Political Theory: Meaning and Approaches

Introduction: Why Do We Need Political Theory?

Every society is governed by ideas. Whether it's about justice, freedom, power, or equality, these concepts shape how we live together, how governments function, and how people resist or obey authority. **Political theory** is the study of these ideas. **It does not just tell us *what is*, but also asks *what ought to be***. Unlike political science, which often focuses on institutions and practices, political theory digs deeper—it explores the values, principles, and ideals behind those practices.

When the Athenians debated democracy in ancient Greece, when Locke spoke of natural rights during the Enlightenment, when Gandhi spoke of Swaraj, or when Ambedkar defended constitutional morality in India—they were all engaging in political theory. In today's world, where politics has become deeply polarized and often reduced to slogans, political theory helps citizens and students alike to think critically, morally, and independently.

What is Political Theory?

At its core, **political theory is a normative and analytical discipline**. It involves systematic reflection on political concepts and values. It asks questions like:

- What is justice?
- Why should we obey the state?
- What is the nature of political power?
- What rights should individuals have?

Political theory also **studies ideologies**, like liberalism, socialism, feminism, or environmentalism, and how they shape institutions, policies, and everyday life.

Key Features of Political Theory:

1. **Normative in nature** – It asks how politics *ought* to be.
2. **Conceptual clarity** – It breaks down and clarifies abstract terms (freedom, equality, justice).
3. **Critical inquiry** – It questions existing power structures and beliefs.
4. **Historically embedded** – It draws from past thinkers and contexts.
5. **Interdisciplinary** – It interacts with ethics, law, sociology, and economics.

Approaches to Political Theory

Over time, scholars and traditions have developed **different approaches** to understanding and practicing political theory. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, but they reflect different ways of asking and answering political questions.

1. Normative Approach

The **normative approach** to political theory is the most foundational yet philosophically demanding way of thinking about politics. At its core, it asks the fundamental moral questions: **What is justice? What is a good society? What should the state do? How should power be exercised?**

Unlike empirical political science, which deals with "what is," **normative theory deals with "what ought to be."** It is concerned with ideals, values, ethics, and human purpose. Though often accused of being abstract or utopian, normative theory is **indispensable** for both democratic imagination and political critique.

A. Classical Roots: The Moral Foundation of Politics

The **origin of normative political theory** lies in ancient political philosophy, especially in Greece and India, where questions of justice and virtue were inseparable from politics.

- **Plato's *Republic*** (4th century BCE) offered one of the earliest normative models of a just state. Plato believed justice meant each class performing its function under the guidance of philosopher-kings.
- **Aristotle**, Plato's student, took a more empirical yet still normative approach. In *Politics*, he argued that the **purpose of the polis** was to promote **eudaimonia**—human flourishing. The good state is not merely about order or law, but about cultivating moral citizens.
- Across the world, similar moral concerns shaped political thought. In **ancient India**, texts like the *Arthashastra* by **Kautilya** and the **Dharmaśāstra** literature emphasized **raja dharma**—the ethical duties of kings and the state.

B. The Enlightenment: Reason and Rights

The **17th and 18th centuries** saw the rise of modern normative theory in Europe, driven by a belief in **reason, individual rights, and the social contract**.

- **Thomas Hobbes**, in *Leviathan* (1651), argued that a powerful sovereign is necessary to escape the chaos of the state of nature.
- **John Locke**, writing later, challenged Hobbes. In his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689), Locke declared that **life, liberty, and property** are natural rights. The state exists to protect these rights, and if it fails, citizens have the right to revolt.
- **Jean-Jacques Rousseau**, in *The Social Contract* (1762), envisioned a society governed by the **general will**, where true freedom comes from self-rule.

C. Indian Context: Swaraj as Moral and Political Freedom

In the Indian freedom struggle, **Mahatma Gandhi** offered a profoundly **normative political theory** rooted in ethics and spirituality. His idea of **Swaraj**—meaning

self-rule—was not merely about ousting the British. It was about **individual self-control, community cooperation, and moral regeneration**.

Similarly, **Rabindranath Tagore** warned against blind nationalism and argued for a politics rooted in **universal humanism**, artistic freedom, and moral dignity.

