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Preface

Writing a book that surveys and critically assesses the history of Western political philosophy is both a rewarding and also an intellectually demanding endeavor. Determining which thinkers to include/exclude, finding the optimal balance between outlining the details of the thinkers and political traditions canvassed versus exploring the critical insights and objections typically raised against those ideas, and framing the relevance and significance of thinkers long dead for the practical predicaments we face today can feel like daunting endeavors for any instructor who teaches a course on this subject. And that is because such intellectual tasks are indeed daunting endeavors! This book treats the ideas of the past as part of an ongoing conversation and debate with the present and the future concerning how we, both as individuals and collectively as societies, ought to live our lives.

The initial research for this book goes all the way back to my time as a graduate student at the University of Bristol, when, as a final year PhD student in philosophy in 1999, I taught my first lecture course, which was a whole semester just on Karl Marx. Since that time I have expanded the range of thinkers I have taught, teaching philosophy students at Aberdeen University, and then, switching from philosophy to political science departments, teaching at Birmingham University, Manchester University, Waterloo University, and Queen's University. I have been teaching at the latter since 2009. At Queen's University I teach a full-year course on the history of Western political philosophy/theory (I take "political philosophy" and "political theory" to be synonymous terms) to a few hundred students every year.

The discipline of political philosophy has evolved and changed significantly over my career. Both the thinkers we typically teach (historically it was all white males, with rare exceptions) and how they are taught have changed over the past quarter century. I am grateful to the thousands of students who have joined me on the intellectual journey of exploring and critically assessing the ideas of past political thinkers. This book is dedicated to my students.

The bulk of this book was written during the COVID-19 pandemic, when unprecedented public health measures were implemented in an effort to mitigate the spread of SARS-CoV-2. As the initial weeks of lockdown turned into months, followed by more months of continued restrictions on social interactions, I invested most of my energies into writing this book and teaching the course material in an online format. The pandemic amplified many of the themes debated in the history of Western political philosophy concerning the relationship between expertise and democratic governance, as well as the scope and limits of individual rights. At this same time, during the summer of 2020, the police killing of George Floyd, and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed, helped spur a broader societal debate about the persistence of racial inequality and the function of protests.

In the final months of writing this book I was living in Ankara, Türkiye, while on sabbatical from my home institution. I was teaching a course at Bilkent University when the devastating earthquake hit Türkiye and Syria in early February 2023, killing tens of thousands of people. The Turkish government then canceled all in-person classes in the country for the next two months, and my students and I returned to virtual teaching (which exhausted all of us during the pandemic). Türkiye is currently listed as a “hybrid-regime” by the *Economist’s* Democracy Index 2022 report. This means, ranking 103rd in the world by measures like “electoral process and pluralism,” “political culture,” and “civil liberties,” Türkiye has both democratic and authoritarian elements. As I am writing this preface there is a Turkish presidential election next week. Spending time writing and teaching in a country where people, including university students, do not feel they can openly express their views about their own government and political culture helped remind me why it is so important to teach the topics covered in this book. The ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality are ones future generations must continue to engage with and refine.

In addition to the thousands of students who helped participate in the writing of this book, by their questions and comments in my lectures over nearly the past quarter century, I am very grateful to the members of the political philosophy reading group at Queen’s University. In the fall of 2021 we had our first in-person meeting since the pandemic had started, and the group kindly read and commented on an earlier version of chapter 1 of this book, providing me with the opportunity to reconsider

both the thinkers covered in the book and the manner in which the material would be covered. I am grateful to Sue Donaldson, Will Kymlicka, Meena Krishnamurthy, Margaret Moore, and Christine Sypnowich for the helpful comments and critical feedback on the initial conceptualization of this book. While perhaps no consensus could ever emerge among political philosophers concerning which thinkers should be taught, let alone how they should be taught, I have profited immensely from engaging with the members of the political philosophy reading group over many years.

Sandrine Bergès was kind enough to provide feedback on the chapter on feminist political thought, and reviewers of the initial book proposal offered helpful suggestions and insights on what the book should aspire to cover. I am also grateful to two referees who provided insightful suggestions for improvements and revisions on a complete draft version of the manuscript. My editor, Jeff Dean, provided extensive and substantive feedback on the complete manuscript, and he always offered helpful advice on how parts of the book could be tweaked or modified to better serve the general reader. Finally, my research assistants Jennifer Guiho and Yerin Chung provided excellent editorial assistance.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The trained mind is the one that best grasps the degree of observation, forming of ideas, reasoning, and experimental testing required in any special case, and that profits the most, in future thinking, by mistakes made in the past.

