CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Rethinking the History of Greek and Roman Political Thought

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The present Companion is designed to introduce the central concepts of Greek and Roman political thought to students and teachers of political science, classics, philosophy, and history. Over the past 20 years, scholars in these distinct fields have begun to communicate with one another intensively across traditional disciplinary lines. This cross-fertilization has led to a significantly deeper understanding of ancient political thought as a product of, and response to, the political world of classical antiquity. More important, perhaps, scholars have also come to recognize that classical political thought provides unique resources for helping us grapple anew with the permanent questions of political life. The time is right, therefore, to integrate these scholarly developments into a comprehensive vision of classical political thought and to ask where we should go from here.

The present volume aims to provide such a vision by incorporating the best recent work on Greek and Roman political thought from a wide variety of disciplinary and methodological perspectives. Yet contributors to this volume have ambitions that go well beyond the work of consolidation and survey. While providing helpful introductions for the uninitiated, they also ask fresh questions. Their essays illustrate the ways in which ancient political thought can inspire us to challenge the conventional political wisdom of late modernity. Contributors to the present volume share the belief that classical political thought constitutes a powerful, if internally diverse, tradition that is capable, even now, of opening us to novel political possibilities. In order to deepen our political understanding, and to expand our political imagination, the authors of the following essays have creatively transgressed their traditional disciplinary boundaries. In doing so, they have begun to delineate the contours of ancient Greek and Roman political thought as a new and distinct subfield – one that draws on traditional frames of reference in classics, history, and ancient philosophy, but also brings ancient political texts into contact
with broader currents of political theory and an enlarged understanding of political life.

**Ancient Greek and Roman Distinctiveness**

If the following essays do indeed point toward a new subfield, then they begin to accomplish this goal by uncovering the distinctiveness of ancient Greek and Roman political thought. The Greeks and Romans already stood out within the ancient Mediterranean world, because, unlike their Mediterranean neighbors, they gave a specifically political interpretation to ideals such as freedom and “law and order” (Raaflaub, chapter 3). What is important, however, is not any triumphal claim that the Greeks originated the political, but rather the exploration of why communal political activity became special or even primary for Greeks and Romans. By contrast with other ancient Mediterranean peoples, as Raaflaub shows, the Greeks and Romans erected their conception of the political on the basis of egalitarian practices of political power (to be sure: among the citizenry, not universally) and a concern with collective aims such as justice, well-being, law and order, freedom, and equality. Their political practices came to light as the most useful responses to the Greek experience of life in small-scale, independent, nonhierarchical, and materially and militarily struggling Mediterranean communities.

Even if the Greeks and Romans created newly political ideals, they never settled on immutable and determinate understandings of what politics was for, or what constituted its central activities. Dean Hammer’s essay (chapter 2) is an exemplary exploration of these points. Through examining the most important modern treatments of ancient politics, Hammer illustrates that ancient Greco-Roman politics should not be reduced to institutional functioning or any Weberian “monopoly of legitimate force” (cf. Herman 2006). (This is one area where the anachronistic importation of modern terminology or concepts can be particularly misleading.) Instead, as Hammer shows, the Greeks and Romans recognized coercive state authority while also understanding individual citizens, including their bodies, as penetrated by the multifarious workings of power. Hammer’s clear-minded interpretation of the ancient political experience through the lens of postmodern social theory pays particular dividends for students of politics as they struggle with the inevitably fuzzy dimensions and chaotic landscapes of political life. At all events, Hammer demonstrates more clearly than ever before that the political must be understood contextually, as a feature of the particular times and places in which politics was recognized and practiced. Yet in doing so Hammer also shows that his emphasis on historical particularity can make certain unfamiliar, and perhaps disquieting, political ideas available for our consideration and use.

**Ancient and Modern**

Initially, at least, those who boldly assert the importance of classical political thought might be greeted with either skepticism or revulsion or both. Skepticism, because our
contemporaries will naturally wonder whether the highly particular, remote, and often alien Greco-Roman political experience can shed light on modern political life and thought. How should scholars and citizens “locate” classical political thought within the contemporary world of technological progress, religious pluralism, universal human rights, and multiculturalism? Revulsion, because virtually all ancient Greek and Roman writers were politically intolerant, illiberal slave-owners who would have scoffed at the idea of universal human rights. They would have failed to understand why they should tolerate, much less respect, the diverse standards of different cultural traditions. What relationship do we now bear, or want to bear, to the highly particular ancient Mediterranean political world?¹

Modern political thought can neither ignore nor simply embrace Greek and Roman political analysis. On the one hand, we study classical political thought in the shadow of early modern efforts to reject the claims of antiquity. The seventeenth century founders of modern liberalism, such as Bacon, Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke, aspired to create an utterly new, even utopian, vision of political order and human freedom. Their sanguine attitudes toward modern progress were based as much on faith in scientific and technological advancement as on the creation of new and supposedly more realistic political ideals. As noble as their ambitions may have been, however, the goal of “routing the ancients,” of eliminating classical political thought from the theoretical road map of modernity, is not a wise option. Whatever their shortcomings or mistakes, the ancient thinkers captured central truths about political psychology and about the social character of human beings. Even now, the ancient thinkers offer us theoretical and imaginative opportunities to improve our political understanding. We can take advantage of these opportunities without endorsing every feature of the classical thinkers’ outlook.

