

CLASSICAL POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

**CBCS CORE COURSE (B.A. HONOURS)
V SEMESTER**

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**SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
INDIRA GANDHI NATIONAL OPEN UNIVERSITY**

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BLOCK 2 PLATO

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Unit 3	Justice	Dr. Raj Kumar Sharma, Consultant, SOSS, IGNOU
Unit 4	Education (Presentation Themes: Critique of Democracy, Women and Guardianship, Education, Censorship)	Dr. Ankita Dutta, Research Fellow, Indian Council of Word Affairs

BLOCK 3 ARISTOTLE

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BLOCK 6 LOCKE

Unit 11	Natural Rights	Dr. Abhiruchi Ojha, Asst. Prof., CU Kashmir
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PRINT PRODUCTION

Shri
MPDD, IGNOU
Maidan Garhi, New Delhi

Shri
MPDD, IGNOU
Maidan Garhi, New Delhi

September, 2021

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ISBN:

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Further information on the Indira Gandhi National Open University courses may be obtained from the University's Office at Maidan Garhi, New Delhi-110 068 or visit our website: <http://www.ignou.ac.in>

Printed and published on behalf of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi, by Director, School of Social Sciences.

Laser Typeset by: Mr. Rakesh Joshi, AE (DP), SOSS, IGNOU, New Delhi.

Printed at:





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COURSE INTRODUCTION

Political philosophy is often seen as that branch of philosophy which is concerned, at the most abstract level, with the concepts and arguments involved in political opinion. While there may be a debate over how to define political, generally, it may refer to all those institutions and practices that are concerned with government. Since political element is central to political philosophy, it is an important part of the discipline of Political Science. There is a difference between political philosophy and political theory. Political philosophy is concerned with normative aspects or what ought to be and in this sense, tries to achieve the ideal. On the other hand, Political theory tries to define, describe and explain. For example, political theory would answer what is meant by state but political philosophy would try to find which type of state is the best. Hence, political philosophy is closer to normative political theory than empirical political theory. Leo Strauss had used the term political philosophy for normative political theory and the term political theory for empirical accounts of political reality. He argued that political theory tells us only about the nature of political things while political philosophy is a quest for wisdom. Political theory tells us about something particular but political philosophy informs about the universal. It enables us to understand essence of political reality while political theory sheds light on some opinion about political phenomenon. According to Bhikhu Parekh, political philosophy is the study of the phenomenon which is 'political' in a 'philosophical' way. Here, philosophical way implies a self-conscious critical inquiry and interpretation of the phenomenon. Parekh further argues that political theory is just a description of the political phenomenon. The origin of Western Political Philosophy can be traced to the ancient Greek and Roman society, particularly with the works of Greek experts, Plato and Aristotle. Classical political philosophy covers themes like the political institutions and their origin, the concepts that interpret and organize political life such as justice and equality, the relationship between morality, ethics and the nature of politics, and the comparisons between different constitutional arrangements or regimes.

This course will familiarise students with some of the greatest thinkers in Western Political Philosophy. Beginning with Plato and Aristotle, it highlights ancient Greek political ideas and the manner in which the political questions were first posed. Machiavelli has been discussed next as an interlude inaugurating modern era of political philosophy. The last two thinkers, Hobbes and Locke discussed in this course belong to social contract tradition. This course is divided in six blocks. The first block has Unit 1: Text and Context: Reading and Interpreting a Text. The second block has three units on Plato which cover his theory of forms and philosopher king, justice and education. Third block covers ideas of Aristotle under the themes – state and good life, citizenship and the rule of law. Block four covers Machiavelli and his ideas on politics, morality and republicanism. Hobbes and his thoughts on social contract and sovereignty have been discussed in block five while the last block covers natural rights,

constitutionalism and limited government and idea of toleration as propounded by John Locke.

Every unit in the course has exercises to assess your progress and the answers are given at the end of each unit. There is a comprehensive list of readings in the end of the course that would help you to broaden your perspective and go deep into the study of political philosophy.



