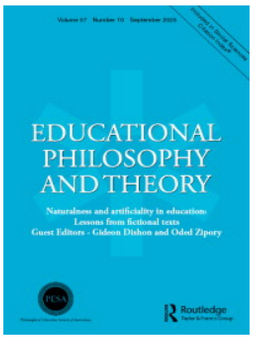

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Addressing controversial ideas in philosophy class: A critical-hermeneutical lens

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ABSTRACT

The history of political philosophy is certainly not without its share of morally objectionable ideas. Aristotle's notion of natural slavery, the subordination of women in Rousseau, and Kant's hierarchy of the races are just a few examples from a long list of morally problematic concepts encountered in the study of political thought. In this article, I argue that our moral discomfort is a pedagogically valuable starting point for critically engaging with political theories that contain controversial ideas. By developing a 'critical-hermeneutical' framework that fosters a nuanced understanding of theories as both enablers of emancipation and solidifiers of domination, I aim to demonstrate how philosophy educators can design their courses in a socially responsible manner by transforming adverse or affirmative reactions to morally objectionable ideas into opportunities for engaging critically with a text.

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1. Introduction

The history of political philosophy is certainly not without its share of morally objectionable ideas. Aristotle's notion of natural slavery, the subordination of women in Rousseau, and Kant's hierarchy of the races are just a few examples from a long list of morally problematic concepts encountered in the study of political thought. Thus far, the question of how to deal with objectionable ideas has primarily been approached from the viewpoint of educational policymaking. Theorists have advocated for the introduction of 'trigger warnings' to create a safe learning environment by helping students make informed decisions about whether to choose a course (Baer, 2019, Carter, 2015, Lockhart, 2016, Wyatt, 2016). While these approaches have fostered important debates on how educational settings can be designed in a socially responsible manner, discussion of frameworks that philosophy educators can adopt for a more inclusive approach are still lacking.

This lacuna is not surprising. Although we are currently at a critical juncture, with many revelations about contested topics and painful truths regarding the legacies of the past coming to light, adopting a value-laden perspective remains particularly difficult in the context of teaching. If, for instance, Kant's notion of moral personhood

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is taught as being consistent with his racial ideology, his moral universalism is introduced as a questionable philosophical attempt (see, e.g. Lu-Adler, 2023).[1] While such interpretations are valuable, approaching philosophers from the past against the backdrop of their worst ideas seems not only setting aside the fact that they 'also had an impact on struggles *against* racism' (Kleingeld, 2025, 5, emphasis added). As teachers, we might also fear prematurely criticizing the Kantian project based on empirically false beliefs before students have understood why Kant is considered part of the philosophical canon in the first place. Whereas academics have the time and capacity to examine Kant from multiple angles, we often face significant time constraints—especially at the undergraduate level. This can make more conservative approaches to teaching more appealing, as they focus on ideas deemed worth preserving. Conservative approaches do not preclude acknowledging morally objectionable ideas. However, such ideas—and the underlying values by which we reject them—do not take center stage in their interpretive approach.

With the aim of developing an interpretative framework that includes two perspectives—one that views philosophers in their strongest form while also engaging thoroughly with the problematic ideas they deployed in a methodological manner—my proposed teaching framework seeks more than simply flagging morally objectionable ideas *en passant*. By providing a value-laden framework, the 'critical-hermeneutical' lens,[2] as I shall call it, seeks to reach a nuanced understanding of political theories as both enablers of emancipation and solidifiers of domination. I will argue that, unlike conservative teaching methods, the critical-hermeneutical lens avoids the problematic presentation of these theories as allegedly neutral when, in fact, they helped legitimize forms of domination. I will show that the critical-hermeneutical lens fosters a critical engagement with texts without losing sight of the valuable aspects of these theories or engaging in anachronistic reasoning—two objections that conservative historiographical approaches might raise against a value-laden reading of the history of political ideas.

The article unfolds as follows. In §2, I motivate why educators of the history of political thought ought to reflect on the hermeneutical framework. I will argue that this is to avoid 'historical amnesia.' I will also introduce the problem of 'wrong focus' and the problem of 'distorted meaning.' In §3, I set out the background and main contours of the Critical Hermeneutics approach. In §3.1, I build on Miranda Fricker's account of epistemic injustice and Rainer Forst's account of the logic of justificatory reasons to delineate three key concepts constituting the formal account of Critical Hermeneutics: domination, non-domination, and progress. In §3.2, some substance is added to this lens as I present a preliminary outline of what the critical-hermeneutical lens could look like. I will argue that Critical Hermeneutics is not susceptible to 'historical amnesia.' In §3.3, I demonstrate that Critical Hermeneutics can also answer to the problem of 'wrong focus' and the problem of 'distorted meaning.' In §4, I discuss in more detail the advantages of this approach, reflecting on how this approach may be implemented. In §5, I briefly summarize the main argument.

2. Staging the problem

Before presenting the central features of Critical Hermeneutics, I want to first address why we should consider a hermeneutical framework at all. Simply put, hermeneutics

responds to a tension inherent in the nature of understanding: on the one hand, we can never fully access an author's intention; on the other hand, we are nonetheless capable of understanding a text. Hermeneutics aims to provide theoretical frameworks that explain the process of understanding. It also seeks to offer methods for a structured engagement with texts. Teaching philosophy means providing methodological guidance for engaging with philosophical texts. In what follows, I will largely align with a hermeneutic tradition that views 'understanding' not as a passive acquisition of knowledge, but as an *interpersonal* and *contextual* process of learning.[3]

