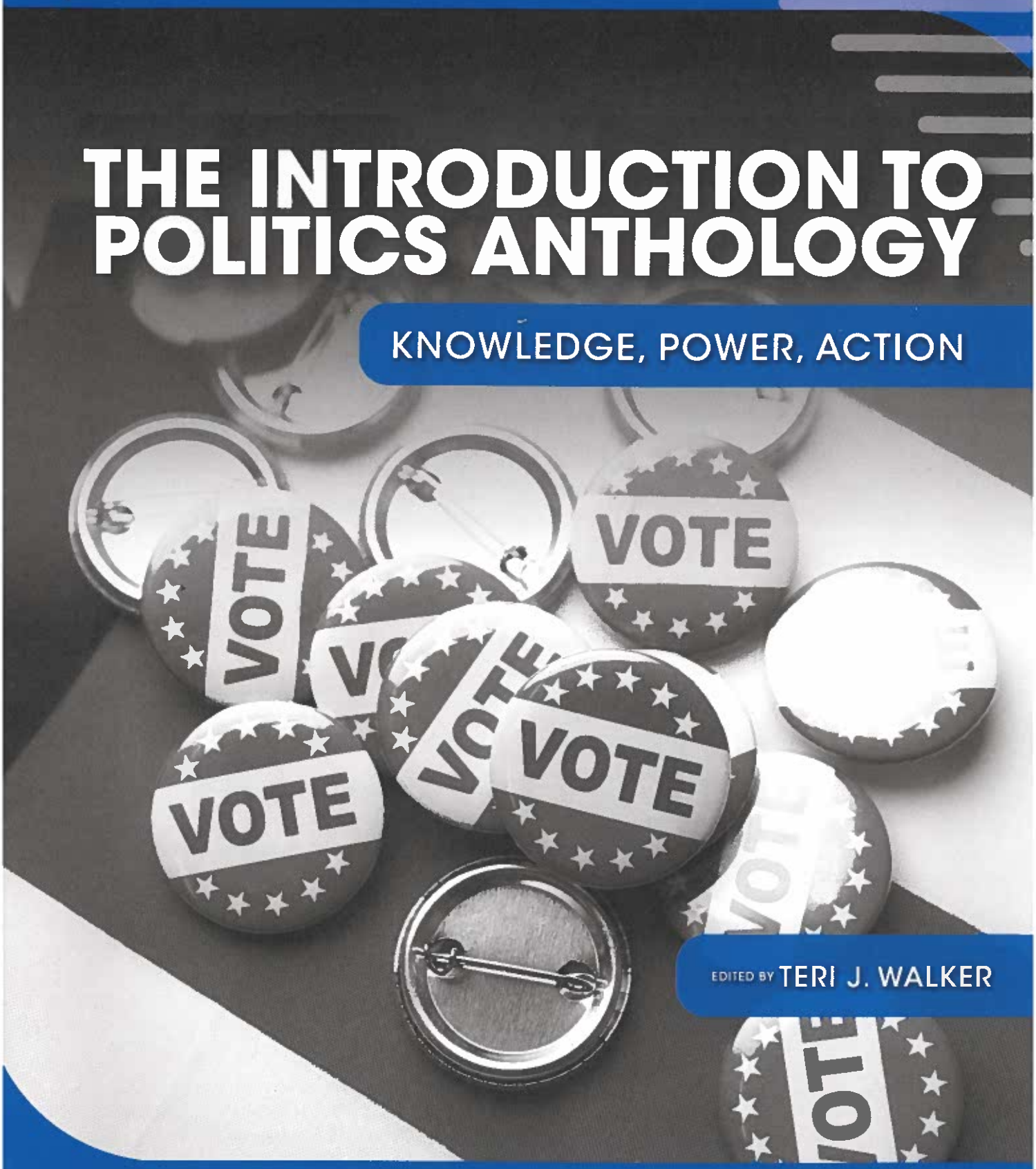
THE INTRODUCTION TO POLITICS ANTHOLOGY

KNOWLEDGE, POWER, ACTION



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Political Philosophy: Not Just Another Subfield

Mary Barbara Walsh

In colleges and universities today, it is common to perceive political philosophy as just one subfield among others in the discipline of political science. Different schools configure these subfields differently, but they typically include American politics, international politics, and comparative politics. This perception of political philosophy as just one subfield on par with these others is, indeed, a misperception! Rather, political philosophy is the oldest approach to the study of politics as well as foundational to the emergence and inquiry of each of these other subfields.

