

THE USE OF POLITICAL THEORY¹

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I

EVEN in Oxford, which more perhaps than any other place in the English-speaking world is the home of political theory or philosophy, it is often said that the subject is dead or sadly diminished in importance. I happen to have a professional interest in assuming that it is still alive, and as likely to remain so as any other subject as long as man continues to be a speculative and enterprising animal. I do not think I am biased; I do not think I need to be. The importance of the subject seems to me so obvious, and the reasons for questioning that importance so muddled, that I do not look upon myself as defending a lost or difficult cause. Political philosophy is dead, I have heard men say, killed by the logical positivists and their successors who have shown that many of the problems which exercised the great political thinkers of the past were spurious, resting on confusions of thought and the misuse of language. Apply the solvent of linguistic analysis to these pretentious systems, they say, and when the dross has melted away, little that is valuable remains. I think that this is a mistake, and I want to explain why I think so.

I admit that the great political thinkers have raised many spurious problems, that they have been confused and have misused language. I believe that those who study their theories ought to subject them to close and rigorous criticism. I believe that they made many mistakes; but I do not believe that they were mistaken in trying to do what they did. I do not believe that the progress of science and philosophy has left no room for their kind of activity.

By political theory I do not mean explanations of how governments function; I mean systematic thinking about the purposes of government. Perhaps it would be better to speak of political philosophy rather than of political theory, keeping the second expression for what purport to be explanations of the facts. If I have not done this, it is because the word philosophy is nowadays used in a narrower sense than it used to be, especially in English-speaking countries. The political theory that I wish to speak about is emphatically not linguistic analysis. It is a form of practical

¹ This article is based on a lecture given at the University of Exeter on 13 March 1959. *Political Studies*, Vol. VIII, No. 1 (1960, 37-47)

philosophy; it is practical philosophy as it relates to government. I want to argue that it is a serious and difficult intellectual activity, and that the need for it, in modern times, is as great as ever it was—indeed much greater. It is not a need which disappears with the progress of science (and especially of the social sciences), and is in no way weakened by the achievements of contemporary philosophy.

It is not a less urgent need than it was; it is only a need less easily satisfied.

II

The belief that political theory or philosophy is dead rests on several misconceptions.

1. In the past, political theory has often been a mixture of two activities: it has sought to explain how government functions or how it arose or why it is obeyed, and it has also put forward opinions about what government should aim at and how it should be organized to achieve those aims. These two quite different activities have not always been kept distinct. Indeed, the Utilitarians were among the first to insist that they ought to be so kept, though they did not always take their own advice. Both these activities are useful. But, for reasons which are not far to seek, the fact that they have so often been confused has brought discredit on one of them much more than on the other. In this scientific age, the explanation of what actually happens is always respectable. We must have theories about how this or that form of government functions; we must even have theories about government in general, we must take notice of what is common to all forms of government. These are all theories that can be verified; they are attempts, more or less successful, to extend our knowledge. But, it is said, theories about what government should aim at and how it should be organized do not extend our knowledge; they merely express preferences, while pretending to do much more. They vary from age to age, from country to country, from party to party, from person to person. It is conceded that they affect action and that therefore we need to know what they are and how they arise. But it is also taken for granted that what they are matters less than how they affect men's behaviour; that it is more important to inquire into their origins and consequences than to study them for their own sake. They have to be studied because people have in fact taken them seriously and been influenced by them, but reasonable men can do without them.

There has been in recent times some resentment of, and contempt for, political philosophy. It is said of it that it not only pretends to give us knowledge but also stands in the way of our getting it. Durkheim, in his *Rules of Sociological Method*, argued that political theorists, in order to reach the conclusions they want to reach, define the terms they use in such a way as to make it seem to follow from their definitions of the state or of law or

even of human nature that government should aim at this rather than that and should be organized in one way rather than another. Political theorists, it is said, have produced concepts which stand in the way of a scientific explanation of the facts because their real (though unacknowledged) function is to justify what the theorists happen to think desirable.

