POLITICAL THEORY

Political Philosophy: Meaning, Nature, Scope and Major Traditions

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Political philosophy is the oldest branch of the study of politics. Long before there were election surveys or comparative data, Plato asked what justice is and Aristotle asked what kind of constitution lets human beings live well. Those questions have not gone away. Whenever a court weighs liberty against public order, or a government decides how far it may tax the rich to help the poor, an answer to a philosophical question is being assumed, whether or not anyone names it. Political philosophy brings those assumptions into the open and asks whether they can be defended with good reasons.

This note explains the meaning, nature, scope, history, traditions and methods of political philosophy in a connected way. It names the scholar behind each idea, illustrates the ideas with Indian and world examples, and ends with guidance for examinations. The topic appears in the first semester of the undergraduate NEP course, in the postgraduate paper on Political Theory, in the OPSC and UPSC optional syllabi and in Unit 1 of UGC NET, so the note is written to serve all five levels at once. It should be read along with the companion note on Political Theory.

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1. Meaning and definitions of political philosophy

The word and the idea. The word “philosophy” comes from the Greek philosophia, which means the love of wisdom. Applied to politics, it means the disciplined search for wisdom about how human beings ought to live together under authority. It is a branch of philosophy, and it is close to ethics, which asks how an individual should live, and to jurisprudence, which asks what law is. Political philosophy takes the same questions to the level of the community. It asks what the best political order is, why anyone should obey a government, and what citizens owe to one another. A student should remember that the subject is not a record of what rulers did, but an inquiry into what they ought to do.

Scholar	Work	Definition in substance
Leo Strauss	What Is Political Philosophy? (1959)	Attempt to replace opinions about the right political order by knowledge of it
Isaiah Berlin	“Does Political Theory Still Exist?” (1962)	Branch of moral philosophy dealing with the ends of political life
John Rawls	Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy (2007)	Concerned with how a just and well-ordered society can be justified to all its members
David Miller	Political Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction (2003)	Systematic study of how institutions such as the state and property can be justified
Jonathan Wolff	An Introduction to Political Philosophy (1996)	Study of the state, its authority, its limits and the principles it should serve

Definitions to remember. Scholars define the field in different ways, and a good answer quotes more than one. Leo Strauss, in What Is Political Philosophy? (1959), described it as the attempt to replace opinions about the nature of political things and about the right or good political order by knowledge of them. Isaiah Berlin, in “Does Political Theory Still Exist?” (1962), called it a branch of moral philosophy that deals with the ends of political life, meaning what governments ought to do and why. John Rawls, in Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy (2007), described the discipline as concerned with how a just and

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well-ordered society can be reasonably justified to all its members. David Miller, in Political Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction (2003), presents it as the systematic study of how institutions such as the state and property can be justified. Jonathan Wolff, in An Introduction to Political Philosophy (1996), treats it as the study of the state, its authority, its limits and the principles it should serve. All these definitions share three ideas. Political philosophy is normative, since it asks what ought to be. It is justificatory, since it asks for reasons. It is fundamental, since it questions assumptions that everyday politics takes for granted.

A working definition. Political philosophy is the systematic, reasoned inquiry into the ends, justification and limits of political authority and the principles by which collective life should be organised. The key terms deserve attention. Systematic means that arguments are built step by step and not by feeling. Justification means that every institution, from a tax system to a court, has to be defended by reasons that those affected could accept. Limits means that the inquiry asks not only why government is needed but also where its power must stop.

Why the question “why obey?” is basic. The central puzzle of the subject is that the state uses force and demands obedience, yet we normally think that no human being has a natural right to rule another. If so, what makes the commands of the state different from the commands of a robber? Each major tradition answers differently. Hobbes says that obedience is the price of security. Locke says that it rests on consent and on the protection of rights. Rousseau says that it rests on the general will. Marx says that the state mostly serves the ruling class, and Gandhi suggests that the individual conscience is the final judge. Learning these answers side by side is the best way to understand the field.

2. Nature of political philosophy

Normative. Political philosophy asks what ought to be, and not only what is. It judges institutions and policies against standards such as justice, liberty and the common good. A report that a country has a particular tax system is descriptive, but an argument that the system is unfair is philosophical, because it needs reasons that can be examined. This

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evaluative purpose is the first thing that separates the subject from the descriptive study of governments.

Conceptual. Much of the work consists in clarifying concepts. Words such as liberty, equality, sovereignty and authority are used constantly in public life, but with shifting meanings. Philosophers separate the senses, as Berlin did when he distinguished negative from positive liberty (1958), so that arguments can proceed without confusion. In India the word secularism is a good example, since its meaning is disputed in daily debate.

Reasoned and argumentative. The subject does not rest on opinion, tradition or revelation alone. Each claim is supported by premises, tested against objections and revised. This is why a student must learn not only what Locke or Rawls concluded, but also how each reached the conclusion and where critics found weakness. An examination answer that gives only the conclusion earns few marks.

Fundamental. Political philosophy goes behind the daily agenda to ask the most basic questions: why have a state at all, who should rule, what is justice, and what do we owe one another? Other disciplines may take the existence of the state for granted, but philosophy asks whether and how it can be justified.

Universal in ambition. Philosophers look for principles that would hold for all human beings, and not only for one society. The idea of human rights and Kant’s plan for perpetual peace are examples. At the same time, communitarian and postcolonial writers warn that claims of universality may disguise the values of one culture, so the ambition must be tested against context.

Historical and dialogic. Thinkers respond to one another across centuries. Rousseau wrote against Hobbes and Locke, Hegel and Marx answered Kant and the liberals, Rawls revived the contract tradition, and Nozick and the communitarians replied to Rawls. The subject is therefore a continuing conversation, and it is best learned as one.

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Critical. Philosophy questions accepted beliefs, including its own. It asks whose interests a concept serves and what an apparently neutral rule leaves out. Marxist, feminist and postcolonial writers have used this habit to show how ideas of citizenship, contract and progress once excluded the poor, women and the colonised.

