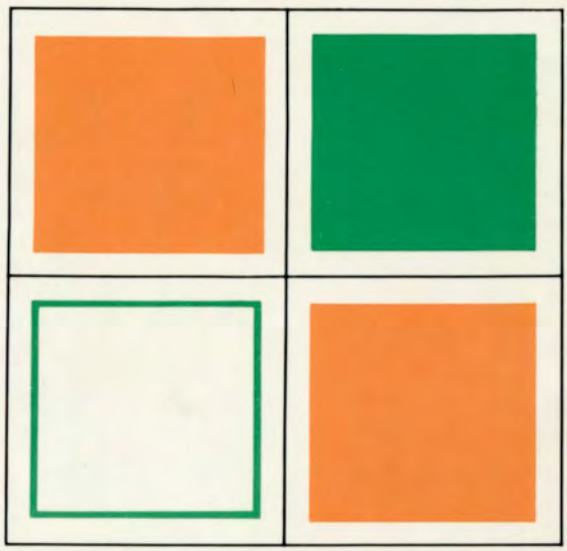
POLITICAL THEORY

ITS NATURE AND USES

George Kateb



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POLITICAL THEORY

Its Nature and Uses

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exist apart from each other: they not only need each other, but are inextricably intertwined. Political scientists studying political activity are, after all, human beings studying the activity of other human beings. The values of the observer affect his choice of what to study and what he sees when he studies, while the objects of his study are creatures possessed of values and engaged in purposive behavior which, to be understood fully, must be understood imaginatively.

The First Essential Characteristic: Moral

Nevertheless, it is still possible to separate traditional political theory from causal or scientific political theory. The distinction is based on ultimate intention. All the writers read in political theory courses are, first and last, moral in their interest in (often obsession with) politics. They seek to persuade, convince, or convert others to a political attitude or undertaking. Many aim to reform political life; a few to remake it altogether. Their intellectual and rhetorical resources are summoned and employed with the hope of changing—sometimes saving—the world, or at least part of it. The causal theorist, the political scientist, on the other hand, is primarily interested in accumulating or refining political knowledge, without any necessary or intimate moral ambition. Whatever the degree of his success at being scientific—that is, objective, impartial, free of prejudice—his aim is to be scientific. He will almost certainly have moral views, historical sympathies, policy preferences; but he will try to prevent their interfering with his observations and interpretations. He is devoted to the truth despite the pain it may sometimes cost him to tell it.

If therefore we try to characterize political theory, we must begin by saying that values sit at its center. Sometimes appearances may be to the contrary. Machiavelli's *The Prince* seems to be wholly a book promiscuously teaching the techniques of power to any interested reader—until we come to its last pages which burn with a passion for the salvation of Italy. The sincerity or congruence of these pages has been questioned many times; even without them, however, a moral sense, at the minimum, is flickeringly present throughout Machiavelli's little handbook. He hates villains, those gratuitously cruel, as much as he admires those who are manly in political affairs. And continuously present is the awareness of the unsuitability of the Christian conscience for guiding men in either the means or ends of politics. Again, Hobbes's pretense is that he is an observer helpless in the face of what he wishes to describe. He will not lament human nature or impute sin to men; he will faithfully record the necessities to which men are subject; he will simply draw the inevitable conclusions from the facts of nature. Yet everywhere in the *Leviathan*, judgments are made, practices are advocated, possibilities are canvassed; there is mockery and despair.

To make the point general: all the books, fragments, or essays included within the corpus of political theory have a moral purpose, despite the disguises and self-deceptions of a given political theorist. The question that unifies any political theory is, What ends or purposes *should* government serve?

The Second Essential Characteristic: Inclusive

Three other qualities are shared by all the writing commonly considered as political theory. There is first the quality of being inclusive. Political theorists are interested in whole systems of politics. Though they may turn their attention to specific moral dilemmas and to matters of detailed political practice, their ambition extends beyond that. They are not content with being partial, though they may be remembered chiefly for certain points, solutions, or suggestions. Their work seeks to provide the lineaments of a complete doctrine of government. Recommendations dealing with the major features of political life are composed into one large scheme for practice, one full answer to the question, Given certain ends or purposes that government should serve, what must government be if it is to serve those ends or purposes? How must it be organized, what powers should it have, what functions should it take on itself, what limits should it respect, who may qualify to rule or to judge or to bear arms or to vote? Naturally, there are differences of emphasis and selectivity from theorist to theorist.

The Third Essential Characteristic: Philosophical

There is next the quality of being philosophical. Political theory is sometimes called "political philosophy." This name points unmistakably to the fact that political theorists are engaged in an enterprise in which obvious facts are pondered and elementary questions are asked, in which many things that the world takes for granted, or takes as settled, are subjected to close scrutiny. The answers given by political theorists, the conclusions they reach, are not necessarily critical, radical, or novel. Sometimes, as in the case of conservative political theorists, the political world, as it exists, is left intact, with nothing more given to it than better reasons than it customarily uses for defending itself—although there is doubtless something disturbing in the very act of talking seriously about an established institution. To the timid, to those who want the *status quo* regarded as sacrosanct, even praise may appear as a sign of apology. And to some degree, this fear is justified: the conservative political theorist, because he is a political theorist, never stays completely within the confines of common opinion. He stirs up trouble by inviting response. In any case, the political theorist tries to go back to the sources of political life in human necessities, tries to identify or define the first principles that

ought to govern political discourse, tries to locate the political sector of life in relation to the other sectors of life. He is a theorist precisely because he believes that much has to be said, many connections have to be made, many difficulties faced, if his answer is to be convincing and make its way in competition with other answers. A writer conventionally accorded the title of political theorist does not go straight to his answers: by the time he finishes, he will have made an image of man and imparted an entire sense of politics. Whatever his final views, he begins with the assumption that politics is problematic, that its means are morally dubious and its ends morally preemptive, that the subject of politics is supremely important because politics involves men in a sizable or important portion of the totality of their moral relations. It should be made clear that when we speak of the philosophical habit of mind, we do not mean to suggest that each political theorist derives his political theory from an all-embracing metaphysical system—some do, some do not; or that each aspires to an all-embracing metaphysical system and looks upon his political theory as a necessary contribution to the completion of that system—again, some do, some do not. In this context, "philosophy" means a manner of intellectual procedure, and nothing more.

The Fourth Essential Characteristic: General

There is last the quality of being general. Some political theorists intend their work to achieve specific results in the world around them in the present or near future; some political theorists are more detached, less urgent in their wish to make things happen in the real world and make them happen immediately. Whatever the case, however, the political theorist does not let the problems facing him and his society exhaust his interest, even though those problems wear the aspect of emergency. The writers address themselves to others than their contemporaries; they are absorbed by politics in itself, not just the politics of their time and place; and the considerations they adduce, the arguments they make, the concepts they use, the learning they lean on, and the learning they wish to convey are all, if not timeless, then meant to endure. More particularly, their writings are meant to be *useful* to future generations, not merely to endure as curiosities or ingenious structures of thought.

In short, when we look over the succession of political theories—from Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* and Cicero's *Laws* to Marsilius's *The Defender of Peace* and Bodin's *Six Books of the Commonwealth* and Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Hobbes's *Leviathan* to Locke's *Two Treatises of Civil Government* and Rousseau's *The Social Contract* and Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and Mill's *On Liberty* (combined with his *Considerations on Representative Government*)—we see that what unites these books, what defines political theory is an approach to political life that is moral (or normative) in intent, inclusive in scope, philosophical in procedure, and general in relevance. It would seem impossible to find anything else of significance (except their high quality) that does unite these writings.

Other Characteristics That May Be Present

We must next point to a feature present in many works of political theory, though not in some of the greatest. That is formality, which can mean orderliness of presentation, or scrupulous attention to the construction and consistency of argument, or both. Which is to say that a political theory is frequently systematic, in the same way in which a work of metaphysics is systematic. Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* are manifestly and proudly systematic, and simply for being so can compel either profound admiration or profound distaste. At the other extreme is a book like Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which is lacking almost totally in formality or system. Yet the opposite of systematic is not slovenly. Burke shows the same capacity to think strenuously, to think philosophically, about issues of the greatest toughness and importance, while allowing his argument to unfold almost casually, in the form of a letter. He pays little attention to the clarification of concepts; he constructs no architecture of ideas. His tone is that of a man of the world confronting men of the world. For all that, the result is one of the main texts in the history of political theory, a book born from the pressure of momentous events, but rising above events, rising above Burke's panic, to formulate a moral view of politics—a conservative political theory—that no other conservative has ever bettered.