It is certainly true that political theory or philosophy does not produce the same kind of knowledge as political science, and it is also true that it has stood in the way of political science.¹ But even if political philosophy has stood in the way of political science, that is no reason for dismissing it as fantasy or the mere airing of preferences. It is only a reason for distinguishing it from intellectual activities of other kinds.

2. What has gone by the name of political philosophy in the past has been shown to be remarkably confused. This has caused some people impressed by the confusion to speak as if what the political thinkers of the past attempted were not worth doing, and as if the only useful function of political philosophy were to dissipate confusion. Political philosophy, they say, is properly the analysis of political concepts.

I do not deny the need for this analysis, and though I should wish to use the expression *political philosophy* in a wider sense, I do not quarrel with its being used thus narrowly. But if this is to be called political philosophy, there still remains another intellectual activity, which is neither political science nor political philosophy, which is more important than the second and not less important than the first, and which is likely to endure when political philosophy, in this narrow sense, has lost what importance it now has. I should not wish to quarrel about names. If, for instance, Mr. Weldon had wanted to do no more than make a narrow use of the expression *political philosophy*, I should neither have followed his example nor condemned him for trying to set it. But I suspect that he wanted to do more than this; I suspect that he wanted to suggest that, apart from political philosophy, as he understood and practised it, and political science, there was nothing important, difficult, and useful to be done by rigorous and systematic theorists in the field of politics.

Political philosophy, understood in Mr. Weldon's sense, is not likely to remain important for long. At the moment, because political thinkers still use ambiguous concepts, the careful analysis of these concepts is still needed to show that many traditional problems are spurious, arising only because the men who put them have fallen victims to the confusions and intricacies of language. Since these concepts are often borrowed from, or shared with, other studies traditionally known as philosophy, the philosopher is better

¹ I think this second charge exaggerated: I suspect that it was much more ignorance than the failure to distinguish between explanation and advocacy which impeded the progress of political science. But I am not concerned to argue this point.

placed than other people to show how they generate spurious problems. This is an important service which the philosopher, in the narrow sense, can still do for the student of politics. But those who practise this kind of political philosophy should notice their own limitations. When they show us what confusions of thought there are in Rousseau's doctrine of the general will or in Hegel's doctrine of the state, we have cause to be grateful to them. They see the nonsense in these doctrines, and they explain what makes it nonsense. So far their work is useful. If, however, they go further, they risk doing harm. They are too ready to assume that where they have seen nonsense there is no sense which they have not seen. Just as it takes some skill in linguistic analysis to see the nonsense in Rousseau, so perhaps it takes some knowledge of sociology and psychology to see the sense in him.

The philosopher in this narrow sense already does no service to the natural scientist. He studies scientific method as the scientist does not study it; and there is therefore a sense in which he understands what the scientist does better than the scientist himself understands it. He knows better than the natural scientist how science differs from other kinds of intellectual activity. Yet he has nothing to teach the scientist, for what he knows about science that the scientist does not know is not knowledge needed to make a good scientist. The philosopher does not help the natural scientist to either his ideas or his methods. And so it will eventually be with the political scientist; the time will come when he will need no more help from the analytical philosopher. He needs him, even now, only to rescue him from confusions of thought; he does not need him, any more than the natural scientist does, to produce the ideas he uses to explain the events he studies.

3. The great variety of theories about what government should aim at and how it should be organized has discredited these theories. It is said of them that they do no more than expound the preferences of their makers, and that in any case they are socially determined.

I do not see the force of these objections. What does the variety of these theories prove about them? That they are not true? But if they expound preferences, the objection is out of place. It is unreasonable to argue that they are not scientific, and then to object to them that they are not true. They are neither true nor false.

Does the variety of these theories prove them unimportant? In just what sense? Will anyone deny that they have had a large influence on the course of history? The fact that they have not served as blue-prints for the reconstruction of society is no evidence that they have not been important. They have powerfully affected men's images of themselves and of society, and have profoundly influenced their behaviour.

