



On Politics: A History of Political Thought From Herodotus to the Present

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Both a history and an examination of human thought and behavior spanning three thousand years, *On Politics* thrillingly traces the origins of political philosophy from the ancient Greeks to Machiavelli in Book I and from Hobbes to the present age in Book II. Whether examining Lord Acton's dictum that "absolute power corrupts absolutely" or explicating John Stuart Mill's contention that it is "better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied," Alan Ryan evokes the lives and minds of our greatest thinkers in a way that makes reading about them a transcendent experience. Whether writing about Plato or Augustine, de Toqueville or Thomas Jefferson, Ryan brings a wisdom to his text that illuminates John Dewey's belief that the role of philosophy is less to see truth than to enhance experience. With this unparalleled tour de force, Ryan emerges in his own right as one of the most influential political philosophers of our time.

On Politics: A History of Political Thought From Herodotus to the Present Details

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Dea Vicentijevi? says

5/5: One can without too much doubt say that Ryan's book is one of the most copious, comprehensive and well-presented books on political philosophy that has been written. It is simultaneously grasping the whole scale of the core problems in political philosophy, by no means lacking in information and wielding the academic discourse it was written in beautifully. One definitely becomes more interested in political philosophy after reading such a book, taking a particular interest in the original works of the world's greatest political thinkers, especially because the ideas themselves are prese...

Tvrtko Bali? says

The thing I liked about most of the book is that it was easy to read and comprehensive. It obviously does have flaws though, or else I wouldn't have given it such a low rating. The author often gets lost in his thoughts and views the theories and societies of the past through the modern liberal lens, which means that the book comes down to being about the development of democratic thought in the West, which is not what the book is supposed to be about. Since that is the topic of the book, he often interprets thinkers and political systems in a way that emphasises their more liberal democratic aspects too much or even just spreads myths and half truths. It can go the other way too, he can misinterpret a thinker to discredit him and be biased all the way through, an example of this that particularly frustrated me was Plato. Furthermore, Ryan tries to justify his way of writing by saying that if the populous isn't actively involved in government, the state isn't political, there may be ruling or management he says, but not politics. This is frustrating not just because it's not true and is a lame excuse for his bias, but also because he openly uses it to discredit any political thought outside of the West as not really political and not developed enough save from maybe some exceptions. I understand that the book is long enough as it is and that covering the traditions, ideas and political systems of all the cultures on the world is practically impossible, but the excuse he uses is so derogative and lazy that it is kind of disgusting. It also comes to bite him in the ass once he needs to write about the middle ages, an age when Europe came to be ruled by feudal monarchies, the Church had great influence through both its spiritual and material strength, and more "political" systems were active in the East. This makes him more limited in the second part of Book One and his hypocrisy comes closer to the surface. However, the part that immediately follows, the first part of Book Two is when he shines, since concerning that period following the development of democratic thought only makes sense, the political systems discussed there are closer to home and therefore easier to discuss regardless of which way in the current a particular thinker prefers. If I was to rate only that quarter of the book, I would have given it four stars. It's too bad that the last quarter completely ruins Book Two as well, as it is reserved for more general topics which then develops into incoherent rambling with no restraint on bias.

Kåre says

Fokus er på filosofi mindre end historie, men begge dele indgår. Der tages udgangspunkt i en række berømte filosofiske tekster om politik, og disse tekster indrammes gennem diskussioner af de historiske forhold for de samfund, hvori teksterne er skrevet.

Hermed udelades meget interessant, og måske meget af det, som jeg synes er interessant. Udeladt er således alle politiske forhold fra før, der blev skrevet interessante tekster om politik. Jeg kender naturligvis en del til dette gennem diverse antropologiske bøger. Man kunne vel godt lige have nævnt, at politik ikke opstod med Sokrates.

Udeladt er også diskussioner af forholdet mellem praksis og filosofi. Hvad er det egentligt, der gør, at nogle forhold bliver beskrevet i filosofien og andre ikke gør? Er filosofien mest beskrivelser af allerede eksisterende praksisser eller er filosofien mere med til at forandre?