On the other hand, the act of recovering ancient voices or ideas should not be enlisted in the conservative project of establishing orthodoxy that have no real place in the modern world. Political hierarchy, gender inequality, unreflective respect for certain traditions combined with neglect or contempt of others, and the anti-individualistic emphasis on “community” – these are not attractive possibilities for our time. At all events, such projects, if based on claims to the cultural authority of classical antiquity, represent only partial and incomplete recoveries of classical political thought. They do not do justice to the traditions of merciless self-criticism practiced by many of the authors of ancient Greek and Roman political texts (see below, “The Provocation to Self-Criticism”).

Without lapsing into either form of extremism, this collection reflects upon the best ways to understand and perhaps reappropriate classical political thought. Our responses derive from the ethical commitment to making our academic work meaningful to inhabitants of the post-enlightenment nation-state. We hope to have addressed the issues in ways that people should care about. In accordance with this commitment, I asked contributors to adopt a self-consciously two-tiered outlook on the ancient material. At least as an initial goal, contributors have located ancient political ideas in their particular historical contexts. This emphasis on historical context grows out of the belief that ancient thinkers offered creative responses to political conventions that they regarded as useless, stultifying, or harmful. These
responses were “local.” They were particularly meaningful, and perhaps unsettling, to contemporaries familiar with the urgent questions of ancient political life. Yet ancient political writers were not prisoners of particular historical contingencies. Nor did they understand themselves as unshakably entrenched in particular historical moments. Instead, both systematic philosophers and unsystematic thinkers typically regarded themselves as exponents of what they took to be a natural or unchanging order, an order that was not historically contingent but satisfied the basic requirements of our human nature. As the following essays amply illustrate, contributors to the present volume understand that the ancients’ ambitions in this regard are worthy of careful consideration and intellectual respect.

**Particular and General**

Yet one might wonder how, if at all, these two modes of analysis – which might be called “particular” and “general,” or sometimes “historical” and “philosophical” – work together. At first glance, the historical emphasis on particularity appears to conflict with any effort to elicit generalized teachings from classical political thought. Is it realistic to think that the gap between particular and general can be bridged by imaginative reflection? Can we avoid mistaking “is” for “ought” in making the transition from history to theory? Is it responsible for scholars and thinkers to put classical political thought to use in the vastly different conditions of late modernity?

To each question, our answer is a resounding yes. Despite the apparent tensions between particular and general, it will emerge that these approaches can cooperate successfully and so produce illuminating results. Study of the ancient city implies neither nostalgia for classical antiquity nor envy of the political lives of ancient citizens. Instead, the ubiquitously rich and deeply alien world of classical antiquity can be recovered as a repository of imaginative and theoretical resources. Recovering the deep history of political thought will remind us of forgotten dimensions of political experience and challenge us knowingly to resist the tyranny of our modern preconceptions. In undertaking such a project of recovery, the difficulty is to avoid either ham-fistedly wrenching classical ideas from their roots in their own native soil or gazing worshipfully on ancient ideas as the wondrous products of a definitively superior era. The appropriate metaphor is rather that of transplanting a healthy tree, with its roots intact, to an alien environment, where it can flower for us to enjoy or perhaps even bear fruit.

To understand why a two-tiered framework of analysis is helpful, consider the fruitlessness, if not impossibility, of writing the history of political thought without employing both analytical modes. On the one hand, purely general and abstract discussions of ancient texts, unanchored in historical understanding, run the risk of anachronism. We can easily distort the ancients’ own political vocabulary and outlook. Such distortions inevitably blunt the force of any theoretical challenges or provocations offered by the ancients. This happens all too frequently, as when scholars have anachronistically imported the modern language of sovereignty or social
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contract theory into study of ancient political ideas or ideology. More specifically, politically central ancient concepts such as *hubris* (arrogance), *aidôs* (shame), or *pietas* (duty) cannot be simply or easily “translated” into the modern political vocabulary. They cannot be communicated to modern audiences apart from historical investigation of the particular communities of meaning in which those concepts played a decisive role.

On the other hand, purely contextual analyses, uninformed by larger questions about political life as such, often result in either meaningless dead ends or reverential “appreciation.” Either form of antiquarianism runs the moral and political risk of promoting doctrinaire claims to cultural authority that ignore the elements of self-criticism in Greek and Roman political thought. Such risks can be accentuated if antiquarian history is reinforced by the naive idea that classical antiquity provides uncontaminated moments of origin for later political developments. One and all, the present contributors heed Nietzsche’s warnings against simplistic notions of uncorrupted or innocent “starting-points” (*On the Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche 1967); cf. Foucault 1977).

Instead of segregating historical and philosophical, or particular and general, approaches, it is most productive to synthesize these modes of analysis. If we envision them as mutually supportive and dialectical, then each approach might teach the other. Neither will have to remain ancillary. In the first instance, our understanding of the history of ancient Greek and Roman political thought can be immeasurably improved if we learn to ask the right questions – questions motivated by broad awareness of political thought and practice in other geographic regions and chronological periods, including European modernity. Modern students of comparative politics have repeatedly illustrated the epistemological value of studying both like and unlike cases, in all their diversity, and they have shed light on how to examine historical *comparanda* with methodological sophistication and self-consciousness (e.g., Katzenelson 1997; Lichbach 1997; Landman 2000: 27–32; for an application in ancient history, Pritchard 2007: 349–52). I discern three ways in which our understanding of classical political thought, specifically, can be improved through conducting comparative studies of political thought and political life in other regions and periods.

