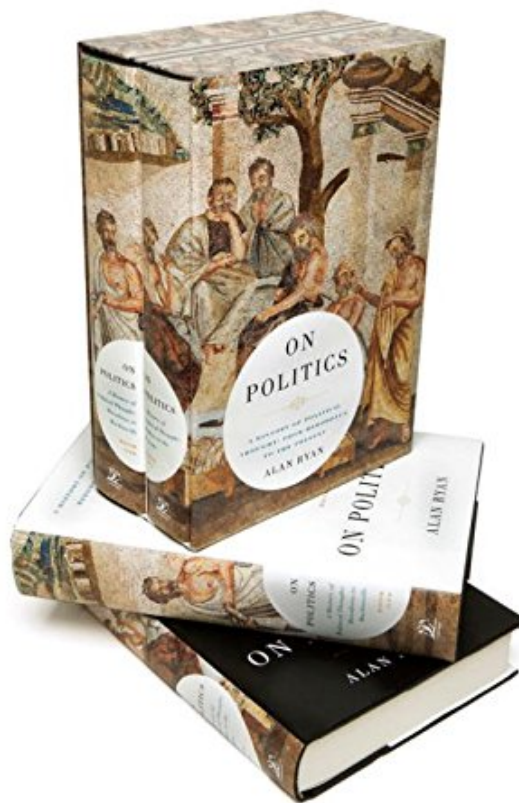
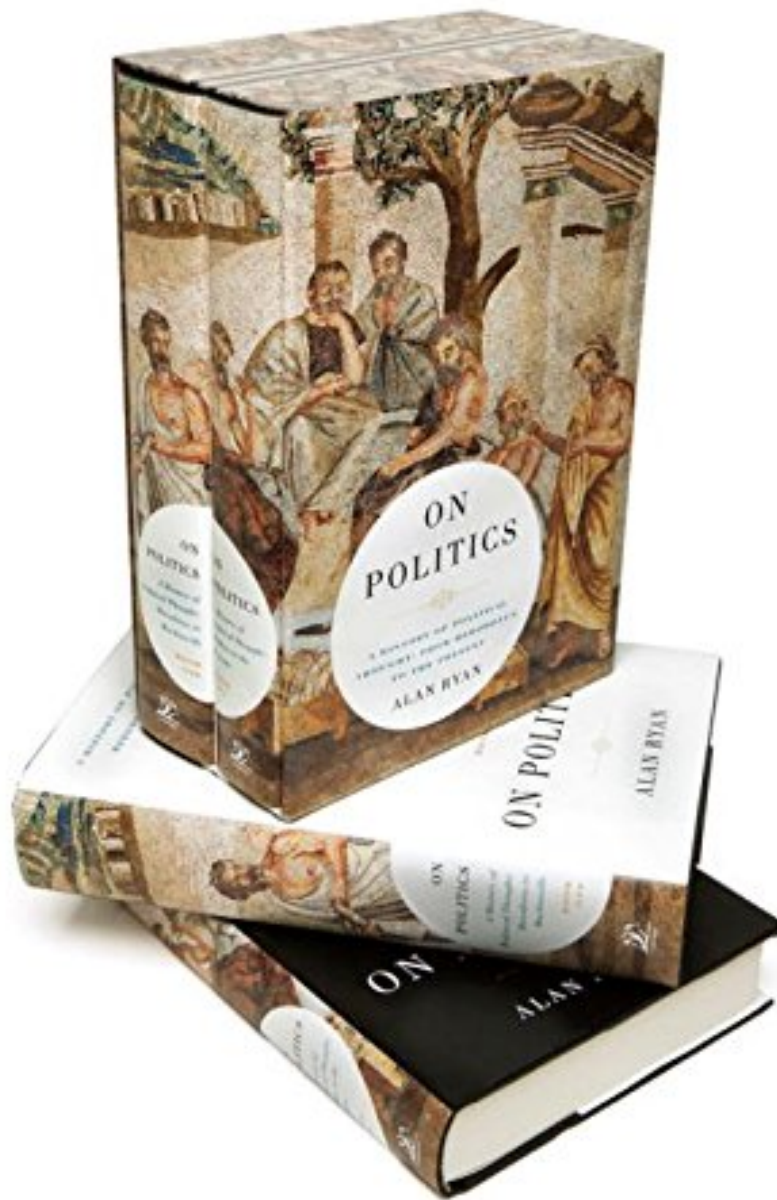


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## **Review**

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Both a history and an examination of human thought and behavior spanning three thousand years, *On Politics* thrillingly traces the origins of political philosophy from the ancient Greeks to Machiavelli in Book I and from Hobbes to the present age in Book II. Whether examining Lord Acton's dictum that "absolute power corrupts absolutely" or explicating John Stuart Mill's contention that it is "better to be a human dissatisfied than a pig satisfied," Alan Ryan evokes the lives and minds of our greatest thinkers in a way that makes reading about them a transcendent experience. Whether writing about Plato or Augustine, de Toqueville or Thomas Jefferson, Ryan brings a wisdom to his text that illuminates John Dewey's belief that the role of philosophy is less to see truth than to enhance experience. With this unparalleled tour de force, Ryan emerges in his own right as one of the most influential political philosophers of our time.

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Provides excellent context for current political environment

By Stephen Mooney

I have a technical background, but have an interest in history. I found this book much more interesting and understandable than I expected. The book presents the thoughts and arguments of the best Western thinkers of the past 2,500 years. The author first sets each thinker in their historical context, then goes into their major thoughts and conclusions. What made this book rewarding for me is the realization that all modern political questions and arguments have been well thought out with great subtlety over the ages. The consensus agreements have changed greatly, but the questions are not new.