Udeladt er vist også diskussioner af alle de tekster, som ikke anvendes. Det er således som om, at disse store forfattere forholder sig til ret så luftige spørgsmål, hvorimod en række andre forfattere eller praktikere faktisk bedriver politik. Denne politik får vi noget af, men sammenhængen mellem den praktiske filosofi (de små forfattere) og de store forfattere er uklar for mig.

Vi får en del om de politiske forhold, men det er vist mest tænkt som en slags kontekst for tankerne. Det er nok fornuftigt nok, da det sikkert er meget vanskeligt at vide, præcis hvad man skal fokusere på. Alligevel savner jeg nok dette.

Jeg tænker også, at når man har skrællet den egentlige politik bort, så er der egentligt ret få temaer tilbage til disse store forfattere. Der kunne skelnes mellem religiøs ret og verdslig ret og derefter kunne de andre forhold puttes på. Mon ikke det kunne ordnes i et par skemaer? Men klart nok, det er slet ikke stilen her. Stilen er snarere lærd og meget nuanceret, så derfor passer det næppe med alt for simple fremstillinger.

Super diskussion af Platon. Han beskrives som anti-politisk, idet han egentligt kun forholder sig til en tænkt situation, hvor politiske forhold ikke længere findes. I hans tanker er der således ingen kriminelle, ingen utilfredse osv., og dermed er politik reelt væk. Super relevant i mange nutidige sammenhænge. Det er svært at vurdere beskrivelserne af Platons samtidighed, idet det er uklart for mig, hvem han skulle sammenlignes med. Skal han sammenlignes med nutidige religiøse/metafysiske eller med nutidige politiske? Ryan sammenligner med politik og det er sikkert velvalgt. Alligevel kunne en diskussion i forhold til de andre aspekter være interessant.

Super diskussion af Aristoteles. Han forsøger at undersøge politiske praksisformer og laver nogle afgørende skel, fx mellem styreformer. Nogle holder stadig, andre gør ikke. Grænserne for hans nutidighed diskuteres også fint.

Polybios beskriver omkring tiden, hvor Romerriget blev konsolideret gennem udryddelse af Katargo, hvordan politik udøves og drager på den empiriske baggrund konklusionen, at Roms styrke består i at mikse forskellige politiske typer sammen. Han artikulerer således ideen om miks som det centrale. Han beskriver også en slags ligevægtssystem, men naturligvis ikke som vi forstår det nu.

Cicero er vist kun med, fordi han er blevet berømt. Tror ikke, at han bidrager med noget

Med Augustine bliver den uklare skelnen mellem religion og lov tydelig (for mig). Augustine skelner helt skarpt. Foroven er der retfærdighed, men her findes den ikke og vi kan i alle fald ikke genkende den. Her er vi syndere og skal og bør straffes. Det er galt, hvis man straffes for noget jordisk, man ikke har gjort, men det gør ikke så meget, for i sidste ende er vi alle syndere og skal straffes. Straf har således en funktion, idet den kan få nogle til at forbedre sig.

Man skal rette sig efter lovgivere, ikke fordi de har ret eller er gudommelige, men simpelthen fordi de er en del af det, som gud har indstiftet.

Romerse borgere slap for tortur, hvis de blev anklaget for noget, og det skulle angiveligt være den borgerret, som de værdsatte mest.

Augustine bruger begrebet libido. Dette oversættes med kærlighed, men ligger nok tættere på Bourdieus libido. Augustine mener således, at man kan nære libido for alt, fx magt, dominans, penge, sex, og at man kan nære det for stærkt. Dette svarer vel fint til Bourdieus brug, hvor libido nærmest er en drivkraft, som gør blind.

Aquinas lykkes åbenbart med at få iklædt Aristoteles en kristen klædedragt.

237. Nobody before the sixteenth century would have thought that secular authority could be indifferent to the religious practices of its subjects: A defense of toleration on the grounds that private religious practice was no business of the law would have been unintelligible. ...The idea that each of us has a personal relationship with an angry but loving god is wholly unclassical.

