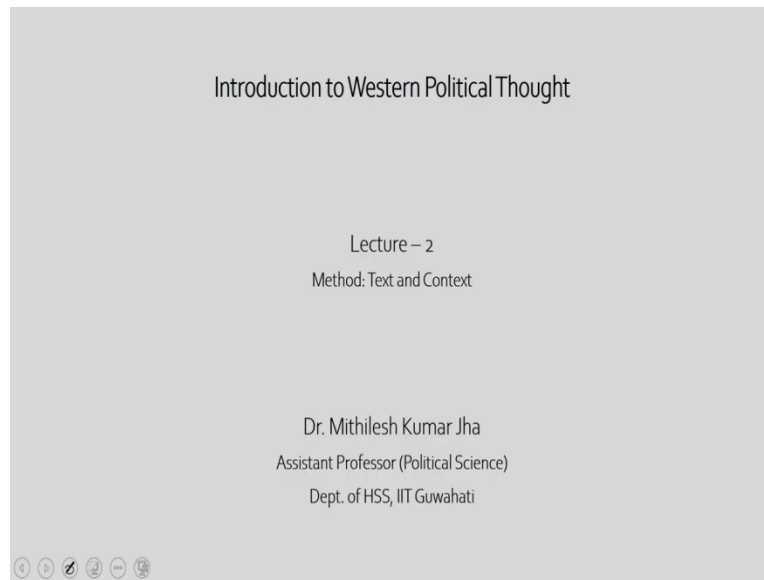


**Introduction to Western Political Thought**  
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**Lecture No. 2**  
**Method: Text and Context**

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Hello and welcome, friends. This is part two of the introductory lecture to this course, Introduction to Western Political Thought. And in this lecture today, we are going to discuss the method and approaches to study classical texts in Western political thought. In the previous lecture, we have discussed the significance of studying political thought. Why should we study Western political thought? How Western political thought should be seen as a part of the many other traditions, like Asian, and within Asian, Chinese, Indian, Arab, and also African traditions of political thought?

Thus, Western political thought is one tradition among many traditions of political thought. In contemporary times, we also talk about the comparative tradition of political thought or global political thought. However, in this course, as we discussed in the previous lecture, we are going to discuss the major thinkers in Western political thought. And one of the reasons for studying Western political thought is not just to understand the texts or the thinkers produced in a particular historical and geographical context, but also through them, it is hoped, we can understand the political discourse in our contemporary times.

Even we can understand our own assumptions and presumptions more critically. So, the study of Western political thought is significant even for understanding the political debates and discussion in the contemporary world. And the reason being, the major concepts or the ideas that we often use when discussing any political problem, is rooted in the political treatises of these thinkers, particular in the Western tradition. And that is why Western political thought remain the dominant tradition of political thought, even when it is one among the many other traditions of political thought.

Now in this lecture today, we are going to discuss how to study political thought. What does it mean to refer to a text as a classic? When does a text become classic? And what are the methods to study those classics? So in this lecture, in the first part, we will discuss the idea of a classic. When and how a text becomes classic? And in the second part, we are going to discuss three methods of studying classics, political thinkers, and political thought. First is the textual method. Second is the historical and contextual method. And finally, and in fact, many will argue that the most important method of studying any thought or any text is the interpretive method or the hermeneutics. These are the three methods we will discuss in the second part before concluding this lecture.

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➤ One of the purposes to study the history of political thought is to retrieve the true or the correct meaning or interpretation of the political thinkers and their texts from the past. However, to do that we need correct method or approaches. Should we read these texts from the point of view of the present? Or should we study these thinkers and texts by situating them in their own contexts?

➤ However, re/discovery of true or correct meaning of these texts become increasingly challenging as we all are already shaped by our own preferences, suppositions and subjective biases. And when we read a text or study a thinker, these biases, suppositions, or preferences do play a role in construing meaning or understanding. In fact, authors have very little or no control over the meaning of their text. These texts once published have a life of their own. They often outlive their authors.

➤ These texts and thinkers then acquire new lives or new meanings in the light of newer or more accurate interpretations. Thus, the authors of these texts could hardly foresee the value of their texts that is attributed to them by the future generations.

Let us begin with this question that in the history of political thought, one of the purposes is to retrieve the meaning or the *correct* interpretation of a text or the ideas that a political thinker portrays. Thus, the main purpose of studying political thought is to retrieve this *true* or the *correct* meaning or interpretation of political thinkers and their text, especially so when these thinkers are from the past, and we do not have access to that past. So, the text that we have included in this course, whether it is Plato's *Republic*, or Machiavelli's *The Prince*, or Hobbes's *Leviathan*; these texts were written in a very different context, both geographically and historically. Now when we read these texts and their thinkers in contemporary time, in the twenty-first century, what should be the method or the *correct* approach to study these thinkers and their texts. And the objective and the purpose of doing political thought is to get the *correct* or the *true* meaning of these texts and their thinkers. Now, this idea like *true* or *correct*, I have put it in the *italics* because you know, often what is truthful, or what is correct is contested. And we will discuss it more when we discuss the interpretive method. Any scientific knowledge, or any epistemological approach that we use to derive at certain knowledge, or a conclusion, is expected to lead us to the *correct* meaning. And this *correct* meaning or the *true* meaning is often regarded as the absolute.

And therefore, we will see how different scholars arguing about different methods and approaches to the study of political thought, to the study of classics often claim that their method or their approach leads to what they call as the *absolute truth* or the *correct* interpretation of a political

text or a political thinker. Nonetheless, we will see how these claims of absolute truth or absolute correct interpretation of a text is a matter of debate. And how that debates lead to a broader, more profound, and comprehensive understanding of a thinker and thought.

One of the purposes of studying political thought is to know the *correct* and *true* meaning of the text and the thinker. But to get this right and correct meaning, we also need a correct method. And when we deploy a certain method to study a text, the question comes, should we read these text or thinkers from the point of view of the present? It often happens, when we read the text in the present context, our meaning or understanding of a particular text is also shaped by our present-day assumptions or suppositions. For instance, we criticize Plato for something which was not that important in his time, but it is very important in our times. Similarly, with Aristotle. Many of the ideas which we think are necessary to think about the political problem, to address the political challenges for today's world, may not be equally significant or even present in the times when Plato and Aristotle were writing. So, how far is it correct when we read Plato and Aristotle to impose our own preferences or suppositions? And that makes the study or the understanding of the text or political thinkers a very challenging task.