On another front, **B.R. Ambedkar** provided a powerful normative critique of both Hindu orthodoxy and Western liberalism. For Ambedkar, political democracy had to be **founded on social and economic equality**.

E. Criticism: Is It Too Idealistic?

Critics argue that **normative political theory is detached from reality**, overly abstract, and ignores how power actually works. Marxists claim it hides material interests behind moral language. Behavioralists reject it for being unscientific.

However, this critique misses the point. In a world facing moral crises—from war to inequality to ecological collapse—we need more, not less, normative thinking.

Even the **Indian Constitution**, one of the most practical political documents, is deeply normative. Its **Preamble** enshrines justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity—not just as words, but as guiding ideals.

2. Empirical and Behavioral Approach

The **empirical and behavioral approach** marks a major shift in the study of political theory in the **20th century**, especially in the **post-World War II period**. Unlike the normative approach that asks *what should be*, the empirical-behavioral approach focuses on ***what is actually happening***. It seeks to make political science more **scientific**, **observable**, and **measurable**—just like the natural sciences.

At the heart of this method is the belief that **politics is not just about ideas and ideals**—it is also about how real people think, act, and behave in political life. It asks:

- Why do people vote the way they do?
- What shapes public opinion?
- How do institutions really function in practice?

A. The Rise of Behavioralism: Making Political Science Scientific

The behavioral revolution began in **America in the 1950s and 1960s**, as scholars became dissatisfied with abstract, idealistic models. Inspired by developments in **psychology, sociology, and statistics**, behavioralists argued that political theory should:

- **Collect data** through surveys, interviews, and fieldwork,
- **Analyze patterns** of behavior like voting, protests, or elite decision-making,
- And **build models** to explain and sometimes predict political outcomes.

This movement is associated with scholars like:

- **David Easton**, who called for a "systematic science of politics" and introduced the **political systems theory**, focusing on how political inputs (like public demands) lead to outputs (like policies).

- **Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba**, who in their landmark study *The Civic Culture* (1963), investigated five countries (USA, UK, Germany, Mexico, and Italy) to identify the cultural traits that support stable democracies.
- **Robert Dahl**, whose empirical studies of pluralism and democracy in America helped shift focus from ideal democracy to how power actually works in societies.

B. Example: The Civic Culture Study

One of the most famous examples of behavioral research is Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture*. In this comparative study:

- They conducted **surveys** in five countries to examine how citizens viewed their political systems.
- They found that a **"civic culture"**—marked by trust, participation, tolerance, and a mix of subject and participant attitudes—was key to democratic stability.
- The study showed that democracy doesn't just depend on laws and institutions—it also depends on **people's values and behavior**.

C. Behavioralism in the Global South and Post-Colonial Critique

While behavioralism originated in the West, it influenced political science globally. In post-colonial contexts like **Africa, Latin America, and South Asia**, scholars used behavioral methods to explore:

- The impact of **colonial legacies** on voting and political institutions.
- The emergence of **clientelism**, **populism**, and **identity-based politics**.
- The gap between **constitutional ideals** and **real governance practices**.

For example, in Latin America, behavioral studies showed how **informal networks, corruption, and charismatic leadership** often defined political life more than formal constitutions.

E. Criticism: Missing the Soul of Politics?

Despite its scientific rigor, the empirical-behavioral approach has been widely criticized:

- **Too data-driven**: It often focuses on facts and figures without considering the **ethical and philosophical dimensions** of politics.
- **Culturally biased**: Early behavioral studies were mostly based on Western liberal democracies and ignored the unique histories of the Global South.
- **Technocratic**: It sometimes promotes a view of politics as management, reducing citizens to data points instead of moral agents.

3. Marxist Approach

The **Marxist approach** to political theory offers a radically different way of understanding politics—not as a competition of ideas or values in a vacuum, but as a conflict between **social classes** rooted in **economic structures**.

For Marxists, the state is not a guardian of the common good—it is an instrument of **class domination**, maintaining the interests of the **ruling class**. Political theory, therefore, is not value-free or neutral. It is shaped by the **material base of society**, and political ideas are part of what Marx called the **superstructure**—the set of institutions, laws, ideologies, and cultural norms that reinforce the economic base.