Dante. Præmissen er, at formålet med et styre er at få subjekterne til at udvikle sig og govern sig selv moralsk for på den måde at opnå frelse. Derfor er Dante for fred, idet fred er en forudsætning for dette.

Der skelnes mellem descending og ascending authority. Kirken og de fleste følte "naturligt" at descending næsten altid er rigstist. Descending er installeret af gud til kongen til undersåtter.

Jeg tænker, at vi nu har et mix. På den ene side taler vi meget om demokrati mm. På den anden side praktiseres descending autoritet på arbejde, på markedet og i meget politik.

Marsilius bruger Aristoteles til at argumentere for, at authority is morally legitimate only when founded on the consent of a people. He was perhaps the first writer to make that thought do some real work (274)

Marsilius mente - vel i tråd med ovenstående - at Kristus havde givet de to dele ret til at rådgive og prædike men ikke til at bestemme.

280ff. Kompliceret afsnit om italienske by-stater og pavedømmet. Forstår jeg det rigtigt, blev romerretten anvendt i det meste af Europa, om end i de udgaver, de nu lige fandt på rundt omkring. Men dette er med til at forene vest-Europa.

291ff. Svært kapitel om humanismen.

Med Luther ser vi ud til at være nået til vejs ende med ideerne om at lov skal forankres i gud (håber jeg da). Jeg ser frem til at læse bog to, hvor argumentationerne vel bliver mere relevante.

Jacqui says

I enjoyed learning about so many great thinkers through the ages, and how they examined previous ideas and were inspired by or rejected them. I loved to see how the thread of ideas from as early as Athens echo forward into the present day.

The question "How should human societies best be governed?" has been answered so many different ways and it was very interesting to read through the history.

Irena Byron says

One can without too much doubt say that Ryan's book is one of the most copious, comprehensive and well-presented books on political philosophy that has been written. It is simultaneously grasping the whole scale of the core problems in political philosophy, by no means lacking in information and wielding the academic discourse it was written in beautifully.

One definitely becomes more interested in political philosophy after reading such a book, taking a particular interest in the original works of the world's greatest political thinkers, especially because the ideas themselves are presented in a comprehensive and memorable fashion.

Karen says

I really enjoyed this book, even when I didn't understand some of the political theories, because Alan Ryan's writing is wonderful. Yes, I have read some of the chapters several times, before I decided that I need to just forge ahead and finish it.

Andrew says

After fits and starts, I have put this book down for another day - although I did complete volume 1 and a good chunk of volume 2. On Politics: A History of Political Thought From Herodotus to the Present by Alan Ryan is a magisterial work that brings together some of the great thinkers in Western political philosophy, and summarizes their points, and the history behind them. Thinkers ranging from the ancient Greeks, such as Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato and Aristotle, through Cicero, Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo, Machiavelli and up through Moore, Paine, Locke and so on are summarized in a highly readable fashion. I have put the book down as it is a bit dense for the season, and I am starting to fatigue - even though it is a well written book. I will certainly be looking to pick this one up again, and potentially even purchase a copy instead of reading my libraries version. I can certainly recommend this book, and will write a more in depth review upon actual completion. As it is, it is certainly worthy of its 5-stars.

Praveen Kishore says

A huge book on (western) political thought and philosophy - starting from Herodotus and ending with globalization, fundamentalism, world government and environmental degradation - covering everything with analytical clarity, distinctive prose and verve.

Indeed, its more than 1000 pages require a determined effort and patience - but whosoever has the tenacity to persevere gets rewarded - as the book is really an engaging and passionate one!

Jim says

-on hold-

This book is being read by the Good Reads History Book Club for over a year and they are finishing shortly.
<https://www.goodreads.com/group/show/...> .