Between the extremes of Burke and Hobbes, there are, of course, numerous intermediary styles. Thus Locke's *Second Treatise* is generally thought to be less systematic, less disciplined in its composition, than Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Locke repeats himself, goes through the motions of illustrating his assertions now and then, alters his treatment of the same subject in different parts of the book, and is sometimes careless in his use of key words (like "property"). But it is clear, if only from his chapter headings, that Locke intended his treatise to develop step by step, the main divisions of his subject to be taken up one by one in a sensible order. That Locke only partly succeeded in the task he set for himself should be acknowledged; but once that is acknowledged, the comparative unimportance of being systematic is actually disclosed. The cumulative richness of Locke's text finally silences—or should silence—disparagement of his capacities to reason about politics. Difficulties of many sorts remain for those who would understand Locke's theory. These are the difficulties, however, that come from following the attempt of an extraordinary mind to impose order on, to make sense of, complex phenomena, phenomena that resist simple treatment and keep breaking out of the confines of even the most careful theory. Our conclusion must be that

the presence of system in a political theory is not, by itself, a sign of the excellence (or lack of excellence) of that theory, and that the failure of a systematic approach to be thoroughly systematic is no indication—or a minor indication, at best—of the quality of a political theory.

As political theorists vary on the matter of system, they also differ in the degree to which they are occupied by questions that are not strictly political, but rather politically pertinent—specifically, psychological and sociological questions. The distinction between psychological and sociological is largely artificial. Society is made up of the activity of human beings; the activity of human beings is mostly carried on according to the rules, forms, and patterns given by society. The social and the psychological blend into one. However, there are certain times when analysis is served by separating what in practice is not separable, by viewing the same thing from different angles. We make the distinction here in order to point to two main kinds of inquiry often found in works of political theory.

The first, the psychological, pertains to the effort made by most political theorists to come to an understanding of human nature. At first sight, there would seem to be something hopeless about such an endeavor. Who, after all, is capable of mastering the inconceivable diversity of human experience and the treacherous elusiveness of human motivation? What one mind can possibly be strong enough to assimilate and arrange all that must be known if human nature is to be known? To leave aside the question of whether it is even proper to speak of human nature in the abstract and without reference to particular cultures and historical periods, does it seem likely that human nature is a fit subject for brief and amateur discourse?

The second, the sociological, pertains to the effort made by a few political theorists to come to an understanding of social institutions in the totality of their workings. Again, such an effort must appear to be presumptuous. If the human mind is complicated beyond description, cannot the same be said of the network of "interpersonal" relationships? If abstract psychology is open to the charge of being inevitably reductive of the richness of the human mind, is not general sociology open to the charge of failing to appreciate both the vastness and the intricacy of any society?

It may be that theorizing about government is a defensible intellectual operation, but do "man" and "society" lend themselves to this treatment? The answer is that unless allowance is made, the psychological and sociological content of the various political theories will doubtless be thought inadequate, or even contemptible. No single writer has ever "explained" man or society, despite the sometimes incredible confidence displayed in the effort to do so. It may as well be admitted that modesty is not characteristic of political theorists. Hobbes disposes of Man in

sixteen chapters of *Leviathan;* in a hundred pages, Rousseau decribes the origin of human inequality. But their arrogance also has its limits. They are not literally aiming at perfect and complete knowledge, whatever that may be. Their interest is in fact quite sharply defined. When they write of man, they are primarily thinking of two things. First, they are intent on reaching some conclusion concerning human frailty. There is a very close connection between the coercive functions of government and the human disposition to vice. An estimation of the strength of that disposition will naturally affect a theorist's views on the structure and relations of government. Second, and more positively, they wish to explore the capacities for moral goodness and creative excellence inherent in human nature. Their opinions on this matter will also affect their theory of the structure and relations of government. In both cases, the great question of what ends or purposes government should serve dominates their discussion. The allowance that must be made consists in the recognition of the restricted and essentially moralistic quality of their discussions, even though the form and tone of these discussions suggest an absolute ambition to speak the whole truth about human nature in all the complexity of its manifestations.

The interest of political theorists in general sociology is also selective. Two main questions figure. The first is, What must the nonpolitical institutions of society be, if the desired political system is to exist in a healthy condition over long periods of time? It is obvious that government does not stand alone, is not self-enclosed, but rather must be sustained by the practices and attitudes and even manners of the governed population. The way or style of life of a people is never neutral in its interaction with the political system. It can either subvert or nourish that system. The second question is, What institutions cooperate best with the political system to achieve the ends at which the system aims? If up to a certain point the values inherent in and issuing from the processes of a political system—values like justice, fairness, rationality, self-determination, continuity, the release of energy—appear to be sufficient and to exhaust the moral concerns of the political theorist advocating that system, other values soon appear that require the proper workings of nongovernmental institutions and practices if they too are to be realized. If certain kinds of human relations, certain kinds of human character, are to emerge, society as a whole must provide the suitable environment. As a result, the works of political theory are full of discussion of the family, sexuality, religion, the economy, art and literature, mores, and many things besides.

Among political theorists, the names of Plato, Aristotle, Montesquieu, and Rousseau may be mentioned as those for whom sociological questions are of the highest importance. The presence of this sociological interest is a sure indication of an overriding commitment to exploring the

possibilities of human development, a refusal to remain satisfied with merely setting down the foundations for a morally acceptable political system. It would be wrong to minimize the achievement of those political theorists like Cicero, Aquinas, Locke, and Paine who seem to deal with sociological questions only incidentally, sometimes assuming that if government is healthy everything else will take care of itself, sometimes occupied so intensely with politics that all other matters fade from sight, sometimes looking upon society as fixed, and only government as capable of change. Their achievements require no apology; what they say about politics affords a basis for others who are more sociologically oriented to build upon. Nevertheless, it is obvious that political theories exhibit widely different amounts of richness: the richer ones are usually the more sociological ones.

To summarize, we can say that those works making up the body of political theory are all characterized by four traits: they are moral, inclusive, philosophical, and general. Only some are systematic. These works also vary in the range of their psychological and sociological speculation. In the species of moral writing about politics, we may distinguish between political theory and the following: ideology (which may be either simplified or debased political theory), the writings of political moralists (which, though moral, may not be inclusive, philosophical, or general, or may be one or two of those things but not all three), and the writings of moral philosophers and philosophical anthropologists (which though not directly political may be filled with import for politics and political thought of all kinds). Courses in the history of political theory are made up mostly of works in political theory, with a few ideologies (like Fascism and Stalinism), writings of political moralists (like Plutarch and Orwell), and implicitly political works of moral philosophy (like those by the late Stoics and the recent existentialists) added to the list. We now must examine the content of political theory in greater detail.

Chapter II

THE DISCUSSION OF ENDS IN POLITICAL THEORY

We have already said that the fundamental moral question of politics is, What ends or purposes should government serve? The literature of political theory is made up of the answers to that question. Down through time, numbers of men have taken upon themselves the burden of thought about first and last things in politics. But they have not spoken with one voice; indeed, political theory is famous for its contrasts. So emphatic do these contrasts seem that the study of political theory can easily become a game in which thinkers are placed in ready opposition to each other, and each body of thought reduced to a slogan or a phrase. Justice or the rule by philosophers is associated with Plato, the rule of law or the life of virtue with Aristotle, peace with St. Augustine, power or political greatness with Machiavelli, constitutionalism or the protection of property with Locke, direct democracy with Rousseau, the classless society with Marx, and so on. There can be no doubt that this simple approach to the study of political theory does reflect, though in a distorted way, the diversity of responses that have been given to the same question. Political theorists have been in conflict with each other, sometimes quite deliberately so. Even where there has been agreement on the definition of the ends of

political life, there has been disagreement on the presuppositions and consequences of that definition. Political theories do not add up to one political theory; there seems to be no cumulative progress in the work of political theorists; the job of political theory never seems to get done; no theory secures the assent of thoughtful men, generation after generation.

Five Responses to Disagreement in Political Theory

What, then, is one to make of interminable disagreement? Several approaches suggest themselves.

The first approach is primarily an *esthetic* one. Confronted by a series of divergent political theories, one could celebrate that very divergence and find in it a source of inexhaustible interest. What matters is not the validity of the conclusions that theorists offer for acceptance, but the skill with which the conclusions are arrived at, the sublety of argumentation, the internal coherence of the theoretical work, the power or beauty either of specific parts of the work or of the work as a whole. One does not search for truth or moral guidance, or for relief from confusion, but for striking intellectual performances. One may assume that there is no such thing as moral truth, and that therefore validity of conclusions cannot be an appropriate standard by which to judge any political theory. Or one may assume that if there can be truth in moral matters, it will not be found, to any important degree, in works of political theory, but rather in common sense, worldly wisdom, or political science that does not pretend to be normative. One may look upon political theory as a species of metaphysics, metaphysics understood as the effort of the solitary thinker to discipline reality by forcing it into a pattern that answers to the metaphysician's own esthetic impulse, or to his intellectual will to power.