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BLOCK I

TEXT AND CONTEXT

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BLOCK I INTRODUCTION

Reading a text is an essential part of epistemology (knowledge creation). The kind of knowledge that is created and even what is counted as knowledge itself depends upon the availability of texts. There are certainly significant factors to be considered in understanding the text by any philosopher or thinker or artist. A text is not merely printed words. Text can be an expression of thoughts, not necessarily always in printed words. The words or the medium of expression speaks about the creator of that knowledge. The liberal understanding of epistemology is problematic. In this school of thought, there is an understanding that knowledge can be created by an isolated, rational and objective individual. Alison Jaggar (1983) in her famous book '*Feminist Politics and Human Nature*' states that this approach fails to acknowledge the fact that ontology is a stepping stone towards epistemology. The knowledge of self affects any expression we do. The knowledge of self leaves an imprint on what we seek as knowledge and what we create as knowledge. In this background, when we are studying thinkers, it is essential to understand the vantage point of the thinker. What was the context in which the text was produced at the original place? Equally important is to place the reader. From which vantage point a reader is reading or re-reading the text. In the process, it becomes clear that a text has its own life independent of the creator. The ideas and thoughts are the product of that thinker's time and as well as that of the readers. Why certain thoughts are prioritised and why others are pushed to the periphery or ignored, are all connected with the politics of text and context. That is why there is a relevance of those texts which give different meanings in different contexts. Here, the act of interpretation connects text and context. We tend to go back to classics for the same reason as the same text acquires different meanings at different times and remains relevant for different reasons. In this unit, we explore work by scholars like Terence Ball and Quentin Skinner, who have emphasised the significance of the relationship between text and context. Thus, it is a starting point to understand the thinkers covered in this course.

UNIT 1 TEXT AND CONTEXT: READING AND INTERPRETING A TEXT*

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Why We Read Texts? Why We Re-Read Texts?
- 1.3 Strategies of Interpretation
- 1.4 Meanings and Contexts
- 1.5 Different Schools of Interpretation
 - 1.5.1 Marxian
 - 1.5.2 Totalitarian
 - 1.5.3 Psychoanalytic
 - 1.5.4 Feminist
 - 1.5.5 Straussian
 - 1.5.6 Postmodernist
 - 1.5.7 Cambridge 'New History'
- 1.6 Mythologies of Reading a Classic Text
 - 1.6.1 Mythology of Doctrine
 - 1.6.2 Mythology of Coherence
 - 1.6.3 Mythology of Prolepsis
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 References
- 1.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit you will be helping students in understanding the significance of reading a text. It is explained why the act of interpretation is inevitable in reading a text. The role of text and the context in which that text is produced are taken into account to explain the process of reading and interpreting a text. Different schools of interpretation are also discussed. All this will help to understand how political theory depends on the act of reading and re-reading texts.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Terence Ball started thinking about the role of reading and interpreting a text in political theory for questions raised by scholars in this regard. He highlighted

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some basic questions raised to political theorists. The first question raised was: why it was that scholars specializing in political theory continued to write about the ‘great thinkers’ of the past. The second question raised was: why do we bother to devise (or to read) this or that interpretation instead of going straight to the source and seeing what the author has to say? In this unit we will be deliberating upon various aspects of reading and interpreting a text to answer these questions. In the next section, we will be discussing why we read texts.

1.2 WHY WE READ TEXTS? WHY WE RE-READ TEXTS?

We read texts to connect with contemporary concerns. We engage with questions of freedom, justice and political participation. The search for solutions to contemporary problems in a given society forces one to read texts and derive meanings out of it. The process of reading and re-reading brings in multi-cultural understandings, especially moving beyond ‘white men’s interpretation’ which has dominated political theory as a discipline for long. These new readings and their interpretations from a set of scholars beyond the boundaries of white skinned male scholars include the voice of different races, sexualities, religion and regions. Thus enriching the field of political theory itself. As Terence Ball is one of the leading scholars dealing with the question of reading texts, let us see what he thought about the act. Ball believed that the process of interpretation is inevitable and necessary in reading. But this act of interpretation is a deadly process. For instance, one can even get killed for a particular interpretation if it goes against the existing laws or religious sentiments. Therefore, the act of interpretation has to be exercised through extreme caution. He understood the significance of interpretation as an effort to find the true meaning of the text/author. Ball cited the thought of Heidegger on significance interpretation as an ‘ontological category’. Interpretation was about dealing with the nature of being. It was about showing the relations between the concepts and categories in a subject area or domain. Similarly, Gadamer gave importance to the act of interpretation as ‘ontological necessity’. According to Gadamer, the world we live in and the texts we read are already invested with meanings. We are born into a world of meanings and with the help of language we speak and traditions we inherit, we try to understand the world. According to Gadamer, we begin our journey of understanding/interpreting with a particular standpoint (influenced by a particular historicity) but at the end of understanding, we may alter the initial prejudices and assumptions about the given meanings. Therefore, the act of interpretation is contextual and dynamic. In the process, one widens the horizon of understanding, seeing common threads of thought even with those who we disagree with. For Gadamer, the art of interpretation is an essential part of the art of living the life of a human being.