First, doing comparisons between different periods and regions helps to render visible certain frequently unacknowledged features of the classical political experience. Consider, for example, our understanding of the relationship between Greco-Roman polytheism and classical political life. Despite their theological beliefs and symbols (Osborne, chapter 8), the Greeks regarded their political practices and ideals as human constructs dependent on human effort. In particular, by contrast with political life in other ancient Mediterranean regions, the Greeks and Romans did not, in general, view the political world as a divinely controlled world, nor did they invest their political leaders with transcendent religious authority (see Raaflaub, chapter 3; cf. Lincoln 2007). Authority in Greek and Roman politics derived from the communal power of citizens.

By contrast with politics in early modern Europe, moreover, Greek and Roman citizens were not subject to politically independent and frequently coercive clerical authority. Greeks and Romans had no need of the great modern theorists of
toleration, such as Locke; they had no need to be liberated from religious orthodoxy by a Spinozistic *Theological-Political Treatise*. To the contrary, as Robin Osborne (chapter 8) demonstrates, Greek and Roman religion was subject to the authority of politics. Greek and Roman polytheism had no systematic orthodoxy or dogma; Greek and Roman political life was free of the religious controversies that so beset early modern political life. To put the point most provocatively, Greek, and to a lesser extent Roman, religion did not obstruct political rationality. Many of these features of ancient religion, and generally of ancient political life, would be invisible without the points of reference provided by far-ranging scholarly “time travel.”

Second, by using analytical vocabularies developed in modern social science, political theory, and philosophy, we can inform our understanding of the classical political experience with a more useful set of interpretative tools (cf. Morley 2004; Ober 2008). In this belief, for example, certain contributors have utilized the vocabularies of modern political science and modern feminism to excellent effect. Josiah Ober (chapter 5) and Craige Champion (chapter 6) use the social-scientific language of collective action theory and international relations theory to explore uncharted territory in the ancient political experience (for other recent examples, see Low 2007; Eckstein 2006; Ober 1998). These chapters successfully defamiliarize certain scholarly commonplaces and make the ancients’ political discourse available to us for the improvement of our own political understanding. In a similar vein, Giulia Sissa (chapter 7) uses the conceptual tools of modern feminism to shed light on the distinctive ways in which the classical political experience was “gendered.” Sissa (chapters 7 and 18) and Champion, in particular, provide frameworks within which we can understand and evaluate the relationship between Greco-Roman “manliness” and ancient bellicosity, against the background of ancient Mediterranean culture at large.

Third, we improve our historiographic self-consciousness through becoming increasingly aware of our own location within histories of political life and thought. To be sure, we risk anachronism if we allow our interpretative lenses to be clouded with inappropriate terminology (cf. Rhodes 2003a). Yet our modern reconstructions of past practices and discourses are inevitably, though often undetectably, shaped by our twenty-first century vantage-points. If we are not conscious of the impact of our own highly contingent positions as late-modern observers, then we will not be able to take a properly self-critical perspective on our own ways of writing the history of classical political thought (cf. Osborne 2006: 14–28; Herman 2006: 85–101).

If our study of specifically classical political ideas can be improved through awareness of the broader currents of modern political thought, and through comparative study of other chronological periods and geographic regions, then the converse is also true: the larger educational value of studying ancient Greek and Roman politics depends on our sensitivity to historical particularity. Our awareness of historical particularity enables the ancient texts to speak on their own terms to permanent problems of political life, as those problems were interpreted and experienced in classical antiquity. As the following essays demonstrate, classical political life and thought are foreign and thus potentially challenging for us. Yet the ancient Greeks and Romans, even now, are not incomprehensibly remote in such a way as to render stimulating “conversation” impossible.
Like us, for example, the ancient Greeks and Romans confronted the universal problems of human neediness and ignorance, of disputes over scarce resources, of conflicts between the individual and the community, and of the frequently destructive human passions and appetites. They confronted such problems by employing concepts and language that we immediately recognize – justice, equality, freedom, virtue, and governance by law. But the ancient Greeks and Romans managed these problems, and used this familiar language, in an unfamiliar way, and within a life-world that differed from our own in many obvious ways, such as the near-universal acceptance of polytheistic religion, the size of the state, the difference between direct participation and representative government, the exclusion of women from citizenship, the practice of slavery, etc. This combination of similarity with difference means that the ancients have something new to offer, especially to modern citizens who also think in the language of justice, equality, freedom, virtue, and governance by law. By understanding the ancient past in a properly historical way, as I have described it, we might go beyond simply “appreciating” classical authors and political forms in an antiquarian or monumentalizing spirit.

Instead, we begin to render classical ideas and ideologies meaningful in arguments that we should care about. Within this framework, the historian of political thought becomes a creative mediator or umpire who judges the usefulness of historical theories and redeploy them in current political controversies. Thus, if we have tried to heed Nietzsche’s strictures against naïve historicism, then we also give due consideration to his view that history should be used for the sake of “life.” Our goal is to arrive at the advantageous position of being able to make use of historical thinkers and practices, to “put them into play,” so to speak, as we strive to ask the recurrent questions of political life. It is in this way that contributors to the present volume have strived not only to formulate the outlook of a newly distinct subfield, but also to uncover the extraordinary resources offered by study of classical political thought.