Now, of course, those who believe in interpretation will say that every generation has the right to read the text from the point of view of the present. And that is not just an option, but one cannot read a text without having one's own preferences, suppositions guiding their meaning, or understanding. And more of it, we will discuss when we will discuss the interpretive method of studying political thought.

But one of the problems comes when we discuss the political thought and thinker is should we study them from the point of view of the present, or more appropriate would be to study these thinkers and their texts by situating them in their own context. These texts or thinkers are products of a particular geographical, historical, and intellectual context. The correct method or approach to studying them would be to situate them in their own contexts – social, historical, and intellectual. And when we situate them in their own context, the meaning and understanding that we have about these thinkers and their text would be radically different than presentist approach to these thinkers and their texts. This question is at the center of the methodological debate to the study of political thought, or to the study of political treatises.

So, the discovery or the re-discovery of *true* or the *correct* meaning of these texts become increasingly challenging as we all are already shaped by our own preferences, suppositions, and subjective biases. Now whether we study from the present point of view, or by situating these text and thinkers in their own context, when we read them, when we interpret them, when we construe meaning about their texts or their ideas, we are necessarily guided by our own value preferences, our own suppositions. And this we have to understand that as a human being, we all have certain biases, certain preferences. And we are often not aware about these biases or preferences. Suppose you like something, or you dislike something, and that liking and disliking may appear to you natural or instantaneous. But these likings and dislikings are shaped by the social values or the preferences that we carry, and that is always present in our conscious or subconscious mind.

When we strive towards construing the *true* or the *correct* meaning of any political treatise, these value preferences or suppositions do play a role. And therefore, in the discovery of the *correct* meaning or the *true* meaning, these preferences or the supposition play a very significant role. Now, one has to also engage with this idea that we do not enter into the world, or understand our society, or our circumstances, by having a *blank sheet* or *tabula rasa*. Some thoughts, some preferences, some values are already ingrained in our thinking and our thought process. So, whenever we understand another person, or a society, or a culture, or the political issue, those preferences do play a role. And it is equally true when we read a text. So, what happens that when we read a text or study a political thinker, these biases, suppositions, or preferences do play a role in construing meaning or understanding of these texts or their thinkers.

In fact, it is argued that these thinkers or the author of these texts have very little or no control over the meaning of their texts. These texts, once published, have a life of their own, and they often outlive their authors. So, many of these texts that we are going to discuss, we will find that these texts have been subjected to many interpretations by the future generations. And why we study these texts is also because these texts stimulate political conversation, political thinking among the future generations. It has relevance not only in the time when it was produced, but also it is equally significant, and perhaps more meaningful for the future generations. And that is why we often go back to these texts like Plato's *Republic*, or Aristotle's *Politics*, or Machiavelli's *The Prince*, or Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Each of these texts and their meaning and interpretations is subjected to the future generations' approach or interest; and also to the newer evidence that is available to the

future generation. And in light of those, they interpret or re-interpret or re-read these texts. And therefore, the meaning and the interpretation of these texts vary and the authors of these texts have very little control over it. It is applicable even today. When we re-read the text, the same text if ten other persons read it, they do not read the same text, because each one of them, this ten other persons will be guided by their own individual subjective preferences, biases, or the values. Therefore the meaning or the understanding they derive from the same text will differ. And over that, the author of that particular text will have very little control.

So, that is what the text is, which is true in all the contexts, and it is more so for the classics, which every future generation will read, re-read, re-interpret in the light of newer evidence, newer requirements. And that is how a tradition is constituted, or a convention is formed. So, once these texts are interpreted continuously, re-interpreted, these texts and thinkers then acquire new lives or new meanings in the light of new or more accurate interpretation. We will see that how the history of political thought has evolved from a textual to contextual, to the more interpretive method.

In the interpretive method, the actual or the effective history is shaped by the interpretation and reinterpretation of a text. And in this model, the text is not just a book; it could be a historical event, or an encounter, or a movie, and so on. An interpretive model is something that we are all involved in. These texts and thinkers continuously acquire newer lives and newer meanings in the light of new and more accurate interpretation. And thus, the author of this text could hardly foresee the value of their texts that is attributed to them by the future generation.


One can think about this in the western tradition and how this text speaks to the different audience. So, modern West discovered the writings of Plato and Aristotle through the Arabic translation. Plato and Aristotle writing in the third or the fourth century BC was translated by Arab philosophers; and from Arabs, modern West rediscovers and goes on to translate and gather more evidences to have better interpretation and broader and more precise understanding of these texts. And the meaning that we now attribute to Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics* is very different, and the author of these texts – Plato or Aristotle could hardly foresee those attributes that we now associate with these texts. So, the rediscovery of the meaning that we associate with a particular

text offered that the author of this text would have very little control, that is the point which we need to keep in mind when we discuss or when we engage with a political treatise.

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What is a classic?

- Not all texts are classics or can become classics. A text must fulfill certain criteria to become a classic. Often such criteria differ from generation to generation and context to context. However, one of the major criteria is the timelessness of these texts and their *epistemic* authority. These texts – in comparison to other texts, succeed 'in reaching out beyond their age and stimulating the minds of later generations'. Thus, a text becomes classic not because few individuals or academic jurists claim it to be so. But because generation after generations find stimulating ideas or conversations in these texts.
- Scholars have also argued that classics are those representative texts which embodies the finest knowledge of their age. However, in sharp contrast to that scholars have also argued that a text becomes classic when it goes against the grain of prevailing thought and predict or foresee the future.
- A text becomes classic in political thought when it deals with the questions which are co-terminus with the human existence such as the questions of just rule or ideal government. Thus, the questions raised by Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Politics*, Hobbes's *Leviathan* are still relevant. All these texts enjoy a kind of *epistemic* authority in the contemporary political discourse as well.



