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Q1(a)

Explain the Philosophical approach to the study of Political theory

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2025 · PSIR GS 1 · 10 marks · Political Theory

Political Theory: meaning and approaches.

Core demand of the question

- Define the philosophical approach to political theory
- **Show its method:** concepts, norms, and reasoned argument rather than only data
- Name classical and modern practitioners
- State its limits beside behavioural and historical work

Revision summary

The philosophical approach treats political theory as reasoned inquiry into meaning, right, and the good regime.

It defines concepts such as the state, obligation, and justice, and tests them against rival claims.

Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Rawls are central practitioners of this method.

Strauss, Oakeshott, Berlin, and Arendt show that texts and categories still organise modern debate.

The approach is not a substitute for behavioural data or institutional history, but it supplies questions that measurement cannot invent.

Introduction

The philosophical approach treats political theory as a search for meaning, right, and the good political life, not only as a catalogue of votes or offices. It asks what justice, authority, and freedom are, and why they ought to bind. From Plato's Academy to contemporary analytic work, the method is argument.

Body

What the approach does

A philosophical student of politics begins with concepts. What is the state? What is obligation? What distinguishes power from legitimate authority? Plato in the Republic and Aristotle in the Politics and Nicomachean Ethics set this pattern: they define, distinguish, and test a claim against a rival claim. The aim is not a survey of opinions but a reasoned account that can survive objection.

Normative work is central. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau did not only describe seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. They asked when coercion is justified. Kant asked whether a

maxim of political action could be willed as universal law. **Hegel** asked how freedom is realised in ethical life and the modern state. **John Rawls** later rebuilt the social-contract tradition as a theory of justice as fairness. **Leo Strauss** insisted that classical texts still speak about the best regime, against a historicism that reduces every idea to its date.

Michael Oakeshott, **Isaiah Berlin**, and **Hannah Arendt** kept the method alive: tradition, value-pluralism, and recovered categories such as action, against a thin empirical science.

What it is not, and why it still matters

The approach is not a substitute for **David Easton's** systems analysis or for archival history. It can become detached from institutions. Behavioural critics charged it with untestable metaphysics. The charge is only half fair. Philosophy still supplies questions that data cannot invent: why majority rule is not justice, and why the state is not only the strongest gang.

Flow diagram

Philosophical approach -> Concepts
Philosophical approach -> Norms and justification
Philosophical approach -> Argument with texts
Concepts -> Justice authority freedom
Norms and justification -> Plato to Rawls

Conclusion

The philosophical approach studies politics through concepts, norms, and argument. **Plato**, **Aristotle**, the contract theorists, **Hegel**, **Rawls**, Strauss, Berlin, and Arendt show the method. It must sit beside institutions and evidence, but it cannot be replaced by them if political theory is to remain a theory of the right and the good.

Facts & figures

Classical core

Plato's Republic and **Aristotle's** Politics set definition, distinction, and the search for the best political life as the method of political philosophy.

Modern contract

Hobbes, **Locke**, and **Rousseau** used hypothetical agreement to justify or limit political authority rather than only to describe existing kings.

Twentieth century

Rawls rebuilt justice as fairness; Strauss, Berlin, and Arendt kept philosophical categories alive against a purely behavioural science of politics.