

Book Review: History of Political Theory: An Introduction. Volume 1: Ancient and Medieval Political Theory by George Klosko

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History of Political Theory: An Introduction considers the contributions of the main figures in the history of Western Political Theory. Volume I traces the development of political theory “from the beginning” in ancient Greece through the Reformation. Main subjects examined include the Classical political theory of the Greek polis, the Hellenistic period, the rise of Christian political theory, political theory of the middle ages, and the Reformation. **Mark Fisher** finds that the volume will be of great value to those who teach ancient and medieval political thought. However, it is not without its problems, with inaccuracies and omissions which, though minor, will trouble specialists.



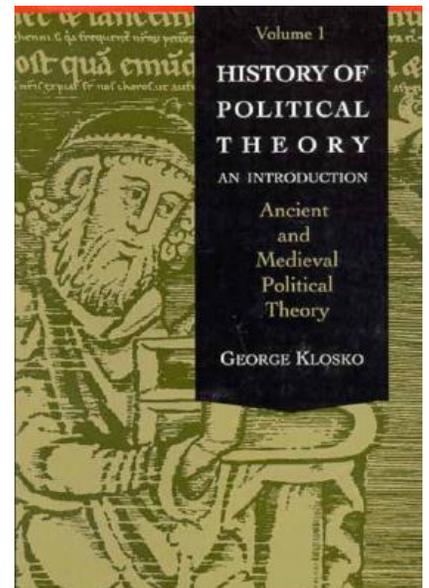
History of Political Theory: An Introduction. Volume 1: Ancient and Medieval Political Theory. George Klosko. Oxford University Press. 2012.

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In *Democracy in America*, a work that is often astonishing in its prescience, Alexis de Tocqueville lamented the prospect that democratic societies might cease to study the classics altogether (2.1.15). Preoccupied with the new and the popular rather than the enduring and the great, the democratic education lost something important when it ceased to grapple with its subtle and sophisticated heritage. To a large extent this turn away from the esoteric and the deliberate was necessary, he thought, and even salutary. But it was a loss nonetheless, for both individuals and society, and one that democracies would do well to mitigate.

Tocqueville’s diagnosis will look right to many of us, especially to those who study and teach the ancients, but his prescription looks decidedly off. He thought that the inclusion of Ancient Greek and Latin in a few elite universities would be a sufficient supplement for the democratic education; yet this answer does not appear to target the democratic education at all, only the elites within democratic society. When the citizenry at large is given a role in governing the state, what is needed is not the preservation of an elitist counterweight to balance the influence of the people; it is a way to incorporate the lessons and skills derived from the study of the ancients into the education of each democratic citizen. This is, perhaps, a more ambitious project than Tocqueville was willing to suggest, but it is one that will be more manageable with the second printing of George Klosko’s *History of Political Theory: An Introduction*.

In the first half of Klosko’s two volume set, Klosko makes the canonical thinkers of Greece, Rome, and early Christendom relevant and accessible in a way that will appeal to both undergraduates and the professors responsible for teaching them. Its stated aim is to act as a supplementary textbook for an undergraduate course on the history of political theory, and it accomplishes this well by presenting material in a lively and accessible prose while balancing general themes with the occasional nuanced detail. Klosko stays true to the sophisticated nature of these thinkers without making them cumbersome, and, perhaps more importantly, helps first-time readers to see that many of the problems that we believe to be distinctively modern (moral relativism, unbridled egoism) are rather central challenges of the Western intellectual tradition, present from its beginning. In line with this, Klosko



demonstrates how thinking with the ancients, as well as thinking about them, not only teaches us a bit of history; it helps to understand how we might ourselves become more conscientious citizens.

According with the customary division between 'ancient' and 'medieval' epochs, the volume is divided into two sections. In the first, Klosko offers an ambitious range of chapters that attempt to cover traditional, sophistic, Socratic, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Hellenistic political theory. The second section is no less ambitious, in either scope or in page numbers, and treats the New Testament, St. Augustine, Aquinas, Marsilius of Padua, and the leading thinkers of the 'reformation'. Each chapter is written such that it might be profitably read on its own or taken in turn within the narrative that Klosko constructs, allowing university instructors to fruitfully utilize all or part of the text in their classroom.

In addition to the substantive chapters just mentioned, the volume also includes a helpful introduction that will aid students unfamiliar with political theory to navigate the chapters that follow. In this introduction, Klosko succinctly discusses what political theory is, why it should be studied, and how one might go about doing so, admirably giving voice to different perspectives on these questions while refraining from the urge to insist that any one set of answers is correct. In this, and in much else of the text, Klosko does well to stay above the academic fray and offer a coherent and convincing reading of the topic he is treating. This approach will prove both illuminating for the student and helpful for the teacher who does not wish to peddle any particular orthodoxy.

Klosko's volume possesses a number of further virtues that will be appreciated by undergraduate instructors. He is at his best in his introduction to Socrates and Plato, who together form the focus of three of the six chapters in Part I. Despite its length, the account is far from exhaustive, but students will find in it a helpful guide to the so-called 'Socratic Problem', Socrates' 'elenchic' method, and the major themes of *Republic*. In addition, Klosko makes a concerted effort to demonstrate how these figures pose one possible response to the problem of 'moral relativism'. The volume should also be commended for its attempt to situate each thinker within his historical context, even if only briefly. Such a move will help to make these distant figures more human and concrete for students, as well as demonstrating that they were often responding to questions that, without too much abstraction, look not too dissimilar from our own.

For all of this, the volume is not without flaws, and some of them are quite serious. Despite including thinkers such as the Hellenistic philosophers and Marsilius of Padua, Klosko glosses over one of Athens' greatest political thinkers, Thucydides. This is a critical omission, and an odd one given his seminal contribution to the so-called 'realist' tradition of political theory. Similarly, Aristotle gets short shrift compared to Socrates and Plato, receiving less than half of the pages that these two receive. Whether these omissions were worth the extra space on Plato and Socrates will be for each individual to decide. (In this reviewer's opinion, no they were not.) Finally, there are more than a few misleading historical generalizations that occur in Klosko's attempt to provide context for these thinkers, and in particular in his characterization of Greece's 'traditional values'. Most of these are relatively innocuous, and they do not detract from what is theoretically interesting in Klosko's presentation. However, they will act as so many grains of sand in the careful eye of specialists, and Oxford University Press would have done well to attend to these in this second edition of the text.

All in all, Klosko's introduction will serve the purposes of most undergraduate courses in the history of political theory very well, and especially those that wishes to structure their reading lists around the texts of Plato. The textbook is no substitute for the primary texts themselves, nor does it aim to be, but it will help students access these texts and see their relevance for the predicaments faced by each and every democratic citizen.

Mark Fisher is presently pursuing a PhD in political theory at the University of California at Berkeley. Prior to this, Mark earned an MPhil in Political Thought and Intellectual History at the University of Cambridge and a BSc in Government at the LSE. Mark works primarily on the history of Ancient Greek political thought and is currently preparing a dissertation that will track Athenian theories of decline in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War. [Read](#)

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