Now the question comes, what is a classic? How to define a classic? And before I discuss this idea of how to classify or what kind of text we should consider as classic in the history of political thought; let us discuss briefly about the idea of a text. You read many texts. And you read some texts just for pleasure, and you just flip through the pages, and that is all. You do not want to read it again, and you do not want to go back to it; you do not want to think about it seriously. So, that is one kind of text which you read for the sake of pleasure. Then there are other kinds of text which you want to read with some interest, with some seriousness. And you try to complete these text as the arguments unfold in this text. So, that is second kind of text. And then there would be few texts in your life which you would like to read, re-read, chewed, digested, and go back to again and again.

The classic falls in this category of a text which is read, re-read, chewed, discussed, debated again and again across the contexts, across the geographical, historical, cultural contexts. And that makes this text a great text, or in other words a classic. And there could be different criteria to define a text as the classic; but one thing is sure that not all texts are classics. There are millions or billions of texts. There are millions of manuscripts; there are millions of other kinds of treatises.

We do not read all of them. Clearly, not all text falls in this category of a classic. And to become a classic, it has to fulfill specific criteria. And what are those criteria? This definition or criteria is problematic as you will see that generation to generation, context to context, they may develop a text which is very different from the previous generation within a particular context. And also, across the context, the criteria of a definition of a classic may vary. However, one of the major criteria for designating a text as a classic is its timelessness. So, as I said that Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics* were written in a very different context of a very small city-states in Greek, in the third to the fifth century BC; now, what is the point of reading these texts in the twenty-first century? What is their significance? And this point is their timelessness. The continuous relevance of these texts makes them classics.

And on top of that, these texts also carry what is called the *epistemic authority*. An *epistemic authority*, let us discuss this point. So, in our life, there are many kinds of authorities. Take the example of the most obvious – the state or the government. We obey the state because it has the backup of the law, or it has the coercive power. And the authority of the state rest on this coercive power that is if an individual or a group of individuals disobey the state, then the state has the coercive apparatus to force these individuals to obey its order, to abide by the authority that a state or a military leader or any official commands.

So, their authority rests on their coercive dimensions. They exercise certain power through their coercive apparatus. In the context of these texts, and the authority of these texts, they do not carry any weapon; they do not, you know, demand any attention. However, in the political conversation, in any theoretical enterprise, you will find references to these texts again and again. In that sense, these texts also command certain authority. But it is very different from the authority of the state or military commander. They do not carry any coercive apparatus, do not even expect obedience or reverence. So the relevance, the authority of these texts are through their *epistemic* significance. We constantly try to go back to, or within that we try to expand the horizon of thinking, the horizon of understanding the political problem and political challenges. So, many thinkers after Aristotle will go back to Aristotle, read it, re-read it, and then develop his or her own thinking about various political challenges. Thus Hobbes's *Leviathan* or Machiavelli's *The Prince* carry certain *epistemic authority*, and that *epistemic authority* gives them the status of the classic, which is very significant for the future generation, or future thinkers to go back to. So even when we talk about, for instance,



John Rawl's *A Theory of Justice*, when he was conceptualizing his understanding of justice, it can also be seen within Aristotelian ethics and Kantian ethics.

These texts are classic – one, because of their timelessness. It is relevant across the generations, across the historical, geographical, or cultural contexts. But also it carries certain *epistemic authority*. It becomes a kind of paradigm, a kind of methodological tool for the future thinkers, or the future generation of thought leaders, to refer to, fall back to. And within them, we try to expand the thinking or theorization of politics. Thus, the *epistemic authority* makes these texts classics.

These texts, in comparison to other texts, succeed in reaching out beyond their age and stimulating the minds of later generations. And that is what makes a text, a classic. Not because it is comprehensible only to the context in which it is produced. So, there could be many texts which can be the most effective modes of communication for their own age, to their own context, but that does not make those texts, classics. What makes them classic is their ability to transcend the limits of their social, historical, geographical, cultural context, and also the age in which these texts were written. So, many texts you will find do not have this ability to transcend their historical and geographical contexts; but the classics have this ability to stimulate the minds of the future generation or future thinkers. Thus a text becomes classic, not because a few individuals or academic jurists claim it to be so. One cannot designate a classic; it cannot be done by a few individuals or some academic jurists. But because generation after generations find stimulating ideas or conversation in a text, that make it a classic. And this interest, this perennial, everlasting interest in a text, or the conversation, or the ideas that these texts contain, makes these texts classics. So, Aristotle, Plato, Hobbes is not read-only by the political thinkers or the theorists, but by many other groups of individuals or those who are interested in understanding politics or theorizing politics. They find these texts and conversations in these texts ideal. And that makes a text, classic, not because a few individuals or a jurist, academic jurist define a text as classic.

Scholars have also argued that classics are those representative texts which embody the finest knowledge of their age. So, the other definition of a text as the classic text is that this text embodies the finest knowledge of its time. Thus, if we want to understand Greek political thought, we should refer to Plato and Aristotle, because these two thinkers and their texts embody the finest knowledge of that time.

Similarly, if you want to understand the sixteenth or seventeenth-century England, you should read Hobbes' *Leviathan*. Or if we want to understand the state and society in medieval Italy and many problems that it was facing; we should refer to Machiavelli's *The Prince*. So, one of the definitions of understanding a text as a classic, is to find in them the embodiment of the finest knowledge of their age. Through them, we then try to understand that society, that historical period.

However, in sharp contrast to that, many scholars have argued that a text become classic when it goes beyond the grain of prevailing thought and predict or foresee the future. So, one definition is that it embodies the finest knowledge of that age in which it is produced. In contrast to that, many other scholars have also argued that a classic text is that text which goes against the prevailing thought of its time and predicts or foresee the future. In that sense, Rousseau's work is regarded as a text which foresaw the French revolution. And therefore, Rousseau's *Social Contract* is seen as a classic. Thus, there are two ways of looking at classic, one as the embodiment of the finest knowledge of their age. And second, it goes against the prevailing knowledge, or prevailing thoughts of their time, and foresee the future, predicts the future. And that ability to predict the future or foresee the future makes a text as a classic.