According to this approach, political theory, like anything beautiful, is essentially on the margin of life, a luxury to be enjoyed after the practicalities have been attended to, a form of play to be accepted playfully. This approach may be carried to the point of likening political theories to literary utopias, admired for their daring, but relegated to the category of fantasy. Or political theory may be seen as comparable to works of literary art, like novels and poems, capable of giving pleasure, but ruined when pressed into utilitarian service.

The second approach could be called *relativist.* The assumption here is that there is no absolute moral truth; perhaps the entire notion of moral truth is mistaken. Political theory is the emanation of historical conditions: if social reality does not automatically produce a basic political theory in consonance with the urgent needs of the whole society, or the needs of either the dominant or the "rising" class or group, it nevertheless circumscribes the range of possible political theory. And as conditions change, so must political theory. What appears to be moral disagreement is

actually the successive discarding of obsolete moral ideas. The relevance of any political theory is confined to the time and place in which it comes to light. Its "truth" is only its adequacy in justifying the defense of, or the attack on, the established order. Consequently, the major use of studying political theory is to gain insight into the nature of a society or a historical period. The element of free creation in works of political theory is shown in minor ways, as in recommendations regarding dress or diet, as they may occur. For the rest, the political theorist, like the propagandist or the politician, but with more dignity, either consciously yields to overriding forces, or unwittingly accepts the presuppositions of political life that his contemporaries share. When there is a wide discrepancy between the theorist and his times, he is likely to be "romantic" in the bad sense—an archaist or futurist dreamer who, in his futility, is as much a prisoner of his historical situation as more realistic men—or some sort of satirist devoid of any pragmatic intention, except that of prodding his society into a heightened self-awareness.

Those who adopt the relativist approach may concede the extreme difficulty of using terms like "class" or "group" or "historical period" with precision: thinkers alive at the same time but living in different countries, or thinkers of the same nationality but separated by one generation or a few, may take part in the same discourse, may be determined in the same manner by their experience of social reality. But in any case, social reality is prior to thought; existent needs generate political theory. And we, alive in the present, better equipped than those before us to understand the decisive role of circumstance in molding consciousness, are not any the less subject to circumstance when we construct or appreciate or accept a political theory.

The third approach could be called the *plausibility* approach. According to this approach, almost all political theories can succeed, at least partially, in convincing the reader initially of their rightness, but they turn out to be unacceptable after closer investigation of the underlying moral *or* factual premises, or both. In case after case these premises are faulty. Only when these premises are granted—and they rarely can be—will these political theories stand up. Their plausibility stems from the common mastery of presentation found in the great works of political theory: an ability to carry the reader along, to hide or disguise their premises, to develop a train of thought fully and compellingly. But once a theorist has been plumbed to his depths, his work will, in all likelihood, be rejected. For example, if you grant to Plato that political rule requires metaphysical knowledge, that such knowledge is essentially incommunicable, that only a few men (those with gold in their souls) are capable of attaining it, and that they can attain it only after a rigorous training of the body, the senses, the desires, and the mind, then perhaps you would also grant him the necessity of absolute rule by philosophers. If you grant

to Aristotle that only Greeks are capable of leading the life of virtue and hence are worthy of freedom, that the life of virtue is the life of happiness, and that for virtue to be permitted its indispensable political component, citizenship must be confined to those capable of leading the life of virtue, then perhaps you would also grant him his view that the ideal state would consist of a body of free citizens of Greek ancestry, living in conditions of leisure and material sufficiency made possible by the labor of the non-Greek slave or serf population. If you grant to Hobbes that the preservation of life is the highest political end, that life is threatened by the weakening of political order, and that the fierce competitiveness of men continuously weakens political order, then perhaps you would also grant him the necessity of the absolute and authoritarian sovereign state. If you grant to Locke that the preservation of human rights is the sole purpose of government, that most men (if protected) will go about their business in tranquility, and that the only source of domestic mischief is the absolute and authoritarian sovereign state, then perhaps you would also grant him the desirability of limited, constitutional rule.

But suppose that the assertions about human nature made by these theorists, their factual claims, are untenable. What is there to do but say that the moral disagreement among these theorists, and between each of these theorists and the impartial reader, is caused (in part anyway) by error? Scientific psychology and anthropology are not far advanced, but are they not far enough advanced to enable one to discredit the conceptions of human nature found in each of these political theories? Suppose also that one disputes Aristotle's insistence on political participation as a necessary ingredient of the virtuous life, or Hobbes's elevation of life itself above all other values, or Locke's concentration on the individual as the center of the moral universe. One could say that these men hold wrong moral beliefs: in the light of one's own beliefs theirs are to be condemned. Or one could say that all beliefs are arbitrary, and that every man can believe what he wants. But he should not think he can rationally persuade someone else of the rightness of his position. Moral beliefs have no connection to rational persuasion or to proof; there is no way of judging the merits of competing beliefs; beliefs are an expression of the feelings of the person holding those beliefs, and nothing more. All statements of moral belief, at whatever length or of whatever ingenuity, remain subjective and are equally entitled to a hearing or to no hearing at all. When there is moral disagreement, no resolution is possible; there can be only silence or warfare.

Or one could say that it is in the very nature of moral matters that men disagree with each other, that these matters are "essentially contested." Life is so complex, the individual can comprehend such a small part of it, each man's experience is such a tiny fragment of all possible experience, temperaments vary so much, moral judgment is so tricky and

inconclusive, that it is no wonder the history of moral thought, and thus of political theory, is riddled with contention. The proper attitude is one of gratitude to the series of political theorists who have taken the trouble to work out their positions. They have enriched the world by showing where numerous fundamental moral beliefs can lead; they have carried moral articulateness very far. After we have chosen, inscrutably as it were, our general outlook on political life, we then can consult a political theory for the careful completion of that outlook. That is the great benefit of studying political theories. And that is the only benefit one can legitimately expect, given the unalterably problematic quality of moral judgment.

The fourth approach is *dogmatic.* Starting with a firm assurance that one's own system of moral beliefs is the only correct system, one may then brand all other systems as erroneous. It need not be thought that the whole truth is to be found in the writings of a single political theorist. Rather, one may say that a certain tradition, which has perhaps evolved through time while staying faithful to a few basic principles or a few articles of religious faith, contains the truth. Other traditions show error in its multiplicity. Moral certitude may derive from the acceptance of religious writings as genuinely divine revelation, or from certitude about "the nature of things" as disclosed by metaphysics or natural science or some combination of both. Those who take the dogmatic approach may concede that even with divine help, or the help of philosophical or scientific genius, human intelligence cannot attain perfect insight into God's will or the nature of things: the act of faith or a measure of skeptical reserve is acknowledgment of human limitation in the face of God's ultimate unknowability or the final impenetrability of nature. Furthermore, many difficulties beset the effort to translate religious or metaphysical or scientific knowledge—which is often highly abstract or general, and sometimes obscure—into moral precepts suitable to guide political life. But the effort must be made; it is really the only effort worthy of the moral man when he sets his mind to political matters. Within the confines of the same system, men will disagree on specific applications to political life—on the correct assessment of a ruler, a practice, a policy, or an act. Equally well-intentioned men, pledged to the same faith or view, may not be equally enlightened or experienced. There must be an authority whose competence to resolve disagreement is accepted by the disputants. Also, as historical conditions change, new interpretations of abstract knowledge are pressed, and may indeed be necessary. Through all changes, however, fidelity to revelation or metaphysics or science can be kept.

As for erroneous political theories, the important question is not, Can anything be learned even from those in error? but, What leads men into error? Many dogmatists claim that at least the rudiments of correct moral judgment are natural to man; but several things can blight the

original endowment, such as self-interest, intellectual pride, the misfortune of living in a society long since lapsed into, but now habituated to, its error. In any case, the dependence of political theory on some larger understanding of the world is stressed; and correct political theory can be derived only from correct assumptions about the world. The fight about political theory is part of the greater struggle about the meaning of human existence, though it may well be that part which is most interestingly symptomatic and most directly relevant to ordinary life. Some dogmatists say that erroneous political theories can be actually poisonous if they gain sufficient adherence. The study of political theory should not be seen as a polite affair: ideas have consequences.