Politics, Ethics, Citizenship

The ancient Greeks and Romans had a particular way of understanding the relationship between the political and the ethical, which illustrates the larger educational significance of studying classical political thought with attention to its particularity. Ancient Greeks and Romans maintained that political institutions and practices ought to provide an education to virtue. In itself this belief is not distinctive, since virtually all societies have sought to develop functional excellences of character, that is, virtues that are relative to, and instrumentally useful for achieving, particular goals of specific cultures. By contrast with later Christian or commercial virtues, however, the ancient Greeks and Romans emphasized the political virtues and the deliberative prudence of active, self-governing citizens. By contrast with many others, including the “moderns” of Europe and North America, they also laid particular stress on human excellence or nobility, as opposed to the gentler or more peaceful virtues of tolerance, decency, and civility. And, finally, rather than adopting a strictly functional or instrumental
conception of virtue, they typically envisioned virtue as an excellence of character whose active exercise was intrinsically good for the virtuous agent.

For the sake of comparison and contrast, it will help to sketch certain later, and perhaps equally distinctive, conceptions of virtue and its relation to political life. By contrast with the fundamentally civic concerns of most ancient polytheists, Christian thinkers, for example, always granted primacy to charity and humility as the chief virtues enabling human beings to fulfill their natural human vocations. The Christian virtues provided a way for the dutiful and observant to win their ultimate reward in the afterlife, that is, a proper place in the heavenly city. As Todd Breyfogle shows (chapter 32), Augustine adapted the polytheistic civic models to a new metaphysical narrative in which our sojourn on earth, even if virtuous or humanly excellent, could only ever have an educative function orienting us to the more important concerns of another type of “city.” In Eric Brown’s view (chapter 31), this late antique and medieval norm was developed out of a much earlier countercultural stance: already in the fourth century BC, Plato’s Socrates had begun to develop private, nonpolitical virtues as an act of political criticism and defiance. Adapting the earlier Socratic model, the Christian virtues constituted an explicit rejection of the polytheists’ way of relating the ethical to the political.

When we turn to the early modern founders of liberalism, the situation is of course entirely different. Despite recent liberal aspirations to separate politics and “morality” (e.g. Rawls 1971), the classical liberals, such as Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Mill, did not shy away from using political authority to help educate citizens to function virtuously in diverse spheres such as commerce and civic life (Berkowitz 2000). In his Report to the Board of Trade (1697), for example, John Locke recommended, like many others of his day, the use of work-houses, child labor, and whippings for beggars, in order to cure the poor of their indolence and to promote industry and self-discipline (Tully 1993: 234–41). In the eighteenth century, as J. G. A. Pocock has shown, a newly “commercial humanism” redefined the ancient, austere, and predominantly civic virtues with the aid of the novel concept of “manners,” so as to produce a more peaceful and socially diverse expression of the citizen’s proper and virtuous functioning (Pocock 1985: ch. 2; cf. Rahe 1992). More recently, in their political practices and practical ideologies, contemporary nation-states have also used political authority to show disapproval of, and even to outlaw, behaviors which were seen to be immoral or intolerable, such as sodomy, bigamy, or blasphemy. Neoconservatives in the United States see a state role for enforcing “family values” and patriotic virtues (Berns 2001; cf. Nussbaum and Cohen 2002), while “communitarians” and liberals alike have argued for the social and political benefits of cultivating virtues of character (Bellah et al. 1985; Dagger 1997). The foregoing examples represent merely a few of the diverse functions to which virtue has been put in modern European and North American theory and practice. Obviously, the horizon of this discussion could be vastly extended if we should turn to the history of Asian or Middle Eastern practices of virtue.

Against this necessarily schematic outline, we can come to understand the highly particular role played by conceptions of ethical and intellectual excellence in classical political thought. In their political theories and ideologies, the ancient Greeks and
Romans emphasized the specifically civic virtues of character such as justice, loyalty to the community, piety, civic friendship, self-control, and courage. Even more importantly, they emphasized civic prudence – that is, the citizens’ capacity to deliberate effectively on the city’s momentous concerns, such as war and peace, awards of citizenship, the maintenance of sacred land, and the use of collective material resources for public building-projects and festivals. Ancient political thought thereby asserted the importance of the citizens’ intellectual faculties – not, of course, their philosophical capacities, but rather the ordinary prudence that enabled citizens to recognize and pursue their own self-interests as members of small-scale political communities. This constitution of the ancient citizen as an active deliberator points to a more actively and robustly civic conception of virtue than those found in the patristic literature, or again in the teachings of early modern liberals such as Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke, or, finally, in the particular brand of contemporary liberalism associated with figures such as John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and Judith Shklar.