John Dewey, *How We Think* (1910)

Humanity faces many pressing societal predicaments in the twenty-first century. These problems include addressing climate change, globalization, and poverty; managing pandemics, population aging, and novel technologies (e.g., genome editing, artificial intelligence, etc.); and redressing historical and contemporary injustices (e.g., those pertaining to colonialism, slavery, and patriarchy). With so many pressing predicaments to address, one might be skeptical of the suggestion that engaging with the thinkers of the past can serve a critical pedagogical function for students in the humanities and social sciences today. “To tackle today’s societal problems we must think cogently, creatively, and ambitiously,” the skeptic might reasonably contend. “We need *forward-*, not backward-looking, thinking,” our skeptic would assert.

I agree with the claim that the problems of today require cogent, creative, and ambitious forward-looking thinking. But I believe our skeptic is guilty of making a false dichotomy when they maintain that we must choose between the ideas of the past or those of the future, as if these two things are distinct and unrelated. Following John Dewey’s sentiment in the epigraph above, I also believe the past can teach us many important lessons, such as revealing the mistakes we are prone to make in diagnosing our societal problems, as well as how best to confront them. This book is written from the conviction that critically engaging with the past thinkers addressed in this book can serve an important, twenty-first-century,

pedagogical function. Fortunately for us, the ideas of the historical thinkers covered in this book—which range from the ancient Greeks and the social contract tradition, to conservatism, feminism, Black political thought, utilitarianism, and Marxism—offer a rich and varied treasure trove of cogent, creative, and ambitious (as well as fallible, erroneous, and short-sighted) political ideas. There is much we can learn from the way past thinkers grappled with what they saw as the pressing problems of their day.

The historical thinkers and topics surveyed in this book include Plato's critique of democracy, Aristotle's emphasis on the primacy of virtue and well-being (*eudaimonia*), the account of human nature posited by Thomas Hobbes in his justification for the state, Emma Goldman's defense of anarchism, John Locke's defense of the right to private property, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's diagnosis of inequality, Edmund Burke's condemnation of the French Revolution, Booker T. Washington's emphasis on self-improvement, Christine de Pizan's condemnation of misogyny, Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of the nature/nurture debate, Anna Cooper's analysis of how sexism and racism are intertwined, Frederick Douglass's condemnation of slavery, W. E. B. Du Bois's critical analysis of racial segregation, Martin Luther King Jr.'s defense of civil disobedience, Frantz Fanon's critique of colonialism, Jeremy Bentham's critique of the talk of "natural rights," John Stuart Mill's defense of free speech, and Karl Marx's critique of capitalism.

The diverse thinkers covered in this book were all societal *problem-solvers* of different types. They theorized about different societal predicaments—ranging from economic, political, racial, and gender inequality to state censorship, civil war, and revolution—problems that reflected the history, geography, and culture of their day. Attending to the details of the arguments advanced by this diverse range of problem-solvers can help us refine our own problem-solving "cognitive toolbox." Thus I invite the reader to engage with these thinkers not only to gain a better appreciation for history and what these political thinkers offered, but because doing so can help us refine the intellectual skills and insights needed to identify and help remedy the problems of today (and tomorrow).

What Is Political Philosophy?

There are different ways to approach the study of the history of political philosophy. *Historians* of political thought prioritize understanding the detailed historical specifics of past thinkers, such as religious and other cultural factors at play during an author's lifetime, or the original meaning of key ideas and concepts employed in their writings. Other scholars survey historical thinkers not for the purposes of getting clear about the details of history but to help bring *conceptual clarity* to political concepts like freedom, equality, and justice (which historical thinkers addressed in their writings). And still others canvass different political philosophers to provide some coherence to the study of *political ideologies* (e.g., liberalism, socialism, feminism, etc.). All of these approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. But the approach taken in this book tries to forge a distinct path from these well-trodden traditional approaches.