A. The Foundations: Marx, Engels, and Historical Materialism

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels developed the concept of **historical materialism**, which argues that **history is driven by material forces**—how human beings produce their livelihood—and the **conflicts that arise between classes** over control of these productive forces. For example:

- In feudal society, the dominant class was the land-owning nobility.
- In capitalist society, it is the **bourgeoisie**—owners of capital and industry.
- The oppressed class in capitalism is the **proletariat**—workers who sell their labor but do not control production.

According to Marx, the **state exists to protect the interests of the ruling class**. In capitalist society, laws about private property, contract rights, and wage labor appear neutral but actually preserve the dominance of capital over labor.

Marx famously wrote in ***The Communist Manifesto*** (1848), "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie."

B. Revolution and Change: From Theory to Practice

Marxist theory doesn't stop at analysis—it offers a blueprint for **revolutionary change**. The idea is that class struggle will eventually lead to the **overthrow of capitalism** and the establishment of a **classless, communist society**.

This vision was put into practice in the **Russian Revolution of 1917**, when **Vladimir Lenin** adapted Marxist ideas to Russia's semi-feudal context. He argued for a **vanguard party** to lead the working class in revolution and emphasized **imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism**—where capitalist nations exploit the global periphery to survive.

C. Gramsci and Cultural Hegemony: Beyond Economic Power

While classical Marxism focused on economic exploitation, Italian Marxist **Antonio Gramsci** introduced the concept of **cultural hegemony**. He asked: if the working class is so oppressed, why doesn't it revolt?

Gramsci argued that the ruling class maintains control not just through coercion (police, military) but through **consent**—by shaping public consciousness via **schools, media, religion, and popular culture**. This "soft power" ensures that capitalist values (individualism, consumerism, meritocracy) become **common sense**.

This idea helps explain why **neoliberalism** remains dominant today even as inequality grows. It also provides tools to understand:

- **Right-wing populism**, where dominant narratives co-opt the language of nationalism or tradition.

- The role of **mass media and education** in shaping political preferences in both democracies and authoritarian regimes.

D. Marxism in the Indian Context: Class Meets Caste

The **Naxalite movement** (1967 onward) was a revolutionary attempt to apply Marxist ideas in rural India, focusing on **land redistribution** and **tribal rights**. Although criticized for its violence, it brought attention to **deep inequalities** in land and labor systems.

More recently, thinkers like **Anand Teltumbde** and **Gail Omvedt** have combined Marxism with **Ambedkarite thought**, arguing that **class and caste must be analyzed together**. For example, Dalit agricultural laborers face not just economic exploitation but also **ritual discrimination**—a form of "super-exploitation" rooted in both economic and cultural domination.

E. Criticism: Economic Reductionism and Lack of Agency

Despite its strengths, the Marxist approach has faced several criticisms:

- **Economic determinism**: Critics argue that Marxism reduces all political and cultural phenomena to class and economics, ignoring identity, gender, religion etc.
- **Revolutionary violence**: Marxist revolutions often led to authoritarian outcomes—such as Stalin's purges or Mao's Cultural Revolution.
- **Neglect of democracy**: Marxists have often been skeptical of liberal democracy, seeing it as bourgeois. This creates tension between Marxism and rights-based discourses.

4. Feminist Approach

The **Feminist approach to political theory** emerged as a powerful critique of mainstream political thought that had long ignored or sidelined the role of **gender** in shaping power, justice, and citizenship. Feminist theorists argue that political theory, institutions, and practices have historically been structured around **male experiences**, treating them as universal while rendering women's experiences **invisible** or **irrelevant**.

At its core, feminist political theory interrogates not just the exclusion of women from politics, but also how **power operates through norms, language, and institutions** that define what counts as "political." It challenges the idea that the state is neutral and insists that what has been called "private" (like family, reproduction, or sexuality) is deeply political.

A. Rethinking the Social Contract: The Sexual Contract

One of the most influential contributions to feminist political theory comes from **Carol Pateman**, who in her groundbreaking work ***The Sexual Contract*** **(1988)**, critiqued the classical liberal idea of the **social contract**. According to Locke, Hobbes, and Rousseau, the social contract is a voluntary agreement among free men to create a state that protects liberty. But Pateman asked: **What about women?**

She argued that liberal social contract theory was built upon a **prior, unspoken "sexual contract"**, which institutionalized male dominance by relegating women to the private

sphere. Marriage, for instance, was not a contract between equals but a way to formalize **male authority over women's bodies and labor**, particularly reproductive labor.