Terence Ball explained the fact that interpretations are based on meanings already understood in a given context. Ball cited the example of a man with blood-stained knife in hand. For an interpreter who is not aware of the particular context may interpret this person as a murderer. But if the interpreter is aware of

the context as that of a butcher-shop, then the person with the blood-stained knife is understood as a butcher. Here the scene is same, but how one interprets is connected with the awareness of context and pre-given meanings. According to Terence Ball, a good interpretation diminishes strangeness and toughness between different set of people with plural contexts. However, interpretations also have a scope to produce misunderstandings. A bad interpretation can lead to confusion and chaos between people. But one thing is clear that there is no neutral interpretation. Interpretation is always by someone with some purpose and pre-given assumptions.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. Explain the concept of ‘ontological necessity’ given by Gadamer.

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1.3 STRATEGIES OF INTERPRETATION

According to Quentin Skinner (belonging to Cambridge New Historians school of thought), the meaning of a text is something which lies within a text and is discovered or recovered by the person who reads it. The meaning of a text is something which is created by its author and given to a text in the process of writing it. Skinner is committed to the principle of ‘authorial intentionalism’, that is, intention of the author. This process of creating meaning and giving it to a text is carried out intentionally by the author. The authors of texts have full self-conscious awareness of (and control over) their own intentions and hence also, the meaning of the texts they produce. This is an approach which privileges the standpoint of the author of a text. It maintains that those who are seeking to understand a text cannot afford to ignore the intentions of its author when writing it. It is a necessary condition for the success of the interpretive enterprise.

Contrary to the above view, the conventional view of the post-structuralists highlights the fact that the meaning of a text is created by and given to a text solely and exclusively by the readers of it. For post-structuralist like James Risser, the text ‘remains open to a fundamental multiplicity of meaning, which, for all intents and purpose, must be produced’ by the reader. This way of thinking about reading and interpretation of a text is associated with the principle of ‘the death of the author’ (an author's intentions and biographical facts should hold no special weight in determining an interpretation of their writing) and which is

BLOCK –I
Text and Context

often attributed to poststructuralist philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida.

Here it is important to understand that there are theoretical differences between reading, interpretation and appropriation of a text. It is another matter that in practice all of them may coincide with each other. A reading is an effort to ‘make sense of’ a text. However, this expression is deliberately ambiguous in meaning and allows for the probability that different readers might attempt to make sense of the same text in different ways. For example, the reading might relate to an effort to ‘discover’ some meaning, which is assumed to be already there in a particular text. It might also mean to do with an effort to ‘give’ a certain meaning to a text or to impose a certain meaning upon it. These are quite different types of efforts but both of them could be said to fall under the notion of reading. Therefore, any account of a particular text by readers can be considered as a possible or plausible reading of it. There is nothing called the misreading of any text. This is the crucial difference between a reading and an interpretation of a text. Interpretations aim to get at something which is assumed by the interpreter to lie within the text itself. This ‘something’ is presumed to be the meaning of the text in question. To interpret a text means an attempt to recover or perhaps discover the meaning of a text and this attempt may or may not be successful. Those who claim to have done ‘interpretation of a text’ believe that they are seeking the ‘truth’ about a text’s meaning. It is expected that readings which are also interpretations can be either true or false; correct or incorrect. They can be assessed as being either closer to or further away from the true or correct account of the meaning of a text. In principle, therefore, opposing interpretations of texts can be evaluated on the basis of an appeal to significant empirical evidence and disputes between interpreters might be resolved by rational argument and debate. Those interpretations which are farther from the meanings of a text can be called as the misinterpretation of texts, even if we cannot talk about the misreading of them. Quentin Skinner has given the impression that in his view the only legitimate way to read a text is to interpret it. Unlike an interpretation, an appropriation is a selective reading of a text. The purpose of offering an appropriation of a text might be to persuade somebody to act in a certain way. In this process, the ideas of the author of a text are taken up by appropriators and used by them for purposes of their own. In such readings, the interest and concerns of the appropriator is reflected and not those of the author. Those who appropriate texts are ready to plunder them for ideas which they find useful and sometimes present to the world as their own ideas and sometimes as the ideas of author of the text in question. When using author’s name, appropriators are exploiting author's authority in the field and at the same time, appropriators distort the meaning of these ideas by ignoring the way in which they were used and understood by the author. Appropriators have neither interest in the intentions of the author nor in the truth. Their readings are so inconsiderate, biased, partial, selective, unbalanced and one-sided, that it would be incorrect to call them interpretations of the text. However, it must be accepted that in practice

it might be difficult to establish whether a reading of a text is an invalid interpretation of it or an appropriation of it.

