche than the rule of the "herd," a dull undifferentiated majority whose tawdry desires and philistine tastes reek of the second rate. Their freedom is at

best the freedom to be a carbon-copy of everyone else. The truth of the modern condition, in Nietzsche's mind, is that there is no objective moral truth. Rather, all moral codes can be traced back to some earlier historical times when they emerged out of a struggle of competing wills in which usually the strong imposed their values upon the weak.

Only later as generations passed, did such standards become sanctified as the "will of heaven," the transcendent good, or reason's revelation from the logos! In his own day and behind such seemingly hollow claims, Nietzsche hears only the echo of emptiness, a nihilism that haunts every corner of modernity's vulgar display. Beneath the hurried and self-important manner of the average man is a vacuum of anything of value, of anything genuine, of anything honest. But, what can you expect of the "herd," to live like this is their nature.

Nietzsche finds the larger tragedy to be that those few spirits born to a higher destiny find little to work with under such adverse circumstances. These elevated beings necessarily live by pure courage, defining their own path by sheer power of will and in so doing fashion beautiful lives, whatever the cost. These alone are worthy of emulation in an otherwise desolate landscape. Nietzsche's thinking provides few alternatives for defining an ethical and political future, and for obvious reasons does not even aspire to repair what has been demolished.

But if this is the case, if Nietzsche's thinking, though potent and intriguing, fails to provide a satisfactory resting place for thought, why advance his ideas as a point of departure in our consideration of modern thought? The answer is not because he has any ultimate solutions for us, but because he alerts us to the dangers of doing philosophy passively and to the need to be on our guard against improperly founded arguments and the import of the hidden assumptions that haunt every kind of metaphysical enterprise. Consequently, study of modern political thought will profit from Nietzsche's critique by using his questioning of philosophy's metaphysical project

as a thread to guide us as we weave through the thicket of ideas and supporting arguments that constitute the Western philosophical tradition and its modern expression.

Nietzsche will force us to reach beyond mere description and assume a critical stance, where we are challenged to assess the arguments that political philosophers offer in order to justify their systems of thought. If in a sense, Nietzsche sets the bar high, we can only profit from the careful reflection it requires of us, a reflection that will hopefully lead to conclusions formed in the light of careful thinking on both the strengths, weaknesses, and limits of the theories we will examine, and hopefully to more defensible judgments about the proper direction political thought ought to take in the post-modern era.

Who was the first philosopher and when did he write? To most, the names of monumental thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle will immediately come to mind. Others will go back even farther to discuss the Pre-Socratics, the "originary" figures who, at the dawn of Greek history, are said to have thought the thoughts that would found the Greek pursuit of truth.

In philosophy, tales of great founding moments and originary thinkers border, necessarily, on the fabled and the fabulous. Consequently, they should not be taken as true or actual genealogies, but rather should serve to define, situate, and shade differences that distinguish variations within and without traditions of thought. Tracing concepts, traditions, or beliefs back to some supposed point of origin often makes it possible to portray aspects of given ways of thinking more clearly and show how they might have progressed or developed through time. These narratives also provide an invaluable tool for comparing and contrasting alternative points of view.

Nevertheless, we know that such storytelling inevitably involves myth-making, so we will want to guard against locating the absolute beginning of philosophy in Greece or

anywhere else. In addition, we will admit from the start that its story will inevitably be told in a variety of different ways and later demonstrate exactly why no one approach can give final form to philosophy's story. Taking note of this caution, we can still safely suggest that the tradition of thought we call philosophy arose mainly in Greece before the advent of the Roman Empire and has come down to us by way of many detours. At each juncture it has become more complex and diverse. It can be said to have influenced and been influenced by most of the great cultures of the world and the traditions of thought they harbour, while continuing to constitute the center of the Western way of defining reality.