The fifth approach is *eclectic,* and turns on the notion that every tradition of political theory—probably every political theorist—is partly right and partly wrong. Political wisdom consists in acquainting oneself with the whole range of political thought, dismissing none of it. If, on the other hand, one at last consents to a particular political theory, the consent must be given in a spirit of humility. One must say that *on balance* the approved political theory is stronger than its competitors. All political theories are to be judged by one standard, by their closeness to the goal of formulating the principles and envisaging the practices needed to realize a way of life, or nurture a kind of human character, to which one is committed. Political theories characteristically emphasize some things while slighting or ignoring others. It may be that no political theory can ever avoid these disproportions: no theorist, no matter how great, can be free of bias or misplaced enthusiasms or blindness to some aspects of life. When one chooses a theory, or a tradition of theory, one must therefore be aware of its shortcomings. Furthermore, a price must be paid for everything; even one's ideal will entail the sacrifice or abridgment of some values, because they are incompatible or uneasy with it. For example, one may cherish human equality and still retain admiration for the aristocratic ethos. A society must choose between them; it cannot have both at the same time. The virtue of adversary political theories is to keep us aware of the losses we sustain as we implement an ideal, or merely subscribe to an ideal in the abstract. No odium, except in rare cases, will attach to those who are in moral disagreement with oneself over the questions of political theory. The truth has been hard to get at; and though we think we now have it, we will not scorn those who have failed. They too contribute to moral understanding.

Some eclectics would endeavor to piece the truth together from heterogeneous theories. They refuse to believe that a political theory has to be accepted or rejected in its entirety, or that its truth is inextricably joined to its error, or that its component elements are so related as to make each of them meaningful only in the presence of the rest and incapable of importation into some other structure of moral thought about

politics. One tradition of political theory may be preponderantly truthful from the moral point of view, or possess more of the truth than any other tradition. But the judicious student will learn from all or nearly all traditions. As time goes on, clarity is reached on an ever larger area of moral matters; some views are put aside as fallacious. Widespread agreement is not reached, but some gross confusions are destroyed. The gratitude to all political theorists is not limitless; admiration for their hard work does not mean indifference to their mistakes. Nevertheless, if one is, say, a liberal, one will not simply respect the sincerity of the conservative and tolerate his advocacy of it; one will also absorb some conservatism for the sake of enriching liberalism. In conservatism will be found reminders of *truths* (perhaps unpleasant) that no one can afford to overlook; there will be restraints on one's excesses. The same eclecticism is suitable for the conservative and others as well. Moral disagreement is a sign of human vitality responding to social complexity.

A Rejoinder to All Five Responses

These then are five possible approaches to the record of moral disagreement that comprises the history of political theory. We have tried to state them with as much fairness as possible. What is important is not to search for examples of these approaches, but to compress points of view that appear explicitly or implicitly in the writings of political theorists themselves, and in works of commentary and criticism. At this point, our purpose is not to decide between the approaches. To borrow from the eclectics, all the approaches contain some truths, contain some of the truth. They also share some arguments. For all their cogency, however, one significant truth eludes them. All political theorists, consciously or not, agree that if a political theory is to be worthy of general consideration, if it is to conform to the standards of moral argument, if it is to be something other than an expression of whimsy or eccentricity, the theorist must sincerely strive to defend principles of government which, if made actual in the real world, would achieve *the common good.* The phrase may not be part of the vocabulary of a political theorist, but when it is not, it will readily be seen that the concept is implicit. Every political theorist commonly studied in courses in political theory believes that all his advocacy is ultimately in the name of the common good. This consideration sets limits on the scope of moral disagreement between political theorists. Much disagreement there certainly is, disagreement of the most profound sort. But the disagreement takes place within an accepted framework, and is all the more interesting for that reason. The record of political theory assumes an altered aspect when we see that behind its wonderful diversity there is allegiance to a single aim: to envisage a political system that works to the common good.

When, therefore, we come across a political theorist who quite clearly

rejects the standard of the common good, we must be careful to notice that he is not making a moral argument which accords with the conventions of moral argument. His disagreement with other political theorists is totally different from the disagreement which the other political theorists have among themselves. Nietzsche, a writer whose system of thought contained much of political relevance, defied the common good, and championed instead the good of a tiny elite at the expense of the great mass of men. (This is a crude way of putting it, but Nietzsche is frequently taken to stand for this position.) He is not to be denied inclusion in the company of political theorists or political moralists because he substituted a peculiar heroism for the common good. He must, however, be seen as an exception. He must be seen as he saw himself, as one who was an immoralist, transvaluing all values, embarking on a journey beyond good and evil. He placed himself beyond the pale of moral argument; he did not write to gain *general* assent. He set himself against *all* the inherited traditions of moral thought.

The problem then becomes to explain why political theory is full of disagreement when political theorists agree that the common good is the end or purpose that government should serve. The fact that they disagree on almost everything while agreeing on the ultimate standard will lose its oddness when we recall analogous situations in other human activities. All legal systems are dedicated to justice, yet vary enormously in their procedures. All societies inculcate virtue, yet produce remarkably dissimilar forms of behavior. All metaphysicians seek truth, yet propound conflicting doctrines. Other examples could be given. The temptation is to conclude, however, that the ultimate standard, in each case, is a concept empty of meaning, but so hallowed in the minds of men, so full of favorable connotations, that everyone gives it token adherence and then goes on to say or do absolutely anything he wants. What supposedly matters, in each case, is not the vacuous ultimate standard but the specific arguments (in metaphysical systems) and the specific practices (in legal systems and social codes of virtue). Similarly, that almost all political theorists protest their devotion to the common good is a fact of no importance. They are to be judged, if judged at all, by the detailed recommendations they make concerning forms of government, the powers and scope of governmental authority, the rights and duties of citizens, and other such political features.

The inclination to dispose of the concept of the common good in this fashion must be resisted. Of course, the concept lends itself to manipulation, to insincere uses. Of course, the concept can be made to entail many kinds of political arrangements or practices, even when sincerity is present. This is only to acknowledge that the concept of the common good is on the highest level of abstraction. It is in the nature of such concepts that men will, with the best intentions in the world, interpret them

differently and by doing so will arrive at heterogeneous conclusions. The important point is that the concept of the common good will, despite its abstraction, exclude some lesser political principles, some political arrangements and practices. The concept is wide, but not infinitely permissive. At least, it will exclude arbitrary rule, the punishment of the innocent, unfair distribution of sacrifices, enslavement of people admittedly equal in moral capacity with the enslavers, continuously ignorant political leadership, corrigible poverty. It will exclude the unprincipled neglect, exploitation, or sacrifice of some for the benefit of others. It will exclude maxims like "Might makes right" and "Some men can be treated as means only." Again, these exclusions may appear to be so vaguely worded as to permit almost anything if a clever enough argument is put forth in its behalf. But after a while the cleverness will be seen through. There are limits to verbal ingenuity. To think otherwise is to abandon the very possibility of rationality, not only in moral matters, but in all sorts of discourse.

If the common good excludes a number of practices, we must not expect to find them elaborated and defended in the literature of political theory (except by an occasional immoralist). If the common good excludes a number of lesser or "lower-order" principles, we must not expect to find them articulated and urged for acceptance. We can expect to find, and do find, competing interpretations of the concept of the common good and consequently widely divergent sets of political recommendations. Besides, even when two or more theorists understand the common good in the same way, their political proposals may be quite discrepant, so problematic is political life, so tenuous is the connection between an ultimate standard and its concrete applications.

Definitions of the Common Good

What then is the common good—what is the good common to all men which the government of a society exists to promote? There have been several main answers to this question, at least as many as to the question, What is the good life for the individual? It cannot be said that each culture or epoch has produced only one answer. At the same time and place, political theorists have conceived of the common good quite disparately. The content of the concept is not *historically* determined. If one insists on knowing why rough contemporaries like Bentham and Burke wrote on the common good as they did and wrote contrastingly, one must look to their biographies. But how pale and small are personal considerations in comparison to their writings considered as public statements—indeed, as public acts. We must take the existence of various interpretations of the common good as a fact of the greatest interest, the psychological explanation of which is only of some slight interest. On the other hand, as we shall see, there is much that *is* historically determined in all political theories, much that seems the product of the time,

an extension of its tendencies, or a disclosure of its promise. The way in which a political theorist defines the common good is not, however, subject to a historically determinist analysis.

It is usually possible to express in a word or a phrase what is considered the common good in the work of every political theorist. The word or phrase would be the name of some political value which, if established in society, would be to the advantage of all members of that society. The value would, in fact, be the greatest of all possible political values; it would be the *highest* value able to be shared by all, and to be shared by all as the result of the proper operation of the political system as conceived by the theorist. None of the purportedly supreme values that appear in the works of political theory is startling or incidental to the life of man. The originality of a political theorist is not shown by reference to his conception of the common good, but rather to its elaboration and defense, and to what he makes follow from that conception. We could say, for example, that Plato thought that order defined the common good; Aristotle (in the ideal state), the life of virtuous citizenship; Cicero, justice; St. Augustine, peace; St. Thomas, order; Machiavelli, the preservation and greatness of one's country; Hobbes, peace; Locke, the preservation of the person (in the extended sense to include possessions); Rousseau, the life of virtuous citizenship; Hegel, the preservation and greatness of one's country; Bentham, the greatest possible pleasure of each; Burke, order; Madison, justice; Mill, freedom; Dewey, the facilitation of social change; and so on.