In the debate of whether text is important or the context, Terence Ball feels both are important. For him, even to know what is “unintended” by the author, we must know “intention of the author”. Also, a text has a life beyond the author, a reader also inscribes meaning to a text (in the same context as that of author and in a changed context). Reading text is a merging of two visions, that is, vision of the author and vision of the reader. This merging point is called by Gadamer as “the fusion of horizons”. For Ball this fusion can be both illuminating and confusing. Illuminating for the reflection of vastness of the distance covered by the text from author to the reader. Confusing because it is not necessary that visions of author and reader must have a meeting point. Alan Bryan agrees with Ball when he emphasises that both authorial intention and text’s own life are important. Bryan cites the case of Locke being considered as an early forerunner of feminism for his work *Two Treatises*. Locke might be surprised with this title but it will be a mistake to think that Locke’s writings never inspired successive feminist academia and activism. There is nothing necessarily wrong or illegitimate in taking the view that arguments constructed for one purpose may subsequently be put to some altogether different use. Another example cited by Bryan is that of Antonio Gramsci’s work. In re-describing the Communist Party as the ‘modern Prince’, Gramsci adapted and made creative use of what he took to be Machiavelli’s notion of a ruthless and all powerful prince. On Gramsci’s reading, the Communist Party, like Machiavelli’s Prince, must be prepared to use guile, cunning, deceit and violence to achieve worthy ends. By substituting ‘Party’ for ‘prince’, Gramsci was able to adapt Machiavelli’s arguments to a more modern and distinctly different context. Thus, Bryan concludes that both author’s intention and life of a text in itself are important.

Two integral ingredients of interpretation of a text are (a) intelligibility, that is, audience’s standards and (b) legitimacy, that is, audience’s acceptance. If one fails to take into account one’s audience’s standards in terms of their language, beliefs and circumstances, then the author runs the risk of seeing one’s work as unintelligible or illegitimate by the audience. Political theory and the texts in political theory are significant wherein both matters of logic and language are equally considered. Political theory texts carry matters of both political action and philosophical enquiry together. It leads to political innovation and conceptual change. It is in part this hybrid nature of political theory that makes its history or any particular episode therein so difficult to interpret and so useful to study and reflect upon.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. What do you understand by textual and contextual reading?

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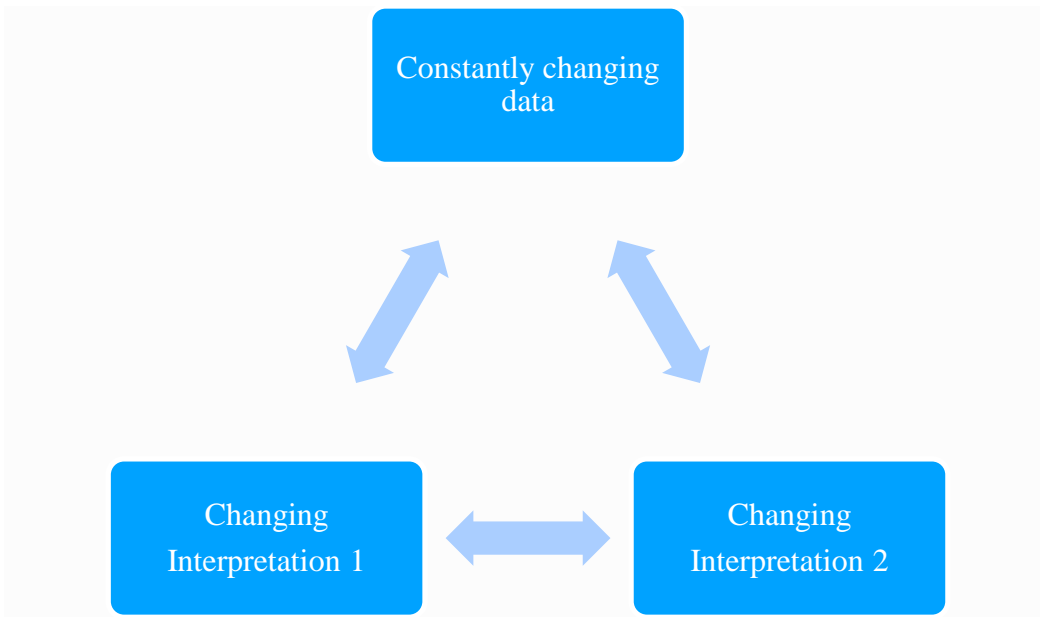
2. Explain two integral ingredients of interpretation.