Interdisciplinary. It draws on ethics, history, law, economics, sociology and psychology. A philosophical argument about distributive justice, for example, uses economic evidence on inequality and legal evidence on property rights, while remaining an argument about what is fair.

Method before data. Its main tools are argument, definition, thought experiment and the interpretation of texts, and not surveys or statistics. Rawls' original position and Nozick's experience machine are examples of imagined cases used to test principles. Evidence still matters, because a principle that cannot work in practice is not a sound guide.

Practical in purpose. Although it is abstract, the subject shapes real choices. Locke's ideas of natural rights influenced modern constitutions. Mill's harm principle shapes debates on free speech. Ambedkar's philosophy of social democracy shaped the equality provisions of the Indian Constitution, and Rawls is cited in discussions of welfare and reservation.

3. Political philosophy and related terms

Usage varies among authors, and the boundaries are not rigid, but the working distinctions below are widely used in syllabi and examinations.

Philosophy and theory. The two are close enough to be used interchangeably in many textbooks. A common distinction treats philosophy as the more fundamental and justificatory core, and theory as the wider field that also includes historical, analytical and empirical work. The companion note on Political Theory develops the wider field.

Philosophy and thought. Political thought records what particular thinkers said and why, in their historical setting. Political philosophy asks whether what they said is true. A student of thought asks what Rousseau meant by the general will, while a philosopher asks whether

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the idea can be defended today.

Philosophy and ideology. An ideology aims at action and tends to defend a position, while philosophy aims at understanding and examines positions critically. Liberalism as a party programme is an ideology, but the analysis of its account of the individual and the state is philosophy.

Philosophy and political science. Political science describes and explains behaviour and institutions, often with data, while philosophy evaluates and justifies. They depend on one another. A study of why democracies fail needs a prior idea of what a democracy is, and a theory of justice needs facts about how institutions actually work.

Term	Main concern	Typical method	Sample question
Political philosophy	Justification of political authority and ultimate ends	Philosophical argument	What makes a state legitimate?
Political theory	Concepts, values, institutions and approaches, including empirical work	Conceptual analysis, argument, evidence	How should liberty be understood and studied?
Political thought	Ideas of particular thinkers or periods in context	Textual and historical study	What did Kautilya or Hobbes argue?
Political ideology	A programme of beliefs that guides action	Slogans, manifestos, organisation	What does socialism recommend?
Political science	How political systems actually work	Observation, comparison, data	Why do voters choose certain parties?

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4. Scope and central questions

The scope of political philosophy can be arranged around six questions that recur from Plato to the present. Each of them is a topic in its own right and has its own note on this site.

What is the state, and why should it exist? This is the question of origin and justification. Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau answer it through the social contract, and Marx answers it through class conflict. The anarchists, such as Kropotkin, deny that the state is

needed at all. A student should be ready to compare at least three of these answers.

Who should rule, and how? This is the question of the best regime. Plato favoured rule by philosophers, Aristotle favoured a balanced constitution that he called polity, Montesquieu favoured the separation of powers, and modern democrats favour the rule of citizens through representation and participation. The note on Democracy treats this question in detail.

Why obey? This is the question of political obligation and legitimacy. Consent, fairness, gratitude, natural duty and utility have all been offered as grounds of obedience. Weber's types of authority and Gandhi's civil disobedience show that the question also asks when disobedience is justified. The note on Power treats it further.

What is liberty, and what are its limits? Mill's harm principle, Berlin's two concepts and the republican idea of freedom as non-domination (Pettit, 1997) are the major answers. Each draws the line between the individual and the state in a different place. The note on Liberalism explains them.

What is justice? Plato's harmony, Aristotle's distributive and corrective justice, the utilitarian calculation, Rawls' fairness, Nozick's entitlement, Sen's capabilities and feminist arguments about the family all belong here. The notes on Justice and Equality go into these answers.

What do we owe beyond our borders and to the future? Global justice, migration, climate change and the interests of future generations are recent additions that earlier philosophy, which was focused on the single state, hardly discussed. These questions are now common in UPSC and NET papers.

In short, political philosophy covers the origin, ends, structure, authority and limits of political life, and it also asks how the same questions should be answered in a world of many cultures.

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5. Evolution of political philosophy

The history of the subject shows how each age added its own questions. A student should learn the periods in order, with one or two thinkers and works for each.

Classical Greece. Plato’s Republic asks what justice is and answers that a just city is one in which each class does its own work, guided by philosopher-rulers who know the Good. Aristotle’s Politics is more empirical. He compared the constitutions of Greek cities, described the human being as by nature a political animal, and classified governments by the number of rulers and by whether they served the common interest or their own. The Stoics later spoke of a universal natural law binding all human beings, an idea that Cicero carried into Roman thought and that later became a base for the idea of human rights.

Classical India. Indian traditions developed their own political philosophy. Kautilya’s Arthashastra is a systematic treatise on statecraft, the seven elements of the state (saptanga) and the duties of the king, and scholars place its date between about the fourth century BCE and the third century CE. The Dharmashastra texts treat law, duty and kingship. Buddhist sources, such as the Aggannasutta, present the ruler as chosen by the people to protect them, and Ashoka’s edicts offer an example of rule guided by dhamma.

Medieval period. Augustine’s City of God separates the earthly city from the heavenly one, and Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae joins Aristotle with Christian doctrine through a hierarchy of eternal, natural, divine and human law. In the Islamic world, Ibn Khaldun’s Muqaddimah (1377) offered a theory of the rise and decline of dynasties based on group solidarity (asabiyyah). In India, Barani’s Fatawa-i Jahandari discussed kingship under the Delhi Sultanate.

Renaissance and realism. Niccolò Machiavelli’s The Prince (written 1513) separated political success from religious morality and examined power as it is actually exercised. Jean Bodin’s Six Books of the Commonwealth (1576) formulated the concept of sovereignty, which became central to the idea of the modern state.

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Social contract tradition. Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan (1651) imagines a state of nature as a war of all against all and justifies an absolute sovereign as the only escape. John Locke's Second Treatise (1689) imagines a state of natural rights and justifies limited, consent-based government. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's The Social Contract (1762) justifies a political order based on the general will. Immanuel Kant later treated the contract as a test of whether a law could be agreed by free and equal persons.