This book explicitly, and consciously, embraces a form of what Lynn Fendler calls a “strategically presentistic approach to historiography.”¹ “Presentism” means an approach to studying the past which is grounded in the present (versus being primarily concerned with reconstructing the past), “using that vantage point as an opportunity to foster a critical understanding of our present circumstances.”² This approach to educational historiography is “strategic” because the link between the past and the present is made for the explicit purpose of facilitating our (i.e., readers in the present context) intellectual insight and development, so that we are better equipped to be effective problem solvers for the challenges of today.³

1. Lynn Fendler, “The Upside of Presentism,” *Paedagogica Historica* 44, no. 6 (2008), 677–90, 687.

2. Fendler, “Upside of Presentism,” 678.

3. Fendler notes the following three appeals of a strategically presentistic approach to the study of the past:

- Epistemologically allow for the possibility that the present may be similar to and/or different from the past;
- Methodologically allow for both discontinuity and continuity in history, permitting a critical perspective on extrahistorical mechanisms such as causality, linearity, or circularity;
- Pedagogically recognize multiple interpretations of things in both the past and the present (677–78).

The thinkers surveyed in this book are not presented as conceptual “puzzle solvers” intent on outlining, in the abstract, what is entailed by political ideals like justice, freedom, and equality. Nor are these thinkers treated (at least not primarily) as proponents of easily identifiable and distinct “political ideologies” (e.g., socialism, feminism, liberalism, and conservatism). Instead, we engage with, and critically assess, these thinkers as practical “problem-solvers.” The history of Western political philosophy is thus presented as a history of different attempts to solve different types of societal problems, problems that are still with us today in the twenty-first century.

The characterization of political philosophy as a particular type of “problem-solving” endeavor is of course a contentious and debatable claim. Political philosophers will provide diverse, even conflicting, answers to the question “What is political philosophy?” Leo Strauss, for example, had the following to say in answer to this question in 1957:

Since political philosophy is a branch of philosophy, even the most provisional explanation of what political philosophy is, cannot dispense with an explanation, however provisional, of what philosophy is. Philosophy, as quest for wisdom, is quest for universal knowledge, for knowledge of the whole. . . . Political philosophy will then be the attempt to replace opinion about the nature of political things by knowledge of the nature of political things. . . . If political philosophy wishes to do justice to its subject matter, it must strive for genuine knowledge of these standards. Political philosophy is the attempt truly to know both the nature of political things and the right, or the good, political order.⁴

My characterization of the study of the history of political philosophy as the study of different types of “problem-solvers” has some partial

The survey of historical thinkers covered in this book aspires to achieve these three appeals, making links between today and the past when relevant, but also emphasizing the dissimilarities and discontinuities between the past and present, and finally acknowledging that multiple interpretations of these issues is both defensible and pedagogically beneficial.

4. Leo Strauss, “What Is Political Philosophy?,” *Review of Politics* 19, no. 3 (1957): 343–68.

overlap with, and some strong divergence from, Strauss's popular understanding of the discipline. I think Strauss's characterization captures the primary concerns of certain political philosophers better than others. Classical thinkers like Plato and Aristotle, for example, fit well with Strauss's characterization, but thinkers like Bentham and Marx do not. More importantly, Strauss's characterization of the discipline as being primarily concerned with the nature of political things is ill suited for most of the political thinkers that have typically been (unjustifiably) excluded from the canon: Christine de Pizan, Emma Goldman, Mary Wollstonecraft, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Anna Cooper, W. E. B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and many others.

A more inclusive (from a historical perspective) characterization of the discipline is, I believe, one that makes more explicit the real-world urgency captured in the writings of these political thinkers, with respect to redressing the "knowledge gap" in our wisdom concerning different types of real-world, societal predicaments (not just a concern for universal knowledge about the nature of political things). Plato wanted to abate the harms of rule by the ignorant. Hobbes wanted to abate the risks of civil unrest and war. For Rousseau the concern was those inequalities that could erode the expression and realization of the general will. For feminists the primary concern is to abate patriarchy, while for critical race theorists it is abating racial inequality. Conservatives emphasize the importance of "the actual and tried" versus "the untried" in political life. And finally for liberals there is great urgency to limit state power to prevent unjustified state interference with individual liberty, whereas for Marx the primary practical task is to abate exploitation and alienation due to capitalism.

To equate political philosophy with the aspiration to know about the nature of political things and the good political order risks framing political philosophy as an ivory-tower academic exercise in a priori reasoning⁵ rather than the exercise of experiential, practical reason designed to improve the quality of our collective political lives. I think the latter is a more apt characterization of the canon of political philosophy for the twenty-first century than Strauss's characterization. But I concede that

5. Or even worse, as a form of ideology that distracts our attention from the injustices and problems of the real world. See Charles Mills, "Ideal Theory' as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 165–84.

there are different opinions about this as the discipline is *pluralistic* in its methodology. But I hope the merits of my characterization of the discipline come to the fore when addressing the diverse range of thinkers I canvass and assess in this book.