Political philosophy engages its practitioners and students with the universal questions that confront persons and societies. These questions include: Towards what ends should a political system work? What is the appropriate relationship between persons and their political system? What is the appropriate relationship between property and politics? How can freedom be reconciled with societal obligations? How can freedom be reconciled with equality? Answers to each of these questions rest upon assumptions about human nature, and these assumptions generate a plethora of additional questions. And, each of these questions also opens the door to other related, subsidiary, or more specific questions.

For example, consider this question: What can a political society legitimately require of its citizens? The answer to this question then demands answers to such questions as: Can a political society require that its citizens wear a seat belt on a public road? Can a political society require citizens to wear a face mask in a public venue? What does a political society owe to its citizens? The answer to this latter question then demands answers to such questions as: Does a political society owe its citizens equal opportunity? If so, what does that equal opportunity look like? Does a political society owe its citizens healthcare? Does political society owe its citizens a free college education?

These questions are fundamentally practical. Political philosophy is not an esoteric endeavor that merely sharpens skills for playing Trivial Pursuit. Political philosophy is not identified with any particular answers but rather engages with the most important questions human beings and societies confront. We all ask and answer these questions about human nature and our relationships to others many times throughout our day and our lives. When I leave the house, I lock the door! This action at least partly manifests my answer to questions about human nature. I also sometimes smile at a stranger I might pass on the street or reach out to a friend to arrange a get-together. I put my seat belt on when I get in the car and I stop at the first red light that delays me. These actions all represent my (often subconscious) answers to these fundamental questions about human nature, my relationships to others in society, and the political system in which I live.

Political societies also necessarily ask these fundamental questions and express those answers in the institutions, processes, and norms that compose that political society. For example, the U.S. Constitution designates a political system concerned with the separation of powers between branches of government and checks and balances to maintain (at least roughly!) the appropriate balance among these branches. This perceived need to balance power is the answer to our founders' questions about human nature and the appropriate relationship between persons and their government. Consider James Madison's (1751–1836) defense of the Constitution: "If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government . . . you must first enable the government to control the governed; and the next place, oblige it to control itself" (Library of Congress 1788). The federal system that people in the United States live under today, where power and authority are divided as well as shared between national and state governments, expresses the founders' conclusions and the people's continuing affirmation about human nature and the purpose of politics.

These universal questions did not disappear at the founding of the United States. All political societies evolve to meet new challenges and explore new possibilities, and, in doing so, they at least implicitly return to these fundamental questions about human nature and the purposes of politics. But political philosophy does tend to emerge most explicitly in times of crisis, when the old order and the old answers don't seem to work anymore. It is not mere coincidence that Plato (c. 428 B.C.E.–c. 348 B.C.E.) lived and wrote during the fall of Ancient Greece, having witnessed the execution in Athens of the person he perceived to be the best among all persons: Socrates (c. 470 B.C.E.–399 B.C.E.). Nor is it mere coincidence that Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) wrote *The Prince* in response to the upheaval in his beloved Florence. Nor is it an accident that Karl Marx (1818–1883) wrote The *Communist Manifesto* (and much, much more) in reply to the catastrophic excesses of capitalism in his time. Discord and upheaval prompt a return to the universal questions grounding political societies.

As a more recent example, John Rawls (1921–2002), arguably the most important political philosopher of the twentieth century, advanced A *Theory of Justice* in response, in part, to what he perceived as an imbalance between liberty and equality made apparent by the civil rights movement. He asked, "What is the most acceptable political conception of justice for specifying the fair terms of cooperation between citizens regarded as free and equal?" (Rawls 2003, 8). As an answer, he presented A Theory of Justice, the foremost expression of liberal political philosophy of the twentieth century.

In both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, deeply troubled by what she perceived as the pervasive and systemic oppression of women, Catharine MacKinnon (1946–) diagnosed the problem of women's oppression as one involving patterns of dominance rooted in what liberal thought and politics mistakenly and dangerously identify as "private" spheres of familial and sexual relationships. Her remedy incorporates a postliberal, post-Marxist, radically feminist approach for attacking "maleness as a form power" (1989, 124) and reshaped the ongoing political discussion around pornography, sexual harassment, prostitution, and more. In all these cases, from Plato twenty-five hundred years ago to MacKinnon and others today, the perception of injustice or disorder inspires political philosophers to elaborate the problem, name and analyze the perceived problem, and propose remedies for how to address that problem.

Thus, political philosophy begins with an experience of pathology and with questions about what is wrong and how things could be better. It moves to include attempts to name and identify causes of that pathology and then propose a vision or a remedy to address that pathology. Political philosophy turns our attention to how things could—and should—be different. The questions that political philosophers ask are normative; that is, these questions are "should" questions that direct our attention to considerations of the right or best order, as opposed to the actual, historical, current moment.