'Enactment' theory is a hermeneutical approach that conceives of 'understanding' as inherently interpersonal and contextual. Shaun Gallagher has influentially shaped this position. Drawing on empirical studies, he argues that even eighteen-month-old children have the ability to 're-enact' to completion the intended act that an observed subject fails to complete (2004, 172). This shows, he contends, that meaning-making is not a passive epistemic process of gathering information but a *dialogical* process. 'Understanding' is thus conceived as picking up on the significance of 'the other's intent' (Gallagher, 2016, 187). On this basis, theorists have argued that history and philosophy are best seen as a 're-enactment of the thoughts of other people' (Retz, 2015, 216, following Collingwood (1994), 301). By entering into a dialogical exchange with the author, we critically engage with our own views—or, as Tyson Retz aptly puts it, we create the 'possibility of arriving at new forms of understanding of the text and of ourselves' (Retz, 2015, 224; see also Retz, 2018).[4]

As philosophy educators, we are meant to provide methodological guidance on how best to begin this dialogue with an author from the past. We do so by raising expectations for students about how to read and understand a text correctly. 'Hermeneutical expectations'—as I shall call them—are not only established through our explicit instructions; they are also conveyed implicitly by aspects such as the chosen course title, the stated aims at the beginning of the course, or the selected passages. When encountering morally objectionable ideas, we might express outrage, ignore them, or jokingly belittle them; we might treat them as exegetical problems or discuss them as reflections of the author's historical context. Regardless of whether we are aware of it, the way we, as teachers, encounter a text in philosophy class inevitably shapes hermeneutical expectations.

A coherent framework that intentionally raises certain expectations to understand a text in a particular manner is what I call a 'hermeneutical lens.' As I see it, the decision of what lens to deploy is dependent on the context. For instance, as scholars, we typically aim to arrive at the correct interpretation of a text, thereby claiming one lens to be superior to others. However, in the context of teaching, we often find it more appropriate to approach a text through multiple hermeneutical lenses, representing the variety of scholarly engagement with the text. The sum of lenses we choose to adopt in a context constitutes what I shall call a 'hermeneutical practice.'

The teacher's hermeneutical choices are constitutive of the hermeneutical practice, whereas a student's suggestions are not. At first glance, this might seem as if I have in mind a particularly hierarchical teaching style. However, the asymmetry I seek to highlight is not indicative of any specific instructional approach. Rather, it highlights the distinction between 'hermeneutical expert power' and 'constitutive hermeneutical power.' For instance, if a student has gathered more expertise about a topic than the

teacher, the student might hold a hermeneutically superior expert position. This, however, does not alter the teacher's constitutive power in determining the hermeneutical practice. The teacher might encourage the student to share their expertise, signaling that the hermeneutical lens they offer is appropriate for understanding the text, or the teacher might feel threatened by the student and attempt to dispute, belittle, or dismiss the student's suggestions. Regardless of how the teacher reacts, it is the teacher's choice that is constitutive of the hermeneutical practice. Even when someone adopts an extremely egalitarian teaching style, where all suggested hermeneutical lenses are considered of equal value, it is the teacher's choices that legitimize an egalitarian hermeneutical practice. The asymmetry of constitutive power is rooted in the respective roles of the participants: while the teacher's choices are immediately constitutive of the hermeneutical practice deployed in the teaching context, the students' suggestions require further legitimization to become constitutive.

There is also a political dimension to these choices. 'Understanding' is not a passive process; it is an active endeavor that involves adhering to certain value and truth standards that constitute meaning.[5] The expectation to 'read over' passages that include racist, misogynist, classist, or Eurocentric contents can never be a morally innocent choice; it teaches that morally objectionable ideas can be disconnected from what 'actually' counts, signaling that these ideas do not carry the same interpretative weight as other, allegedly more interesting ideas. Educational theorists have called this phenomenon 'historical amnesia' (see, e.g.,Nelson 2009; Goodson 1989; Polakow-Suransky 2004). Historical amnesia refers to the erasure of significant historical events of injustice, oppression, or exploitation. In this context, it specifically relates to the erasure of the legitimizing function that certain theories played in justifying misogynist, racist, classist, or Eurocentric ideas by misleadingly presenting these theories as neutral.

To avoid complicity in contributing to historical amnesia, teachers need to reflect on the lenses they deploy in the teaching context and be aware of the hermeneutical expectations they raise and the corresponding values those expectations convey. While I believe that the best teaching practice is achieved by deploying a variety of lenses, I shall argue that the critical-hermeneutical lens is particularly fruitful if we are seeking to foster a socially responsible engagement with the history of political thought.

Critical Hermeneutics raises the expectation to approach political theories from a value-laden viewpoint. Moral evaluations differ from factual and analytic evaluations of propositions. A proposition is factually true when the predicate or relation expresses an empirically true statement. For instance, 'The headquarters of the WHO is in Switzerland' is true if it actually is the case that the WHO is located in Switzerland. A proposition is analytically true if the predicate is contained within the subject of the concept. For example, the statement, 'Freedom in Locke is the power to issue commands to one's body or mind,' is analytically true if the assertion matches Locke's definition. To deliberate morally about a concept means to consider what would be the case if a philosophical concept shaped the political realm: Do we want to live in a Kantian republican state that grants the franchise solely to male property owners? While the predicate is contained in the concept, the evaluation reaches beyond a factual or analytical analysis: it requires us to adopt a normative standpoint to evaluate whether we *should* endorse a philosophical idea or concept.

Although this might seem like an intuitive way to engage with ideas in political philosophy, the problem with moral evaluations is that they rely on normative standards that are subject to change. We see this reflected in both the 'historical reconstructive' approach and the 'rational reconstructive' approach—two commonly accepted positions in the historiography of philosophy.