To clarify the type of problem-solving that was addressed by the canonical thinkers covered in this book, it may be useful to make an illustrative analogy between medicine and political philosophy. Two essential skills are necessary for success in both medicine and political philosophy. The first essential skill is a *diagnostic skill*—to accurately identify pathology (in the case of medicine) and pressing societal ills (in the case of political philosophy). The second skill is a *prescriptive skill*—the insight and foresight to know how best to prevent or remedy the problems/challenges (health or societal) identified by the first epistemic skill.

The first step in any potential medical intervention is to accurately diagnosis what it is that ails a patient. Symptoms must be identified and categorized, along with findings from more precise diagnostic measures (e.g., biopsy), before ascertaining if pathology is the prognosis. Many things can go wrong with the human body and mind. A skilled health-care clinician must first be able to discern what the cause of a health malady is. This diagnostic step is necessary before any sage prescription for treatment or therapy can be made. Once the health malady has been properly identified, medications, surgery, or some other treatment can be prescribed to treat or manage the health problem.

Like a skilled health-care clinician, a political philosopher will both engage in a diagnosis of societal ills and formulate some tentative prescriptions that could help prevent or improve the problematic state of affairs. Over the course of the history of Western civilization there have been a multitude of societal ills political philosophers have addressed. In ancient Athens Plato diagnosed what he took to be the problem inherent with democracy—namely, that it was a political system that placed power in the hands of the *demos* (majority) who were governed by their appetites and lacked the knowledge of what was truly good for society. Plato's remedy to the "rule of the ignorant" was to entrust power to "philosopher rulers," individuals whom Plato believed would not deviate from the quest to achieve the truth. Aristotle concerned himself with quality of character, maintaining that virtue involved an

intermediate position between the extremes of having too much or too little of an emotion.

The societal unrest of civil war in seventeenth-century England was the pathology Hobbes concerned himself with, which led him to argue for the legitimacy of an absolute sovereign. The opulence and inequality of eighteenth-century France led Rousseau to prescribe the remedy of a democratic form of sovereignty (guided by the general will). In contrast, Wollstonecraft, Douglass, Cooper, and Du Bois all diagnosed significant inequalities (e.g., gender and racial) that must be redressed by challenging the hierarchies embedded in the status quo of the family, slavery, and segregation. Utilitarians like Bentham and Mill identified the problem of predicating laws on appeals to natural rights versus a concern for happiness, and championed democracy and limited government as concrete prescriptions that could help promote “the greatest happiness of the greater number.” And perhaps the grandest of all “political health practitioners,” Karl Marx, detailed the social ills of capitalism and the prescriptions of a postcapitalist way of life.

The Importance of History

History is relevant to our future because the past was once someone else’s present, and today is the future that they theorized about. Others contemplated the social ills of their day and offered prescriptions to redress those shortcomings. Attending to the errors and omissions of past thinkers (e.g., such as the marginalization of the actual history of colonialism and slavery in social contract theory)⁶ can help teach us about the importance of observation, intellectual humility, and creativity, making us more cognizant of our own biases, blind spots, and faulty assumptions. Conversely, acknowledging and celebrating the persistent efforts and innovative insights of past thinkers—whether it be Plato’s critique of democracy, Wollstonecraft’s diagnosis of the cause of gender inequality, Bentham’s championing of the principle of utility, or Fanon’s criticism of colonialism—can teach us about the value of insight, courage, dedication, and having an adaptive (problem-solving) mind.

6. Charles W. Mills, “Race and the Social Contract Tradition,” *Social Identities* 6, no. 4 (2000): 441–62.

Our interpretation of the past is not static, nor will it (nor could it) ever yield a fixed consensus in terms of how to interpret it. The past is constantly being rewritten, as our understanding of both the past and present evolve and change. Writing over a century ago, the Spanish American philosopher George Santayana quipped, “History is always written wrong, and so always needs to be rewritten.”⁷ And nearly half a century after Santayana penned those words, the philosopher of education John Dewey made a similar point about interpreting history, maintaining that the story of the past is written by the agenda of the present:

The slightest reflection shows that the conceptual material employed in writing history is that of the period in which a history is written. There is no material available for leading principles and hypotheses save that of the historic present. As culture changes, the conceptions that are dominant in a culture change. Of necessity new standpoints for viewing, appraising and ordering data arise. History is then rewritten.⁸