Doubtless these ascriptions could be questioned. Political theorists are not themselves always clear about the hierarchy of their values. It is not, however, of crucial importance to insist that this rather than that is the value which the theorist cherishes above every other. We read a political theorist for his whole argument. But for rough purposes, to identify each theorist with a supreme value defining the common good, as we have done, is not seriously misleading. The main point is that, clearly or not, each theorist is out to achieve a net political result which in his opinion is to everybody's advantage or benefit; and is, at the same time, the most desirable that can be attained, and worth any cost that must be paid by omitting or compromising other values.

We must stress that the common good is a *political* value; it is the purpose or end which *government* should serve. The essential sphere of governmental activity is the network of those relations between people which are amenable to political regulation. All the values posited as the common good are values pertaining to the quality of these relations, though they may turn out to be instrumental to values more important than themselves. The common good need not be the highest good in life, but it is the highest good in political life.

promotes human vice or contention, and sometimes on the belief that abundance does so. But for the thoroughgoing pessimist, no level of material life can solve the problem of human nature: the sickness of man is incurable. Political theory can proceed without reference to economics.) The highest political end is thus not really a value itself, but rather the *sine qua non* of all values. In turn, the only values that should occupy men are either spiritual or everyday, or perhaps some mixture of the two. The only reality cannot be seen or is seen face to face. The great middle range of human exertion—public or private—is stained with sin, requires sin, punishes sin, or is marked by vanity, futility, the irrepressible urge to satisfy unappeasable desires. As long as there is peace, the spiritual and the everyday are safe. And the terms of peace do not matter; the forms and policies of government are immaterial. People may talk about justice, or pleasure, or freedom; but a true understanding, and hence a true realization of these worldly values, is closed to mankind, so twisted is its comprehension, so infirm is its nature. Therefore no purpose is worth the risk of civil war or revolution. Nothing ever comes of violence except death and a change in the appearance but not the reality of political and social life. Mere existence may not be much, but it is what men should reasonably settle for as the best net result of the workings of the political system.

In the writings of St. Augustine and the Augustinian tradition (including Luther) much of the foregoing line of argument is present, and further supported by reference to the authority of Scripture. A remarkable though fragmentary version of it can be found in Pascal's *Pensées*. Hobbes's political theory offers a secular Augustinianism, in which a superhuman attempt is made to render human nature in colors as dark as those of the Augustinian tradition without passing judgment on it. And where the Augustinians disparage all worldly values because of their belief in the immeasurable superiority of the spiritual life and the blessing of the afterlife, Hobbes disparages from within a naturalist framework. He wishes to demonstrate that the single-minded pursuit of any worldly value leads to war and hence the possibility of death, and that since men hate death above everything else, especially the *premature* death inherent in war, they must learn to abate their passions. Only by doing so, can there be peace. The worldly values are thus not condemned in the light of other-worldly values, but exposed as destructive of one who is in their thrall. Peace alone must be the object of single-minded pursuit: worldly things, some entirely and some partly, must be sacrificed to it, if it is to exist. Whatever other political values are established by the procedures and policies of the political system—such as the rule of law, prudent statesmanship, the care of poverty—come as they can, and are welcome. They contribute to peace. But peace is the overriding end.

An absence of extremism characterizes those theorists who go beyond

theorist to theorist, but the value of property, civil liberty, orderly and regular justice is clearly endorsed. That is to say, the components of a secure, perhaps happy, life are placed at the heart of political reckoning. The proof of this sentiment is found in the fact that all these theorists allow for the use of violence to achieve either a restoration of a political system that has been damaged by the encroachments of arrogant rulers, or the initiation of a political system that promises to make good the demands that men may legitimately make of a political system but which are not met by the existing one. To be sure, there is no wanton preaching of violence, no enthusiastic theory of violence. Some theorists, like the Thomists and the Calvinists, hedge the right of revolution with severe restrictions and implicitly give the benefit of the doubt to established authority. But they also make clear that there are limits to what the people should endure. Though disruption and violence are to be lamented, and necessarily involve men in wrongdoing, certain values justify men in extreme measures. These values pertain not only to the expression of conscience and the worship of God, but also to the worldly life of men. Other theorists, like Locke, Burke, and Paine, are less severe in their restrictions, and discuss the problem of revolutionary violence wholly apart from the sacred needs of religious life.

The theorists we have placed in the second category have widely divergent views on the value of public things as opposed to private things. They all conceive of the political system as the source of many blessings, but join to their conception several attitudes that set them at odds with each other. Their attitudes toward three different matters are relevant: first, the moral quality of the institution of government; second, the moral quality of political participation; and third, the relation between the ends directly served by the proper workings of government and the ends made possible.

There are two paramount positions on the moral quality of the institution of government. One holds that there is no need at all to apologize for the necessity of having government. Government, as described by Cicero, the Thomists, the Calvinists, the *philosophes*, Burke, Madison, Green, Dewey, and others, is a totally sensible contrivance for human wants and purposes. Human life is unimaginable without it, though lip service may be given to the loveliness of an anarchic condition at the beginning or end of time. The mere operation of government, when it is as it is supposed to be, embodies a number of moral values, such as rationality, justice, fairness; indeed, Cicero and Thomas see it as the earthly approximation of godlike behavior. These moral values are not even to be found except in the operation of government; they have no other locus. Such a position comports well with the sorts of moderate expectations these theorists have for government.

The other position is found in the constitutionalist tradition of Locke,

the libertarian tradition of Paine and Jefferson, and the liberal tradition of Spencer. It is most passionately expressed by Paine, who said in *Common Sense* that "government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil. . . . Government, like dress, is the badge of lost innocence; the palaces of kings are built upon the ruins of the bowers of paradise."[1] The sentiment is echoed in the common phrase that that government is best which governs least. The explanation for the existence of government is found not in general human necessity and aspiration but in the tendency of some men, if not all, to transgress against their fellows. Vice is the source of government, and thus government is a *shameful* necessity. The public realm is inherently despicable: men's dependence on it should not restrain them from viewing it with radical suspiciousness. When it works well, the people should be barely aware of it: its importance is negative. Social relations—that is, the sum of nonpolitical relations—carry forward the real work of mankind. By reasoning in this way, these theorists manage to combine aversion to government with expectations of it that are more than minimal.

Closely related are the conclusions on the moral quality of political participation. What should one think of the role of the man of public affairs, and also of the role of citizen? On the role of the man of affairs, the statesman, Cicero, Aquinas, Calvin, the *philosophes*, Burke, and Madison speak with great deference, sometimes with awe. They underline the burdensome and morally treacherous life which the statesman—if he is a moral man—must lead. When he performs his role in accordance with the highest standards, he performs a role that is second to none in moral dignity. At least, it is second to none except for that of priest or minister. It is a role worthy of the best men. And when the best men fill it, order or justice, the common good, will be forthcoming. On the other hand, the difficulties of statesmen do not preoccupy Locke and Paine and Spencer and the traditions stemming from them. Because it is primarily negative, the task of government should not weigh heavily. It is open to ordinary talents. By thus minimizing government, these writers can depreciate public things and still define the common good as something more than mere peace.

Furthermore, some liberal and all democratic writers make much of the office of citizenship, advocating as they do the institution of representative government. This necessarily sets limits to the extent to which they can in fact depreciate public things, at the same time that it sets limits to the extent to which they feel compelled to depreciate public things. Citizen participation provides a safeguard for the good behavior of those in power, and thereby makes power less fearful. The office of citizenship is a political necessity. More than that, Paine and Jefferson

[1] Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, in Harry Hayden Clark (ed.), *Thomas Paine, Representative Selections* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 4.

invest it with genuine moral value. Paine, for instance, speaks of "the gigantic manliness" fostered by a political system resting on the involvement, though indirect, of the people. On the other hand, among the nonliberal and nondemocratic theorists in this category, the concept of citizenship is hardly in evidence (except in the thought of Cicero and Madison, who mix popular and elitist tendencies). Their lofty evaluation of the moral quality of political participation is based almost exclusively on the labor of rulers when they are guided by the correct principles, when they are enlightened.

The relation between the ends directly served by the proper workings of government and the ends made possible is a vast subject, including in itself a large portion of moral speculation about politics. We can touch on it only briefly. All the theorists in the second category, even those who place considerable value on public things, commit themselves to a belief in the inestimable worth of private activity. The division among them can be represented in the following way.