When we 'rationally reconstruct' an argument from a past philosopher, we seek to translate their ideas into contemporary debates, thereby treating them 'as colleagues with whom […] we can exchange views' (Rorty, 1984, 247). To rationally reconstruct a philosophical idea means to adopt or improve concepts that can be actualized without significant objections. By raising the hermeneutical expectation to direct our focus on the 'rational' side of an argument and to evaluate ideas by abstracting them from time-sensitive content, rational reconstructivists are not interested in contingent ideas that merely prove that an author is a product of their time.[6] Approaching the history of political thought through a rational reconstructivist lens allows for flagging problematic ideas, but there is no reason to engage further with them, especially when they are merely discriminatory stereotypes that appear uninteresting from a philosophical point of view. This seems especially pertinent when dealing with philosophical theories such as Kant's, where one could argue that the legitimization of morally objectionable forms of life is not embedded in the philosophical theory itself but rather stems from empirically incorrect biases.

However, distinguishing philosophical principles from the social forms they helped legitimize is problematic. It obscures aspects that are either absent from a theory or incompatible with commonly accepted norms, making the theory appear more aligned with contemporary values than it actually is. For instance, if a political theory defines legal personhood in a way that aligns with the empirical claim that only male property owners are granted 'active citizenship' status—as is the case with Kant (Kant MM, 6:314; see Widmer, 2025)—then we are dealing with a theory that places no value on universal suffrage. Ignoring textual passages like such constitutes a form of historical amnesia. It creates the expectation that attention will be diverted from the morally objectionable ideas the theory helped to legitimize. Nevertheless, the underlying concern is not trivial: a moral approach to the history of political thought becomes problematic when it distracts from the ideas that justify a theory's place in the canon. Call this the 'problem of wrong focus.'

Historical reconstructions endeavor to establish the author's original meaning and intention.[7] This position has gained wide recognition through Quentin Skinner's 'contextualism' Skinner, (2012), which holds that our descriptions of philosophical problems differ to such a degree that we cannot properly understand philosophical ideas from the past if they are not approached from within their own context. Historical reconstructivists seek to reconstruct the meaning of a philosophical theory or argument by treating it as a proposition evaluated by the standards within the context of its time. They have no problem focusing on the 'bad' ideas of philosophers. In fact, it is imperative not to reduce a philosopher to a few ideas we deem good, but rather to perceive them more holistically as thinking beings who sometimes expressed incoherent thoughts or changed their views. Although this position does not create the expectation of forgetting the moral values a theory legitimizes, it raises the expectation of bracketing the forms of domination that have emerged as a result of those theories.

This, too, constitutes a form of historical amnesia: it erases the more recent history that has sought to address the problematic effects of such justifications. Nevertheless, this account too raises a legitimate concern about deploying a contemporary moral framework. According to this lens, the problem is that interpreting philosophers from the past through a contemporary moral viewpoint means relying on anachronistic standards that risk distorting the original meaning. Call this the 'problem of distorted meaning.'

Neither of these historiographical approaches is originally meant to operate as teaching methods. Admittedly, in practice, these methodological approaches are rarely distinguished so purely from one another. However, given that we always raise hermeneutical expectations to understand a text in a certain way when we teach, we implicitly deploy hermeneutical frameworks when approaching a text. Disentangling these two lines of thought is helpful insofar as they bring to light two common ways of reasoning that explain the level of skepticism toward a value-laden approach from a philosophical-historiographical point of view.

To teach philosophical ideas in a rationally reconstructive manner means focusing on a philosopher's strong rather than weak ideas. Just as we do not need to study the history of alchemy to understand modern-day chemistry, the rational reconstructivist sees no reason to engage with morally problematic views that are clearly wrong or outdated. The historical reconstructivist, dedicated to studying theories against the backdrop of the context in which they emerged, though seemingly more inclined to focus on outdated moral ideas, worries that approaching the history of philosophy through the lens of our current values introduces a level of anachronism that distorts the original meaning. While approaching the history of political thought through either of these lenses raises the expectation that morally objectionable ideas do not carry the main interpretative weight, in both cases, the interpretative heavy lifting is done by an interpretative lens other than the outdated values it legitimizes.

Apart from the politically charged reasons one might have for rejecting a value-laden interpretative lens,[8] there are also historiographical reasons specific to philosophy that explain why one might be skeptical of a value-laden approach to teaching philosophical texts from the past. These concerns need to be taken seriously. If the critical-hermeneutical lens is to be successful, it must not only avoid historical amnesia; it must also provide satisfactory answers to the 'problem of wrong focus' and the 'problem of distorted meaning.' I will return to this in 3.2 and 3.3.

3. Critical hermeneutics

Critical Hermeneutics starts from the premise that ideas from past philosophers cannot be fully understood from either our present context or that of the original author. Rather, this lens suggests that we understand political theories through the political struggles for non-domination, which manifest as fundamental values in political theories and beliefs we commonly share. Despite what the name might suggest, my account shows more similarities with 'moderate' hermeneutical approaches than with Habermas's 'critical hermeneutical' account.

Shaun Gallagher distinguishes between 'conservative hermeneutics,' 'critical hermeneutics,' and 'moderate hermeneutics.' Conservative hermeneutics traces back to the

tradition of Schleiermacher and is based on the idea that 'understanding' means (i) 'reproducing' the author's intention, (ii) aiming for objectivity by adopting a 'value-neutral' standpoint, and (iii) prioritizing 'significance' over meaning (Gallagher 1992), 220). In the tradition of critical hermeneutics, shaped by Habermas, 'understanding' takes the form of a 'critique of ideology' (240). This position (i) regards language as entrenched in ideological structures, (ii) defines the task of the interpreter as uncovering hegemonic structures, and (iii) thereby sets in motion a process of emancipation (240–260). Moderate hermeneutics also begins with the assumption that our ideas are always linguistically and thus culturally shaped, and therefore contain ideological biases. However, it rejects the notion that full emancipation can ever be achieved through critique alone. By gaining a better understanding of our biases, we can engage in localized forms of critique to overcome specific forms of domination (257–273).