As a counterpart to their concern with virtue, the ancients also meticulously explored the vices that corrupt political life, such as cowardice, greed, dishonesty, self-indulgence, and lack of discretion. In virtually every case, ancient Greek and Roman thinkers and citizens used the language of vice to criticize members of the body politic who failed to make an adequate contribution to civic vibrancy and health. In the distinctive Greek and Roman political environment, the modern commercial virtues would have appeared narrowly self-interested and calculating. They would have been ranged among the vices, above all as greed (*pleonexia* or *avaritia*) or self-indulgence (*akolasia*), but more generally as selfishness that diverted a citizen’s attention from the common good. In the mostly small, mostly egalitarian political communities of the Greek and Roman world, the civic orientation of the citizenry was central to the ancient city’s material prosperity, military security, and general well-being.3

Political thinkers and citizens of classical antiquity in general viewed their political lives from within the framework of virtue and vice. As we discover in the essays of Malcolm Schofield, Charles Hedrick, and Philip Stadter, along with the contributors to part III (“The Virtues and Vices of One-Man Rule”), Aristotle and his philosophical forbears did not originate this emphasis on the interconnections between politics and civic virtue. It wasn’t only in the philosophers’ imaginary utopias that political thinkers envisioned political power as capable of helping citizens achieve a good life through educating them to justice, civic friendship, and prudence. Rather, from its earliest appearances onward, Greek and Roman political reflection emphasized the character development of citizens as the key ingredient in both individual and civic flourishing. This is as obvious from reading the Roman historian Livy as it is from reading Homer, Herodotus, and the Athenian orators. Contrary to a frequently expressed view, the ancient philosophers did not construct utopian cities of virtue and reason in a vacuum; rather, they developed preexisting lines of thought and intervened in contemporary debates.

The ancients’ concern with citizenly character, of course, presupposes the all-important category of citizenship itself. It is with the category of citizenship that we can begin to move from identifying the ancients’ distinctive concerns to exploring
their larger theoretical significance. As P. J. Rhodes illustrates in chapter 4, citizenship and civic ideology were central to the ancient understanding and experience of politics. Given the traditions of civic humanism developed in the Italian city-states, revived by the American Founders, and again rejuvenated by modern theorists of citizenship (e.g., Arendt 1958; cf. T. Pangle 1988; Oldfield 1990; Zuckert, chapter 34), it would be misguided to assert that ideals of active, excellent, and intrinsically worthwhile civic virtues were the unique prerogative of ancient Greeks and Romans. As Christopher Nadon shows in chapter 33, citizenship has constituted a central theoretical and practical category wherever republican forms of political organization have prevailed, such as Renaissance Italy or the colonial United States. More broadly, in fact, the continental tradition of modern political philosophy – including Montesquieu, Rousseau, and Hegel – has built upon and extended the ancient theories of citizenship and civic virtue. Even though such figures often transfigured ancient theories, they tended to agree that the classical experience of citizenship was one of the most fruitful sources of inquiry into this critical political idea. The reason is, roughly, that the egalitarian ancient city-state expected and often demanded from its citizens an extraordinary degree of civic participation and interest. Such demands led to an exceptional degree of reflection upon the nature of civic virtue and vice and on the broad questions of moral psychology and political agency that such reflection usually inspired.

Contemporary political philosophers have increasingly acknowledged the political and ethical importance of virtuous citizenship, and the ancient Greeks and Romans have continued to provide a language for helping them articulate and defend their views. In political philosophy, republican theorists such as Ronald Beiner (1992), as well as liberal perfectionists such as Stephen Salkever (1990; cf. Collins 2006), have turned to the ancients in order to find an appropriate vocabulary and understanding of civic, deliberative virtue; and theorists have begun to talk seriously about democratic virtue (Euben, Wallach, and Ober 1994b; Wallach 1994; Zuckert, chapter 34). Among other things, these theorists are concerned with cultivating prudence, with overcoming apathy, and often with encouraging contemporary citizens to put substantive ideas about human goodness onto the common table of public, democratic deliberation. Guided by the political reflections of the ancients, these theorists explore how we might elevate the modern citizenry’s understanding and experience of politics to a level commensurate with its democratic power. The present volume puts on display, among much else, the rich and theoretically well-informed vocabulary of political virtue that the world of classical antiquity has to offer theorists interested in improving the quality of our civic discourse. At all events, classical political life and thought help us to raise additional questions about the distinctively Rawlsian brand of liberalism that remains suspicious of any public conversations based on comprehensive or substantive conceptions of human goodness.

Even if the particular ancient experience has broad philosophical appeal for modern theorists, however, it is worth entering at least one caveat. By contrast with the ancient polis, modern states are large-scale, socially differentiated, and pluralistic political entities. Hence, any efforts to adapt ancient theories or ideologies of virtue to the modern context must contend with these formidable practical differences.
The modern interest in ancient citizenship and citizenly virtue should not lead to calls for wholesale importation of the ancient models into modern nation-states. At least since the publication of Benjamin Constant’s “The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns” in 1819 (Constant 1988; cf. Holmes 1979), and recently since the reinvention of this distinction by Isaiah Berlin (Berlin 1958), political theorists have been all too familiar with the dangers of utilizing political power to inculcate virtue, particularly in modern conditions. As a result, contemporary theorists tend not to commit themselves so strongly to a program of virtue cultivation as Rousseau did in his Letter to d’Alembert. Yet, as we have just seen, the contemporary turn to virtue, among liberal, republican, and conservative theorists, is substantial and increasingly important. The thought behind this “characterological turn” is that there must be middle ground between the individualistic, libertarian outlook (cf. Kateb 1992; Nozick 1974) and the insanely demanding standards of virtue-oriented organizations of power such as (say) the Iranian theocracy.