Some theorists say or imply that the fundamental unit of private life is the group, be it the family or the occupation. The values of private life are those of domesticity or craftsmanship, or both. For most people, the richness of reality—insofar as life on earth can be rich—comes from immersion in the everyday. The highest purpose of government, the common good, is to secure the framework within which everyday life can proceed as unprecariously as possible. Politics is only a means; the end is nonpolitical; it is private, or social. (The Thomists and the Calvinists say that beyond securing everyday life, there is one purpose higher still—the promotion of the true faith—and that promotion takes place in subordinate assistance to spiritual authority.) The genuine task of government is not ceaseless activity in behalf of private life, but a benign superintendence and protection of activities that go on more or less free from outside direction. Some amount of paternalism is advocated, but it is marginal.

Some theorists, and Locke is the first major one, see the individual as the fundamental unit of private life. The interests of the individual are the touchstone of governmental activity, and are the supreme values of life. Interests are clothed in the language of rights, the natural right of every man to life, liberty, and property. Government is the servant of the aggregation of men. It performs that service mainly through forbearance, through abstention from meddling with the individual as he pursues his ends. Once government secures his rights, it has done all it is competent to do, and all it has any warrant to do. Or, as Bentham would say, once government clears the way for the pursuit of legitimate self-interest, it has done its job.

Some theorists, beginning in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth

centuries, and Mill is the most important, also see the individual as the fundamental unit of private life. But the theory of indefeasible natural rights gives way to a concern for the cultivation of personality, or "individuality" as Mill calls it. Government continues to be primarily abstentionist and is judged by its tolerance, by its commitment to freedom. Only in a condition of maximum freedom can individuality flourish. The highest end in life is the free individual who is permitted to become "a noble and beautiful object of contemplation."[2] To make freedom meaningful, education is the absolute prerequisite. To serve the cause of freedom best, government should "require and compel the education, up to a certain standard, of every human being who is born its citizen."[3] It should not insist on public education for all, but it should insist that all be educated. That is its great duty; and by discharging that duty, it acknowledges the primacy of private ends, and most adequately exemplifies the instrumental nature of politics.

Some theorists, beginning with the welfare-liberals in the latter part of the nineteenth century, subscribe to the view that the individual's benefit is the highest of all moral values and understand benefit to be all that conduces to self-realization, much as Mill does. However, two changes differentiate them from Mill. First, they expand the role of government to take in the continuous implementation of policies that relieve suffering and lessen poverty, that "remove the obstacles" (in T. H. Green's phrase) to full self-realization. Government ceases to be abstentionist; freedom itself will be interfered with, if necessary, to make freedom more meaningful. For countenancing large-scale interference, Dewey can be said to have replaced freedom as the content of the common good with some other value. We have chosen to call that value "the facilitation of social change" in order to indicate his wish that government be restlessly sensitive to the needs of self-realization. Social life is in constant flux, and government must be prepared both to rescue the individual from the onrush of events and to guide those events in the right direction, to the utmost of its ability. Second, Green and Dewey give up the traditional liberal image of the individual as isolated and wholly self-reliant. They cherish the individual above everything, but emphasize the interdependence of individuals. Individuals do not exist in isolation, morally or any other way. They are what they are because of the society in which they were born and raised. They do not make themselves. Their pursuits are pursuits undertaken with others. Green says, "When we speak of freedom as something to be so highly prized, we mean a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something

[2] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1950), p. 161.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 216.

worth doing or enjoying, and that, too, something that we do or enjoy in common with others."[4] This general sense of man as a social creature makes it easier for Green, Dewey, and their successors to conceive of government as an active agency, rather than as simply a preserver, a deterrent of wrongdoing. There is no worship of government; it furthers ends greater than any it embodies or achieves. But it does further them: it does not only indirectly permit them to emerge. We may say that Green and Dewey, aided by some in the Kantian, Hegelian, and Marxist traditions, develop the idea of individuality, the idea of *person*, which is only sketched, though brilliantly, by Mill. They try to answer such questions as, What must social conditions be if men as they pass from childhood are to become persons? What must social conditions be if the needs of men as persons are to be satisfied? What sorts of treatment at the hands of government are persons entitled to, from the point of view of political and legal procedure? What is to be morally expected of a person in the form of duties and obligations? By raising such issues, they find ways of honoring Mill's commitment while altering his notion of government's contribution to it.

In sum, there are many roads that lead to the second category in which we have placed political theorists, just as there are many conceptions of the common good present in this category. What allies these theorists is their common sense. In any case there can be no doubt that the political life of the Western world derives most of its intellectual content from the continuous interplay of the ideas of the theorists in this category.

The main writers in the third category are Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Hegel. They (and their followers) bring to man's political life the greatest expectations; they make it support a staggering moral weight. When political life is ideally what it should be, men are thereby put in touch with a reality higher in seriousness or meaning than any other, with the exception (made by Plato, Aristotle, and some in the Hegelian tradition) of a contemplative reality. The relations of ideal politics, the structures and processes of ideal politics, embody values superior to any private ones they may permit or promote. The common good, the ultimate political value, is the preservation of the political system. Its preservation is the preservation of crucial moral opportunities. If politics can be said to be instrumental, it is instrumental to the perfection of character. It is directly instrumental: without involvement in its activities, character cannot become perfect. Participation in political life calls forth the fullest virtue. To be sure, the political system is expected to attend to the usual concerns of ordinary life. But politics is not exhausted by the services it performs. Its full measure is taken when we see it above all as the medium for transcendent human excellence of one kind or another.

[4] T. H. Green, "Liberal Legislation and Freedom of Contract," in John R. Rodman (ed.), *The Political Theory of T. H. Green* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), pp. 51–52.

The key to this position is obviously the view taken of the value of public things as opposed to all private things. There is no human endeavor in the world to compare with participation in the ideal political system. (When the political system is not ideal, the virtuous man seeks his fulfillment outside the political system and does so either because he wants to avoid contamination from imperfect politics or because he will generally be denied the chance to take part.) Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rousseau, and Hegel are all in agreement on this valuation. On the *reasons* for prizing public things, as well as on other matters, they show enormous differences from each other.

Why then does each thinker hold the broadest possible conception of the common good? Why does each thinker expect the maximum from the working of the ideal political system? In the case of Plato and Hegel, the premise is that the ideal political system is, in effect, the realization of some supreme universal principle. For Plato, the system described in *The Republic* would be, if established in some polis, the outward manifestation of the abstract idea of justice. The reign of justice would still the intolerable flux of political life. Right relations between men would be achieved, and the cruelty, selfishness, and blindness common to the varieties of imperfect politics abolished. Society would be, at least approximately, in accord with metaphysical reason, with the underlying rationality of the world. "In heaven," says Socrates, "there is laid up a pattern of it [the ideal state] methinks, which he who desires may behold. . . ."[5] Correspondingly, Plato continuously disparages all the aims that unphilosophical men pursue, whether these aims are selfishly public or selfishly private, from honor to gain to appetitive satisfaction to naked domination. To be sure, these desires can never be totally abolished, even in the ideal state. But they can be tempered and regulated; and thus tempered and regulated, they do not interfere with the realization of a just order, but rather are made to contribute to it. Their abatement in the name of the just order, whatever the feelings of the great mass of unphilosophical people, is in no sense a sacrifice of anything worth preservation: men dine on a "mess of shadows."

For Hegel, "The state is the actuality of the ethical Idea. . . . The development of the state to constitutional monarchy is the achievement of the modern world, a world in which the substantial Idea has won the infinite form . . . the history of this genuine formation of ethical life is the content of the whole course of world-history. . . . The nation state is mind in its substantive rationality and immediate actuality and is there-

[5] Plato, *The Republic* (592), in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (2 vols., New York: Random House, n.d.), vol. I, p. 851.

fore the absolute power on earth."[6] In his *Philosophy of History,* Hegel projects a view of the pattern of human history, in which the entire human career is seen as the gradual, painful, and inevitable progression in the realization of the idea of human freedom, going from the Oriental stage to the Greek and then to the Roman, and culminating, at last, in the perfection of the Germanic (and Christian) stage. The institutional articulation of the last and highest stage is constitutional monarchy: a graded and stratified society, which has representative institutions, and at the apex of which is the institution of a wise, benevolent, and harmonizing monarchy. The purpose of history, from the start and through all its suffering and confusion, was to arrive at the society Hegel describes in *The Philosophy of Right,* a society that is, one might say, both the rationalized and the romanticized version of the Prussian monarchy of Hegel's day. To live with full awareness in such a society is to be implicated in the triumph of the rationality of the world. Correspondingly, Hegel argues that in comparison to the survival of the state in power and honor, the individual's interests are distinctly secondary. "Sacrifice on behalf of the individuality ~~of~~ the state is the substantial tie between the state and all its members and so is a universal duty."[7] The rigors and perils of the state's relations with other states disclose the essential "vanity of temporal good and concerns."[8] Duty transcends all private and group ("corporate") pursuits and concerns.