The notion of 'non-domination,' which I develop in this section, provides the evaluative foundation of this critical approach. It neither assumes that every thought is ideologically compromised, nor does it begin with the premise that critical reasoning will lead to full emancipation. Instead, the critical-hermeneutical lens adopted here starts from the presupposition that theorizing is an emancipatory practice—one that allows us to reflectively address and overcome specific forms of domination we find problematic—and that this reflective engagement finds expression in the political theories we develop.

While our first engagement with a text from the past may start out with a feeling of irritation when we encounter morally objectionable ideas, Critical Hermeneutics is meant to place them within the evolution of our values that highlight both the achievements of their own time and the shortcomings when judging them from our own situated perspective. Doing so means understanding political theories with regard to their capacity for providing concepts that enable us to reflectively conceptualize different types of domination. The aim of this section is to define the notion of 'non-domination'—along with the corresponding notions of 'domination' and 'progress'—that characterizes the form of the critical-hermeneutical lens.

But before setting out the above definitions, I would like to preempt a possible worry. One might object that approaching the history of political thought through the concept of 'non-domination'—a concept that finds its origins in the republican tradition—means interpreting political theories through a value-laden framework that carries its own political and philosophical commitments. *Prima facie*, this seems problematic. Consider, for instance, Marx's *Capital*. Marx's theory introduces a new way of conceptualizing a specific form of capitalist domination. However, he deliberately refrains from framing it in normative terms, instead using the notion of 'exploitation' that reflects his historical materialist commitments. The worry is that interpreting theories through the concept of 'non-domination' comes with the risk of squeezing theories into a dress that distorts their meaning.

However, in what follows, I shall present an approach that highlights general features of emancipatory political theories in a manner that does not interfere with the philosophical commitments of the theories in question. The critical-hermeneutical lens provides a framework for deciding which texts to choose and which aspects of a theory to discuss. Critical Hermeneutics does not engage with theories from a

specific philosophical position, such as how a republican philosopher would argue with a Marxist philosopher. Instead, it is meant to provide a hermeneutical guideline for teachers on how to structure and design a course that will allow them to discuss theories in different contexts of (non-)domination. The notion of non-domination is deployed at a different level of abstraction, which does not interfere with the philosophical commitments of the theories themselves.

3.1. non-domination, domination, and progress

Forst (2021) provides a valuable starting point to think about the notion of non-domination I envision. According to Forst, 'domination exists where asymmetrical social and political relationships prevail, sustained by hegemonic justifications that narrow the space of justifications through ideological power or threats (or both)' (2021, 158). Non-domination is defined as the 'status of free and equal persons who are both addressees and authors of the norms that determine the basic structure of their society' (2021, 196—70). Forst's account of non-domination echoes the Kantian republican tradition as he takes the security of political liberty as non-domination, equality as equal opportunities, and independence of arbitrary power through self-legislation as its fundamental starting point. However, the reason I view his account as particularly fruitful is his unique focus on the 'justificatory' structure of 'normative orders,' which acknowledges that both forms of domination and non-domination have a 'reflective' and 'narrative' structure manifesting in 'justificatory reasons.'

While I seek to retain such features in my own definition of non-domination, the concept I envision includes two alterations to Forst's intended use of the concept. First, I seek to bracket Forst's own normative theory, which he outlines as the normative features that justificatory reasons must have to count as rightful. Omitting his ethical theory leaves us with an account of domination where the 'grammar' of non-domination is unspecified and open to various political philosophies.

Second, while Forst's definition of non-domination provides a valuable starting point, it does not yet emphasize the epistemic changes we undergo once we gain the reflective capacity to recognize and name a form of domination. A theory that provides us with the novel concepts to recognize certain forms of non-domination means changing the intensional stance toward an extensional practice. Consider, for instance, the normative reflection on the legal prerogatives of the aristocracy before and after the French Revolution. In early modern theories, prior to the French Revolution, legal prerogatives of aristocrats were justified as a necessity grounded in a 'divine rational order' that we must uphold. By contrast, philosophers like Rousseau introduced a new form of theorizing, in which legal prerogatives of the aristocracy appeared as an oppressive form of domination. In other words, Rousseau introduced a novel conceptual apparatus to identify and recognize a form of domination, which had been previously lacking.

In order to highlight this change not only normatively but also epistemically as a reflective belief that fundamentally altered what political theorists from now on deem 'rightful,' I would like to incorporate a social-epistemological perspective as found in Miranda Fricker's account of 'hermeneutical injustice' Fricker, (2007). While Forst

considers social structures in terms of their normative aspects, Fricker approaches them with regard to their epistemic entanglements, formed by concepts that shape our collective social understanding through which we make sense of ourselves and our social interactions Fricker, (2007, 155). Fricker differentiates between 'hermeneutical lacunas,' i.e., the lack of resources to understand or make sense of one's own experience or to convey one's experience to others, and cases in which the whole body of social knowledge is *unfairly* shaped (148, 158). The latter occurs when the experiences of a dominant group are much more extensively reflected in the epistemic nexus compared to those of marginalized groups. In such cases, we encounter what Fricker calls 'hermeneutical injustice,' which is 'the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource' (155). As I see it, hermeneutical injustice is a form of domination, as it corresponds to asymmetrical social and political relationships expressed through the lack of hermeneutical resources. For the critical-hermeneutical lens I am developing here, I intend to use Fricker's account to highlight the hermeneutical resources gained when we reflectively understand a type of domination.