Plato, writing over twenty-five hundred years ago, suggested medicine as a metaphor for philosophy. Political philosophy, like medicine, aims for the good health of the object upon which it works. While medicine aims for the health of the body, political philosophy aims for the health of the political society. The political philosopher experiences the current historical, political experience as unhealthy and offers healthy remedies. It is not that the health the philosopher describes is historically present or empirically apparent, but rather it is a possibility built into the human condition. And, just like there is no perfectly healthy human body, there is also no perfectly healthy political society. But health is still something for which political societies should strive and a "picture of health" something to hold up to as a point of comparison for the great variety of unhealthy political societies in history (see Plato 2013, for an elaboration of this metaphor).

So Plato compares political philosophy to medicine and the political philosopher to a medical doctor. When one goes to the doctor with a headache, that person presents the doctor with a problem, an experience of pathology, of unhealth, of something painful and wrong. The doctor then makes a diagnosis. If the doctor is competent and talented, then hopefully it's a correct diagnosis. Perhaps the cause of the headache results from the quantity of beer the patient consumed the night before, or perhaps the headache results from too much studying for a political science course. Ultimately, the doctor offers a prognosis along with suggestions for possible remedies for the headache. Drink less beer or turn on the lights as you read, and you will feel better. The political philosopher does the same for political society, moving from an experience of pathology in political society to a diagnosis of the causes of the disorder, and, ultimately, offers possible remedies to resolve the pathology (Wiser 1986, vi and 151).

In this way, political philosophy involves three steps: an experience of disorder (of pathology), the discernment of a diagnosis, and the proposal of remedies. Each of these steps is rooted in a vision of what a healthy political system might look like. When Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) declared "I have a dream," he was pointing to his vision of a healthy, just political society in which freedom would ring "from

every city and hamlet, from every state and every city." He was not arguing that his dream was empirically real or historically actual. Rather, he was describing his vision of a better, more just political order that contrasted sharply with his own experiences and the actual disorder, that is, pathology, in the United States characterized by "the sweltering heat of oppression." And, he moved beyond that perception of disorder, and diagnosis of the disorder, to propose remedies: "Now is the time to make justice a reality" (King 1963).

Plato's work provides the iconic example of the method of political philosophy. This current paper elaborating political philosophy as a subfield of political science gathers examples from the traditions of Western Civilization not because it is superior to other traditions or histories, but because it is the tradition that the readers of this text are most likely to share. As we have seen, this method grounds the pursuit of political philosophy in questions about the human condition and political relationships and requires that the study of politics involve the movement from that experience of disorder to one that also identifies, diagnoses, and offers remedies for that disorder. Plato's dialogues engage his students and his readers in these fundamental questions by portraying the quest for knowledge of Plato's teacher, Socrates. Most of Plato's dialogues depict Socrates questioning his interlocutors about such concepts as virtue, piety, love, beauty, justice, and more.

Plato traces the origins of Socrates's persistent, often-annoying and sometimes-dangerous questioning to Socrates's realization that he does not know and is wiser as a result of this realization! In the words of Plato's Socrates in *The Apology*, "I reasoned with regard to myself: 'I am wiser than this human being. For probably neither of us knows anything noble or good, but he supposes he knows something when he does not know, while I, just as I do not know, do not even suppose that I do'" (Plato 1984, 21d). In this way, knowledge results from an openness to questions. Knowledge, for Plato, always begins with the perception that reality is richer than we are and is both knowable and ultimately unknowable. Reality, for Plato, can never be wholly captured in human words or with precise answers, but the pursuit of knowledge—the asking of questions—is the distinctly human and most rewarding of all human activities. To be human, for Plato, is to be caught in between knowing and not knowing and to have an experience or vision of justice that, while never fully expressed in any actual political system, serves as a standard of justice for all political systems.

"What is justice?" is the question that pervades Plato's most famous dialogue, *The Republic*. It is in this dialogue that Plato offers a vision of the just political order. A just political regime brings together reason with politics according to Plato; in a just political system, philosophers rule! Politicians are guided by insights into the harmonious interactions between all segments of society. And just political systems aim to educate all citizens to reach their fullest human potential, a potential that demands an exercise of the soul as well as the body, an experience of transcendent reality as well as material, historical reality.