It must be acknowledged that Cicero and St. Thomas also look on the right political order as the human embodiment of supreme universal principle. The Ciceronian right political order accords with the mind of Nature; the Thomist with the will of God. But in neither of these theorists is the effort of connecting the proposed political system to a supreme universal principle so relentlessly carried out. Both writers are painfully aware of the tremendous obstacles an infirm human nature and a clouded human understanding place in the way of achieving any ideal. Their main moral endeavor consists in improving their inherited frameworks, and supplying for each framework an added consecration by reference to Nature or to God. There is very little *magic,* so to speak, in their political vision, very little pretentiousness. In their fascination with detailed recommendations, they often lose sight of their overarching intellectual construction. To live in the political systems they envisage is to share in something morally excellent, but it is not to share in an enterprise nearly as sublime as Plato's Republic or Hegel's constitutional monarchy.

As for the theorists of the divine right of monarchy, say, James I of England, or for Christian moralists like St. Paul who claim that "the

[6] G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right,* trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), pp. 155, 176, 212.
[7] *Ibid.,* p. 210.
[8] *Ibid.*

powers that be are ordained of God," some of the same considerations hold. To link rule with the will of God is, above everything else, a device to promote obedience. James I speaks of the monarch as receiving his power directly from God, and becoming thereby "God's Lieutenant" or "God's Minister." He is entitled to complete acceptance of his commands, except when his commands are unlawful. In that case, the most allowed to the subject is "eschewing and flying his [the king's] fury in his unlawful [commands], without resistance, but by sobbes and teares to God."[9] St. Paul speaks of the ruler in this way:

> For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.[10]

But for these writers, as for the Augustinian and Lutheran traditions in political theory, obedience secures peace, and peace makes possible what really matters: the godly life, which is not public or political. St. Paul, St. Augustine, and Luther make it clear that the godly life can be lived in any society, provided there is peace, whereas for Plato and Hegel (contemplation aside), to participate, in whatever way, in the right political order is to have one's life transformed.

A different mode of praise for the political order is to be found in the writings of Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Rousseau. It could be said that Plato and Hegel see the excellence of their political systems as residing in a fixed pattern of human relations. All classes make their contribution to that excellence, either through governance or military service, or through mere obedience to rule and labor in the maintenance of the economic functions that sustain life. On the other hand, Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Rousseau make the chance for political involvement the differentiating characteristic of the ideal political system. For the three writers, active citizenship is intrinsic to the definition of the good man. The ideal political order is primarily the arena for virtue, for the highest kind of virtue. To preserve it is to preserve the network of activities that form the most morally significant segment of the good life. The stress is on *activity*—or to use a more modern-sounding word, *process.* It is not on pattern. Indirect participation through obedience, duty, and professional or vocational competence does not suffice. The common good is the preservation of the reality of virtue, the soul of which is public or political.

What then is the nature of virtue in each case? What is it that political involvement, far more than any other kind of involvement, elicits

[9] James I of England, *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies,* in *Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West* (2 vols., 3rd ed., New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), vol. I, p. 928.
[10] *Romans,* 13:4.

establish a remoteness from decision-making that mortally impairs virtue. To be represented is to alienate one's will; to alienate one's will is to become a slave. Man must take part in the process by which law is made; otherwise, he will live by a will that is not his own, he will not be free. In addition, taking part in the law-making process offers the supreme opportunity to practice benevolence, to do good toward one's fellows. To vote in accordance with the requirements of justice is the greatest conceivable act of benevolence. In sum, to help make the law by which one is bound, and to help make just laws, is to achieve the status of "moral liberty," a status that alone is adequate for a full humanity, and a status that is possible in the ideal city-state sketched in *The Social Contract.*

Machiavelli's theory also insists on the connection between citizenship and virtue. But Machiavelli's idea of virtue (virtù) is not that of Aristotle, Rousseau, or indeed of any conventional moralist. In his *Discourses of Livy,* the true quality of Machiavelli's ideals becomes clear. Their affinity to certain Greek and Roman ideals—that is, to pre-Christian ideals—is proudly in evidence. In the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle reports the Greek version of this view, though he does not accept it. Aristotle says,

> Now those activities are desirable in themselves from which nothing is sought beyond the activity. And of this nature virtuous actions are thought to be; for to do noble and good deeds is a thing desirable for its own sake.[16]

Only philosophical endeavor, in Aristotle's opinion, satisfies the criterion of being desirable in itself. But it is obvious that some in Greece thought otherwise. One might mention the love of great political deeds done for one's country that informs the speeches of Pericles in Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War.* Machiavelli's great model turns out to be the civic spirit of republican Rome which he wishes revived in his native Florence. Virtue is not epitomized by philosophical wisdom. It certainly is radically different from Christian virtue, the virtue of humility, forbearance, and otherworldliness. Machiavelli's virtù is manliness, courage, and the willingness to love one's country more than one's own soul. Of course, the virtù of the citizenry in the good republic has an aim: it is to be employed in the service of the freedom and greatness of one's city. There is no private value that begins to compare to the moral value inherent in the freedom and greatness of one's city. Implicit, however, in Machiavelli's writing is the old Greek and Roman sense that political deeds are to be prized not only for their utility to the city, but also for the way in which they express virility, in the most extended meaning of that word. The preservation of one's city as a healthy republic is at the same time the

[16] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (X, 6), in Richard McKeon, *op. cit.*, p. 1102.

the interests and desires of men remain substantially intact, subject to the restrictions and compromises needed to insure the survival of everyone in society. For both men, patriotism will engage the energies of men and supply a splendid way of directing those energies outward, rather than having them tear society apart in civil and class war. No one has spoken more cynically of human nature than Machiavelli. His major purpose, however, is not to cure human nature of its wickedness, but to employ that wickedness in a cause (the freedom and greatness of the state) in a manner that is as little destructive domestically as possible. In any case, the life of political action is unthinkable without the human drives pious moralists condemn. The point is to guide those drives into the right channel.

Thus all five theorists work hard to show that they have reckoned with human nature in their visions of the right order of politics. They are eager to exploit different segments of the spectrum of human nature. But all are sure that in suitable circumstances their theories will not be betrayed by human frailty. The extremism of their moral claims on the political order could not otherwise be sustained.

There is one specific aspect of human nature that must be referred to: human inequality. These five theorists can be divided into two groups, with Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel affirming the decisive political significance of human inequality, and Machiavelli and Rousseau, with comparable intensity, founding their political systems on a belief in human equality. What is involved is a calculation concerning the distribution of political capacity among men. As is well known, Plato's *Republic* can exist only if philosophers rule, only if those in possession of metaphysical wisdom alone rule, and rule absolutely. To become a philosopher, a man must undergo the most arduous discipline of his desires, his manly aggressiveness, and his moral and intellectual faculties. Only then can a man be trusted with total political domination over a society. And if there is such a man, or if there are a few such men, then his (or their) total political domination will realize the pattern of political perfection, with all the blessings for all the people attendant on such an arrangement. But Plato insists that only a tiny fraction of any group of people could possibly have the native endowment, the gold in their souls, adequate to the enterprise of ultimate refinement: the transformation of a man into a philosopher. It is the measure of Plato's optimism that he thinks at least a few can be trusted with absolute power, while also thinking that power ordinarily corrupts him who wields any degree of it.

The doctrine of human inequality takes a racialist form in Aristotle. It is Aristotle's belief that all and only Greeks have the native endowment necessary to lead the life of virtue. In the ideal political society, labor is confined to a subject foreign population, who are incapable, by nature, of the life of virtue. The beneficiaries of this labor are the class of citi-

> trious, and therefore less given to idleness, would be more united, and less exposed by the poverty of the country to occasions for discord.[21]

But security requires power; power requires the avoidance of impoverished circumstances. The founder must choose a fertile spot, but insure against the perils of plenty by wise customs, strict discipline, and severe exercises. In any case, Machiavelli's notion of material sufficiency apparently seems to him easy of fulfillment. It would have been meager by modern standards. Rousseau greatly fears the moral effects of luxury. He wants the economic system of the good society to be as simple and as spare as possible. He wishes to avoid economic classes, conflicts of interest, the presence of avarice and envy, the forgetfulness of public duty in preoccupation with getting and spending. The agrarian way of life will be the nurse of virtuous citizenship.

It becomes clear that the political vision of none of those who make the most extreme moral claims on the political system is impeded by economic considerations. When they define perfection, the gratification of the senses has only a small place.