Enlightenment, idealism and utilitarianism. Montesquieu's The Spirit of the Laws (1748) defended the separation of powers. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill argued that laws should be judged by their contribution to happiness, and Mill's On Liberty (1859) set out the harm principle. Hegel's Philosophy of Right (1821) presented the state as the realisation of ethical life and freedom.

Marx and the critique of liberalism. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in The Communist Manifesto (1848), and Marx, in Capital (1867), explained political institutions through the ownership of the means of production, and argued that liberal rights concealed class power. The note on Marxism develops this critique.

Twentieth century: eclipse and revival. In the 1950s, positivism and behaviouralism made normative philosophy appear unscientific, and Peter Laslett wrote in 1956 that political philosophy was, for the moment, dead. The claim was answered by Strauss (1959), Wolin (1960) and Berlin (1962), and it was decisively reversed by John Rawls' A Theory of Justice (1971). Hannah Arendt's The Human Condition (1958) renewed the idea of politics as shared public action.

Contemporary developments. After Rawls, Robert Nozick (1974) defended a minimal state. Communitarians such as MacIntyre, Sandel, Taylor and Walzer questioned liberal individualism, and feminists such as Pateman and Okin criticised the exclusion of the family from justice. Habermas developed deliberative democracy, and Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum developed the capability approach. Postcolonial writers such as Said, Spivak and Chakrabarty asked how empire shaped political concepts. Current debates cover global justice, democratic backsliding and populism, and the governance of digital technology and

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artificial intelligence.

Period	Main concern	Key figures and works
Classical Greece	Justice and the best constitution	Plato, Republic; Aristotle, Politics
Classical India	Statecraft, duty, righteous kingship	Kautilya, Arthashastra; Buddhist sources; Ashoka
Medieval	Law, divine and human authority	Augustine; Aquinas; Ibn Khaldun; Barani
Renaissance	Power and sovereignty	Machiavelli; Bodin
Seventeenth to eighteenth century	Contract and consent	Hobbes; Locke; Rousseau; Montesquieu
Nineteenth century	Utility, freedom, class	Bentham; Mill; Hegel; Marx
Twentieth century	Revival of normative theory	Arendt; Berlin; Rawls; Nozick
Since 1980	Plural voices and global questions	Sandel; Walzer; Habermas; Sen; Pateman; Said

6. Major traditions and schools

A school is a family of thinkers who share a basic answer to the central questions. The paragraphs below give, for each school, its core claim, its representative scholars and its chief criticism, in the same order for easy comparison.

Classical idealism. The core claim is that politics is the pursuit of the good life, and that the state should educate citizens in virtue. Plato and Aristotle are the main scholars, and in the modern period Hegel and T. H. Green belong to the same line. The chief criticism comes from Karl Popper, whose The Open Society and Its Enemies (1945) accused Plato of laying the foundation for authoritarian rule by those who claim to know the good. A student can use the example of philosopher-kings to explain this danger.

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Realism. The core claim is that politics must be understood as the struggle for power, and that moral rules apply to rulers only with care. Thucydides, Kautilya, Machiavelli and Hobbes are the main scholars. The chief criticism is that realism can excuse any abuse of power as necessity. Its value lies in reminding us that good intentions without power achieve little.

Social contract theory. The core claim is that legitimate authority comes from the agreement, actual or imagined, of free and equal individuals. Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Rawls are the main scholars. The chief criticism is that no one actually signed a contract. Hume argued that most governments rest on habit and force, and Pateman (1988) argued that the contract assumed the authority of men over women.

Liberalism. The core claim is that the individual is prior to the state, and that the state exists to protect liberty and rights. Locke, Mill, Kant, Rawls and Berlin are the main scholars. Communitarians say that liberalism neglects community, and Marxists say that its rights favour the propertied. The note on Liberalism treats the school in detail.

Conservatism. The core claim is that society is an inherited, slowly grown order, and that reform must be cautious and respect tradition. Edmund Burke and Michael Oakeshott are the main scholars. The chief criticism is that conservatism may protect injustice only because it is old. The note on Conservatism develops the school.

Utilitarianism. The core claim is that the right law or policy is the one that produces the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Bentham and J. S. Mill are the main scholars. Rawls (1971) argued against it that it ignores the separateness of persons and could justify sacrificing a minority for the benefit of the majority.

Marxism. The core claim is that the state reflects class power, and that genuine freedom needs the end of exploitation. Marx, Engels, Lenin and Gramsci are the main scholars. The chief criticism is that Marxism reduces politics to economics and underrates individual rights. The note on Marxism explains it further.

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Anarchism. The core claim is that the state is unnecessary and harmful, and that society can organise itself by voluntary cooperation. Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin are the main scholars, and Tolstoy and Gandhi's ideal of enlightened anarchy have also been compared with it. The chief criticism is that anarchism assumes more goodwill than human beings usually show.

Libertarianism. The core claim is that individual property rights are so strong that only a minimal state is justified. Robert Nozick and Friedrich Hayek are the main scholars. The chief criticism is that it tolerates large inequality and ignores disadvantages that people did not choose, such as birth in a poor family.

Communitarianism. The core claim is that persons are shaped by their communities, so justice must respect shared understandings. MacIntyre, Sandel, Taylor and Walzer are the main scholars. The chief criticism is that it may support the oppressive norms of a community, such as caste rules.

Republicanism. The core claim is that freedom means not being subject to arbitrary power, and that it needs active citizens. Cicero, Machiavelli (in the Discourses), Rousseau, Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit are the main scholars. The chief criticism is that it demands a civic virtue which modern societies may not supply.

Feminism. The core claim is that gender structures power, and that the family and private life are political. Wollstonecraft, Millett, Pateman and Okin are the main scholars. The chief criticism is that differences among women, by class, caste and race, are sometimes ignored. The note on Feminism treats this school.