Now in political thought, a text becomes classic when it deals with the question, which is regarded as the co-terminus with human existence. These questions are the question of justice. What is just rule? What is the ideal form of government? And most of the texts that we are going to discuss in this course deal with this question of just rule, ideal state, how to achieve an ideal state within the pragmatic challenges of complexities or disputations that are prevalent in the political realm.

So most of these texts, like Plato's *Republic*, or Aristotle's *Politics*, Hobbes's *Leviathan*, are still relevant, because these texts engage with these fundamental questions, which are regarded as the co-terminus with human existence. We constantly strive for a better government, for an ideal life, for the ideal form of government. And in that pursuit, these texts continue to make sense. So every time you go to these texts, you come out of some profound insights, not just to the meaning or understanding of these texts, but also in your attempt to understand the politics in the contemporary times.

And that makes these texts, classics. Because every time you go back to read it, you come out with a better explanation, better understanding of not these texts; but also of the present day's predicaments. Thus, all these texts enjoy a kind of *epistemic authority* in the contemporary political discourse as well. So often, when you talk about politics, equality, justice, state, government, sovereignty, obligation, you, again and again, go back to these texts within the Aristotelian frame, or the Platonian frame, or Kantian ethics, or Hegelian notions, or Marxist perspectives.

All these texts carry certain *epistemic authority* and determine the language or discourse of the contemporary political discussions as well, and that make these texts, classics. So, this is a more or less the understanding of the text as a classic. Now we will move on to the method of studying these classics; what would be the correct method and approach to study these classics? And as I said, we will discuss one by one the textual, the contextual, and the interpretive method.

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Approaches and Methods

- One of the major approaches to study political thought in any tradition is through the study of the texts which are regarded as the classics. However, there are many challenges to correctly read these texts and re/discover/retrieve their meanings.
- In order to understand a text or its author correctly, first we need to understand what is said in the text. Then, we try to establish the correct interpretation of the words or concepts that is used in that text. In other words, first we need to be truthful or original to the text or their author. Once such meaning or interpretation is established with a degree of certainty in the light of available material we use these texts to understand the past as well as our present.
- Thus, there is a degree of historicity involved in the study of classical texts or the history of political thought. However, our purpose is not to satisfy the historical or antiquarian interests. We study these texts or thinkers because they are relevant for our age; they help us develop our own thinking about the political problems. And thus, the question of interpretation can't be avoided. However, before discussing the merits and demerits of interpretative method let us discuss the textual and contextual methods in some detail.

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If we talk about the method and approaches to study a classic, one of the major approaches to studying political thought in any tradition is through the study of the text, which is regarded as classic. If you want to study the Western tradition of political thought and thinking, you will study these classics, and through studying these classics, you claim to know the western tradition of political thought and thinking.

However, when we approach these texts or these traditions, there are many challenges to read these texts correctly. And there is a need for constant striving for discovery, rediscovery, and retrieval of the meanings of these texts or understanding of these texts. It has led to many approaches.

To understand a text or its author correctly, first, we need to understand what is said in the text. So, the first and foremost thing when we study political thought, or a political thinker, or a text in any tradition, is to study the text - that is called the textual method. You try to understand what is said in the text. Then we try to establish the correct interpretation of the words or concepts that are used in the text. So often, it becomes a kind of challenge when we think about virtue in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, or *virtu*'s understanding in Roman times, and Machiavelli's understanding of *virtu*.

Thus, the use of the concepts and their meaning requires us not just to understand the text but also their wider social, linguistic, and intellectual context in which these words and utterances are used. In other words, first, we need to be truthful or original to the text or their author. So first, we try to understand what is said in the text by being truthful, without imposing our own preferences or our own suppositions, by focusing on in a best possible objective or neutral manner, to understand what is said in the text. Once such meaning or interpretation is established with a degree of certainty in the light of available material, we use these texts to understand the past as well as our present. So, once we are truthful and original to the author of a text, or the argument of that text, then we can use that knowledge or that understanding not only to understand the past society or theorization or thinking; but also it helps us to understand or resolve many of the political challenges that we face in the contemporary times. And that is why we study political thought or political treatises.

So, in doing this, there is a degree of historicity that is involved. We cannot understand Plato's text or Aristotle's text without involving the historicity or the historical approach to it. And therefore, you will also find that when we talk about political thought, there is a kind of history that is attached to it, history of western political thought, history of modern Indian political thought, or history of Indian political thought, history of Arab thought, and so on.

History has become a kind of prefix to the understanding of political thought in any tradition. Thus, it involves a degree of historicity. However, our purpose in political science is not that of a historian or antiquarian. We do study these classics, however not with the same degree of interest like that of a historian or an antiquarian would have. We study these texts or thinkers because they are relevant for our own times; they help us develop our own thinking about the political problems and the challenges that we face today.

And as we have discussed, the significance of political thought is that it enables us to reflect critically on our own preferences, our own biases and then have a better approach and understanding of the politics of our time. So, we do not share the interest of historians or antiquarians when we study these classic texts. Nonetheless, the proper or the adequate understanding of these texts and their authors involve a degree of historicity.

And thus, the question of interpretation cannot be avoided. So, as we have said and we will discuss it in much detail, that the reading of these text requires interpretation. And that interpretation is unavoidable. However, before discussing the merits and demerits of the interpretative method, which we all deploy when we study a text or the context, let us discuss the textual and the contextual method of studying political text or political thinker in some detail.

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Textual Method

- Textual method of studying classical texts give autonomy to the text. So, the focus is given exclusive to the texts. It regards that a text is the sole basis for construing its meaning and understanding. So, if we were to read and understand Plato's political thought, we should read and re-read his *Republic*. If necessary, we could also read *Republic* in the light of other texts of Plato such as *Georgia*, *Laws*, *Statesmen* to have better understanding.
- Leo Strauss while giving primacy to the text argues about 'reading between the lines' by carefully studying the meaningful silences, intentional ambiguity, dissimulation, the significance of centrally placed speeches, inexact repetitions of earlier statements'. He is actually referring to an exoteric form of writing where authors often deploy certain tactics to avoid the wrath of authority in order to convey their messages. Thus we could retrieve the meaning when we pay closer attention exclusively to the texts by reading between the lines.
- However, the problem associated with the textual method is that it studies the thinkers and their texts within a set frameworks of issues or questions and examine how the thinker or texts respond to those issues or questions. In other words, there is a fallacy of coherence. Statements of the thinkers are fit into an already set framework and any inconsistent or contradictory statements by the author are overlooked or ignored.