Our particular understanding of that middle ground must both respect modern ideals of freedom and autonomy and adequately educate modern citizens to eschew unreflective relativism and naive conformity to present standards. Classical political thought might prove especially helpful and challenging to modern theorists as we struggle to find such a middle ground. The essays in the present volume indicate just how rich, complex, and diverse the Greek and Roman understanding of civic virtue and deliberative prudence could be. It is hoped that the present collection will provide an interpretative and philosophical basis for supplementing and enriching recent efforts, for challenging contemporary orthodoxies, and for stimulating further reflection upon the political possibilities of virtue politics in modernity.

Supplementing Contemporary Theory

From the perspective of understanding classical political thought as both a supplement and a challenge to contemporary theory, it is worth observing that contemporary theorists of citizenship have paid less attention than they might to two important features of classical political thought. First, human excellence or nobility. The great modern ideal of equality has tended to reduce contemporary interest in human excellence or nobility, as opposed to the peaceful virtues suitable to commercial or liberal republics (Rahe 1992; Pettit 1997). However, certain theorists have redirected attention to intellectual and political nobility by referring to the ancient example. Leo Strauss and Thomas Pangle, for example, aspire to “ennoble” liberalism by offering a more aristocratic interpretation of its key principles and possibilities (Strauss 1968; T. Pangle 1992; Lutz 1998). Their goal is to reassert a nonrelative understanding of the perfectibility of human nature, so as to combat the perceived inadequacies of the contemporary liberal world, including relativism, conformism, and the lack of spiritual fulfillment. Often this political aspiration has been coupled with an appreciation of Plato and Aristotle’s belief that political life is incomplete by comparison with the philosophical life. Only philosophy, in the ancient philosophical
view, provides the highest fulfillment of human nature and the deepest satisfaction of human longing. Translating such views into a more contemporary idiom, such theorists articulate and defend a principled intellectual life as the best human life altogether, in the spirit of Platonic political philosophy.

Second, the intrinsic worth of the active exercise of political virtue. Although Arendt (1958) and Sandel (1996, 1998) emphasize the intrinsic worth of civic activity, it is possible to discern in classical political thought an even more profound concern with intrinsic goodness than these theorists have recognized. Developing the citizens’ character and prudence, and thus providing citizens with an opportunity for a good life per se, was seen to be an essential task of the ancient political regime (cf. Diamond 1977; Licht 1978). Speaking roughly, at least, the ancient polis existed in order to make citizens good, in the belief that both individual lives and the community as a whole would flourish most fully by this means. In other words, the ancient “politics of virtue” should be understood as “eudaimonistic” – that is, as directed toward the cultivation of virtues of character and intellect as a perfection of human nature. The cultivation of virtues which are good for their own sake enables individuals themselves to lead good, flourishing human lives, even as they contribute in functionally excellent ways to the city. This conception of virtue politics envisions civic virtue as an intrinsically worthwhile (i.e., as a “final” or “telic”) constituent of human well-being, as well as an instrumentally useful capacity enabling individuals to coexist in just and stable polities. Seen in this light, the classical politics of virtue strives to bridge the gap between individual self-interest and the demands of the larger political society. This volume as a whole shows that the well-known Socratic, Platonic, Aristotelian, and Stoic versions of eudaimonism grew out of, and were developments of, a long, diverse, and exceptionally well-developed Greco-Roman tradition of political thought. This tradition was particularly concerned with understanding how and why the political cultivation of civic virtues and deliberative prudence contributed to the good lives of individual citizens.

This line of interpretation suggests that the classical political philosophy and ideology of civic virtue can be connected to what is now called “virtue ethics.” This is true particularly for the Greek traditions of civic virtue. In ethical philosophy, Elizabeth Anscombe (1958), Rosalind Hursthouse (1999), and Gabriele Taylor (2006), among others, have drawn on ancient, and particularly Aristotelian, thinking about virtue and vice in order to remedy apparent shortcomings in the prevailing Kantian and utilitarian theories. As David Depew shows in chapter 26, however, these neo-Aristotelian philosophers should also take account of virtue and vice as political phenomena, in the spirit of the ancients’ own understanding of the virtues and of eudaimonia. Aristotle, most obviously, perceived ethics as a particular branch of politics, and he regarded his Nicomachean Ethics as the essential preliminary study for his Politics. Again, however, this way of relating ethics to politics was characteristic of classical political ideas and ideologies as a whole. As the essays in this volume indicate, study of ancient Greek and Roman political thought helps to provide a political framework for modern reappropriations of ancient ethics.

Much the same could be said about the resurgence of interest in the political passions. If ancient politics was particularly concerned with citizenly character, then
the ancient thinkers were especially well positioned to reflect upon questions of moral
and political psychology. Ancient reflections upon the role of the passions in political
life have proved to be a fruitful basis for the modern reconsideration of political
psychology in all its forms. Contemporary theorists such as Martha Nussbaum
(2001), Jon Elster (1999), and Michael Walzer (2004) have taken up with gusto
the study of emotion and its political applications, typically in ways that are explicitly
and deeply indebted to the Greeks and Romans. The diverse essays by Sissa, Ludwig,
Kaster, and Gibert illustrate, among other things, the special importance of Greek
and Roman political thought for the study of political emotion and show how broad
and pervasive, both chronologically and generically, the ancient interest in political
passions came to be. By deepening the conversation (though not, perhaps, the
“quarrel”) between the ancients and the moderns, these essays strengthen the
ancient contribution to our understanding of central, but traditionally neglected,
facets of our political experience.