However, before putting forward my definition of non-domination, I wish to highlight those aspects of Fricker's account which I do not seek to take on board. First, Fricker focuses solely on injustices tied to one's identity, focusing on conceptual changes in the political realm (e.g. the introduction of the legal concept of 'marital rape'). The conceptual transformations I have in mind are broader in scope as the form of domination not only adheres to one's identity but, more generally, to any kind of political 'normative order'—to speak with Forst—where we lack the concepts needed to make sense of different types of domination on a private, interpersonal, national, or transnational level (Forst, 2018, 2021, 159). At the same time, my account is also narrower since the scope of the conceptualization of domination merely reflects the intellectual realm, where we discursively and rationally theorize about forms of domination.

Second, while Fricker adopts an epistemic-virtue ethical account for her notion of injustice, I understand—again, more in alignment with Forst (2021, 164)—dominating structures in Kantian terms as undermining the human *dignity* of agents. According to Forst, to be treated as an end in oneself means to claim one's fundamental 'right' to non-domination. Though Kantian language is used here, it does not mean that the methodology is Kantian. Finding the rational language of non-domination means reflecting on our political entanglements in a manner that was previously lacking, irrespective of the philosophical methodology and its commitments. To theoretically justify 'a right' to live a dignified life of non-domination requires 'the reflective capacity' to grasp the notion of domination against which the right provides protection.

With these considerations, we can finally define the central features that characterize the critical-hermeneutical lens. As I understand it, for a political theory to be 'non-dominating' means 'to overcome asymmetrical social and political relationships by gaining the hermeneutical resources to recognize dominating structures.' For a political theory to legitimize forms of domination means that it 'lacks the capacity of grasping asymmetrical social and political relationships either by not providing any

or insufficient hermeneutical resources to recognize or reflectively combat a type of domination.' If a political theory succeeds in bringing forward concepts of non-domination, it initiates 'progress,' understood as a 'theoretical reflection that depletes the justification of dominating orders in such a way that those affected have better hermeneutical resources to determine for themselves the normative orders to which they are subjected.'

3.2. a substantial account of a critical-hermeneutical lens

In section 2, I claimed that, in order to avoid historical amnesia, we need to approach morally problematic ideas not just as a side note or afterthought. Rather, the moral values on which we base our refutation of injustice, oppression, and exploitation are constitutive of the interpretative frame. This idea has been captured by Reinhart Koselleck who argues that certain events in history shape our experience in such a way that they preshape how we make sense of the political realm. According to him, some political events influence our perception of political reality so profoundly that they become metahistorical concepts—historical categories that structure our present-day understanding of political events (Koselleck 1969/2004, 50). While Koselleck is primarily concerned with the constitutive categories of experience, these events also shape the normative framework through which we critically evaluate political events (see also Bouton, 2016, 182).

To illustrate how historically shaped evaluative categories provide the foundation for Critical Hermeneutics, I will now develop one example. I will do so by reflecting on different types of domination, the corresponding forms of non-domination, and, finally, by offering some thematic examples. While this is open to any historical period, the following scheme is a first (and most likely incomplete) attempt to categorize different types of domination that predominantly characterize the struggles of the modern age up to the present.

Types of domination	Individual hegemony (e.g. oppression of freedom of speech)	Social hegemonial powers (e.g. sexism, racism, classism)	Despotism (e.g. totalitarianism)	Legal prerogatives (e.g. federalism, capitalism)
Types of non-domination	Individual liberty (e.g. constitutional & human rights)	Equality (e.g. gender, race & class equality)	Democracy (e.g. republican, liberal, social)	Rule of law, distributive justice
Topical Examples	Freedom of speech, bodily integrity, religion, assembly	Equal opportunities (race, gender, class)	Universal franchise, separation of state powers	Accountability, distribution of resources

In the first row, I have specified different types of domination. In the second row, I have defined the values that emerged in response to overcome these types of domination. In the third row, we find examples of how these topics are typically discussed in political theory. The suggested table is only one way of approaching this categorization. Some may prefer to give certain topics their own category (e.g. human rights or capitalism as a category on its own) or subsume one category within another. However, for current purposes, this scheme is meant to illustrate how a substantial account of domination could serve as the critical-hermeneutical lens of non-domination through which we approach historical texts in political theory. By placing them in relation to substantive values that have formed as a result of

struggles for domination over time, the critical-hermeneutical lens does not create the expectation to bracket morally problematic ideas. It avoids historical amnesia by using the values on which we base our refutation of problematic content as an interpretative frame to critically approach the text in question.

3.3. countering the 'problem of wrong focus' and the 'problem of distorted meaning'

The critical-hermeneutical lens not only avoids historical amnesia. It is also capable of addressing the 'problem of wrong focus' and the 'problem of distorted meaning.' The problem of wrong focus ties back to the rational reconstructivist's concern: Why should we adopt a moral framework to engage with outdated beliefs of a past philosopher, given that these authors deploy other, much more valuable concepts? The problem of distorted meaning goes back to the historical reconstructivist's worry: What do we gain from calling out canonical authors for holding outdated views at a time when it was not only commonly believed that, for instance, males are the superior sex, but when 'sex' also meant something fundamentally different? While I take both concerns to be valid, the critical-hermeneutical lens can address them both.