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The textual method dominated the study of political thought for a very long time. And one of the characteristics of the textual method is that it gives autonomy to the text. Thus, to study a thinker, or to study a tradition, or political thought in a tradition, it gives autonomy to the text. The focus is given exclusively to the text, and it argues that a text is the sole basis for construing its meaning and understanding. So, there is no need to study anything else besides the text. Text is the sole authority, and we should give autonomy to the text when we try to construe the meaning or understanding of political thought or the ideas of political thinkers. So, if we were to read and understand Plato's political thought, for example, we should read and re-read his text *Republic*. And if we encounter some ambiguities, certain challenges in understanding some of the passage, some of the ideas that are there in the *Republic*, we should read, re-read again and again the same text to understand or to construe the meaning of this text.

However, at best, what we could do is to read some other texts written by the same thinker to understand the meaning of the *Republic*. For example, the textual method demands that if we encounter certain problem and challenges in understanding some of the passage or paragraphs in Plato's the *Republic*, we should read Plato's other works such as like *Gorgia*, *Laws*, and *Statesmen*, to have a better understanding of his thought or ideas. Similar is the case with Hobbes, Lock, Rousseau, or any other thinkers. The textual method demands that we should give autonomy to the text. And if there is some confusion, some challenges, then we should read that text in the light of some other texts by the same author.

Leo Strauss, within this textual method, while giving primacy to the text, argues about *reading between the line*. And this is a kind of very rigorous method of studying a text or studying the political ideas of a thinker. It says that meanings that authors want to convey can be retrieved not just by reading the text, but also by *reading between the lines*. And what does it mean to read a text between the lines? He argues that reading between the lines is by carefully studying meaningful silences. Sometimes the author does not want to say something openly. So by understanding the silences, intentional ambiguity we can have a better understanding of a text. Sometimes the author leaves somethings unclear, ambiguous. And those ambiguities are deliberate, intentional to convey a certain meaning, certain message. And why those authors do that, we will discuss in a minute. But let us think about this *reading between the lines* require carefully studying the meaningful silences, intentional ambiguity, dissimulation, the significance

of centrally placed speeches, inexact repetition of earlier statements and so on. Here, he is referring to an exoteric form of writing, where authors often deploy certain tactics to avoid the wrath of authority to convey their true messages.

We often find a writer or a thinker face threat from those who exercise authority. We will discuss it when we discuss Plato. Socrates was forced to drink poison because the authority of that time finds his teachings or his arguments as a threat to their authority. The authority often sees such political thinkers or those who think beyond the requirements of their age as a threat to their rule. And these authors then use a very exoteric form of writing to convey their messages. And to retrieve those message, you have to read between the lines. And that is what the argument of Leo Strauss is. And this kind of persecution is not unknown to even 21st century when you find that the government across the countries question or persecute those writers, those thinkers, or ban their books which they think will be dangerous to the present status, or status quo. So Leo Strauss, when he was arguing about this idea of *reading between the lines*, was hinting towards that kind of rigorous exercise which we need to deploy when we try to retrieve the meaning of the author.

Thus we could retrieve the meaning when we pay closer attention exclusively to the text by *reading between the lines*. However, there is a problem with this textual method. Because more often than not, the textualist will try to interpret or understand a text or the ideas of political thinkers by imposing a certain set of questions, or a certain set of ideas on them or on that text. So, that is called the fallacy of coherence. They will try to have these thinkers; these texts speak on certain set questions, certain perennial questions.

So, you may often come across many arguments about political thought and thinkers that all of them have answered the same question. So, the question remains the same, but the answer to those questions differ from age to age as the way of defining the history of political thought. But as we will discuss through the contextual and interpretive method, this approach to the study of political thought through this coherence set of questions or concepts are problematic. It hardly reveal the nuances or the complexities of thought and thinking that is contained in a text, or that is there in the statement of the political thinker.

The textualist approach often tries to fit the statements of the thinker into an already set framework. And any inconsistent and contradictory statements by the author are overlooked and ignored in their study of this text and the thinker. So, that is the problem with the textual method of studying political thought.

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Historical/Contextual Method

- Contextual method of studying the history of political thought or a classical text should be taken as a continuity of historical method and approaches. In fact, most revealing works on these thinkers and their texts have been carried out by the history department. They have argued that the correct meaning can be retrieved by studying the context in which these texts were produced. There could be two kind of contexts – first, socio-economic and historical; and second, intellectual. Having the knowledge of these contexts, they argue, enhance our understanding of a thinker and his text/s.
- Quentin Skinner and JGA Pocock represent the Cambridge school. This school extend the historical approach to study political thinkers and texts. The defining characteristic of this school is 'idea in context'. They argued that true meaning of a text could be construed only in a linguistic context.
- Although, Skinner and Pocock are taken together as the representative of this school. There are slight differences between their approaches. Skinner's conventionalism admit the role of author's intention. While Pocock's contextualism argues that linguistic context is sufficient to construe the meaning of a text. He argues that 'meanings available to authors depend on the ways of thinking, writing, or speaking that exist in their communities'. And thus authorial intentions matter little in determining the meaning of a text. Despite these differences, both of them have argued that utterance or the words could be better explained and understood in its linguistic context alone.

Now, if you look into the contextual method, which is, in a way extension from the historical approach to the study of political thought. Thus the contextual method of studying the history of political thought or a classic text should be taken as a continuity of historical method and approaches. For a very long time, the most revealing works on these political thinkers or their texts have been produced by the history department. There is this tension between the political thinkers and philosophers and the historian - where the historian claim that they are the custodian of the truth. They can correctly, through their methodological rigor, construe the meaning of a text or a political thinker from the past. And the political philosopher of the contemporary times is not the correct agent to rediscover or retrieve those meanings. Thus, there is tension involved between a political philosopher and the historian.