The last factor we see as influential in determining the level of a theorist's political expectations, namely, the value of worldly as opposed to spiritual things, can be quickly treated. We have already seen that within the class of all worldly things, public things far surpass private things in worth. Is there some kind of spiritual or contemplative activity that, in turn, far surpasses public things? The answer for Plato and Aristotle is unmistakable. The life of contemplation, the life dedicated to the attainment of knowledge of the source and nature of being, is the best possible life for those capable of it. Plato's parable of the Cave, at the beginning of Book VII of *The Republic*, is the most powerful statement of this position in the literature of the world. Plato makes it clear that the philosopher takes on the burden of politics with the greatest reluctance, and does so to avoid the selfish or incompetent rule of the unphilosophical. Aristotle speaks of the contemplative life as an imitation of God. On the other hand, Machiavelli seems fairly indifferent to the contemplative life, and Rousseau hostile to most of the forms it takes.[22] Refinement of mind precludes a wholehearted civic virtue. Even more, both writers judge religion by the standard of its efficacy in uniting the people and increasing their devotion to the interests of society (though Rousseau says he believes that the efficacious religion is also the true one). Hegel's position is ambiguous. Some in the Hegelian tradition, like

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[21] Machiavelli, *op. cit.* (I, 1), p. 107.

[22] Rousseau, "A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences," in Rousseau, *op. cit.*, pp. 151–156.

Is there a God? If so, does he have purposes? If so, does he have purposes for mankind? If so, what are they? How can they be found out? How can they be realized? Is there an afterlife? If so, how should that affect the way in which men live on earth? If there is no God, are there any consequences for morality? If there is no afterlife, are there any consequences for morality? Is nature informed by reason? If so, what is its relation to human purposes? If not, where shall man find his purposes? Does history have a meaning? Is there such a thing as inevitable progress? What makes men truly happy? How is man distinct from the rest of nature? Such questions and others like them continue to haunt thoughtful men. And as long as they do, moral speculation about politics will go on, and take divergent forms, and propound divergent theses.

With so much chance for contention over issues forming the background of political theory, there is small cause for wonder at the disagreement over the common good. But reference to background does not dispose of the subject of disagreement. It need not be vulgar to take into account the personality of the political theorist, and his experiences and social conditioning. The integrity of political theory is not damaged when the historian tells us about the temperament of a theorist or his political associations, the events he witnessed, and the interests toward which he was especially friendly, or when the historian tries to describe the factors shaping the thought of a period which those then alive were unconscious of, or did not examine or feel the necessity to specify. Intellectual effort does not have unconditioned autonomy. "The man and his times"—a phrase often used in accounts of a political theorist's work—must be studied, because some of the sources of political theory are found there. Hence part of the explanation of disagreemnt among political theorists is found there.

In sum, two points must be affirmed. First, political theory has always been dedicated to defining the common good, and thus to answering the question of what the end of government ought to be. Second, for the reasons we have taken up, a number of definitions have been traditionally given, despite the general commitment to the common good. Our dissatisfaction with the five approaches to explaining disagreement among political theorists derives from their failure to see the general commitment throughout all the disagreement, and from their attempt to account for the disagreement without reference to that commitment. Still, these approaches deserve another brief look.

Once the idea of the common good is insisted on, each of these approaches yields something of value. We have borrowed a good deal from them, as we have ventured to make sense of the history of political theory. These approaches are not completely at odds with each other. Acceptance of one does not cancel the rest. They may serve different uses; they cer-

The works of political theory that have survived the test of time, that continue to be read and pondered, are just those works that escape the confines which Marxism makes so much of. The great political theories may each possess ideological aspects or be put to ideological uses. They also, and more importantly, possess creative originality which cannot be accounted for by historical necessities. And they demonstrate the continuity of philosophical concerns, philosophical questions and problems, from generation to generation, from culture to culture. We have accorded great weight to the contribution made by background notions to the work of the political theorist. These notions are not the predictable secretions of any one time or place, but the perennial preoccupation of thoughtful men in their fascinated struggle with the meaning of life. No matter how much the economic systems of men have changed, they have continued to philosophize in much the same manner as the first philosophers. We cannot deny that the advent of industrial technology, with its unprecedented promise of abundance and leisure, has added a novel quantity to men's political speculation. But the connection between abundance and speculation is not uniform or simple, and it does not destroy the links between the political thought of the past century and all the political thought of earlier times. All relativist critiques of the history of political theory run the grave risk of presuming that they can obliterate rationality. (About positivism, it is better to say nothing than to say little, though it too suffers from the same debilitating crudity as Marxism and other relativisms.)

The plausibility approach has the merit of locating the sources of political theory in premises that are not themselves political. We have tried to do just that in this essay. The difficulty with this approach is that it converts these premises into purely factual ones. In contrast, we have tried to suggest that the place of facts in views of the material basis of life, human nature, the value of worldly things, and the value of public things is limited. It is a rare background notion that would now commonly be thought refuted. Plato's theory of incommunicable metaphysical wisdom, Aristotle's theory of the innate inferiority of non-Greek races, the Stoic theory of the mind of the universe, the Augustinian doctrine of predestination, the Hegelian theory of historical stages, all may now have ceased to command any but the slightest allegiance among philosophers. Still this fact does not render the political theories of Plato, Aristotle, and the others obsolete. Much remains alive in their works. And it would be too much to say that most analogous background notions have experienced the same kind of rejection. The plausibility approach tends to be too hasty.

The sanity of the dogmatic approach depends on the species of dogmatism. One can believe that correct moral understanding of political

Chapter *IV*

THE USES OF POLITICAL THEORY

It is no secret that the study of "the old books" of political theory has fallen on hard times. Those who teach the subject in America feel like an unwanted minority, not so much persecuted as ignored, or when not ignored, brushed aside as obscure or irrelevant. According to a recent study of the profession of political science in the United States, political theory ranked last among seven fields of political study "in the esteem of the profession." Political scientists were asked "to identify . . . the field(s) of political science in which they felt that the *most* and the *least* significant work was being done."[1] The ratio of "favorable to unfavorable mentions" was lowest for political theory. Even those respondents who were themselves teachers of political theory could muster only enough enthusiasm to place political theory fourth. In the face of such skepticism it is necessary (though perhaps quixotic) to try to make some statement about the use of political theory as contained in the old books.

There are many reasons for reading the works of political theory. They will fascinate anyone concerned with the history of ideas and concepts, or with the history of moral consciousness, or with the history of responses to political crises, or with the integrity or internal consistency

[1] Albert Somit and Joseph Tanenhaus, *American Political Science: A Profile of a Discipline* (New York: Atherton, 1964), pp. 55–56.

possible. The inordinately difficult act of self-transcendence is indispensable if the political scientist is to be faithful to his calling.

The second answer is that to be scientific is to assert nothing that has not been verified, and to propose no hypothesis that cannot, in principle, be verified. Mere hunch or guesswork or stale repetition of received opinion simply does not qualify as verified or verifiable statement. In turn, verification entails direct observation of the condition being described. And that, in turn, is sometimes thought to entail the translation of perceived truths into the language of mathematics, so that all ambivalence and inexactitude are shunned.

The third answer is that to be scientific is to aspire toward the creation of a continuously growing body of political knowledge, each addition to which derives from the extant body of political knowledge and is verified empirically, a body of knowedge which one day can attain a reasonable completeness. The body of knowledge grows as hypotheses derived from it are seen to be verified and as their number increases. The premise is that the study of politics is the study of invariant regularities, invariant relationships. In a given situation, men will act in one and only one way. The necessary and sufficient conditions for any species of political behavior, for any political act, gesture, decision, tendency, can be specified. The foundation of political science, thus construed, is the science of human behavior. Politics is the congeries of regular and predictable emanations of human nature. Psychological determinism is the necessary article of belief, while other sorts of determinism which involve, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, "vast, impersonal forces," are now ignored or held to be discredited. To be sure, the interest of the political scientist is not in the entire realm of psychological knowledge, but is rather centered on that portion of the realm which deals with traits of character that normally figure in politics—traits like fear, anger, pride, envy, competitiveness, guilt, honor, spite, desire for gain, and desire for sheer survival in a tolerable status. It must be added, however, that no psychological datum can be ruled out *a priori*; some finding once thought beside the point can, as political knowledge deepens, suddenly acquire relevance. It is just that the political scientist will place greater emphasis on, and make greater use of, some portions of the realm of psychological knowledge than others.

Now if the roles of the political scientist as everyday expert and as philosopher go unchallenged, his role as literally a political scientist has met with a good amount of opposition, from within the profession of political science as well as from within the profession of philosophy and such related professions as history. I believe that much of that opposition is well founded. These matters are naturally too massive to be treated with any adequacy in a short space. But I do think a little should be said, because the question of the use of the old books of political theory is