This critique reveals how **patriarchal power** is embedded in institutions like marriage, family, and even citizenship.

B. Law and Male Power: MacKinnon's Radical Critique

Catharine MacKinnon, a radical feminist legal theorist, extended the feminist critique to law and state institutions. She argued that the **law reflects and reinforces male dominance**, particularly in areas of **sexuality, harassment, and violence**.

For example, for decades, **marital rape was not recognized as a crime** in many liberal democracies because the law treated marriage as granting sexual access. This legal norm, MacKinnon argued, **erased women's autonomy and consent** under the guise of marital obligation.

The feminist challenge here is not just about changing specific laws, but about questioning how **legal categories, judicial reasoning, and rights themselves** are gendered.

C. Indian Perspectives: Caste, Class, and Intersectionality

In the Indian context, feminist thinkers have emphasized that gender cannot be separated from **caste, class, religion, and community**. **Nivedita Menon**, in her influential work ***Seeing Like a Feminist***, argues that feminist politics is not only about rights and inclusion but about **rethinking how power itself is conceptualized in politics**.

She questions why issues like **domestic violence, unpaid care work, reproductive rights**, or **gendered labor markets** are often treated as "social" rather than "political." This reflects what feminists call the **public-private divide**, where the public realm (parliament, markets, wars) is considered political, while the private realm (home, family, emotion) is seen as apolitical.

However, as Menon argues, the personal is political. For example:

- The **criminalization of marital rape** remains incomplete in India, showing how **state neutrality is a myth** when it comes to regulating women's bodies.
- The struggles of **ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers, and domestic workers** during COVID-19 highlighted how **care labor**, mostly performed by women, is essential but undervalued—politically invisible but structurally central.

D. Historical and Global Dimensions: Feminism as a Global Critique

Feminist theory has global and historical roots, with each wave of feminism addressing different dimensions of gendered oppression:

- In **medieval Europe**, thinkers like Christine de Pizan challenged the idea of women's inferiority in education and public life.
- In **the Industrial era**, women like Mary Wollstonecraft (*A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*) demanded education, voting rights, and equal dignity in political participation.

- In **contemporary times**, scholars like **Judith Butler** have questioned the very category of gender, arguing that it is socially constructed and performed, not biologically fixed.

E. Criticism and Internal Debates

Feminist political theory is not a monolith. It includes diverse strands such as:

- **Liberal feminism**, which seeks inclusion through rights.
- **Radical feminism**, which focuses on patriarchy as a system of domination.
- **Marxist feminism**, which links gender oppression to capitalist structures.
- **Postmodern and intersectional feminism**, which question fixed categories and highlight overlapping systems of power.

5. Postmodern Approach

The **postmodern approach** to political theory is a radical break from traditional schools of thought. It does not ask *"What is the ideal form of government?"* or *"What is justice?"* in a fixed, universal sense. Instead, it questions whether such **universal answers** are even possible or desirable. It is **deeply skeptical of grand narratives**—such as the Enlightenment ideal of reason, Marxist ideas of historical progress, or liberal beliefs in universal rights.

Postmodernism insists that **what we take as 'truth' is socially constructed**, shaped by language, power, and cultural context. In this sense, it is not just a theory about politics—but a political act in itself. Postmodern thinkers aim to **deconstruct dominant discourses**, expose hidden hierarchies, and **amplify marginalized voices**.

A. Foucault: Power Beyond the State

One of the most influential postmodern thinkers, **Michel Foucault**, reconceptualized power. Unlike earlier theorists who saw power as something held and exercised by the state or ruling classes, Foucault argued that **power is everywhere**—in schools, prisons, clinics, families, and even in scientific discourse.

In works like ***Discipline and Punish*** and ***The History of Sexuality***, Foucault showed how modern institutions don't merely punish or legislate, but **discipline individuals by shaping how they think, behave, and view themselves**. He introduced the idea of ***biopower***—the way states manage populations through healthcare, census data, and public morality.

Example: The rise of "model citizens" in modern societies—productive, healthy, and obedient—is not just the result of law, but of **institutional discipline**. School routines, prison reforms, or even hospital protocols work to **normalize** people, pushing them to conform to social expectations.