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1.4 MEANINGS AND CONTEXTS

Meanings change as contexts change. For example, Filmer’s *Patriarcha* (1680) which believed that all kings are Adam’s heir and were absolute and divine rulers was challenged by John Locke’s book *Two Treatises of Government* (1689). Locke said that absolute monarchy is not acceptable and it is not possible to prove that all kings are Adam’s heir. Even in the situation wherein both Filmer and Hobbes spoke about political obligation, the nature of ruler was different. For Filmer, the political obligation was justified in the name of divinity of the king. For Hobbes, political obligation was justified in the name of contract done between men for self-preservation of individuals. As facts are dynamic, no reading is innocent. They are filtered through and coloured by other reader’s readings. There is a need for regular reappraisal of one’s own received values and validity of interpretations. There can be plurality of theories. Lakatos called it “three-cornered fight”.

Finding truth is a process of constant validation and falsification. However, it is not necessary that the process of finding truth is always done in fairness. When the process of finding truth relies on fairness, then the product is called scholarship. When the process of finding truth is based on partisan cause, then the product is called politics. For Terence Ball, scholarship is not politics and politics is not scholarship.



Therefore, we can conclude that both origin of writing and receiving by readers are equally important. Authorial intentions are important but they are not the end in itself. Intentions can be discovered or rediscovered in later stage also. Any text may have unintended consequences (unexpected by the author at the time of writing). Reading is a problem-solving activity wherein the reader connects the content of the text with contemporary issues. Texts are alive only when they are carefully and critically reappraised rather than blindly worshipped. No single method of interpretation can address all the issues. It depends upon the context. Interpretive problems can be witnessed in any school of thought. Every author and reader has their own strengths and accordingly each will do justice to the text.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. What is the difference between scholarship and politics?

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1.5 DIFFERENT SCHOOLS OF INTERPRETATION

Humans continuously interpret contexts and texts around them. Students of political theory read and decide between rival interpretations of political texts. As a subject constantly fascinated with its classic texts, political theory requires an interpretation of not just the ‘words’ but also the ‘meaning’ of these classic texts. Such an interpretation is essential to understand the statements made long ago in

different contexts and also to make them familiar and accessible to the present. As stated in the beginning itself, interpretation may sometimes lead to misunderstandings and there is nothing called a neutral standpoint from which to analyse a text. What it does uphold is the simple fact that there can be no understanding without interpretation.

Different schools of interpretation have been discussed below.

1.5.1 Marxian Interpretation

The Marxian approach places ‘class’ and ‘its inequalities’ as the focus of analysis. For Marxists, conventional ideas hide the damning reality of class inequalities and paint false pictures of society’s fairness and justness. The task of textual interpretation then is to expose the raw reality hidden behind the rosy façade. The goal is to undo the fabric of illusion woven by the mainstream point of view and reveal the true hidden social and economic reality. Crawford Brough Macpherson’s *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962) is an important Marxian interpretation that projects Locke as an extraordinarily clever propagandist for capitalism. Macpherson understands Locke’s discussion of private property in the *Second Treatise* — where he proclaims property as that part of nature which one mixes with one’s own labour — as a justification of the institution of private property. Marxists see all theories as ideological masks. How and why their own theory must be exempted is not explained (or explainable). Predominantly, Marxian interpretations also tend to ignore impact of identities based on other power structures (other than class) like caste, gender, sexualities, religion, region and race in shaping reality. Even when they recognise other identities, they are placed as secondary in shaping reality.

1.5.2 Totalitarian Interpretation

The rise of fascism and communism encouraged investigation into the philosophical roots of modern totalitarianism. The roots, once one starts looking for seems to be present everywhere. Plato’s philosopher king, Machiavelli’s ruthless prince, Hobbes’s all-powerful sovereign/Leviathan and Rousseau’s all-wise legislator, all seem to be forerunners to totalitarian rulers of the 20th century. A well-known work of this perspective is Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945). He construes Hegel’s remark ‘what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational’ in the “Preface” to the *Philosophy of Right* as justifying everything that is now real (or “actual”) exists by necessity and must thus, be reasonable and good (“rational”). Hegel is seen as giving his philosophical approval to the proto-totalitarian Prussian state which existed at that time. A closer look, however, discloses Popper’s misinterpretation. Hegel uses the word *wirklich* which translates as ‘actual’ and means ‘realised potential’, and not what is “real”, as Popper supposes. Hegel’s remark would mean: “What is rational is that which fully actualizes its potential; and that which fully actualizes its potential is rational.” It is, then, not the sinister justification of everything that is real (one of which was totalitarian Prussia). This example

highlights the danger of appropriating a text (both at conceptual and linguistic levels) which we discussed earlier.