### *Origin of Philosophy*

Even in the early history of Greek thinking, philosophers asked questions about the nature of things. They stood in wonder of the shape or form of the objects that surrounded them—indeed, in wonder that there was something rather than nothing and that what did exist could be identified and interrelated. Yet they also noticed change. No form seemed completely stable. Everything appeared to be in transformation. Some theorised that nature is inherently in flux and constituted by a multiplicity of basic substances—such as fire, water, ether, and so on.

The seeming permanence of some forms is an illusion, only a moment of transition in which unseen forces fleetingly hold essentially antithetical substances in check. Others seem to have argued the opposite position, holding that flux and change are only a contingent veneer that covers over and thus conceals what is real: the underlying, unchanging order of all things. Plato and Aristotle are examples in many respects of the latter ancient system builders, dazzling their young followers with the specter of a higher and immutable knowledge. For all their disagreements, both articulated philosophies are designed to show the way to a universe of truth that could incorporate all difference into a final and unchanging whole.

For Plato, the cultivation of reason draws thought beyond mere opinion limited as it is to what the senses can know from the fleeting forms of the material world to a realm of pure thought, where truth in its flawless beauty and unchanging perfection reveals itself directly to reason. Aristotle argued that the everyday change we observe actually reveals to the thinking person an underlying telos or logos (an underlying pattern or structure) that governs the unfolding of nature. Although nature goes through cycles of change, the more fundamental telos that governs those cycles does not vary.

Conversely, there is the critical discourse of Socrates, the hero of Plato's dialogues, who offers no unifying system at all. Rather, he sees himself as the archetypal gadfly who ceaselessly examines and reexamines the ideas of others to find the point at which they fail. We imagine him in the market places, stalking the Sophists and rhetoricians to put their ideas to the test-ideas offered to the public to deceive them into accepting policies that would serve only the interests of the few.

In this, Socrates represents rigorous thought's power to raise the question and thereby identify the problems standing at the heart of philosophical discourse. For Socrates, every claim to the "the true" and "the good" must satisfy stringent standards of reflection. As long as questions remain, philosophy's work is not complete. In somewhat the same way, subsequent thinkers question Plato's and Aristotle's theories to identify their inadequacies. They hold that thought, limited as it is by sense experience, can never apprehend such universal principles, if indeed they could be said to exist at all.

Theorists like Epicurus call for a more limited and practical approach. Philosophy should teach us how to live rather than engage in grandiose conjectures about the nature of things. Not surprisingly then, the Sophists, Stoics, and Cynics advance alternative and less ambitious approaches that pretend to deny the very possibility of a unified metaphysics.



Paradoxically, their criticisms of the problems inherent in earlier thought merely function to clear a space in which they can unfold their own metaphysical beliefs, ones that are also based upon far-reaching speculations about the nature of the universe and that, in spite of themselves, end up reducing the chaos of life to more fundamental and unchanging patterns.

### *Philosophy and Twofold Movement*

It is useful to identify two movements. First, we can find the metaphysical ambition of philosophy, the philosophical activity that advances comprehensive systems that seek to reduce the diversity and apparent flux of the everyday world to an unchanging set of laws or principles- to a universe of truth. Second, there is the activity of critical reflection on the limits, discontinuities, and aporias of all such systems and of the kind of thinking that produces them. This approach leads to a careful interrogation of the registers of discourse used by various schools of philosophy to constitute their systems.

It explores the underlying assumptions of every systematic claim to truth. Such critical reflection may border at times on the anti-philosophical. It may even raise doubts about the very foundations of the philosophical enterprise itself. For example, critical reflection has from time to time questioned the priority that philosophical discourse claims for its own categories, standards and criteria, arguing that they are conditional rather than categorical.

Indeed, in its most radical moments, it has scrutinised the very power of language (reason or thought) itself, surfacing its inherent instability and exploring the limit such indeterminism imposes on philosophical method. Yet, even in this anti-philosophical mode, one ends up with a philosophy of sorts. Criticism cannot completely escape the metaphysical ambition of philosophy, since the desire for transcendent, universal, and immutable truth permeates philosophical discourse at every point.