Plato's *Republic* offers a vision of a healthy political system with which he contrasts all other political systems. This vision of a healthy, just republic embodies principles by which to diagnose the sickness, and hopefully address that pathology, of all other political systems. Perhaps the most famous excerpt of all Plato's writings is the "Allegory of the Cave." Through this allegory, Plato attempts to convey the human experience of in-betweenness, the human experience of being both body and soul, and the human experience of being caught between actual, historical (more or less) corrupt political systems and the transcendent experience of

the principles of justice available through our souls. This allegory conveys the experience of a person bound in a cave who is released and experiences the fullness of life and knowledge outside the cave. Philosophy turns us to this fullness of reality outside the cave. "There would, therefore ... be an art of this turning around, concerned with the way in which power can most easily and efficiently be turned around. ... This art takes as a given that sight is there, but not rightly turned to looking at what it ought to" (Plato 1968, 518d).

Although Plato may have been the first political philosopher in western civilization, he is certainly not the last. Different political philosophies and philosophers answer these fundamental questions in a variety of different, and often opposing, ways. What political philosophers share is the questions and the systematic approach to those questions. They move from the experience of disorder and a diagnosis of the causes of that disorder to articulate a vision of a better order, but they differ in terms of their diagnosis, remedy, and prognosis of the actual disorder. So, for example, consider the political philosophies of Plato and Machiavelli, who each confronted these fundamental questions but offered diametrically opposed answers.

Both men faced the disintegration of their political homelands. Both also proposed remedies, but while Plato proposed that the political disorder of his time required that the use of power be guided by philosophers dedicated to a pursuit of transcendent principles such as justice, Machiavelli argued that the only effective response to the disorder in his homeland demanded the embrace of power itself, that Princes have no concern other than power. And since politics, according to Machiavelli, is grounded in force, "the prince should never turn his mind from the study of war; in times of peace he should think about it even more than in wartime" (Machiavelli 1992, 41). Writing almost two thousand years after Plato, Machiavelli strenuously and explicitly rejected Plato's political philosophy. Machiavelli argued that Plato's answers only exacerbated the disorder of his time and the states of war throughout history. "But since I intend to write something useful ... it seemed better to go after the real truth of the matter than to repeat what people have imagined. A great many men have imagined states and princedoms such as nobody ever saw," but "the man who neglects the real to study the ideal will learn how to accomplish his ruin" (Machiavelli 1992, 42). Machiavelli's political philosophy manifests a view of human nature and politics that explicitly opposes that of Plato.

Still, Plato and Machiavelli share the pursuit of political philosophy and the questions and the attempt to answer those questions in a systematic way. Wiser calls this questioning, and the attempts at answers, a "search for order" (Wiser 1983). For Plato, this search involved an experience of transcendence; for Machiavelli, this search for order demanded a rejection of transcendence and a focus on power. For modernity, this search often involves an understanding of the individual and the appropriate limits on politics.

The birth of modern science in the sixteenth century heralded a shift in worldviews and the pursuit of knowledge across fields of study, including the study of politics. Modern science offered a method for investigating the natural and political world that could bring certainty if the correct questions were asked in the correct way. Whether identified with the empiricism of Francis Bacon (1561–1626) or the rationalism of René Descartes (1596–1650), modern science promised not only progress and truth but also the domination of nature and ultimately politics. With modern science, we (humanity) "could thus render ourselves the

lords and possessors of nature" (Descartes 2016). With consistent application of this method, which reduced inquiry to that which can be observed or rationally deduced, humanity could shape nature and politics to its will, leaving behind illusory appeals to transcendent justice and the empty hopes of philosophers such as Machiavelli, which relied on the character or virtue of the leader to somehow impose order on political disorder.

It is in this context that the modern notion of a social contract emerged. This social contract is dependent on human will and desires, it imposes political order on disorder without reference to transcendent principles and without claiming that politics is simply about pure unadulterated power. One of the first liberal political philosophers, John Locke (1632–1704), opens his *Second Treatise of Government* by rejecting any spiritual or religious basis for legitimate political power but also offering an alternative so that his reader not "think that all government in the world is the product only of force and violence" (Locke 1980). Rather, legitimate politics is about what we, the contractors, want and secure through that contract. And what do we want? The protection of our life, liberty, and property. What don't we want? Government stepping into our private lives, our families, and our workplaces for any reason beyond the protection of life, liberty, and property. Liberal political philosophy offers these answers to these perennial questions.

