

Introduction to Political Philosophy

Introduction to Political Philosophy

Key concepts, major questions, and foundational thinkers

1. What Is Political Philosophy?

Aspect	Description
Definition	The branch of philosophy that examines how societies should be organized, the justification of political authority, and the relationship between individuals and the state.
Scope	• Justice and equality • Rights and duties • Power, authority, and legitimacy • The ideal form of government
Method	Combines normative (what ought to be) analysis with descriptive (what is) observations, often using thought experiments, historical case studies, and logical argumentation.

2. Central Questions

- 1. What is the best form of government?**
 - Democracy, monarchy, aristocracy, republic, etc.
 - 2. What makes political authority legitimate?**
 - Consent, social contract, natural law, utilitarian benefit.
 - 3. What are the basic rights and duties of citizens?**
 - Civil, political, economic, and social rights.
 - 4. How should justice be distributed in society?**
 - Equality of opportunity, distributive justice, desert.
 - 5. What is the role of the state?**
 - Protecting rights, providing public goods, promoting welfare, limiting coercion.
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3. Historical Foundations

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Era

Thinker(s)

Core Contributions

Ancient Greece **Plato, Aristotle**

- Plato's *Republic*: justice as harmony, philosopher-king.

- Aristotle's *Politics*: classification of regimes, concept of "polity" (mixed government).

Roman & Early Christian **Cicero, St. Augustine**

- Natural law theory; law grounded in reason and divine order.

Medieval **Thomas Aquinas**

Synthesis of Christian theology with Aristotelian natural law.

- Hobbes – social contract, absolute sovereignty for peace.

Early Modern **Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau**

- Locke – natural rights (life, liberty, property), government by consent.

- Rousseau – general will, popular sovereignty.

Enlightenment **Montesquieu, David Hume, Immanuel Kant**

- Separation of powers (Montesquieu).

- Skepticism about rationalist politics (Hume).

- Moral autonomy and republicanism (Kant).

19th Century **John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Alexis de Tocqueville**

- Liberalism & utilitarianism (Mill).

- Historical materialism & critique of capitalism (Marx).

- Democracy and civil society analysis (de Tocqueville).

20th Century **John Rawls, Robert Nozick, Hannah Arendt, Jürgen Habermas**

- Theory of justice as fairness (Rawls).

- Libertarian minimal state (Nozick).

- Political action & the public realm (Arendt).

- Communicative action & deliberative democracy (Habermas).

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4. Major Theoretical Traditions

Tradition	Central Idea	Representative Thinkers
Liberalism	Individual liberty, rule of law, limited government.	Locke, Mill, Rawls
Conservatism		