Does the variety of these theories prove that we no longer need them? I do not see that it does. What are we to have in their place? Political

science? But its function is not the same. It does not attempt what these theories attempt. Why then should it supersede them? And we can say the same of political philosophy as Mr. Weldon understood it. Its function is different. It does not satisfy the same need. And just as political science and the analysis of political concepts do not satisfy this need, so they do not remove it. It is still there, no matter how active and successful they may be.

Are these theories unimportant because they are socially determined? The production of such theories is an activity of man in society, and is therefore affected by his other social activities. All social activities limit one another. What men can do or even imagine in one direction is limited and affected by what they can do and imagine in other directions. We may agree that a theory like Marxism could not have been produced in the Dark Ages. But then neither could the steam engine have been produced then. The feasible and the imaginable are limited by the actual. This is as true of industry and science as of political theory.

We soon get into difficulties if, like Marx, we treat political theory as of secondary importance. Marx called it a form of ideology or false consciousness, contrasting it with science, which gives us real knowledge; and he looked forward to the day when we should have true social science and be able to dispense with ideology. Yet he could not help attributing great importance to ideology. A class, to be politically effective, must have an ideology; and unless it is politically effective it has no active role to play in history. Ideology is illusion, and yet, unless men had these illusions, the course of social evolution would not be what it is.

We have here an example of a type of simple and false reasoning to which many people—and sometimes even philosophers—are still prone. They show that one kind of theory is mistaken by its producers for another kind, and then conclude that the second kind supersedes the first. Marx's version of it is this: the makers of ideology mistake it for science, and therefore when science shall have come into its own, there will be no room for ideology.

Marx made one kind of mistake, Burke made another. He thought that political theory, except when it justifies the established order, is harmful. That, at least, is to admit its importance. Yet Burke, because he did not see clearly the function of political theory, misunderstood the French revolution. He saw the revolution as a disaster caused by people's being misled by the philosophers. Its immediate cause was that the unprivileged classes were making new claims on society, claims which could not be met unless society was greatly changed. The philosophers did not create the conditions that disposed the unprivileged to make these claims; their task was rather to formulate the claims, to expound them systematically, and to condemn the old society which could not meet them. It was useless to rail at the

philosophers for disturbing society. It is true that there was no overt demand for the theories they produced. There never is a demand for such theories in advance of their appearance. But there was a readiness to accept them when they appeared. There was, in that sense, a need for them. Burke's mistake was in not understanding this need, and Marx's in speaking as if the need would disappear when the social studies had become scientific.

It may be true that the need is more difficult to satisfy the more the social studies become scientific. It may also be true that, because of the discredit into which traditional political theory has fallen, the need is less widely recognized, especially among intellectuals, than it used to be. The old political theorists did so many things which they ought not to have done that we are tempted to conclude that there is no longer a need to do anything that they did. We may admire their fantasies, and yet say that the time for fantasy is over. We may say: By all means, let us state our preferences if we feel so inclined; let us make explicit the rules of conduct and the ideals which we accept. But this is something altogether more modest than what the old political theorists attempted.

There is some truth in this way of thinking, but it falls so far short of the whole truth as to be profoundly misleading. I want to explain why this is so.

III

In primitive societies, custom and prejudice are perhaps sufficient guides to conduct. And by prejudice I mean here what Burke meant by it; I mean a belief about right conduct which the believer takes on trust. In primitive societies, men can perhaps do without a systematic practical philosophy, just as they can do without a dogmatic religion. In the eyes of a sophisticated student of a primitive society, the customs and beliefs belonging to it may form a coherent whole; he may see how they fit together to make it the peaceful and contented society which it is. But in the eyes of the primitive man, they are not a coherent but only a familiar whole; he does not see how they fit together, he merely lives comfortably with his neighbours and with himself because in fact they do fit together.

The sophisticated man needs more than a set of customs and prejudices which are in fact coherent, though he does not see that they are; he needs a practical philosophy. He lives in a changing society, and he is socially mobile in that society; he is not exposed to change which is so slow that he cannot perceive it. He lives in a society where men strive deliberately to change their institutions. If he is not to feel lost in society, he needs to be able to take his bearings in it; which involves more than understanding what society is like and how it is changing. It also involves having a coherent set of values and knowing how to use them to estimate what is happening;

it involves having a practical philosophy, which cannot, in the modern world, be adequate unless it is also a social and political philosophy.