Liberalism, born in the seventeenth century with Locke and others, identifies the individual as endowed with rights and the only source of political legitimacy. (Liberalism here refers to the tradition of liberal political thought, which identifies individual liberty as the only legitimate source of political power. Equality and public good are legitimate only so far as they secure the greatest possible liberty. The ongoing discussion in the United States between liberals and conservatives occurs within the context of the greater tradition of liberal political thought.) From that point on, political philosophers have been occupied with either criticizing, reformulating, rejecting, or offering alternatives to liberalism. In the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) offered perhaps the best-known reformulation of liberalism. Mill's liberalism rejected natural rights as an irrational fiction and argued that utilitarianism, the greatest good for the greatest number, a calculation of pleasure minus pain, better supported liberal principles. Societies and individuals flourish when individuals are free to identify their own ends within the constraints of a recognition that others must also be allowed to pursue their own ends. In the twentieth century, John Rawls provided an alternative vision of liberalism based on a vision of fairness in which the principles of justice provide insight into the appropriate, fair balance of freedom and equality. And, most recently, Martha Nussbaum (1947-), has offered a human capabilities approach grounded in a vision of human dignity as the basis for rethinking the balance between liberty and equality in liberalism.

The greatest challenge to liberalism was posed by Karl Marx in the nineteenth century. Marx perceived liberalism to be the servant to capitalism and political systems to be mere responses to patterns of coercion in the economic realm. Marx unmasked the patterns of domination in the economic realms, patterns of coercion that reproduce in every other sphere that liberal political thought mistakenly labels as private. After all, the right to property and to work is empty if fewer huge industries control the marketplace. The right to vote is empty if one's choices are between candidates controlled by the very small minority of people with massive financial resources. According to Marx, liberal freedom is merely a political illusion undermined by

slavery in every sphere of human social interaction. Only a revolution in the economic sphere, which produces a revolution in every other sphere, promises real, lived freedom. It is only when we leave the old ways of producing behind that "we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (Marx & Engels 1948). Feminism, postmodernism, cosmopolitanism, and other schools of political philosophy all learn from Marx's critique of liberalism.

Questions about liberty and equality dominate the landscape of political philosophy today. These include questions about gender, families, race, and justice; questions about what we owe to each other and what we can demand from each other and our political systems; questions about the purpose of politics and the nature of truth; questions about our obligations to future generations and to people across the globe and beyond our borders; and questions about the sovereignty of nations given the irresistible forces of globalism. All these questions emerge in response to a perceived disorder; political philosophers help us to understand and respond to that disorder.

But, with so many questions and possible answers, how do you know which is correct? The ultimate arbiter of the answer to any of these questions is you! This is why Plato baffles us with his dialogues and Socrates badgers his interlocutors in Plato's dialogues. This is why Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) implores his readers to "read thy self" (Hobbes 1968, 82) as a defense of his solution to the political disorder of his time. This is why Marx turns our attention to history and the riddles in history, which he can unravel for us, so that we too can understand the true nature of humanity and politics. And this is why I end this [reading] with a question: What do you think? As you [...] encounter so many ideas and possibilities as you move forward in your education and your life, be sure to ask: What do I think? How does this accord with my understanding of human nature and the world and my experience of problems and possibilities?

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Questions for Reflection, Discussion, and Research

1. Mary Walsh explains the oldest approach to the study of politics. Describe how the pursuit of political philosophy is relevant to current political institutions, practices, or issues in the United States today.
2. Political philosophy engages its practitioners and students with universal questions that confront persons and societies. Identify and discuss one question. What sort of questions dominate the landscape of political philosophy today in the United States? What are some examples of these sorts of questions? How has today's society dealt with answering these questions?
3. What metaphor does Plato offer to describe the pursuit of political philosophy? What does this metaphor reveal about political philosophy?
4. Why did Athens find Socrates to be annoying and ultimately dangerous? What does this reveal about political philosophy?

THE INTRODUCTION TO POLITICS ANTHOLOGY

KNOWLEDGE, POWER, ACTION

The Introduction to Politics Anthology: Knowledge, Power, Action provides students with a curated collection of articles that familiarize them with key concepts and perspectives related to the study of politics and political science.

The anthology is organized into 11 units. The opening units introduce students to the concept of politics and the discipline of political science; explore the interconnectedness of political philosophies, ideologies, and beliefs; and underscore the importance of political participation, active citizenship, and collective action. Additional units discuss civil rights, civil liberties, the relationship between media and politics, power dynamics within political systems, and the influence of money on power and politics. Students read about the effects of political institutions on policy outcomes in legal, economic, and social systems; the policymaking process and those who play roles in creating, developing, implementing, and enforcing public policy; international relations; and how to prepare to enter the globalized workforce. Questions for reflection, discussion, and research complement each reading to stimulate critical thought, support discussion, and increase retention of the material.

The Introduction to Politics Anthology is an ideal resource for foundational courses in politics and political science.

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