And the history of political thought, we will find that the most revealing text or works on Plato, Aristotle, and others are produced by the history department in many universities. And they have argued that the correct meaning can be retrieved by studying the context, and there could be many



contexts of a text. One is the socio-historical context, the other is the linguistic context, and still other is the intellectual context.

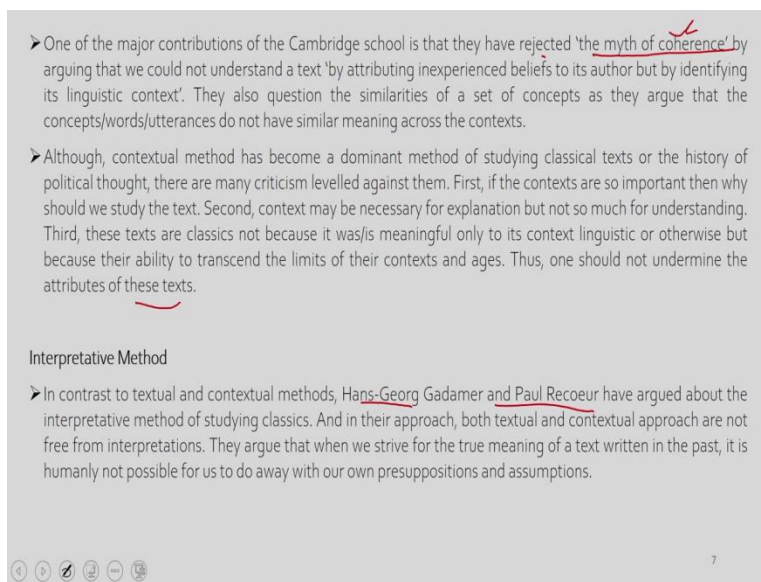
There is a kind of ongoing evolution of political thinking and theorization, not just within the socio-historical and linguistic context of their time, but also across these contexts by looking at the intellectual context of their writings. So, these historians or those who support the historical method to study political thought have argued that the correct meaning can be retrieved by studying the context in which these texts were produced. And these contexts, as I have said, could be the socio-historical, linguistic, and the intellectual context. However, broadly we can divide these contexts into two kinds. One is the socio-economic and the historical context; and the second is the intellectual context. And they argued that knowing these contexts enhances our understanding of a thinker and their texts. So, the most appropriate and the correct method of studying a text or a thinker is by situating them in their socio-historical, linguistic, and intellectual context.

Quentin Skinner and J G A Pocock represent the Cambridge School. And this school extends the historical approach to study political thinkers and texts. The defining characteristic of this school is *ideas in context*. They argue that you can have the appropriate or correct understanding of ideas in their contexts. However, the Cambridge School theoretician, or historian were arguing about a very different context than socio-historical or intellectual. They were talking about the linguistic context of these texts. And often, we take Skinner and Pocock, having a similar approach to their study of political thought as the representative of this school. There are slight differences in their approaches. Skinner is a more conventionalist, who while talking about the role of linguistic context, also include the intention of the author. So, the author's intention we should keep into account while we situate his text or his ideas in the larger linguistic context.

So, Skinner's focus is on the author's intentions besides the linguistic context. However, Pocock being a contextualist, argued that linguistic context is sufficient to construe the meaning of the text, and he argued that meanings available to authors depend on the ways of thinking, writing, or speaking that exist in their community/contexts. So, once we understand the meanings that are available to the thinker, or the ways of thinking, writing, and speaking in the community in which he was writing, we can also recover the author's intention.

He argues that we do not have to pay separate or extra attention to the author's intention; if we have a broader understanding of the linguistic context in which a text is produced, or a thinker was writing or thinking, we can understand his intention as well. However, Skinner is giving more focus on the author's intention. And in Pocock's argument, the author's intentions matter little in determining the meaning of a text. However, despite these differences, both of them Pocock and Skinner argued that utterance or the words could be better explained and understood in the linguistic context alone.

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- One of the major contributions of the Cambridge school is that they have rejected 'the myth of coherence' by arguing that we could not understand a text 'by attributing inexperienced beliefs to its author but by identifying its linguistic context'. They also question the similarities of a set of concepts as they argue that the concepts/words/utterances do not have similar meaning across the contexts.
- Although, contextual method has become a dominant method of studying classical texts or the history of political thought, there are many criticism levelled against them. First, if the contexts are so important then why should we study the text. Second, context may be necessary for explanation but not so much for understanding. Third, these texts are classics not because it was/is meaningful only to its context linguistic or otherwise but because their ability to transcend the limits of their contexts and ages. Thus, one should not undermine the attributes of these texts.

Interpretative Method

- In contrast to textual and contextual methods, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur have argued about the interpretative method of studying classics. And in their approach, both textual and contextual approach are not free from interpretations. They argue that when we strive for the true meaning of a text written in the past, it is humanly not possible for us to do away with our own presuppositions and assumptions.

One of the major contributions of the Cambridge School is that they have rejected the *myth of coherence* as we have discussed in the textual method, by arguing that we could not understand a text 'by attributing inexperienced beliefs to its author, but by identifying its linguistic context'. So, they were arguing that often when we read a text, we impose our own meaning, our own expectation to these authors, and then criticize or accept or celebrate the authors and their texts while addressing our concerns and expectations.

And those who do not address those concerns and expectations we tend to reject them. We tend to downplay their roles and significance. However, these historians are arguing that we have to understand the linguistic context of these thinkers if we want to understand the true meaning of the text or the statements they were making. They also questioned the similarities of a set of

concepts as they argued that the concepts, words, utterance does not have similar meaning across the contexts. So, in the study of political thought, you may come across that we try to project a kind of coherence in the argument of these thinkers by identifying key texts and then figuring out what thinkers across the ages have said about these set of concepts. And that is how we proceed to understand a thinker and his thought. But that is completely fallacious, according to the Cambridge School historians, while understanding the concept, because the concept or the ideas have meaning in a particular context.