Deliberative democracy. The core claim is that legitimate decisions arise from public reasoning among free and equal citizens. Jürgen Habermas, Joshua Cohen, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson are the main scholars. The chief criticism is that inequalities of status and education may weaken real deliberation, so that some voices dominate.

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Capability approach. The core claim is that justice should be measured by what people are actually able to do and to be, and not only by income. Amartya Sen (Development as Freedom, 1999) and Martha Nussbaum are the main scholars. The chief criticism is that deciding which capabilities count is itself controversial.

Postcolonial thought. The core claim is that colonialism shaped political concepts, and that non-Western traditions must be given their own voice. Fanon, Said, Spivak, Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee are the main scholars. The chief criticism is that its insights are hard to turn into proposals for institutions.

Ambedkarite and Gandhian thought. Ambedkar's core claim is that democracy needs social equality and the annihilation of caste. Gandhi's core claim is that freedom is self-rule (swaraj), grounded in truth and non-violence. B. R. Ambedkar and M. K. Gandhi are the main scholars, together with commentators such as Bhikhu Parekh and Ramachandra Guha. Critics argue about whether Gandhi's ideals suit a modern state, and about Ambedkar's view of religion.

School	Core claim	Chief scholars
Idealism	Politics serves the good life	Plato, Aristotle, Hegel
Realism	Politics is the struggle for power	Kautilya, Machiavelli, Hobbes
Social contract	Authority rests on agreement	Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Rawls
Liberalism	Liberty and rights come first	Locke, Mill, Berlin, Rawls
Conservatism	Respect inherited institutions	Burke, Oakeshott
Utilitarianism	Maximise happiness	Bentham, Mill
Marxism	The state reflects class power	Marx, Engels, Gramsci
Anarchism	The state is unnecessary	Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin
Libertarianism	Minimal state, strong property rights	Nozick, Hayek
Communitarianism	Community shapes the self	MacIntyre, Sandel, Walzer
Republicanism	Freedom as non-domination	Cicero, Skinner, Pettit

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Feminism	Gender structures power	Wollstonecraft, Pateman, Okin
Deliberative democracy	Public reasoning gives legitimacy	Habermas, Cohen
Capability approach	Justice as real freedoms	Sen, Nussbaum
Postcolonial thought	Decolonise concepts	Said, Spivak, Chakrabarty
Ambedkarite and Gandhian	Social democracy; swaraj	Ambedkar, Gandhi

7. Core problems of political philosophy

Political obligation and legitimacy. Why should citizens obey the law? Consent theory, associated with Locke, says that they agreed, at least tacitly. Hume replied that most people never chose their government, and that obedience rests on convention and utility. The fairness argument (H. L. A. Hart, 1955; Rawls) says that those who benefit from a cooperative scheme owe a fair share of its burdens. The natural duty argument (Rawls) says that we must support just institutions. Philosophical anarchists such as Robert Paul Wolff (In Defense of Anarchism, 1970) argue that the duty to obey can never override personal moral autonomy. Weber added that obedience rests on traditional, charismatic or legal-rational legitimacy.

Justice. Plato defined justice as each part of the city doing its own task, and Aristotle distinguished distributive justice, which gives shares according to merit, from corrective justice, which repairs wrongs. Utilitarians judge by total welfare. Rawls (1971) proposed two principles chosen behind a veil of ignorance, namely equal basic liberties, and inequalities allowed only if they are open to all and benefit the least advantaged. Nozick (1974) replied that a distribution is just if it arises from just acquisition and voluntary transfer. Sen, in The Idea of Justice (2009), argued that the aim should be to remove clear injustices and not to design a perfect society. The note on Justice treats these theories.

Liberty. Berlin’s “Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958) separates negative liberty, which is freedom from interference, from positive liberty, which is self-mastery and the real capacity to act. Mill defended liberty of thought, expression and lifestyle against both law and social pressure, and limited interference to preventing harm to others. Republicans such as Pettit

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(1997) define freedom as the absence of domination, even where no interference occurs. A student can use the example of a worker who is free in law but fully dependent on one employer to show the republican point.

Equality and rights. Equality may refer to legal status, political rights, opportunity or outcome. Sen's question "Equality of what?" (1979) shows that the choice of measure is itself philosophical. On rights, Locke grounded them in natural law, Bentham dismissed natural rights as "nonsense upon stilts", and Dworkin's Taking Rights Seriously (1977) treated rights as trumps against collective goals. The note on Rights develops the debate.

The good life and the limits of neutrality. Should the state remain neutral between different ideas of the good life, as liberals argue, or should it promote some of them, as perfectionists and communitarians argue? The debate affects education, religion, speech and family law. Indian secularism, described by Rajeev Bhargava as "principled distance", is a distinct answer, since the state neither stays away from religion nor supports one religion.

Civil disobedience. When is it right to break the law? Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience (1849), Gandhi's satyagraha, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) and Rawls' account in A Theory of Justice all hold that open, non-violent, conscientious law-breaking can be justified in an almost just state, if appeals have failed and the protester accepts the penalty.

Problem	Main positions	Key scholars
Obligation and legitimacy	Consent, fairness, natural duty, utility, philosophical anarchism	Locke, Hume, Hart, Rawls, Wolff, Weber
Justice	Harmony, desert, utility, fairness, entitlement, capabilities	Plato, Aristotle, Rawls, Nozick, Sen
Liberty	Negative, positive, harm principle, non-domination	Berlin, Mill, Pettit
Equality and rights	Legal, political, opportunity, outcome; natural rights and trumps	Sen, Locke, Bentham, Dworkin

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Neutrality	Liberal neutrality versus perfectionism; principled distance	Rawls, Bhargava
Civil disobedience	Open, non-violent, conscientious law-breaking	Thoreau, Gandhi, King, Rawls

8. Methods of philosophical inquiry

Conceptual analysis. The thinker breaks a concept into its parts and tests definitions against examples. The analysis of liberty into negative and positive senses is a standard case. A student can show the method by taking a word like democracy and listing the different things it can mean.