Against the worry of 'wrong focus,' it is important to note that the critical-hermeneutical lens does not promote the study of outdated stereotypes; rather, it seeks to situate a theory in relation to various types of (non-)domination. By starting from the premise that we inevitably hold certain values to be true because we are part of a specific tradition, the critical-hermeneutical framework teaches us to cherish the achievements of political philosophies in conceptualizing forms of domination in one realm while not ignoring the role they played in stabilizing and perpetuating other forms of domination in another realm. Rendered in this way, it is not the critical-hermeneutical lens that is at risk of adopting a misleading focus. If we take seriously the task of actualizing and testing a philosopher's theory by treating them 'as conversation partners,' as rational reconstructivists seek to do, we need to focus not only on their intellectual achievements of reflectively overcoming forms of domination. We also need to hold them responsible for legitimizing dominating structures—as we would with an actual conversation partner. The critical-hermeneutical approach treats the philosopher more holistically, engaging them in various debates and considering their legitimization of narratives that support structures of domination, rather than reducing them to a selective set of ideas.

Addressing the problem of distorted meaning is a more complex issue, especially because Critical Hermeneutics agrees with historical contextualism on various points. Historical contextualism is more than simply a method. It is based on the 'epistemological and normative premise that ideas are properly understood only when studied within the context of their initial articulation' (Gordon, 2014, 26). By contextualizing an idea, a historical reconstructivist does not seek to excuse a philosopher for their problematic views. Their concern is exegetical in nature, as our value-laden concepts are inapplicable to other contexts. The value of 'gender equality' serves as a good example: Our conceptualization of 'gender' differs so fundamentally from the eighteenth-century conceptualization of 'sex'—as we find it in Rousseau—that approaching Rousseau's view on women with our sophisticated understanding of the

matter becomes a futile endeavor. In this vein, Skinner argues that if we use our standards to engage with the history of thought, we are at risk of evaluating a theory based on whether or not the author 'anticipated' certain ideas that evolved much later (Skinner, 2012, 68). Rather than understanding a philosopher's theory in its original meaning, so the concern goes, we problematically end up searching for a 'hidden' message that is meant to prove that a philosopher was actually ahead of their time (and thus deserves to be read). How can we ensure that we do not distort the original meaning of a historical author when we approach their work through values that only solidified later?

Here, the two-fold perspective incorporated in the critical-hermeneutical lens becomes pertinent. While the perspective on a theory as an *enabler* of domination focuses on the situatedness of the author and the hermeneutical changes they evoked with their specific theory, the latter perspective on a theory as a *solidifier* of domination focuses on the limits of the text and its aftermath known to the reader. The difference between these two perspectives is best understood in terms of their respective tasks. The latter judgment aims to render the past as fully and accurately as possible based on the available evidence, so that it may be properly appreciated. The task of the former judgment is to use a rendition of the past for present purposes, involving a selective interpretation of current accounts. Conceptualized in this way, we do not hold Rousseau responsible for not deploying our contemporary concept of gender. Rather, critical hermeneutics fosters the expectation of a nuanced reading, which views theories in their capacity to discursively overcome certain forms of domination while also being capable of solidifying others. Learning about the origins of egalitarianism in Rousseau in light of the French Revolution helps us understand the value of democracy and the struggles attached to it as it originally occurred in the Modern period. Learning about Rousseau's sexism helps us understand why the discussion of female suffrage took another century to really take off.

The critical-hermeneutical lens shares with Skinner's contextualism the notion that the intentional aim of philosophers can only be understood within the context in which their theories occur. However, this does not prevent us from acknowledging parts of a theory that remain ignorant of other forms of domination. While it would be futile to judge Rousseau's theory solely by our current understanding of gender equality, Critical Hermeneutics seeks a multifaceted perspective that places his theory not only in the context of monarchical domination but also in the realm of patriarchal domination, showing that while his theory enables an egalitarian rule of law, it also reinforces a type of social hegemony. Moreover, reading philosophers through this lens makes us realize that we are also limited in grasping the full scope of forms of domination, recognizing that future readers of the history of political thought will criticize certain forms of domination that we have not yet conceptualized.

Though Critical Hermeneutics agrees with Skinner's contextualism on many points, there is a crucial difference that I see as an advantage. One of the main weaknesses in Skinner's contextualism—as Peter Gordon has phrased it—is the unreflective stance on the 'quasi-transcendental assumption that a context is a unique and narrowly bounded condition for meaning' (Gordon, 2014, 44). While Skinner operates on the assumption that 'a context' is an isolated nexus of meaning that we need to decode

in order to understand a philosopher, the critical-hermeneutical lens acknowledges the *dynamic* character that lies in the value-based situatedness of the reader who co-forms the context.[9] This is particularly valuable in the context of teaching, where students easily feel alienated by texts that, at first, may appear as if they bear little or no relation to their present-day reality. Rather than raising the hermeneutical expectation for students to let go of their moral irritation and to understand a text that promotes foreign values in its original context, the critical-hermeneutical lens facilitates a view that builds upon a contemporary set of values and uses it productively to engage critically with a text.

4. Implementing the critical-hermeneutical lens

As I see it, implementing the critical-hermeneutical approach comes with at least three advantages. First, exploring political philosophy texts from the past through the lens of (non-)domination allows us to utilize the discomfort that students (and teachers!) experience when encountering deeply morally objectionable ideas. When students protest reading certain philosophers, it is typically not because they are trying to avoid intellectual challenges. Rather, it is because canonical philosophers are often read with the hermeneutical expectation of rendering problematic ideas as less important to what the course 'is actually about.' Approaching political theorists through the lens of them breaking with forms of domination creates a space to discuss a philosopher as a respondent to structures of domination in their own time and as a respondent to our time. Enriched with the knowledge we have gathered about the problems we face when certain aspects are ignored, students learn that a political theory can function as an enabler of domination in one realm while acting as a solidifier of domination in another.