So, concepts like justice or virtue means different thing in a different contexts, and they do not have a similar application or understanding across the contexts. We can, in their opinion, best understand the text and their meaning in its linguistic context. Although the contextual method has become a dominant method of studying classical text or the history of political thought, there are many criticisms leveled against them.

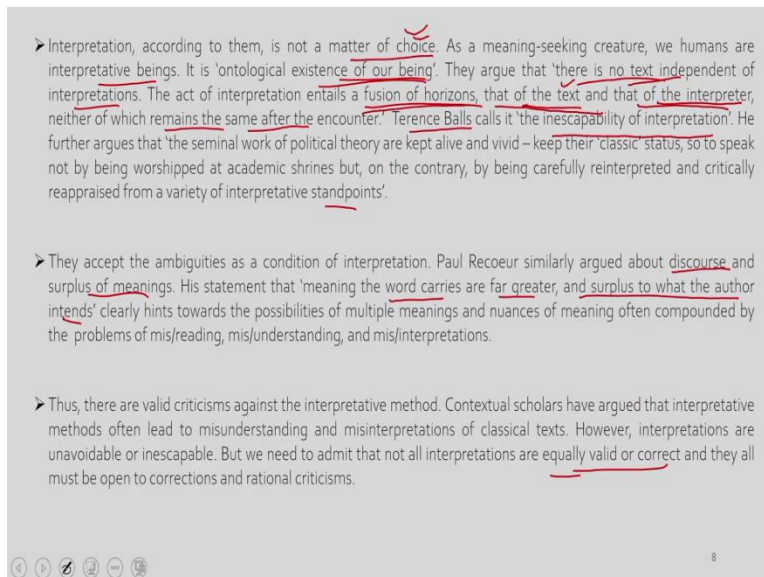
First, if the context is so important, then why should we study the text? One of the criticisms that are leveled against the Cambridge School is that if the context, whether linguistic or otherwise, is so important, why should we pay so much attention to a text if its meaning is available in the linguistic context. The second criticism is, the context may be necessary for the explanation of the text, or for the explanation of any ideas that are there in the text. But for understanding the context in itself is not sufficient. The third criticism is, these texts are classic, not because it was or is meaningful only to its own context, whether linguistic or otherwise; but because of their ability to transcend the limits of their contexts. So, simply we study these texts, not because it was meaningful or relevant only to its own linguistic or intellectual context, but it has the ability to stimulate new thinking, new conversation even in our own time. And that is what makes these text classic.

Thus one should not undermine the attributes of these texts, which is independent of its linguistic, intellectual, and social context. Of course, we can have a better understanding of these texts and their ideas when we locate them in the larger socio-historical, linguistic, and intellectual context. But we should not reduce them to those contexts alone, because these texts have a certain value of their own; as I have discussed, they have the *epistemic authority* which shape new debates and discussion about political problems across the contexts, across the historical time.

Those are the criticisms against the contextual method. Now, we move on to the third method or approach to the study of political thought that is the interpretive method. In contrast to textual and contextual methods, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur have argued about the interpretive method of studying classics; and in their approaches both textual and contextual approaches, according to them, are not free from interpretation. So, when we try to study a text or the context, we are involved in the task of interpretation. And they argue that when we strive for the true meaning of a text written in the past, or a different historical, geographical, cultural context, it is humanly not possible for us to do away with our own presuppositions and assumptions.

These texts were written in a different context, both historical and also linguistic and cultural. Now for us, it is very difficult, in fact, impossible to do away with our own expectations, presuppositions, and assumptions while being *truthful* to the authors, their text, and their time. It is humanly impossible. So, what we are left with is to interpret them. And this interpretation is not a matter of choice, but we are, naturally as a human being - a meaning seeker creature. We are constantly involved in interpretation. And both textual and the contextual method, therefore, according to the interpretive method, are not free from the interpretation.

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- Interpretation, according to them, is not a matter of choice. As a meaning-seeking creature, we humans are interpretative beings. It is 'ontological existence of our being'. They argue that 'there is no text independent of interpretations. The act of interpretation entails a fusion of horizons, that of the text and that of the interpreter, neither of which remains the same after the encounter.' Terence Ball calls it 'the inescapability of interpretation'. He further argues that 'the seminal work of political theory are kept alive and vivid – keep their 'classic' status, so to speak not by being worshipped at academic shrines but, on the contrary, by being carefully reinterpreted and critically reappraised from a variety of interpretative standpoints'.
- They accept the ambiguities as a condition of interpretation. Paul Ricoeur similarly argued about discourse and surplus of meanings. His statement that 'meaning the word carries are far greater, and surplus to what the author intends' clearly hints towards the possibilities of multiple meanings and nuances of meaning often compounded by the problems of mis/reading, mis/understanding, and mis/interpretations.
- Thus, there are valid criticisms against the interpretative method. Contextual scholars have argued that interpretative methods often lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretations of classical texts. However, interpretations are unavoidable or inescapable. But we need to admit that not all interpretations are equally valid or correct and they all must be open to corrections and rational criticisms.

Interpretation, according to them, is not a matter of choice that we choose to interpret something. As a meaning-seeking creature, we humans are interpretive beings. So, every time you read

something, you watch something, you meet someone, you observe certain things - the meaning that you have of them or the understanding that you try to derive from those things requires interpretation. Thus we interpret all the time. *Interpretation for us is the ontological existence of our being.* We constantly interpret. And through interpretation, we try to make sense of the world and our place in it. So, they argued that there is no text independent of interpretation. And the act of interpretation entails a *fusion of horizons*. And this point, we have to understand that - one, no text is independent of interpretation. And second, the interpretation requires the *fusion of horizons*. And, what is this *fusion of horizons* - it is a horizon of the text; and that of the interpreter.

Thus, a text which was written by Plato in Greek was written in a particular historical, political, intellectual circumstances. But when we read it today, in reading, we encounter it, we interpret it through our own expectations, through our own horizons of thinking and imagination. And the meaning and interpretation is the result of this *fusion of horizons* of the time when this text was written; and the time when this is being read. And the meaning that we have of that text, or the understanding that we have of that text or the thinker, is the result of this *fusion of horizons* between the text and those who are involved in the reading of the text. And once that encounter happens, neither of them remains the same after this encounter. And that is how understanding, interpretation evolved, developed, and become much more persuasive. And this is true with other exercises in human life as well. So, suppose you have a friend, and you just meet once, you have one perception or understanding of that friend. But when you meet again and again, your understanding or the sense of that person develops/evolves, and so that is true with the method of interpretation as well.