In the Indian context, Foucault's idea helps explain how the **Aadhaar project**, while framed as welfare reform, also enables **surveillance and biometric control** over populations.

B. Derrida: Deconstruction and the Limits of Language

Jacques Derrida, another key postmodern thinker, developed the concept of **deconstruction**—a method of critically examining texts, concepts, and institutions to show that they are **unstable and open to multiple interpretations**.

For Derrida, language is never neutral. Words carry **baggage of history, exclusion, and hierarchy**. Even concepts like "democracy", "equality", or "freedom" may carry **hidden assumptions** that privilege some while excluding others.

Example: The slogan *"**All men are created equal**"*—famously used in the US Declaration of Independence—was celebrated as a triumph of liberal thought. But Derrida's lens would ask: Who counts as "man"? What about women, enslaved people, indigenous populations?

C. Judith Butler: Gender as Performativity

Judith Butler, blending postmodernism with feminism, challenged the idea that **gender is natural or binary**. In ***Gender Trouble*** (1990), she introduced the concept of **gender performativity**, arguing that people are not born men or women—they **become** them by performing social roles, gestures, and identities.

Butler's theory helped shift the debate from gender as a **biological fact** to gender as a **socially constructed and repeated performance**. This approach allows us to understand how gender norms are policed and how trans and non-binary people challenge those norms.

Contemporary Example: The growing global recognition of **trans rights, third-gender status**, and **non-binary identities** owes much to postmodern feminist thought. In India, the **2014 NALSA judgment** by the Supreme Court, which recognized the rights of transgender individuals, echoes Butler's insights by affirming **self-identification over biological essentialism**.

D. Fragmenting the Grand Narrative: Power, Identity, and Marginality

Postmodernism distrusts any theory that claims to speak for all humanity—whether it's liberalism, Marxism, or nationalism. Instead, it emphasizes **pluralism, local narratives, micro-politics**, and **fluid identities**.

It aligns with **subaltern studies in India**, where thinkers like **Ranajit Guha** and **Gayatri Spivak** emphasized the importance of **recovering voices from the margins**—peasants, tribal communities, women, and colonized subjects—whose experiences were left out of colonial and nationalist histories.

Spivak's famous essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", asks whether those at the bottom of social hierarchies can ever truly be heard within dominant frameworks of language and power. Postmodernism urges us to **listen to these silences** and question who gets to define reality.

E. Criticism of Postmodernism: Too Fragmented, Too Relativist?

Despite its insights, postmodernism has drawn serious criticism:

- It **refuses to take firm moral positions**, making it hard to fight injustice.
- Its **language is often obscure**, limiting accessibility.

- It can **paralyze political action**, as it doubts the very foundations of agency and truth.
- Postmodernism deconstructs power but it struggles to **reconstruct alternatives**.

6. Indigenous and Non-Western Approaches

While much of political theory has been shaped by **Western traditions**—from Plato and Locke to Marx and Rawls—there is a growing recognition that such frameworks do not capture the **plurality of political thought** found across the world.

Indigenous and non-Western approaches challenge the **Eurocentric bias** in political theory and offer **alternative ways of thinking about justice, power, rights, and the good life**, grounded in **local histories, spiritual traditions, communal ethics**, and experiences of **colonialism and resistance**.

These approaches do not merely "add diversity" to the canon. They **reframe the very questions** of political theory. Instead of focusing solely on the individual, rights, and the state, they often emphasize **community, harmony, duty, relational ethics**, and **historical memory**.

A. B.R. Ambedkar: Caste, Constitution, and the Ethics of Liberation

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's political philosophy is a powerful example of a **non-Western, anti-caste political theory** that challenges the foundations of Indian society.

Educated in both India and the West, Ambedkar engaged deeply with liberalism, Marxism, and Buddhism—but **refused to be confined** by any of them. He argued that political freedom without **social justice** was meaningless. For Ambedkar, **caste was not just a cultural or religious institution**, but a form of **graded inequality and systemic humiliation**, perpetuated by Hindu dharma and maintained through generations of oppression.

Ambedkar's concept of **"annihilation of caste"** was not just a social demand—it was a political and moral revolution. His conversion to **Buddhism** was a rejection of the hierarchical, birth-based structures of Hinduism and a turn toward a **moral community based on equality, compassion, and rationality**.

