

What is Political Thought (a.k.a. Political Theory/Philosophy)

Political science is divided into four distinct branches: **political theory**, **international relations**, **comparative politics**, and **American politics** (or 'domestic politics' – if studying in Germany, it would be German politics, etc.). What distinguishes each of these from the others?

Introduction to Political Thought, pp. 1-20

- “We think that everyone has a *right* to an equal stake in politics” (2)
 - What makes this a political and **normative** judgment?
 - Who is ‘everyone’? What is ‘an equal stake’?
- “...there are **two sets of tools** that students of political thought need in order [to] gain critical purchase on the subject. The first is a basic sense of the history and development of political thought; the second is a critical grasp of the theoretical or philosophical issues at the heart of politics” (2)
 - Why is the concept of **human rights** a good example in this context? (3)
 - Other examples mentioned include: the **state**, **sovereignty**, **citizenship**, **justice**
- “Beginning with the idea that laws and constitutions (the instruments of politics) are only good laws and constitutions in so far as they give effective expression to our considered moral and political beliefs. . . moral and political ideas are the foundations of politics” (4)
- “Moral/political positions are not measured on a single scale with ‘truth’ at one end and ‘falsity’ on the other. . . there is considerable disagreement about what standard they are to be measured on at all.” (5)
- “If political science asks ‘*what* are the key building blocks of politics?’ political theory may ask ‘*why* are these the key building blocks of politics?’ (6)
 - The role of **logical positivism** in the 1920s and 1930s, culminating in A.J. Ayer’s calling normative utterances ‘nonsense’...and yet we would all (hopefully) recoil from the message of Swift’s “Modest Proposal”
- “Normative standards often conflict...[and] normative concepts are most often value judgments. People come to their values, beliefs and opinions in a whole variety of ways.” (7)
- Recognizing that there is a range of perspectives, however, is quite distinct from “accepting the further idea that all opinions are equally worthy. This last idea is termed **relativism** and it gives us no critical purchase on the debates.” (8)
- “Behind every moral and political principle is a justifying argument, what we term the theoretical foundations of a principle...**foundational arguments** take many forms. A cursory glance would reveal moral, religious, rationalist, epistemological, historical, and sociological arguments.” (8-9)
- **n.b.** – “typically people coming to the subject for the first time are so taken by each encounter that it is not unusual for them to agree wholeheartedly with each argument they come across (even when it contradicts the position they embraced the week before!).”
- Overview of the book’s main themes: Platonic idealism, Aristotelian teleology, Marxist artificiality, utilitarian consequentialism, Rawlsian distributive justice, anti-foundationalism, multiculturalism (ex: “it may be necessary to treat people differently in order to treat them equally” (14))

Introducing Plato (for Thursday, read. R&S ch. 1 and Book II of the Republic [available online]): the **socratic method** and the birth of **dialectics**, **platonic idealism**, justice, and Socrates' responses to Thrasymachus ('might makes right') and Glaucon (the case of the Lydian ring)