This way of engaging with the history of political thought makes visible, at least to some extent, the polyvalent nature of knowledge in terms of its practical-ethical and ideological implications.[10] Human history is as complex as human nature.[11] We seldom encounter theories and thought systems that are entirely free from problematic content. Rather than ignoring this complexity, the critical-hermeneutical lens is meant to highlight it by placing them in relation to a variety of values that have emerged over time in response to social and political struggles. For instance, while Kant and Rousseau perform poorly in the field of gender equality, they excel in defending a notion of individual liberty. The hermeneutical expectations set by this lens prevent us from describing a philosopher who was against the enfranchisement of women as a 'champion of democracy'—as Rousseau is often labeled. Rather, the critical-hermeneutical approach fosters a more nuanced understanding of the conceptual achievements of philosophers within a specific nexus of domination. It raises the expectation to acknowledge that while Rousseau's theory had introduced valuable concepts capable of conceptualizing forms of monarchical domination, it had also justified patriarchal forms of domination and deployed sexist reasons to undermine women.

By examining a philosopher's theory through the complex lens of various types of domination, we raise the expectation of engaging with the political struggles and fights of times long past—struggles whose fruits are often taken for granted

nowadays. Approaching the struggle for non-domination through the lens of various types of domination raises the expectation for a nuanced understanding of the social reality of those authors, thereby fostering an appreciative attitude toward the struggles of our ancestors that are not, to the same extent, our own.

Second, contrary to the impression this paper might have given thus far, the critical-hermeneutical lens does not necessarily build on a shared feeling of alienation when we encounter morally objectionable beliefs. It is not uncommon to encounter students who are, for instance, skeptical toward democracy or hold ideological beliefs about gender, race, or class. Assume a student agrees with Kant's claim that women should be given passive citizenship status because of their dependent situation or nature, which makes them allegedly more suitable for traditional roles as housewives and mothers; or his claim that people living in poverty should be passive because of their tendency to legislate in their own interest rather than in the interest of the common good; or, even worse, follows Kant in his belief that allegedly natural racial differences are a reason to exempt non-whites from moral personhood status. A successful application of the critical-hermeneutical lens does not depend on students *agreeing* on a set of values constituting the frame. Rather, it is meant to provide a setting in which Kant and those who share his problematic views are held accountable for their beliefs by exposing them to criticism that has been brought forward in response to factually wrong and morally objectionable beliefs. Merely flagging morally objectionable ideas does not challenge them. It raises the expectation to ignore or gloss over morally objectionable beliefs in order to focus on what allegedly 'really matters.' Critical Hermeneutics, by contrast, is meant to foster a situation in which both the historical author and students who agree with them are forced to answer to the critique brought forward against these beliefs. This critical engagement fosters a teaching practice where forms of domination are actively addressed and contested—a practice that is, in itself, *non-dominating*.

Third, rather than approaching the history of philosophy with an increased focus on individual thinkers—as is often done in philosophy classes—the critical-hermeneutical lens moves away from an author-oriented approach and toward a *problem-oriented* setting. By designing courses that center on political topics rather than authors, we avoid a one-sided depiction of a philosopher's theory by understanding their texts as responses to various discourses. The main question guiding the set-up of a course is not: *How can we understand philosopher X?* or: *What is the philosophical tradition of Y?* but rather: *What has philosopher X contributed to the topic F consisting of problem of a, b, and c?* This approach comes with several advantages.

One advantage is that by discussing philosophical views through their capacity to discursively respond to various forms of domination, it asks to what extent and in what ways a philosophical view can respond to a specific problem in question. We are often tempted to take a philosopher's arguments on board by actualizing their theories and utilize them to defend *our* values. Rather than reading our values into a philosophical theory, this way of framing the issue presses us to engage more critically with their fundamental principle and its capacity to track morally objectionable values.

Moreover, while we often approach political theories through certain labels ('republicanism,' 'liberalism') that teach us to focus on the differences between these traditions

and authors, the critical-hermeneutical lens allows us to also focus on their *similarities*, thereby acknowledging the evolving nature of these categories. If, for instance, 'democracy' is the main topic we focus on in a course, we see how certain values we nowadays consider democratic were already shared by many authors for whom the governance of the people did not take center stage. Doing so sensitizes students to the contingency of the labels we use to place these thinkers on the political spectrum. By understanding authors as respondents to a specific problem, it is not seen as emerging as an entirely new idea but rather as a term signaling a new way of governance, which builds on central values that had already been shared by authors associated with other currents and traditions.

Another advantage of this problem-focused approach is that it has the potential to broaden the scope of the canon, allowing for the easier inclusion of marginalized philosophers. Recent studies on forgotten thinkers have shown that philosophers at the margins, who experienced forms of domination, were often better equipped to recognize them—at least compared to philosophers from more privileged backgrounds. Rather than solely discussing canonical authors, where the emphasis is often placed on the systematicity of their thinking, a lens that focuses on the problem of domination and the novelty of conceptualizing it in previously unavailable ways invites greater inclusion of political theorists from the margins. Consider, for instance, the case of Germaine de Staël. While her writing style did not fit the academic status quo of her time, she used other literary forms to highlight the social inequalities women faced (Gjesdal 2025). Whereas the inclusion of marginalized philosophers can sometimes feel forced when done against the backdrop of a more conservative teaching style, conceptualizing political theory courses around political and philosophical problems allows the critical-hermeneutical lens to foster a more organic engagement with positions not (yet) fully recognized within the canon.

5. Summary

In this article, I have argued that Critical Hermeneutics is a valuable lens through which we can approach political theories that contain problematic ideas in philosophy classes. The critical-hermeneutical lens is characterized by a notion of non-domination, understood as a state of overcoming asymmetrical social and political relationships by gaining the necessary hermeneutical resources to recognize dominating structures. This lens raises the expectation to evaluate philosophical theories from the past by their capacity to respond to various types of domination that had hitherto received poor, if any, theoretical representation.