This book has greatly changed my perspective on "current events" in world politics. There are no simple answers in the book, but now I have a fantastic context in which to think about the day to day world politics.

23 of 25 people found the following review helpful.

Sublime and Profound!

By Akhilesh Pillalamarri

Other reviewers and numerous magazines and newspapers have given this book the excellent review it deserves. As such, I cannot do much more justice to it in my own review, but would like to touch upon some of the best aspects of this book.

There are some other books that are summaries on Political Thought but none are as good as this one. This book is really a dialogue between the author and the ideas of the thinkers presented within in a considered, nuanced, and subtle fashion. The author speculates on the merits and drawbacks of each of the ideas contained in the book without coming off as too strong or without seeming as though he is propagating one particular world view. The book has a unity to it that would not be possible if it were simply a collection of essays by different authors or even the same author; in short, it is held together by the question, which the author refers to again and again on what is the best way for people to organize themselves politically. Thankfully, the book is not teleological either, which allows various ideas to be considered in and of themselves instead of as points on the way to the present. In short, the book is not polemic. Nor is it overly esoteric (some thinkers such as Leo Strauss have a much more esoteric take on political thought), since it deals with the political organization of humanity, a topic that involves application in the form of practical and organizational questions, though these often derive from theory. In fact, it is interesting to see two strands of political thinking highlighted in this book and their interplay with each other- one which derives specifics from a pre-conceived theory (Plato, Hobbes, Marx) and one which sets up some general maxims on the basis of observation (Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Tocqueville).

This book really contains two volumes. I found some aspects of each of these volumes more interesting than others. The first volume includes the expected- that is, Plato and Aristotle among some other Classical and Medieval thinkers. I would assume that most readers such as myself would have some knowledge of Plato and Aristotle and as such I personally found the sections of Medieval thought to be most interesting because, other than Augustine and Aquinas, much of it was new to me. The second volume was where the author truly shines. Many of the questions and issues posed by thinkers in the period between 1500-1900 are relevant to the present and were instrumental in thinking about how the modern state and political order have developed. I especially enjoyed his sections on Hobbes, counterrevolutionary thinkers (Burke for example), Tocqueville, Mill, Hegel (who is often not discussed through the lens of political theory), and 20th century anxieties and reactions to modernity and social trends. (I wish the author also included some more thinkers in their own



chapters instead of talking about them through other chapters; for example, Hume and Kant but as the author himself notes, when undertaking such a large project, it is inevitable that one has to be selective. There is enough food for thought for the seriously thinker to do further research on his/her own).

Finally, this book contains some other strengths. The Economist has put them better than me, so I will quote it a couple of times in order to point out the things that make this book worth buying (copyrighted by the Economist and I claim no authorship):

(1) "Mr Ryan has devoted his life to studying political ideas...and he reminds us that politics is about fundamental philosophical issues rather than just horrible hacks calling each other pooppy-heads. How can people run their collective affairs without sacrificing individual rights to collective order? What is the basis of the state's authority over its citizens? Should that authority be absolute or limited by constitutional checks and individual rights?"

(2) "It is also important that, as Mr Ryan puts it, "long-dead writers often speak to us with greater freshness and immediacy than our contemporaries." James Madison has the best advice for Egyptian liberals who want to prevent Muhammad Morsi from turning democracy into dictatorship. John Stuart Mill...has the best arguments against Michael Bloomberg and the "soft despotism" entailed in his soft-drink regulations...Mr Ryan's historical approach helps us at the very least to look at our problems from new angles, and at best to harness the help of history's sharpest minds in producing policies."

(3) "Mr Ryan's approach to political theory is thoroughly old-fashioned--and all the better for it. In recent years historians and political theorists have been busily undermining the Western canon--dissolving the great political theorists in their wider intellectual contexts or discovering seminal thinkers in the rest of the world...Mr Ryan is happy to put the greatness back in. He treats Hobbes and company as thinkers to be grappled with rather than historical figures to be contextualised."

These three quotes demonstrate why this book is such a pleasure to read, because it is deep and thoughtful yet immediate. This is a great book to have as a reference and a reminder especially when one cannot always go back and reread, say, Plato or Hobbes on a daily basis. My background does include Political Theory and I have read most of the thinkers in this book (in college before I got this book) but personally I think this book captures the essence of political thinking in a very informative and readable way. Furthermore, I believe a book like this is useful in providing unity and structure to the cannon of thinkers which if read individually could come across as disparate unless one has a volume such as this and/or a good knowledge of history, especially Western history. Finally, if a person does not have the chance or interest in reading the original works of the thinkers, then this book is a good alternative. This book represents a tradition of Western political thought that reached its highest form in the West over the past 500 years so one should not expect to find much non-Western thought in it, which is fine, since Western political thought evolved in its own manner in conversation among its various texts and thinkers while other civilizations's intellectual thought evolved in their own largely independent ways until recently. To summarize, this is perhaps one of the best books I have ever read, so I recommend it highly.

27 of 32 people found the following review helpful.

Superb, engaging, beautifully written

By Nigel Warburton

This is a superb book, engaging and beautifully written. A delight. Few philosophers have the breadth and depth of understanding to make sense of the long history of political philosophy. Alan Ryan is exceptional in combining authority, a light touch, and a contagious enthusiasm for his subject. Highly recommended.

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