Thought experiments. Imagined situations are used to test principles. Hobbes' state of nature, Rousseau's early human society, Rawls' original position and Nozick's Wilt Chamberlain example all ask what we would conclude under stated conditions. Their strength is that they isolate one question, and their weakness is that they may be far from real life.

Dialectic. Plato's dialogues proceed by question and answer, and they expose contradictions in the views of the speakers. Hegel and Marx used the same term for the movement of history through conflict and resolution. The word therefore has two senses, and an answer should say which one is meant.

Reflective equilibrium. Rawls described the method of adjusting general principles and particular judgments until they fit together. If a principle yields a verdict that we find intolerable, we revise either the principle or the judgment. The method shows that philosophy is a process of careful adjustment and not of one-time proof.

Textual and historical interpretation. Quentin Skinner (1969) argued that a text must be read in the intellectual context in which it was written, so that modern concerns are not attributed to earlier authors. Leo Strauss, by contrast, held that great texts speak across time to those who read them carefully. A student should know both positions.

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Genealogy and critique. Foucault, following Nietzsche, traces how concepts and practices arose from relations of power. Critical theorists of the Frankfurt School and postcolonial writers use critique to expose hidden assumptions in ideas that seem neutral.

Comparative method. Scholars increasingly place Western texts beside Indian, Chinese and Islamic sources, so that a concept such as justice is understood from several traditions. For example, Rawls' fairness can be read together with the Indian idea of nyaya, as Sen has done.

Method	Main idea	Example
Conceptual analysis	Break a concept into parts	Negative and positive liberty
Thought experiment	Test principles in imagined cases	Original position; state of nature
Dialectic	Question and answer; conflict and resolution	Plato; Hegel; Marx
Reflective equilibrium	Adjust principles and judgments together	Rawls
Textual and historical reading	Read texts in context or across time	Skinner; Strauss
Genealogy and critique	Trace the power behind concepts	Foucault; Frankfurt School
Comparative method	Read several traditions together	Sen on justice

9. Political philosophy in the Indian context

India has a long and independent tradition of reflection on power, duty and the good society. It is not merely the application of Western ideas. It supplies concepts that Western philosophy lacks, and it also raises its own critical questions.

Classical sources. Kautilya's Arthashastra treats the state as an organism of seven elements, namely the king, ministers, territory, fortified city, treasury, army and ally, and it treats the welfare (yogakshema) of the subjects as the duty of the king. The Dharmashastra

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tradition, including the texts attributed to Manu, makes duty (dharma) the basis of kingship and social order, though modern critics, above all Ambedkar, challenged its caste hierarchy. Buddhist sources, such as the Aggannasutta, trace kingship to a choice made by the people to appoint a ruler who protects them, and Ashoka's edicts present a ruler bound by moral duty (dhamma) to his subjects.

Gandhi. Gandhi's Hind Swaraj (1909) criticised modern industrial civilisation and set out a vision of self-rule (swaraj), in which political freedom and individual moral discipline go together. His methods of satyagraha and ahimsa are also philosophical claims, namely that truth cannot be imposed by violence and that means and ends are inseparable. His idea of Ramarajya and of a decentralised village republic remains disputed.

Ambedkar. B. R. Ambedkar argued in Annihilation of Caste (1936) that political freedom is empty if social hierarchy remains. In his Constituent Assembly speech of 25 November 1949, he warned that India was entering a "life of contradictions", with political equality but social and economic inequality, and he called for "social democracy" based on liberty, equality and fraternity. His philosophy of rights and recognition shaped the equality provisions of the Constitution.

Nehru, Tagore and others. Jawaharlal Nehru, in The Discovery of India (1946), defended a secular, plural and scientific outlook. Rabindranath Tagore, in Nationalism (1917), criticised narrow nationalism and argued for a universal humanism. M. N. Roy developed radical humanism, and Jayaprakash Narayan and Vinoba Bhave developed ideas of partyless democracy and decentralisation.

Modern Indian scholarship. Rajeev Bhargava has argued for secularism as "principled distance". Partha Chatterjee has argued for "political society" in The Politics of the Governed (2004). Bhikhu Parekh has argued for dialogue-based multiculturalism in Rethinking Multiculturalism (2000). Pratap Bhanu Mehta has given an account of democratic ethics in The Burden of Democracy (2003). Amartya Sen has described an Indian argumentative tradition in The Argumentative Indian (2005), and Sunil Khilnani has presented the idea of India as a political invention in The Idea of India (1997).

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Why this matters for examinations. OPSC and UPSC increasingly expect Indian illustrations in theory answers, and UGC NET asks about Indian authors directly. Pairing a Western concept with an Indian counterpart, such as the social contract with the Buddhist account of kingship, or negative liberty with Gandhi's swaraj, shows a depth that a purely Western answer cannot.

Thinker	Work	Main idea
Kautilya	Arthashastra	Seven elements of the state; welfare of subjects
Dharmashastra and Buddhist sources	Various; Aggannasutta	Duty of the ruler; kingship by choice
Ashoka	Edicts	Rule guided by dhamma
Gandhi	Hind Swaraj (1909)	Swaraj; means and ends
Ambedkar	Annihilation of Caste (1936)	Social democracy; annihilation of caste
Nehru	The Discovery of India (1946)	Secular, plural, scientific outlook
Tagore	Nationalism (1917)	Universal humanism
Bhargava	Secularism work	Principled distance
Chatterjee	The Politics of the Governed (2004)	Political society

10. Merits and limitations of political philosophy

Merits and importance

It asks the first questions. Before an institution can be run well, it must be shown to be worth having. Political philosophy supplies this first step by asking why a state, a court or a property system should exist at all. Without it, we would build institutions without knowing their purpose.

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It gives standards of criticism. Without an idea of justice or legitimacy, we could describe a regime but not condemn or defend it. Philosophy provides the standards by which laws and policies are judged. For example, the judgment that untouchability is wrong rests on a philosophical idea of equal human worth.

It clarifies concepts. By separating the senses of liberty, equality or democracy, it prevents debates from being merely verbal, as in the many meanings of secularism in India. This clarity helps a student to write precise answers.