I became interested in checking out the book club upon reading that Neal Stephenson has been a member of a history only book club for twenty plus years. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/book...>
(Perhaps this? <http://www.historybookclub.com/>)

Book One & Two is available at the Nashua Public Library. I am giving Book One a shot which is 399 pages and covers the ideas of Herodotus to Machiavelli.

The book jacket calls it a comprehensive, ambitious and accessible history of political theory. After a quick scan, I agree.

(Three Decades in the Making!).

I may try to break the two books into 200 pages sections to be read in 4 periods . Let's see.....

I view this as the Poly Sci class I did not take in college....

Cary Kostka says

The author accomplished something that I have not encountered yet; a very in depth detailed account of political history. He does a wonderful job of taking you through the political climes and thoughts of all ages from Socrates and Aristotle into today's very divisive political arenas. The read is very long and information dense, so it will take some time to get through the material. Also, plan on devoting some time to diving deeper into certain topics and newly introduced political theorists. You may try to resist doing this, but your curiosity will not allow for it.

Scriptor Ignotus says

An extremely well-composed survey of western political theory, written by an accomplished political theorist. Early in volume I, Ryan posits that the question of how men are best able to govern themselves has been one of the central refrains in the history of political thought. His survey is written from the perspective of a proponent, albeit a cautious one, of modern liberalism. One should not expect perfect objectivity or a full fleshing out of the theoretical nuances of each of the many figures that Ryan covers in this work.

What *On Politics* is intended to do, however, it does remarkably well; it introduces (or reintroduces) readers to the pantheon of western political thought, ,gives them historical and political context, and asks questions about them that may spark a reader's curiosity and encourage them to learn more. Most of the work is relatively chronological, until Ryan finishes with Marx, at which point the latter nineteenth and twentieth centuries are covered with several different brushstrokes in the last few chapters. I was already familiar with many of the names Ryan covers, but learning lesser-known names and looking at Ryan's references at the end of the book has expanded my to-read list. The writing is light, concise, and conversational throughout as well, which helped to keep my attention through 1000 pages of text.

Marks54 says

A long time ago when I first took a class in political theory, we used George Sabine's magnificent history. This book is a successor to Sabine (although I have heard that the Sabine book is being updated). It is a rich and wonderful book that I heartily recommend to anyone interested in classical approaches to political theory. The book is organized to chapters that focus on a particular author and all the real classics are represented from Herodotus and Thucydides through Marx. There is also a series of essays raising issues of importance to the 20th and 21st centuries that span the classic authors. The chapters were without exception well written, rich in content, and helpful in providing needed context for a thinker and his work. For some of the great political theorists, such as Plato, Aristotle, Rousseau, or Tocqueville, I would heartily recommend reading the originals where time and interest permit. For a variety of other authors (John of Salisbury), it might not be as worthwhile or even possible to read the original. For these cases and others, the book is extremely helpful at providing a serious review of the work and the information needed to place the author within a broader context of thinkers.

This book is not a casual undertaking and readers need to pay attention. For those who wish to invest some effort in learning about political theory, this is one of the better possibilities around and superior to Fukuyama's recent volume. I found the book very worthwhile, however, and didn't mind spending the time to work through it.

Justin Evans says

Talk about bad timing: Ryan has obviously been writing this book for years now, and had it been released in, say, 2007, it would have seemed perfectly sensible. It's important to discuss political ideas, to think about how we rule and are ruled, and from where we get our assumptions.

But with the world economy in a never-ending tailspin, massive unemployment in most developed economies and faltering investment rates in developing ones, a very real resurgence of class warfare and ludicrous ideology on both sides of the political spectrum, it's more than a bit galling to have a tenured professor explain to you, in patient, lucid prose, that young people are very well equipped to deal with labor market flexibility, or that liberal capitalism works really well because (this is not an exaggeration, he really uses this as his example) contemplative people can become long distance truck drivers and have time to think and venture into their imagination.

In between, presumably, ingesting massive amounts of speed and barely sleeping while they try to make impossible deadlines that are demanded by their employers.