1.5.3 Psychoanalytic Interpretation

The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, argued that our actions are driven by desires and fears which we may not be consciously aware of (state of unconsciousness as important). This approach puts forward the idea that psychoanalytic interpretations can be applied to all sorts of texts including those of political theory. This treatment has been given to thinkers like Machiavelli, Burke, Luther and Gandhi. An example of this approach is Bruce Mazlish's *James and John Stuart Mill* (1975). Mill's *On Liberty* is cast as a personal appeal and a declaration of independence from his father who was exceptionally strict. Mill might not have consciously envisioned, it but his unconscious desires shaped his work. He also had an affair with a married woman named Harriet. Given that his mother's name was also Harriet, this coincidence fits perfectly with what is known in psychoanalytic theory as the Oedipus complex. Expectedly, Mazlish makes the most of it. Psychoanalytic interpretations, though sometimes insightful, are speculative, impressionistic and non-falsifiable. The approach also moves attention away from the text and onto the author which is hardly the proper method for any attempt at textual interpretation.

1.5.4 Feminist Interpretation

This approach puts gender as the focal point of analysis and uses that vantage point to look at political theory. The essence of this approach is reflected in Susan Okin's statement, "the great tradition of political philosophy consists...of writings by men, for men, and about men". This gap has pushed for feminist readings and reappraisals of the classic works. The first phase of this approach began in the 1960's. Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Emma Goldman, Bentham, Mill and Engels were singled out for their attention and homage to gender question. A second, more radical, phase followed which sought to expose the misogyny in the works of the greats of political theory including the ones who had in the first phase been venerated. For example Carole Pateman highlighted in her work *The Sexual Contract* how the social contract was a fraternal contract and the welfare state was a patriarchal institution. The third phase criticised the essentialised civic virtues of men — hunger for power, competitiveness, rationality. It turned the public/private distinction on its head and declared the superiority of the private realm of the family to the public realm of politics. Feminist interpretations have been dominated by upper class, white-skinned and educated women. To bring forth the voice of different women (as the category of women is not monolithic) is a challenge for this school of interpretation.

1.5.5 Straussian Interpretation

This approach originates from the work of Leo Strauss who tried to locate the eternal truth of politics in the works of Plato and other ancient and pre-liberal era thinkers. These 'rigorous' works were contrasted with the 'lenient' works of modern liberal thinkers. Strauss lamented the weakening of normative

foundations in the face of the violent winds of fanaticism. His experiences as a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany influenced his approach. Having pointed out the crisis, Strauss and his followers tried to trace the origins and diagnose the maladies of liberalism, relativism, historicism and scientism. Solutions were to be found by prudently re-reading and deciphering the real meaning in the texts of the pre-liberal era. The Straussian approach made distinction between ‘exoteric’ and ‘esoteric’ doctrines of a text. The ‘exoteric’ disguise intended for the public and decoding the ‘esoteric’ doctrine embedded between and hidden behind the lines. This approach counts, on some sort of insider’s knowledge which is available only to the initiated who in turn dismiss the uninitiated as hopelessly ignorant. Also, it just projects that the esoteric doctrine does not correspond to the exoteric doctrine.

1.5.6 Postmodernist Interpretation

Postmodernism arises out of the failures of grand narratives. It is a diverse perspective shared by many different, even dissimilar, thinkers. Postmodernism emphasises the incoherent and incomprehensible nature of the world and resists any attempt to find continuity and unity in the human condition. It also dismisses the idea of linear progress as merely an advance in one group’s power to dominate the others. One of the most influential scholar of this approach is Michel Foucault. He examines the ways in which human beings are ‘normalised’, that is, made willing participants in their own subjugation (by power). It involves re-reading texts from the perspective of the present and then realigning and relocating them according to new axes so as to reveal who contributed to the subjugation and who resisted it. Another popular scholar of this approach is Jacques Derrida. He aims to ‘deconstruct’ or expose and criticize the arbitrariness of claims to truth by examining various binary oppositions or dichotomies such as knower/known, object/representation, text/interpretation, true/false. What is proclaimed as truth, including texts, is merely a representation of a part of truth/s. No version can claim superiority. As such, all interpretations are essentially indeterminate. The insistence on the indeterminacy of interpretations is an extremely cynical stance that does not advance our knowledge. But more importantly, it legitimises or, at least, is unable to distinguish propaganda and falsehood in the texts and thus, making it morally and epistemologically unsatisfactory.