B. Ubuntu: African Communitarianism and Moral Humanism

The African political philosophy of **Ubuntu**, prevalent in countries like South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Kenya, offers a deeply **communitarian vision** of politics.

The central idea of Ubuntu—**"I am because we are"**—emphasizes that human beings are not autonomous individuals but **deeply embedded in a web of social relations**. Ethics and politics, in this framework, are not about maximizing personal freedom but about sustaining **social harmony, collective dignity, and mutual responsibility**.

Global Example: Ubuntu guided South Africa's **Truth and Reconciliation Commission** under **Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela**, where **forgiveness and dialogue** were prioritized over punishment in the aftermath of apartheid. This was a powerful rejection of the Western model of retributive justice in favor of **restorative justice**, rooted in indigenous values.

C. Islamic Political Thought: Justice, Law, and Divine Sovereignty

Islamic political theory does not separate religion from politics in the way that Western secularism does. It envisions a political order grounded in **divine justice (Adl)**, **moral accountability**, and **communal welfare (Maslaha)**.

Classical thinkers like **Al-Farabi**, **Ibn Khaldun**, and **Al-Ghazali** discussed the ethics of rulership, the role of the Caliphate, and the balance between reason and revelation. Contemporary Islamic thinkers debate the compatibility of **Sharia** with democracy, pluralism, and modern human rights.

D. Confucianism: Hierarchy, Virtue, and Social Harmony

In East Asia, **Confucian political philosophy** has shaped politics for over two millennia. Unlike liberal individualism, Confucianism prioritizes **family, hierarchy, and moral cultivation** as the foundation of a just society.

For Confucius, a good ruler is not the one with the most power, but the one with the highest **moral character (ren)**. Authority is legitimate only when it is **earned through virtue, not coercion**.

Across East Asia, Confucianism has also supported **collectivist cultural norms**, respect for elders, and **non-adversarial politics**, which contrast with the confrontational model of Western liberal democracies.

E. Hindu Dharmic Political Traditions

The Indian subcontinent's indigenous political thought is vast and varied. From the **Mahabharata** and **Arthashastra** to modern interpretations of dharma, politics was often seen as the pursuit of **righteous order** (dharma), not just power.

In texts like the **Ramayana**, kingship is judged by **moral obligation to subjects (Rajadharma)**, and the idea of **cosmic order** reflects an attempt to link politics with ethical and ecological balance.

Kautilya's Arthashastra presents a more realist vision, comparable to Machiavelli—focused on **statecraft, espionage, war, and economic control**. Yet, even Kautilya did not reject ethics entirely—he saw the king as a servant of the people's well-being (*praja sukhe sukham rajyah*).

F. Subaltern and Postcolonial Approaches: Rewriting the Political

A crucial dimension of non-Western political theory comes from **postcolonial thinkers** who critique how **colonial power distorted local knowledge** systems and imposed Western frameworks.

Thinkers like **Frantz Fanon**, **Edward Said**, and **Gayatri Spivak** emphasized the importance of recovering **subaltern voices**, resisting epistemic domination, and recognizing that Western "universalism" often masked **imperial interests**.

G. Critiques and Challenges

While Indigenous and non-Western approaches **broaden our intellectual horizons**, they also raise important tensions:

- Can ancient traditions be applied meaningfully to **modern, diverse societies**?
- How do we balance **cultural respect** with **universal rights** (e.g., gender equality vs. tradition)?
- Are these approaches sometimes **romanticized**, ignoring their **internal hierarchies** (such as caste or patriarchy)?

Nonetheless, they remain essential for **decolonizing political theory**—not just by adding more voices, but by **redefining the foundations** of what counts as political.

Conclusion

Political theory is not merely an academic exercise—it is a deeply lived, political act. Whether we vote, protest, follow rules, or resist injustice, we are engaging in political theory in everyday life. It shapes how we understand power, justice, rights, and responsibility. As citizens, reflecting on these ideas is essential to sustaining a meaningful democracy. Political theory equips us with the tools to ask critical questions, imagine better futures, and challenge unjust structures. In the words of Michael Sandel, "A politics of moral engagement is not only possible, but necessary." Studying political theory, then, is not about exams—it is about becoming active participants in shaping society.