Significant Editorial Choices

With a view to illustrating the challenges posed by classical political thought to
contemporary political ideas and ideologies, I have chosen to adopt a topical approach
in this volume. By comparison to a conventional author-by-author and chronological
approach, the topical approach is far better suited to bringing out both the historical
specificity of classical political thought, and its potential to be fruitfully set into
dialogue with modern political practices, ideologies, and theories. As a result, this
volume will best serve readers with significant interests in real political questions, such
as whether the ancient Greeks and Romans had a concept of “rights” (see Cartledge
and Edge, chapter 10), whether private freedoms existed in the ancient republics (see
Wallace, chapter 11, and part III, “The Virtues and Vices of One-Man Rule”), and
whether ancient democratic practice and ideology differed from those of modern
democracy (see Liddel, chapter 9). This volume will also be useful to those who
come to the ancient material hoping to explore different perspectives on topics they
have investigated chiefly with reference to modernity – e.g., the problem of collective
action (see Ober, chapter 5), the ideal of cosmopolitanism (see Konstan, chapter 30),
and the question of “civil religion” (see Osborne, chapter 8).

To make the same point more audaciously, the topical approach reflects our belief
that the continuing importance of classical political thought should never be simply
assumed. Traditional chronological and author-based surveys appear to make just such
an assumption. Our view is that arguments are needed to show that classical political
thought is still meaningful, useful, and interesting in modernity. For, as Bernard
Williams has effectively demonstrated, “It is too late to assume that the Greek past
must be interesting just because it is ‘ours’ ” (1993: 3). That is exactly right, because,
as Williams says, channeling Nietzsche’s concern with “untimely meditations,” “We,
now, should try to understand how our ideas are related to the Greeks’ because, if we
do so, this can specially help us to see ways in which our ideas may be wrong” (1993: 4).
The essays in this volume might be regarded as providing particular case-studies of "untimely meditations." They begin to address the invitations offered by Nietzsche, Williams, and others of similar outlook, precisely by exploring the ancients' historical particularity within an enlarged framework of philosophical speculation and interest.

Such commitments help our *Companion* to extend the contributions of other collections that have focused specifically on the usefulness of particular ancient thinkers (e.g., Aristotle, as in Tessitore 2002) or particular political regimes (e.g., Athenian democracy, as in Euben, Wallach, and Ober 1994a). But this *Companion* is the first general survey of the field that takes such ambitions seriously. Even 20 years ago, the questions we pursue were not squarely in the center of most scholars' active research programs, despite certain notable exceptions (e.g., Euben 1990; Finley 1985a; MacIntyre 1984; Saxonhouse 1985). The surveys that have traditionally served students and teachers (e.g., Barker 1918; T. Sinclair 1951), and even newer handbooks (Rowe and Schofield 2000), have failed genuinely to address the issue of how best to reappropriate classical political thought within the framework of contemporary political thought and life. New questions have become more generally available through the work of interdisciplinary scholars and theorists who have returned to classical political thought because of their increasing dissatisfaction with contemporary liberal theory and the political cultures based on it (e.g., Douglass, Mara, and Richardson 1990).

Nevertheless, despite our confidence in the freshness and importance of the questions we explore, the present collection does not presume to give authoritative answers to these questions. To the contrary: our own "untimely meditations" are intended as open-ended stimuli to further study of classical antiquity in the same deeply interrogative spirit. It is hoped that readers will finish the volume with a fresh sense of the possibilities for further research and the opportunities offered to us by ancient political thought. From this vantage-point, we are cautiously optimistic that this volume will be of interest not only to students, but also to professional scholars striving to advance our collective understanding. Accordingly, in order to maintain the volume’s open-endedness, I have not made any effort to iron out substantive disagreements among my fellow contributors (see, for example, the essays of Chappell and Depew in chapters 25 and 26, respectively). In this sense, I have been guided by Socrates' disconcerting insistence that everyone must think through the most important problems for himself or herself in the aporetic world of political discourse. Readers will hopefully find sources of guidance in these essays, yes, but they should not be tempted to seek any kind of ultimate resolution. Our goal is to enrich our understanding of permanent questions and problems without misleadingly suggesting that we offer unassailable or definitive answers.

As readers will have gathered, we understand “ancient political thought” to include political ideas and ideologies of all stripes, as they emerge from diverse genres of evidence, including drama, material culture, historiography, and oratory, as well as the works of the canonical philosophers. Greek and Roman political thought began with the earliest Greek poets (on which see Raaflaub, chapter 3, and Forsdyke, chapter 15), whose political interventions consisted in developing models...
of political virtue and critiques of civic vice. Questions of periodization will always be controversial with respect to end-points. I have focused attention on the most important early Christian writers (see Brown, chapter 31, and Breyfogle, chapter 32), in order to illustrate both their continuities with and departures from the earlier traditions of classical political thought. Augustine, in particular, should be understood as intervening in his own right, and all anew, in the central philosophical and political controversies of his day.

Yet, despite the volume’s wide range, our center of gravity is still the canonical philosophers, in particular Plato and Aristotle. These two figures are unique in receiving their own dedicated section (part V, “The Athens of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle”), and their influence is felt widely in other chapters (see, e.g., Hahm, chapter 12; Hedrick, chapter 27; and Nadon, chapter 33). Naturally, these figures, among others, deserve more scrutiny than is possible in any such collection. But our goal of addressing the central topics and questions of political life, and thus our adoption of a topical approach, is most appropriate for explaining why the thought of these and other figures should be important to our contemporary thinking about political life. The ancients’ truly “untimely” qualities emerge most forcefully from asking real questions about politics and political theory, rather than from simply assuming that “we” should continue to study the “classics” because they are the (ancient) “greats” or because they are “ours.”