1.5.7 Cambridge New ‘History’

The Cambridge ‘new historians’ see textual interpretation as revealing the historically variable problems to which particular philosophers proposed particular answers and deny that there are eternal problems. Understanding meaning needs that we understand the problem being addressed. Peter Laslett, in his introduction to Locke’s *Two Treatises* (1960), reinstates the book to its political and historical context. It also shows that the volume had been written nearly a decade earlier than what was known paving the way for succeeding reinterpretations of Locke. This method of historical investigation has been vehemently promoted. Textbook approaches have been rejected as insufficiently

historical. For this approach, political theory is a form of political action. It is intended to warn, persuade, criticize and frighten. Political theorists have always involved in propaganda and persuasion. Textual interpretation is a task of restoring texts to the historical contexts and understanding the question(s) to which the texts were offered as answers.

Therefore, we could see that any single method won't suffice to get the answers we seek. A plurality of approaches which will not burden us in the range of questions we can ask is preferable. In adopting this pluralistic approach, intellectual, political and linguistic contexts have to be considered. Also we have to remember the fact that texts take a life of their own once they are published. To concentrate solely on what the author intended in a particular text is to the neglect of what other thinkers and readers had to say about the said text. Interpretative enquiries are problem-driven and dynamic. We turn to texts to clear doubts. These doubts may arise from anywhere but their interpretative solutions must be justified by rigorous scholarly criteria. The classic works may be kept alive through reinterpretations and reappraisals.

Check Your Progress Exercise 4

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. Explain significance of interpretation in reading a text. Which school of interpretation has impressed you the most? Describe briefly its features.

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1.6 MYTHOLOGIES OF READING A CLASSIC TEXT

The task of the political theorists have been to study and interpret a canon of classic texts. The classic texts contain a 'dateless wisdom' in the form of 'universal ideas'. As a result of study of classic texts, Quentin Skinner feels that we learn and benefit directly from investigating these timeless elements. These texts possess perennial relevance. The best way to approach these texts must be to concentrate on what each of them says about each of the fundamental concepts. The classic texts are embedded with questions of morality, politics, religion and social life. This means to read each of them as though it were written by a contemporary. Focusing simply on their arguments and examining what they have to tell us about the perennial issues. Taking them out of their contexts will lose sight of their dateless wisdom and thereby, lose contact with the value and purpose of studying them. There have been certain mythologies existing when it

comes to reading classic texts. In the following paragraphs, we are going to discuss some of them.

1.6.1 Mythology of Doctrines

The most insistent mythology is generated when the historian is set by the expectation that each classic writer will be found to articulate some doctrine on each of the topics regarded as constitutive of its subject. It is a perilously short step from being under the effect (however unconsciously) of such a paradigm to ‘finding’ a given author’s doctrines on all of the mandatory themes. This mythology is called ‘mythology of doctrines’ and it takes several forms. The first is the risk that scattered and incidental remarks are converted into doctrines regarding the mandatory themes of the subject. Both (a) ‘intellectual biographies,’ where the focus is on the varied ideas of individual thinkers and (b) ‘histories of ideas,’ where the focus is on the idea itself as stated by many varied thinkers, are vulnerable to this kind of mythology.

In the case of ‘intellectual biographies,’ a certain view or doctrine may be attributed to a writer based simply on some chance similarity of terminology even if s/he cannot have in principle meant to define. For example, Marsilius of Padua is accredited with the doctrine of separation of powers because of some remarks on the executive role of a ruler compared with the legislative role of a sovereign people. But the doctrine’s origin was drawn to the Romans about two centuries after his death and would grow fully only in the 17th century. Also, a doctrine may be too freely extracted from or read into simple statements. The author might have simply stated the principle (even believed in it) without intending to articulate a doctrine out of it. For example, John Locke is attributed with the ‘doctrine’ of ‘the political trust’ based on some scattered remarks.

In the second case, that is, regarding ‘histories of ideas,’ there is a trend to embody an ideal type of a given doctrine as an entity, an organism almost, with a history of its own. Such reification, creates a form of non-history of the doctrine where its history and history of the writer is erased. For example, in the case of doctrine of separation of powers, from Marsilius to Montesquieu there is erasure of history of the evolution of the doctrine. It is presented as given doctrine. Also, endless debates are generated about the incidence and emergence of a given idea in certain writers or during certain times.