What both Santayana and Dewey recognized is that the past should not, and can never be, treated as “settled.” Furthermore, they understood that the act of interpreting and making sense of the past has important significance for us in the “here and now.” Rewriting our collective history, like rewriting one’s own personal history, is a *transformative* act, one that permits a new identity to cohesively emerge. Storytelling is an integral part of the process of self-development, education, and growth. This is especially true when the history in question is the history of ideas. Ideas can be powerful catalysts for change, but they can also be powerful tools that entrench an exclusive and unequal status quo. This book concerns itself with a specific domain in the history of ideas, namely a number of influential political thinkers who have helped shape, for better or worse, the culture and sociopolitical institutions of Western civilization. This book is designed to

7. George Santayana, “Reason and Science”: *The Life of Reason, or the Phases of Human Progress*, vol. 7, eds. Marianne Wokeck and Martin Coleman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024), 26.

8. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Holt, 1938), 232–33.

help inspire and aid the reader in the intellectual journey of engaging with, and critically assessing, classics of Western political philosophy.

The Foundational Question Guiding This Project

Before embarking on the intellectual journey of critically attending to the ideas of past thinkers, let us consider, in more detail, the foundational question (FQ) that anchors the study presented in this book:

FQ: Why engage with the study, and critical evaluation, of the history of Western political philosophy?

No doubt many distinct answers could be given to this question, and this foundational question raises a number of more specific questions that it is prudent to address before trying to answer FQ. Three more specific questions are:

1. What constitutes the *classics* in the history of Western political philosophy?
2. Why study the *history* of Western political philosophy (versus more contemporary theories and arguments)?
3. Why study the history of *Western* political philosophy (versus non-Western traditions, such as Eastern philosophy (e.g., Confucius)?

With respect to the first question, “What constitutes the *classics* in the history of Western political philosophy?” we should acknowledge the elephant in the room—that the traditional canon of Western political philosophy typically taught at universities was composed, at least predominantly if not exclusively, of dead, white, male thinkers. This has led to (I believe well-founded) criticisms that the discipline must be substantively revised. Some have called for decolonizing the teaching curriculum, and adopting a more inclusive range of thinkers (e.g., more female thinkers) within the canon.⁹ This book aspires to take such criticisms

9. Charles Mills, “Decolonising Western Political Philosophy,” *New Political Science* 37, no. 1 (2015): 1–25; Penny Weiss, *Canon Fodder: Historical Women Political Thinkers* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009).

seriously, and while it covers many thinkers traditionally considered part of the canon (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Mill, and Marx) it also substantively addresses the contributions of female political thinkers (e.g., Goldman, Pizan, Wollstonecraft, and Cooper) and Black political thinkers (Washington, Douglass, Du Bois, Fanon, and Martin Luther King Jr.) who have tended to be neglected or marginalized in the field.

The second, more specific, question noted above asks: “Why study the *history* of Western political philosophy versus more contemporary theories and arguments?” “The past is the past,” a critic might argue when resisting engaging with thinkers long deceased. “The practical challenges of the twenty-first century are so unique and pressing,” our skeptic might continue, “that there is little reason to believe that contemplating the arguments advanced by philosophers living in ancient Greece, or during the English Civil War, French Revolution, or Industrial Revolution, will really help us find sage insights into the problems of today.”

Engaging with the arguments of philosophers long dead might appear as idle navel-gazing to some if attention is not given to the vast range of societal predicaments these thinkers theorized about, as well as the interdisciplinary scope and contemporary relevance of the modes of social inquiry they inspired. The innovative theorizing of past thinkers can serve as an important source of *learning* and *inspiration* to those of us living in the twenty-first century. When canvassing the concerns of these past thinkers I draw attention not just to the progressive and lasting positive contributions canonical thinkers have made to Western political culture but also to their “cognitive blind spots,” problematic assumptions (e.g., prejudice) and glaring omissions in their theorizing about the problems of their time, which can still adversely impact how we view the political landscape today. For example, many of these political thinkers ignored the origins and persistence of sexual, racial, and cultural inequality. When Rousseau prescribed that our political lives should be governed by the “general will,” which is supposed to “come from all” and “apply to all,” he only considered men fit for exercising such civic responsibilities. And Marx assumed that technological progress could advance to “meet the needs of all” by exploiting the world’s natural resources without concern for the long-term ecological impact on the planet and our future. By attending to the past we can reveal key insights that have been overlooked, even by insightful and progressive thinkers.