It trains the mind. Students learn to state a claim, find its assumptions, meet objections and revise. These skills help in examinations, administration, law and journalism. They are especially useful for the analytical papers of UPSC and OPSC.

It shapes constitutions and law. Locke’s natural rights, Montesquieu’s separation of powers and Ambedkar’s social democracy all passed from philosophy into constitutional texts. The Preamble of the Indian Constitution, with its words justice, liberty, equality and fraternity, is a philosophical statement.

It preserves a shared heritage. It keeps alive the arguments of Plato, Kautilya, Aquinas, Hobbes, Gandhi and Ambedkar, so that each generation does not begin from nothing. This heritage gives a common language to scholars of different countries.

It supports democratic citizenship. Citizens who can reason about fairness, rights and authority are better able to take part in public debate and to respect those who disagree. A democracy depends on such reasoned discussion.

It encourages tolerance. Meeting rival schools shows that reasonable people can differ about basic values, and this undermines dogmatism. A student who has studied liberals, Marxists and Gandhians finds it harder to treat any single view as the only truth.

It connects disciplines. Its questions cross law, economics, sociology and history, and give them a common vocabulary of justice and rights. This makes the subject a bridge among the social sciences.

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It prepares for new problems. Questions on artificial intelligence, climate justice and migration are first worked out as philosophical questions about responsibility, fairness and community, before law catches up. Philosophy therefore helps societies to think ahead.

Limitations and criticisms

Abstractness. Ideal theories, such as an original position or a state of nature, may be far from real conditions, so their guidance for actual politics is uncertain. Sen (2009) criticised the search for a perfectly just society for this reason, and preferred the comparison of real alternatives.

Lack of proof. Normative claims cannot be settled by experiment, so philosophical disputes often continue for centuries without agreement. This is a basic difference from natural science, and it should be stated plainly in an answer.

Cultural bias. The canon has been mainly European and male. Feminist and postcolonial writers argue that its concepts carry this bias, and that other traditions have been neglected. The Indian sources discussed above show how much was left out.

False universalism. Claims to speak for all humanity can disguise the standpoint of one group. Communitarians argue that principles are always rooted in a particular community, and that a view from nowhere does not exist.

Ideology in disguise. Marxists say that philosophical principles often serve the interests of the dominant class, as when equal liberty was used to justify unequal property. A critical reader should always ask whose interest an argument serves.

Behaviouralist criticism. Easton and others complained that philosophy was speculative and gave no testable knowledge about how politics works. They wished to build a science of politics, based on observation and data.

Positivist criticism. Logical positivists such as Ayer held that value statements are neither true nor false, which would deprive normative philosophy of a rational basis. Berlin (1962) and Rawls (1971) replied that moral argument is possible and valuable.

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Distance from practice. Philosophers may not have to bear the consequences of their theories. The history of the twentieth century shows that confident utopian theories can lead to harm, which is a warning against applying any theory without care.

Difficulty of language. Technical vocabulary and long arguments make the subject hard for beginners and for the general public. Teachers must therefore explain terms with simple examples, as this note tries to do.

Many conflicting schools. Different schools reach opposite conclusions, which can leave a beginner unsure what to think. The remedy is to compare them critically, and not to adopt one by habit.

11. Illustrations: philosophy applied to real questions

Is a reservation policy just? A utilitarian asks whether reservations raise total welfare by widening opportunity and reducing social conflict. Rawls' second principle allows inequalities only if they are open to all and to the benefit of the least advantaged, and his principle of fair equality of opportunity supports efforts to overcome disadvantage of birth. Nozick's entitlement theory objects where the policy overrides just holdings or free choices. Communitarians ask whether the policy recognises historic injustices to communities. Ambedkar argued that formal equality could not remove caste hierarchy, which is a case for special provisions. The Supreme Court's judgment in Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992) upheld reservation for backward classes, set a general ceiling of fifty per cent and required the exclusion of the "creamy layer". It shows how philosophical arguments turn into legal rules.

Why should a citizen obey an unjust law? Hobbes would say that disorder is worse than most injustice, so obedience is a duty. Locke would allow resistance when government breaks the trust on which it rests. Rawls would allow civil disobedience against serious injustice in a nearly just state, if the protest is public, non-violent and conscientious. Gandhi's salt march of 1930 is a practical case, since breaking the salt law in public and accepting the penalty made the injustice visible. Thoreau, King and Gandhi share the view

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that conscience may override law, but only with a willingness to bear the consequences.

How far may the state limit speech? Mill’s harm principle allows restriction only to prevent harm to others, so offence alone is not enough. Berlin’s negative liberty supports a wide protected area, while arguments from positive liberty ask whether people have the education and resources to use speech effectively. Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution protects speech, while Article 19(2) allows reasonable restrictions in the interest of, among other things, public order, decency and the security of the State. The tension between the two clauses is exactly the one that philosophers describe.

Question	Philosophical tools	Indian reference
Is reservation just?	Utility, Rawls’ second principle, Nozick, communitarian recognition	Ambedkar; Indra Sawhney (1992)
Why obey an unjust law?	Hobbes, Locke, Rawls, Gandhi, Thoreau	Salt march, 1930
How far may speech be limited?	Mill, Berlin	Article 19(1)(a) and 19(2)

12. How to use this note in examinations

What each examination expects

Examination	What is usually expected	How to prepare
UG (NEP)	Meaning, nature, importance and main schools, with examples	Learn the definitions, the characteristics and the schools table
PG (MA)	Critical comparison of schools, the revival debate and core problems with scholars	Master sections 5 to 7 and write comparative answers
OPSC	Structured answers of 150 to 250 words with Indian illustrations	Use section 9 and the illustrations in section 11

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UPSC (PSIR)	Analytical and critical answers linking philosophy to contemporary issues	Use the critical analysis in section 13
UGC NET	Scholar–work matching, one-line concepts and comparison of schools	Revise the authors and books table in section 14

Practice questions

1. Define political philosophy and explain its nature. (UG, short essay)
2. Distinguish political philosophy from political theory and political science. (UG, PG)
3. Explain the social contract tradition with reference to Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. (UG, OPSC)
4. Is political philosophy dead? Discuss with reference to the decline and revival debate. (PG, UPSC)
5. Compare Rawls and Nozick on distributive justice. (PG, UGC NET)
6. Examine the problem of political obligation. (PG, UPSC)
7. Discuss the contribution of Gandhi and Ambedkar to political philosophy. (OPSC, UPSC)

Structured outline for a long answer: Rawls and Nozick on justice

Introduction. State that both are twentieth-century liberals who disagree on the role of the state, and name their works (1971, 1974).