In following the mythology of doctrine, there is a possibility that a historian may supply a theorist with a doctrine appropriate to the subject from its scattered remarks. Historian may speculate about a writer’s opinions regarding a topic which the writer did not even consider seriously. A historian may also denounce a writer for omitting some doctrine which historian thinks is integral to the subject. For example, Plato’s *Republic* is criticized for ‘omitting’ the ‘influence of public opinion’ and Locke’s *Second Treatise* for omitting ‘all references to family and race.’ A historian may criticize a writer for not being comprehensive/systematic enough. The assumption here is that the writer intended its writing to be systematic. For example, Machiavelli’s *Prince* is often attacked as ‘extremely one-sided and unsystematic’.

1.6.2 Mythology of Coherence

The historian's preconceptions and expectations also leads to second type of mythology, a mythology of coherence. The first historical absurdity is the tendency to find or even supply, by filling in gaps, a coherence to a text which may actually not be present. For example, in reading Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, historians and political scientists try to bring in a coherence across all his writings. Whereas Gandhi himself never tried for such coherence. Similarly, Karl Marx is criticised for lack of coherence across his writings. While criticising, historians and scholars forget that certain ideas evolve and reform over the lifespan of an author and break in ideas is normal in such circumstances.

The mythology of coherence assume that it may be quite proper in the interests of extracting a message of higher coherence from an author's work, to discount the statements of intention which the author itself may have made about what s/he was doing, or even to discount whole works which would impair the coherence of the author's system. For example, Locke who set out in the beginning to defend an authoritarian position is portrayed as a 'liberal' political theorist for the sake of coherence. It is also common for historians to see contradictions in a writer's work as barriers which should be accounted for to fit in the coherent system.

1.6.3 Mythology of Prolepsis

The mythology of prolepsis is characterised by a description of a work, being influenced by its significance and in such a way that it leaves no place for an analysis of what the author actually meant to say. This often happens when the historian is interested in the retrospective significance of the work s/he is analysing.

Check Your Progress Exercise 5

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. Define classic texts. Discuss mythology of doctrine.

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1.7 LET US SUM UP

After discussing the conceptual difference between reading, interpretation and appropriation of a text, it is clear to us that in practice all three ways merge

together in the process of understanding a text. Similarly, after looking into the debate of whether author's intention in writing a text is important or an independent life of a text is important, we have understood that life of a text is unpredictable. Sometimes a text is known for its author's intentions and sometimes a text attains its own meaning and life from readers. In this chapter it has been emphasised that the act of interpretation is integral and indispensable in understanding a text. We discussed different schools of interpretation to realise uniqueness of each school and simultaneously understood that no school is in a position to answer all problems for all times. No school is perfect and complete in itself. It is in judicious application of these approaches that a better understanding of a text is developed. At the end of this chapter we discussed what counts as a classic text and how certain mythologies are developed in understanding these classic texts.

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1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1. According to Gadamer, the world we live in and the texts we read are already invested with meanings. For him, the act of interpretation is contextual and dynamic. According to him, in the art of interpretation we learn the art of living the life of a human being.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1. In the textual reading intention of the author is given primacy. The meaning of a text is something which is created by its author and given to a text in the process of writing it. This process of creating meaning and giving it to a text is carried out intentionally by the author. In the contextual reading, the primary importance is given to the context in which the text was originally written and the context in which the reader reads it.

2. Two integral ingredients of interpretation of a text are (a) intelligibility, that is, audience's standards and (b) legitimacy, that is, audience's acceptance.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

1. When the process of finding truth relies on fairness, then the product is called scholarship. When the process of finding truth is based on partisan cause, then the product is called politics.

Check Your Progress Exercise 4

1. Political theory requires an interpretation of not just the 'words' but also the 'meaning' of these classic texts. Such an interpretation is essential to understand the statements made long ago in different contexts and also to make them familiar and accessible to the present. Whichever school of interpretation impressed you the most, explain the reason for it and give its basic features.

Check Your Progress Exercise 5

1. The classic texts contain a 'dateless wisdom' in the form of 'universal ideas'. These texts possess perennial relevance. Mythology of doctrine: The most insistent mythology is generated when the historian is set by the expectation that each classic writer will be found to articulate some doctrine on each of the topics regarded as constitutive of his subject.



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