Furthermore, throughout this book the ideas of past thinkers are assessed in terms of more contemporary knowledge about topics like human nature, happiness, private property, gender, racism, and democracy. When relevant, I attempt to link the ideas of these past thinkers to contemporary concerns. Here are just five examples:

1. Plato's concerns about the rule of the ignorant parallels concerns about the recent rise of populism.
2. Locke's account of the right to private property connects to a range of divergent political interests and movements, ranging from Indigenous rights to libertarianism and taxation of income.
3. Conservatives emphasize, in the words of Michael Oakeshott, "the familiar to the unknown," "the tried to the untried." Does this mean that society should adopt a position of "bioconservatism" and resist adopting new genetic technologies like genome editing, a technology that might permit us to improve our biology?
4. The consequentialist outlook of Jeremy Bentham helps frame the strengths and weaknesses of cost-benefit analysis in public policy decision-making *and* provides the normative theoretical basis for arguments about animal rights.
5. Anna Cooper's attention to the overlapping problems of racism and sexism has direct relevance to the intersectional lens often deployed today to bring attention to the different ways oppression is manifest in contemporary societies.

The third and final specific question raised above is "Why study the history of *Western* political philosophy versus non-Western traditions (for example, Eastern philosophy, like Confucianism)?" Today's world is global and interconnected, and thus an exclusive focus on Western political philosophy might appear to some as a parochial interest or modern invention.¹⁰ I think there is some validity to such concerns, though the arguments

10. Fred Dallmayr, "Toward a Comparative Political Theory," *Review of Politics* 59, no. 3 (1997): 421–27; Andrew March, "What Is Comparative Political Theory?," *Review of Politics* 71, no. 4 (2009): 531–65; Kwame Anthony Appiah, "There Is No Such Thing as Western Civilization," *Guardian*, July 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/09/western-civilisation-appiah-reith-lecture>.

advanced in this book are perfectly compatible with the conjecture that there is also great value in attending to the arguments and insights of thinkers outside the Western tradition. This book is not intended to provide an *exhaustive* coverage of all the thinkers and traditions worthy of study that have ever lived (nor an exhaustive list of thinkers within just the tradition of Western political philosophy).

To dedicate a book to the study of the Western canon should not be taken to imply that *only* that canon is worthy of study. I decided to write a book on the canon of Western political philosophy because I believe doing so can offer important, *distinctive* educative lessons that are crucial for students to learn in today's globalized world, lessons concerning the limits of state power, toleration, equality, freedom, happiness, property, racism, rebellion, technological progress, equality, democracy, and patriarchy. These lessons are really the focus of this book, though the lessons are taught via an engagement with thinkers in the history of Western political philosophy. Other important lessons could no doubt be taught by engaging with Islamic political thought or Confucianism, for example. But those topics would have to be covered in a different book than this one.

The issue of the value and centrality of, as well as the approach to teaching, the history of Western civilization is among one of the most contentious and divisive issues debated on university campuses today. The three specific questions addressed above have all weighed heavily on my own mind in my teaching, as well as in the design and writing of this book. When I started university as an undergraduate student back in the early 1990s in Canada, these questions were not live questions like they are today. What was considered the canon back then was much pretty much fixed, and this rigidity meant the list of thinkers deemed essential to learn about and engage with was often accepted uncritically. The value of studying that rigid canon was also taken as a given, as was the value of studying historical figures more generally and the value of focusing on Western political thinkers (versus non-Western thinkers). But a lot has changed over the past few decades, and in my view this change (on the whole) has been beneficial and long overdue.

What constitutes the canon to be taught to our undergraduate students in political science and philosophy courses, and how we teach that canon, are now regarded as moral, evaluative, and highly contested issues.

What we include and what we leave out (e.g., the voices of women, the experience of those who suffered the injustices of racial and cultural inequality) can help either combat or perpetuate different types of societal problems. This means such questions warrant a great deal of care, attention, and critical reflection rather than being treated as simply a descriptive and settled matter (e.g., “teach what we have tended to teach in the past!”).