Body. Under Rawls, explain the original position, the veil of ignorance, the two principles and the difference principle. Under Nozick, explain the entitlement theory with its three parts of acquisition, transfer and rectification, the minimal state, and the criticism of patterned distribution through the Wilt Chamberlain example. Then compare them. Both respect individual rights, but Rawls treats natural talents as a common asset and Nozick treats persons as self-owners. Add critiques, with Sandel, Sen and Okin on Rawls, and Cohen and Nagel on Nozick.

Conclusion. The debate shows how a single concept of justice can generate rival institutions.

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Sample answer (about 200 words)

Question. What is political philosophy? Explain its nature.

Introduction. Political philosophy is the systematic, reasoned inquiry into the ends, justification and limits of political authority. Plato’s Republic asked what justice is, Hobbes asked why we should obey, and Rawls asked what principles of justice free and equal persons would choose. Strauss (1959) described it as the attempt to replace opinions about the best political order by knowledge.

Body. Its nature is, first, normative, since it asks what ought to be and not only what is. Second, it is conceptual, since it clarifies terms such as liberty, as Berlin (1958) did. Third, it is argumentative, relying on reasons and objections, and fourth, it is fundamental, asking why we need a state at all. It is also historical, because thinkers answer one another across centuries, and critical, because it questions assumptions, as feminist and postcolonial writers have done. The subject differs from political science, which describes and explains behaviour with data. Yet the two are complementary, since a theory of justice needs facts and a study of democracy needs a concept of democracy.

Conclusion. In India, Gandhi and Ambedkar show that the subject is not only Western.

Quick check

1. **Who wrote What Is Political Philosophy?** Leo Strauss (1959).
2. **Who wrote Leviathan?** Thomas Hobbes (1651).
3. **Which work introduced the original position?** Rawls, A Theory of Justice (1971).
4. **Who wrote Anarchy, State, and Utopia?** Robert Nozick (1974).
5. **Who distinguished negative and positive liberty?** Isaiah Berlin (1958).
6. **Who wrote Politics and Vision?** Sheldon Wolin (1960).
7. **Who wrote The Human Condition?** Hannah Arendt (1958).
8. **Who formulated the harm principle?** J. S. Mill, On Liberty (1859).
9. **Who wrote Hind Swaraj?** M. K. Gandhi (1909).

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10. **Who described Indian secularism as principled distance?** Rajeev Bhargava.

Common mistakes

Listing thinkers without the problem each answered. A list of names does not show understanding. Always say which question each thinker tried to answer.

Confusing philosophy with ideology or political science. Philosophy examines and justifies, ideology guides action, and political science describes with data. State the difference in a line.

Treating Rawls and Nozick as simply opposed. Both defend individual rights, and they differ on how far the state may redistribute. Say so in the comparison.

Giving names without works and dates. Examiners reward the pair, especially in UGC NET. Learn them together.

Ignoring Indian thinkers. In OPSC and UPSC answers, add Kautilya, Gandhi or Ambedkar. This shows range and depth.

13. Critical analysis for OPSC and UPSC

Mains answers earn marks for balanced evaluation, and not for description. The points below can be used to argue a position, with scholars cited in support.

Is political philosophy still relevant? The “death” announced by Laslett (1956) proved premature, because values cannot be removed from the study of politics. Rawls (1971) showed that sustained argument about justice was possible, and later debates on global justice, populism and technology show that new problems keep producing philosophical questions. The sounder view is that the subject was neglected for a time, and not exhausted.

Ideal versus non-ideal theory. Rawls and Nozick built ideal theories of a just society. Sen (2009) argued that this is neither necessary nor sufficient for reducing real injustice, and that comparing actual alternatives is more useful. A strong answer weighs both. Ideals give

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direction, but policy needs a comparison of feasible options.

Universalism and context. Rawls' principles claim wide validity, but communitarians such as Walzer and Sandel say that justice is local. Postcolonial writers add that "universal" often meant European. The Indian experience, with Ambedkar's universal claims about equality built from a local analysis of caste, shows that the two can be combined.

Individual and community. Liberalism starts with the individual, while communitarianism, Marxism and Gandhi's thought stress community or society. A balanced answer notes that liberals such as Mill also valued community, and that communitarians such as Taylor accept individual rights.

Western bias and Indian sources. Most textbooks begin with Plato and end with Rawls. Kautilya, Buddhist political thought, Gandhi and Ambedkar offer distinct answers to the same problems, and they should be treated as philosophy in their own right.

Theory and power. Philosophy can legitimise power, as in some uses of Hegel and of the divine-right theory, but it can also challenge power, as in Locke, Marx and Ambedkar. A good answer evaluates which effect a particular theory has had.

Contemporary relevance. Populism, surveillance, algorithmic decision-making and climate change raise questions of legitimacy, consent, equality and responsibility that data alone cannot settle.

Model concluding paragraph

Political philosophy does not give final answers. It gives the questions and the reasons without which political choices would be made blindly. From Plato and Kautilya to Rawls and Ambedkar, it has helped societies to examine their rulers, their laws and their own beliefs, and it will continue to do so as new problems arise.