Terence Ball calls it *inescapability of interpretation*. So, we cannot, as human beings, escape the requirement of interpretation. And he further argues that the seminal works of political theory are kept alive and vivid, have kept their classic status, not by being worshipped at academic shrines, but on the contrary, by being carefully reinterpreted or critically reappraised from a variety of interactive standpoints.

So, in interpretation, our standpoints matter. And the standpoint of the text and the thinker also matter. And the interpretation is the result of that fusion, as we have said, the *fusion of horizons*. So, we have the presentist viewpoint – the standpoint of the present. And then, we have to

acknowledge that the text was written in a different context within a different horizon. So, when we use these two horizons, the interpretation, the meaning, or understanding is the result of that *fusion of horizons* between the past and the present. And this fusion of horizon an interpretation is not something as a matter of choice, but we do it all the time we try to understand a text or a thinker from the past or different context. However, this interpretation and acceptance are ambiguous. So, we cannot have an *authoritative* interpretation. In fact, what is *truth*, or what is *correct* in the absolute sense of the term, is something they often contest. There is no absolute truth.

Thus, there is a kind of relativity in the exercise of interpretation. There is a degree of ambiguities which they consider as a condition of interpretation. And Paul Ricoeur similarly argued about discourse and surplus of meanings. His statement is that the meaning the word carries are far greater and surplus to what the author intends. Now, this statement by Paul Ricoeur also hints towards the possibility of multiple meanings and nuances of meaning, which is often compounded by the problems of misreading, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation. So, the interpretive science of studying a text or a political thinker is something that evolves through ambiguities, misreading, or misinterpretation. Thus there is valid criticism against the interpretive method. Contextual scholars have argued that interpretive methods often lead to misunderstanding and misinterpretation of that text. Thus the contextualists have criticized the interpretive methods. However, interpretations, as we have discussed, are unavoidable or inescapable, but we need to admit that all interpretations are not equally valid.

Not all interpretations are equally valid or correct. Therefore we must subject all interpretation to open criticism, or correction in the light of newer evidence, in the light of better argumentation, or the rational criticism. And that is how our understanding or meaning of a text or a thinker evolve over the years when we subject our interpretation to critical scrutiny, in the light of new evidence, and also in the light of new, better rational argumentation. And that is how understanding develops and evolves.

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#### Concluding Remarks

- As we have discussed in this lecture there are multiple approaches and methods to study the political thinkers and their texts – textual, historical/contextual and interpretative. For a very long time textual method has been the dominant method to study political thought. However, in the recent decades contextual methods of 'Cambridge school' have dominated the study of political thought. In fact, Cambridge University Press has a series of publications under the rubrics of 'Ideas in Context'.
- However, whether it is textual or contextual approach to study classics, they both employ a degree of interpretations. We have very little access or resources to retrieve the *original* meaning of a text. Thus, our understanding of the texts and their authors are always subject/open to interpretation and reinterpretations in the light of fresh evidence and better rational arguments.
- In the lectures that follow, we shall focus on the thinkers more specifically in connection to the themes that we have selected. While doing so we shall begin with a brief bio-sketch of these thinkers, locating them in their larger socio-historical as well as intellectual contexts. We will conclude each of these thinkers by critically assessing their roles and significance of their thought.



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These are the three methods of understanding political thought. And as we have discussed today that there are multiple approaches and methods to the study of political thinkers and their text, textual, historical/contextual, and interpretative. For a very long time, the textual method has been the dominant method of studying political thought. However, in recent decades, contextual methods of Cambridge School have dominated the study of political thought. In fact, Cambridge University Press has a series of publications under the rubrics of *Ideas in Context*.

However, whether it is a textual or contextual approach to a study classics, they both employ a degree of interpretation. So, interpretation is not something which is a matter of choice, but it is something that we are all involved in whether we study a text or the context. We have very little access and resources to retrieve what is called the original, or the truthful meaning of a sentence or a text. Thus our understanding of the text and their authors is always subject and open to interpretation and reinterpretation in the light of fresh evidence and better rational arguments.

And that is how thinking, understanding, and the meaning evolves across the contexts, across the generations, and across the ages. You have to keep in mind these three approaches and methods to the study of political thought. In the lecture that follows, when we will discuss the thinkers and the treatises that we have included, we will focus on the thinkers more specifically in connection to the themes that we have selected for each of the thinkers.

While doing so, we shall begin with a brief bio sketch of these thinkers, locating them in their larger socio-historical as well as the intellectual context. And we will conclude each of these thinkers by critically assessing their roles and the significance of their thought. So, that would be our approach to the thinkers and the themes that we have included in this course. And for the methods as we have discussed in this lecture, you can refer to some of these texts.

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Terence Ball's *History and the Interpretation of Text* – you can find this as a very useful source to understand many methods and approaches to the study of a text or a political thinker. This text you can find in the *Handbook of Political Theory*, by Gerald Gaus and Chandran Kukathas, from the Sage Publications. Mark Bevir's, *The Role of Contexts in Understanding and Explanation* is a very good text to understand the Cambridge School and the criticism against the Cambridge School of thought.

Similarly, David Boucher and Paul Kelly, you should refer to understand what is classic and how to study a classical text. You should also refer to Moore Forsyth, and Maurice Keens-Soper's, *A Guide to Political Classics: Plato to Rousseau*. Shefali Jha's is a very good text to understand different approaches to the study of political thought that we have discussed. And you should also refer to J G A. Pocock's, *Political Thought and History: Essays on Theory and Method*. And



similarly you can refer to J Tully's, *Meaning and Context – Quentin Skinner and his Critics*, Cambridge: Polity Press Publication.

These are some texts that you should refer to understand more on various approaches and methods of studying political thought. And I hope you liked this lecture. Do share your comments and feedback, and we will be happy to respond. Thanks for listening. Thank you all.