One might be tempted to take the limitations of Western political thought—like the fact that traditional canonical thinkers ignored issues like patriarchy, colonialism, and racial inequality—as a basis for neglecting, if not rejecting, the continued importance of seriously engaging with central historical thinkers in Western political thought. I think such a dismissive attitude is problematic and should be resisted. There is a valuable pedagogical lesson to be learned by acknowledging that insightful, even progressive, thinkers of the past had their own cognitive blind spots, biases, and prejudices. Rather than treat such thinkers as infallible “intellectual heroes” of Western civilization, we should engage with them in a nuanced and humble fashion. All these thinkers (like us today) were fallible, working with assumptions about human nature, culture, religion, race, and gender that can and should be challenged today. We study these thinkers not for the purpose of ridiculing them for all their faulty assumptions or glaring omissions, but to draw attention to the strengths, as well as acknowledge and redress the weaknesses, of the theories, assumptions, insights, and prescriptions they offered regarding how we should collectively live together.

The most timeless contributions of these thinkers continue to provide important insights we should consider and engage with in the twenty-first century. Our engagement with the canon should be one of critical inquiry, the middle ground between adoration/deference and the impulse to “cancel” and dismiss. Recall Dewey’s apt insight that “the trained mind profits the most, in future thinking, by mistakes made in the past.”¹¹ In the chapters to come I try my best to canvass both the strengths *and* weaknesses/limitations of the thinkers we will cover. By doing so I hope the book is a catalyst to the project of renewing and revising the classics in political philosophy.

11. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston: D. C. Heath, 1910), 78.

Humanistic Education and Epistemic Virtue

Let us now return to answer the foundational question (FQ) raised earlier: *Why engage with the study, and critical evaluation, of the history of Western political philosophy?* I have a short answer to this question, and a longer one. The short answer will strike the reader as a generic type of answer often provided by instructors teaching in the humanities and social sciences: namely, that doing so helps encourage and refine *critical thinking*.

The critical thinking inherent in political philosophy concerns a specific domain of social inquiry: *how should we, both as individuals and collectively as societies, live our lives?* For example, when thinking about the legitimate scope, limits, and function of government, what we assume about human nature, gender, property, happiness, racial inequality, the experience and wisdom of the past, and so on will have a profound impact on what kind of future we aspire to bring into existence in the “here and now.” The thinkers of the past theorized about their own “present and future collective lives,” and thus we can learn a great deal by attending to the virtues and vices of the concepts, theories, assumptions, and aspirations they invoked when addressing the practical predicaments of their own time.

But if the reader will indulge me, I would like to elaborate further on this short answer with my longer answer to the FQ, as this will help explain the content and approach of this book. This book has been designed to be a contribution to *humanistic education*. The literature on humanistic education is vast and could be the focus of a book in itself. My own personal “philosophy of education” draws on a variety of humanistic thinkers, ranging from Socrates and Rabindranath Tagore to John Dewey, Carl Rogers, and Martha Nussbaum. I will just briefly summarize the vision of humanistic education that informs this book and has been the foundation of my teaching for over twenty years.

First and foremost, a humanistic education is *student-centered*; it treats students as *developing* human beings and reflective democratic citizens versus merely as students pursuing a degree who need to get a course credit, or future employees valued only for what they can contribute to the economy, or impressionable minds receptive to being swayed into adopting the specific political ideology an instructor

advocates. Because humanistic education is conceived of as a reflexive, ongoing developmental process (versus a goal-oriented approach to education), it prioritizes the development and refinement of a number of specific *epistemic* or *intellectual virtues* that can help facilitate the self-realization of students. Three cornerstone epistemic virtues are integral to this work: (1) curiosity, (2) insight and nuanced understanding, and (3) optimism.

Epistemic Virtue #1: Curiosity

Curiosity can be defined as “a cognitive induced deprivation that arises from the perception of a gap in knowledge and understanding.”¹² The curious intellect is motivated to try to make sense of what it currently does not know or understand. The intellectual activity of remedying this knowledge and understanding gap is an *enjoyable* activity for the genuinely curious mind. This book is written for the intellectually curious student. Such a student will often wonder about one or more of the following types of questions: “Why are our social and political lives the way that they are?” “Why is there government versus anarchism?” “Why is rule by democracy a desirable and defensible political aspiration?” “Why is there inequality in the world—socioeconomic inequality, gender inequality, and racial inequality?”

The motivation to engage with the political philosophy of the past is driven, at least in part, by the intrinsic reward of satisfying our intellectual curiosities of trying to understand, as well as critically assess, the political ideas and ideals of the past. Ideas and ideals concerning human nature, justice, equality, democracy, gender, race, happiness, and freedom have had, and continue to have, a real impact in politics. Engaging with the classics in political philosophy enables us to indulge our curiosity about the attraction and variation in, and limits of, political ideas and ideals. The study of political philosophy is serious business as it deals with important societal topics like political power, racial inequality, colonialism, patriarchy, democracy, and so on. But it can, and should, also be a fun topic to study if approached from a curious mindset.