The Provocation to Self-Criticism

As readers of this volume will soon discover, the ancient Greeks and Romans themselves should inspire us to recognize the very challenges that they themselves present. Classical political thought inaugurated an extraordinary tradition of self-criticism which it practiced ruthlessly and well (see, e.g., Ober 1998). The Greek and Roman tradition of self-criticism, exemplified by figures as diverse as Homer, Sophocles, Socrates, Cicero, and Seneca, is particularly useful, because it renders self-destructive, even self-refuting, any traditional claims to authority based on the “Classics.” Those who seek to understand classical political thought should be inspired by the ancients’ spirit of ceaseless inquiry and self-interrogation. They should be inspired, in particular, to interrogate their own conventions without envisioning classical political thought as a straightforward substitute. The greatness of the classical tradition lies, in fact, in provoking us to face our own problems resolutely in the recognition that the problems faced by modernity, and thus the solutions to those problems, can only ever be our own.

Even though the ancients tended, as a whole, to view the political world as an outgrowth of human nature – rather than as an artificial construct such as a social contract – they were also convinced, and distinctively so (cf. Raaflaub, chapter 3), that the political world could be improved, and even transformed, through human efforts. This is self-evidently the premise of Aristotle’s Politics (on which see the
chapters by Depew and Chappell); this premise lies behind Plato’s most provocative and ambitious political texts, the *Republic* and *Laws* (on which see the chapters by Saxonhouse and Hitz); and this premise, finally, guided all of Greek thinking about politics as a means of decision-making, of educating citizens to virtue, and of providing security, prosperity, and happiness for all inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world.

Greco-Roman self-interrogation comes to sight most deeply in the question of whether politics itself was necessary, useful, or good. If the ancients tended to view political life as “natural,” then particular individuals and movements were forced to contest the ancient “primacy of politics” (Rahe 1984) on the equally fundamental plane of naturalism. As David Konstan, Eric Brown, and Todd Breyfogle demonstrate, withdrawal from and even hostility toward conventional political life took on a variety of forms under the naturalistic banner. Taking inspiration from the critique of conventional political forms, ancient cosmopolitans oriented themselves toward a world-community of the virtuous and rational and toward proper understandings of “living according to nature” (Konstan, chapter 30). Even if unrealizable in practice, anyway, the ancient cosmopolitan utopias provoked contemporaries – and still provoke us – to ask what precisely is wrong with politics-as-usual. Can political life be significantly improved, given the limits of human nature? What might the possibilities for human fulfillment within political life amount to? Yet another type of parallel politics, originating in the Athenian democratic experience, is the Socratic political art, which most fully, perhaps, expresses the turn from actual political realities to a fully ethical understanding of “the political” (compare Brown, chapter 31, with Kamtekar, chapter 22). Given the Platonic interpretation of Socrates’ life and death within Athens (Nails, chapter 21), it is understandable why Plato would have presented his distinctive and compelling portrait of the apolitical Socrates as he did (cf. Balot 2006, 2008).

**Conclusion**

It is fitting to point forward to the essays in this collection by invoking Socrates and his various mysteries, aporias (*aporiai*), and masks (cf. Nehamas 1998). For Socrates, above all, symbolizes not only the spirit of relentless self-interrogation promoted by this volume, but also the belief that speculative inquiry into ethical and political life is intrinsically worthwhile. Whether or not the historical Socrates was a model of good democratic citizenship, certainly Socrates’ boldly interrogative and critical outlook, suitably adapted, can provide appropriate models for us (cf. Villa 2001). If Socrates’ model proves at all attractive to readers, then they will find that classical political thought provides an unparalleled opportunity to unsettle, provoke, and educate the “moderns” in the spirit of profound Socratic self-examination.
NOTES

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1 Before we congratulate ourselves too quickly, however, it is worth asking whether the “master/slave dialectic” is truly a product of bygone ages, considering that the North American and European labor forces are increasingly composed of nonunionized and stateless workers. How much of a difference is there between the terrible conditions of most ancient slaves (who, barring mining slaves, had legal protections against abuse) and the terrible conditions of modern “wage-slaves”? Classical political thought should not be dismissed out of hand because of the self-congratulatory thought that we have made outstanding moral progress since ancient times.

2 I have added the qualifier to Roman religion because of the common tendency of the Roman elite to manipulate religion for political purposes. Although Greek religion (e.g. the Delphic oracle) also admitted of such manipulation by members of the elite, the Greeks tended rather to subject religious interpretation to communal debate, as in the Athenians’ famous public discussion of “wooden walls” by which, as Delphi predicted, they would be saved during the Persian assault (Hdt. 7.140–4).

3 The same ethical sensibility held fast even when larger political organizations, such as the Hellenistic kingdoms, or the Roman Empire, assumed primacy of place in the eastern Mediterranean. In those cases, as Arthur Eckstein (chapter 16) and Carlos Noreña (chapter 17) show, the language of virtue and vice was specially adapted to the rulers and other powerful figures on the increasingly unified Greco-Roman political stage.