14. Authors and books for UGC NET

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Author	Work (year)	Idea or relevance
Plato	Republic	Justice; philosopher-king
Aristotle	Politics	Classification of constitutions; political animal
Kautilya	Arthashastra	Statecraft; saptanga theory
Augustine	City of God	Two cities
Aquinas	Summa Theologiae	Eternal, natural, divine and human law
Ibn Khaldun	Muqaddimah (1377)	Asabiyyah; rise and fall of dynasties
Machiavelli	The Prince (1513)	Power and political realism
Bodin	Six Books of the Commonwealth (1576)	Sovereignty
Hobbes	Leviathan (1651)	Absolute sovereign; state of nature
Locke	Two Treatises of Government (1689)	Natural rights; limited government
Montesquieu	The Spirit of the Laws (1748)	Separation of powers
Rousseau	The Social Contract (1762)	General will
Bentham	An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation (1789)	Utility
Burke	Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)	Conservative tradition
Wollstonecraft	A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792)	Founding feminist text
Kant	Perpetual Peace (1795)	Republican constitutions; peace
Hegel	Philosophy of Right (1821)	State as ethical life
Marx and Engels	The Communist Manifesto (1848)	Class struggle
Mill	On Liberty (1859)	Harm principle
Gandhi	Hind Swaraj (1909)	Swaraj; critique of modern civilisation

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Weber	“Politics as a Vocation” (1919)	State and legitimate force
Ambedkar	Annihilation of Caste (1936)	Caste and democracy
Popper	The Open Society and Its Enemies (1945)	Critique of Plato, Hegel and Marx
Arendt	The Human Condition (1958)	Action in the public realm
Berlin	“Two Concepts of Liberty” (1958)	Negative and positive liberty
Strauss	What Is Political Philosophy? (1959)	Defence of classical philosophy
Wolin	Politics and Vision (1960)	Tradition of political philosophy
Rawls	A Theory of Justice (1971)	Justice as fairness
Nozick	Anarchy, State, and Utopia (1974)	Entitlement theory
Dworkin	Taking Rights Seriously (1977)	Rights as trumps
MacIntyre	After Virtue (1981)	Virtue and tradition
Sandel	Liberalism and the Limits of Justice (1982)	Communitarian critique
Walzer	Spheres of Justice (1983)	Complex equality
Pateman	The Sexual Contract (1988)	Feminist critique of contract
Habermas	Between Facts and Norms (1992)	Deliberative democracy
Pettit	Republicanism (1997)	Freedom as non-domination
Sen	Development as Freedom (1999); The Idea of Justice (2009)	Capabilities; comparative justice
Chatterjee	The Politics of the Governed (2004)	Political society

Revision tip. Learn each author with one work, one year and one idea, and group the authors under the schools in section 6. Practise matching the scholar with the work, since NET questions are often framed in this way.

15. Key takeaways, sources and further reading

- Political philosophy is the systematic, reasoned inquiry into the ends, justification and limits of political authority.

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- It is normative, conceptual, argumentative, fundamental, historical, critical, interdisciplinary and practical.
- It differs from political theory, which is wider, from political thought, which is historical, from ideology, which is action-oriented, and from political science, which is empirical.
- Its central problems are the state, legitimacy and obligation, justice, liberty, equality and rights, and the limits of neutrality.
- Its major schools include idealism, realism, contract theory, liberalism, utilitarianism, Marxism, communitarianism, republicanism, feminism and postcolonial thought.
- The decline of the 1950s was answered by Berlin, Strauss and Wolin and reversed by Rawls (1971).
- India supplies its own traditions, namely Kautilya, Buddhist political thought, Gandhi, Ambedkar and modern scholars such as Bhargava and Chatterjee.

Official sources

- eGyanKosh (IGNOU), study material on Political Theory and Political Philosophy
- NPTEL, Mithilesh Kumar Jha, Introduction to Political Theory
- SWAYAM, Sibaji Pratim Basu, MOOC on Introduction to Political Theory
- Odisha State Higher Education Council, Model Curriculum for Three Year Degree Course in Political Science (NEP-2020); UGC NET, UPSC and OPSC syllabi for Political Science and International Relations
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, entries on political obligation, justice, liberty and social contract

Twenty books for further reading

1. Rajeev Bhargava and Ashok Acharya (eds.), *Political Theory: An Introduction* (Pearson Longman, 2008)
2. Jonathan Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1996)

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3. David Miller, *Political Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2003)
4. Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2002)
5. John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy* (Harvard University Press, 2007)
6. George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (Henry Holt, 1937)
7. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (eds.), *History of Political Philosophy* (Rand McNally, 1963)
8. Isaiah Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (Clarendon Press, 1958)
9. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard University Press, 1971)
10. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (Basic Books, 1974)
11. Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (Allen Lane, 2009)
12. Philip Pettit, *Republicanism* (Oxford University Press, 1997)
13. Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas”, *History and Theory*, 8(1) (1969)
14. B. R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936)
15. M. K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (1909)
16. Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism* (Macmillan, 2000)
17. Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* (Columbia University Press, 2004)
18. O. P. Gauba, *An Introduction to Political Theory* (National Publication, 2023)
19. M. J. Vinod and Meena Deshpande, *Contemporary Political Theory* (PHI Learning, 2013)
20. V. R. Mehta, *Foundations of Indian Political Thought* (Manohar, 1996)

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Frequently asked questions

Is political philosophy the same as political theory? They overlap, and some writers use the terms interchangeably. A common distinction treats philosophy as the justificatory core and theory as the wider field, including historical and empirical work.

What is the main question of political philosophy? There is no single question, but the most central is why political authority is justified and what its limits are, because every other issue depends on it.

Is political philosophy only Western? No. Kautilya, Buddhist political thought, Gandhi and Ambedkar are philosophical traditions in their own right, and modern scholars such as Bhargava and Chatterjee continue them.

Why did political philosophy appear to decline in the 1950s? Behaviouralism preferred testable facts, and logical positivism treated values as feelings. Berlin, Strauss and Wolin replied, and Rawls (1971) revived the field.

What is the difference between political philosophy and political ideology? Philosophy examines positions critically in order to understand them, while an ideology is a programme of beliefs that guides action and tends to defend one position.

Which books should I start with? Begin with Bhargava and Acharya (2008) or Wolff (1996), then read Rawls' Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy (2007), and use the eGyanKosh and SWAYAM resources alongside.

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