So Ryan has a very bad case of ivorytoweritis, but then, so do I, which I will now prove. This text is at its most disturbing not when he's skimming over the ancient and medieval theorists, not when he's ignoring the historical conditions that give rise to political theories in the first place, not when he gives John Locke a free pass for his execrable arguments, nor when he fails to understand Hobbes, and not even when he purports to write about Marx without writing about, you know, 'Capital'.

It's at its worst when it ignores the fact that the vast majority of important 'political' thought since at least

Marx, probably since Rousseau, and possibly since Montesquieu, has focused on social, cultural and economic matters instead of procedural and institutional matters.

This is a contentious claim, and maybe Ryan, like Straussians and other political science types, wants to insist on the continuing importance of 'the political.' But he doesn't do that: he just **ignores** political economy, cultural criticism and social thought... except when he's complaining that leftist cultural critics are exaggerating (viz., the aforementioned happiness of the long distance truck driver and the joys of the flexible new economy). It's no surprise that he doesn't understand the Frankfurt School; it is a surprise that he seems to like fascists (e.g., Schmitt and Gentile) more than the left-liberals who, following Toqueville, point out that a population's mores matter more (sorry about that) than the political organization that is set up around those mores--and that our mores today are destroying the planet.

For Ryan, social criticism is a kind of disease that leads evil people to complain about the greatest system ever set up to deal with human conflict: liberal capitalist democracy of the kind under which most of us no longer labor. Had he put off publishing this book for a few years, I like to think he would have changed his mind about that. But then, professors who retire from Princeton to Oxford and then to private life probably weathered the great recession pretty well.

An extra star for the book design, which is **crazy sexy**.

Nick says

In a sweeping history of political philosophy, this book took awhile to begin understanding, in terms of style more than substance. It's more of a narrative than an analytical review, which was a disappointment to me at first. In general though, it turned out to be a very well organized book that covered roughly 2,500 years of political ideas and it has helped me align and clarify my own interests going forward, which is always what I seek when choosing a book to read.

Steven Peterson says

This is a major work—and a welcome one. Once upon a time, I thought that Sabine's history of political philosophy was the apogee in this arena. But I think that the author, Alan Ryan, has actually surpassed Sabine. He does a nice job of introducing us to the variety of political thinkers over time. But his analysis of the works—going beyond just description—is the real contribution of this two volume set. Ryan notes that (page xxiii): “This is a book about the answers that historians, philosophers, theologians, practicing politician and would be revolutionaries have given to one question. How can human beings best govern themselves”?

For the record, he considers the following subjects/thinkers, among others: Herodotus, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Polybius, Augustine, Aquinas, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Hegel, Bentham, Mill, Tocqueville, and Marx. There are also chapters on more general subjects, such as republicanism after Hobbes and Locke, or the American founding, or democracy in the modern world.

It is intriguing that he began the work with Herodotus (and Thucydides). Ryan dissects Plato and Aristotle nicely, exploring some of their major works and making sense of their arguments—while sometimes raising questions about those arguments. There is a lengthy and insightful analysis of Augustine's political thinking.

A key question that this thinker addressed (page 149): “. . .how seriously should a Christian with his eyes on eternity take the politics of his earthly life. . . .”

Machiavelli? A diplomat who lost his job as a result of internal politics. Some of his works were efforts to get back in the good graces of the rulers of Florence, such as the Borgias. Much of the chapter explores *The Prince*, and Machiavelli’s interesting analysis of what it takes to be successful. There is also lucid discussion of *Discourses*, a follow up to his earlier volume with some interesting twists.

There is relevance for the United States in quite a number of chapters. For example, after the chapters on Hobbes and Locke, Ryan considers “republicanism.” Here, he examines the works of John Harrington, Algernon Sidney, and Charles-Louis de Secondat, the Baron de Montesquieu. Each of these thinkers reflected on aspects of republicanism. And each of these was referred to by America’s Founding Fathers during the Constitutional era. The discussion places the discussion of those Founders in a broader context.

And so on. A powerfully developed two volume set. If interested in the history of political philosophy, this is an outstanding point of departure.