12. George Loewenstein, “The Psychology of Curiosity: A Review and Reinterpretation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 116, no. 1 (1994): 75–98.

A primary motivation for engaging with the canon of Western political thought should thus be a sense of *discovery*. What are the ideas, for better or worse, that have shaped the institutions and culture of Western liberal democracies? This sense of discovery was what motivated my interest in the field, first as a student and then (ever since) as a professor and scholar, so I have tried my best to write this book with a sense of discovery. By studying the classics in political philosophy, and by doing so in an inquisitive fashion, students will be exposed to intellectual giants that exemplify the epistemic virtue of curiosity. From Plato's classic examination of the question "What is justice?" and Hobbes's conjectures about what life is like in the "state of nature," to Goldman's defense of anarchism, Burke's reflections on the French Revolution, Wollestonecraft's criticism of sexual inequality, Du Bois's diagnosis of the ills of the Jim Crow era, and Marx's conjectures about class and class conflict, the thinkers covered in this book certainly thought outside the box for their times by critically reflecting on the societal predicaments they faced. By engaging with these inquisitive thinkers of the past, students in the twenty-first century can be inspired to exercise and celebrate their own curiosity about why things are the way they are, and how we might collectively act to bring about a more desirable future.

Epistemic Virtue #2: *Insight and Nuanced Understanding*

Everyday politics is often a rancorous business. Disagreement is omnipresent. Sometimes political arguments stem from disagreement over what constitutes the relevant facts concerning a particular policy or societal issue. Will policy A boost the economy more than policy B? Will strategy X help combat the harms of climate change in the future more effectively than strategy Y? But often political disagreements are disagreements about moral and political values. For example, is it more important to grow the economy or to ensure its benefits are more evenly distributed? What moral obligations do we have to future generations and who should take on most of the burdens of mitigating the harmful effects of climate change (e.g., the biggest carbon emitters today, or those who emitted the most historically, or those who can most afford to reduce their reliance on carbon, etc.)? When can government justifiably interfere in our liberty?

The ideas of past political thinkers have helped shape the evaluative judgments embedded in diverse political traditions, such as liberalism, feminism, conservatism, Marxism, and critical race theory. By critically engaging with the historical thinkers that inspired and shaped these political positions, we are exposed to a wide array of normative insights that can help us develop a better understanding of, and appreciation for, the diversity of insights and opinions in contemporary political life.

Epistemic Virtue #3: Optimism

As a general character trait, optimism is commonly described as a disposition that expects good (versus bad) things to happen. But the type of optimism I have in mind for cultivating in this book is a more narrow and specific type of optimism, conceived of as a distinctively *epistemic virtue*. When faced with adversity, an optimist adopts a creative (or open) mindset to *problem-solving* the collective predicaments that must be addressed. This can be contrasted with a pessimistic (or fixed) mindset, which fails to competently think or act because it is consumed with despair or a fatalism about the circumstances. Optimism is thus a *hopeful* disposition. Hope is something essential to the political theory of John Dewey,¹³ a thinker who inspired this student-focused book. Hope is not deluded “wishful thinking” that somehow things will just work out for the better. Rather, the epistemic manifestation of hope and optimism is the belief that we can *learn* from the past, and that these lessons will help us better address the societal challenges of today and bring about a better tomorrow.

This optimism is based in the reality that ideas have had, and will continue to have, a substantive impact in the real world. Ideas of racial and gender supremacy helped create and sustain societal hierarchies, whereas ideals of equality and inclusion have helped challenge and dismantle such hierarchies. Ideas concerning nationalism have contributed to the rise of fascism and provided justifications for starting world wars, whereas ideas about the importance of individual freedom and toleration have helped

13. Stephen M. Fishman and Lucille McCarthy, *John Dewey and the Philosophy and Practice of Hope* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

limit state authoritarianism and xenophobic attitudes. Ideas concerning the right of the nobility to rule over others legitimated feudalism and reinforced the pretense for the humanitarian theology behind colonialism, whereas ideas about government accountability and political representation can inspire democratic reform and gender quotas for political parties. Ideas can have a profound, tangible impact on the life prospects of the world's populations. They are a subject worthy of study and careful critical examination.