In contrast to more conservative teaching styles, according to which the emphasis is often placed on the logical rigor and systematicity of philosophical arguments while outdated values and beliefs are bracketed, I have argued that the critical-hermeneutical lens places emphasis on the novelty of tracking forms of domination. While more conventional teaching methods risk to making themselves complicit in actively forgetting about the problematic values they legitimized, the critical-hermeneutical lens teaches us to take morally objectionable values seriously in our interpretation and engage with them on an argumentative basis. Despite concerns about the use of a value-laden hermeneutic theory as putting the focus on allegedly uninteresting ideas

or distorting the meaning, I have shown that the critical-hermeneutical lens offers a valuable framework for engaging with morally objectionable ideas by treating philosophical theories as potential enablers of emancipation or solidifiers of structures of domination.

On the level of implementation, I have argued that the critical-hermeneutical lens comes with three more advantages. First, the critical-hermeneutical lens highlights the polyvalent nature of knowledge. Rather than celebrating specific authors, students learn a critical engagement with texts while appreciating their achievements. Second, this approach encourages to not merely flagging morally objectionable ideas, but to use our substantive values productively as an interpretative basis, thereby holding the author and anyone who agrees with them seriously. Third, this approach teaches a problem-focused approach, which does not hide behind labels that legitimize certain views as an accepted view in political theory but presses us to test the fundamental principle against various forms of domination.

Although the critical-hermeneutical lens is value-laden, it does not encourage teachers to take on a moralizing role. Instead, it is meant to function as an implicit or explicit guideline to think about the design of a course—i.e., the title, selection of text passages, and discussion methods—which foster the discussion in which our values take center stage. Only when the study of the history of political thought prompts us to critically reflect on past moral failures can we equip students with the critical thinking skills necessary to avoid repeating those mistakes in the future.

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Notes

1. The question of whether racist ideas are consistent with a given philosophical system ultimately hinges on whether such ideas are merely empirically incorrect or whether they point to something fundamentally flawed within the system itself. This debate has gained particular traction in Kant scholarship. Some philosophers, including Charles W. Mills, argue that Kant articulates the right concept of humanity but contradicts himself—on the one hand, ascribing humanity to all human beings, while on the other, withholding moral personhood from non-whites (Mills 2017, 94). Lu-Adler, by contrast, contends that Kant's universalism remains so abstract that it problematically fails to resolve the question of who is included in the conception of moral personhood.
2. 'Critical Hermeneutics' is often associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas and Paul Ricœur. While I draw on the critical theory tradition, I seek to develop an independent account specifically designed for teaching contexts, one that does not focus on speech acts and intersubjective consensus-finding as in Habermas, or phenomenology as found in Ricœur. As I discuss in a later footnote, I agree with Shean Gallagher's critique that the aim of a critical enactment with an author's intent is not aimed at overcoming ideology, but critically highlight the ideological entrenchment of specific ideas.
3. An early proponent of this idea is Wilhelm Dilthey, who claims that in order to understand the actions of others, we need both empathy—an attitude by which we put ourselves in the shoes of the author—and context, which helps us understand the intention behind someone's actions (Dilthey 1988, 153). Empathy, in this context, is not

primarily a moral feeling but an epistemic one. To feel empathy for a historical author does not mean agreeing with their ideas or views; rather, it means that, in order to gain access to their thinking, we must understand their world from their standpoint. While enactment theorists have often been critically discussed in terms of empathy (see < xref > Skinner </xref > 2001, 185), Tyson Retz has shown that certain enactment theories do not necessarily rely on empathy (<xref > Retz </xref > 2017).

4. Gallagher (1992) and < xref > Retz (</xref > 2015) consider their approach a 'moderate' version of enactment theory.
5. This argument aligns with a tradition according to which all thought (and sciences) is inherently political, i.e. the view that knowledge is perspectival and, thus, not value neutral. This tenet has been advanced, among others, by authors such as Sylvia < xref > Wynter (</xref > 2003), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2018), Patricia Hill Collins (2010), Helen < xref > Longino (</xref > 1990), and Sandra < xref > Harding (</xref > 2015). I am grateful to a reviewer from *Educational Theory and Philosophy* for encouraging me to embed my account in the tradition of these pertinent works.
6. For a genealogy of this concept in analytic philosophy, see Michael < xref > Beaney (</xref > 2013). In a different manner, Habermas, too, makes use of 'rational reconstructions' in his theory of communicative action (Gaus, 2019).
7. Note the difference between 'reconstruction' and 'reproduction.' *Reconstruction* signifies a process of recreating meaning based on available evidence, which I take to be at play in every act of interpretation. *Reproduction* is more narrow, referring to a philosophical position that seeks to replicate the intention of a philosopher. Therefore, while one type of historical reconstruction may include a form of reproduction, the reverse is not necessarily true.
8. The reasons brought forward against 'trigger warnings' are mostly framed as concerns about the alleged loss of 'free speech' on campus. I do not delve further into this debate, as I want to focus on the reasons that might concern philosophy teachers in particular.
9. This line of reasoning ties back to a common view in the history of science and philosophy, put forward by authors such as Barthes (1987/2004), Ortega y Gasset (1973), and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2010), to name just a few.
10. The polyvalent nature of knowledge has been the target of manifold contributions that seek to study knowledge as a system. To name one example, Ash argues that 'holistic thought had more complex, both supportive and refractory relationships with Weimar, Nazi, and postwar German cultures than conventional dualisms would predict. Like organicist thinking, Gestalt discourse was ideologically multivalent, or heterogeneous' (see Ash, 1995, 3). I am grateful to a reviewer of *Educational Theory and Philosophy* for making me aware of this example.
11. For a recent exposition of manifold 'conundrums' that come along with the study of the history of knowledge, see Anna Stetsenko (2022).

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