In the past practical philosophy was rooted in religion and metaphysics; men derived, or purported to derive, their beliefs about how they should behave and how government should be organized from God's intentions for man or from the nature of the world or from man's being a rational creature. But many of the teachings of religion and metaphysics have been undermined by science or by logic; they have been shown to be incompatible with the facts or to rest on confusions of thought and bad argument. Not all religious and metaphysical doctrines have been directly controverted; for many have referred to an order of realities supposed to be beyond the realm of ordinary experience, with which alone science is concerned. They are beyond the reach of science, and logic cannot touch them if they are self-consistent. Yet the spread of science disposes many people to reject even these doctrines. They reject not only what science can show to be false, they also reject what science does not show to be true. Though there is, perhaps, nothing irrational about having both unverifiable and verifiable beliefs about the world, provided the first beliefs do not conflict with the second, many people find it difficult to do this, and feel the need to reject all beliefs for which there is no evidence. They may, of course, reject them consciously, and yet also behave as if they believed them; which is irrational. But that possibility does not concern us.

With the decay of religion and metaphysics there has gone a depreciation of the practical philosophies so long connected with them. There has even been a change of attitude to the moral principles contained in these philosophies. Let me give an example to illustrate my meaning. 'All men are equal in the sight of God' is a statement about God's feelings and intentions for man; it purports to be a statement of fact. It is not, on the face of it, a value-judgement; it is descriptive and not prescriptive, and yet it is unverifiable. Connected with this statement are beliefs about how men should behave. These beliefs do not follow logically from the bare statement about God's feelings and intentions; they follow only if it is assumed (as of course it always is) that men ought to behave in ways that further God's intentions for them. Though, when a man ceases to believe in God, he is not committed to rejecting these beliefs, since they do not follow logically from the statement that God has certain intentions, he is inclined to feel less strongly about them. It is only when these beliefs are put before him in some other connexion, as parts of some other intellectual structure, that he is again disposed to accept them as fervently as he did before.

The attempt to derive moral principles from theology or metaphysics is a time-honoured way of putting them forward as principles which all men everywhere do or ought to accept. Therefore, when this manœuvre is

rejected, so too is the idea that there are universal principles. It is admitted that there always are moral principles and that there always will be; it is admitted that the study of what they are and how they arise is valuable. But the task of elaborating a systematic practical philosophy is depreciated; it is what the theologians and metaphysicians used to do. It is what they still do, though with less conviction now than when their labours were not greeted with scepticism. The task made sense to them; but how can it make sense to men thoroughly imbued with the scientific spirit?

Now, this attitude to practical philosophy is quite irrational. The need for it is there, whether or not it is possible to derive universal principles from beliefs about God or the world or man; it is there, whether or not it can be shown that there are principles which men do or ought to accept everywhere. Man today, much more than in the past, must get his own bearings in the world; he must *make* himself at home in the world, for he can no longer be at home in it merely by conforming to the conventions and acquiring the prejudices of his station in society. Indeed, he no longer has a station, as his ancestors did; he is much more socially mobile in a much more quickly changing society.

Self-conscious, sophisticated man's conception of himself does not consist only of what he knows about himself or thinks he knows; it consists also of what he aspires to be. Admittedly, he is not what he aspires to be; he is what he is. But the kind of image he has of himself depends largely on what he aspires to be. He does not get his aspirations from the sciences, not even the social sciences; he gets them, directly or indirectly, from practical philosophy, whether or not that philosophy is tied to religion or to metaphysics. He cannot live from hand to mouth, following custom and accepting all current prejudices as they come. He lives in a kind of society which makes him critical and self-critical. To be happy, he must have aspirations, and must also feel that he can live up to them; he must be true to some image of himself. If he wants what he cannot get, or wants incompatible things, or has ambitions that bring him into conflict with other men, he cannot be happy.

Not everyone is capable of acquiring for himself a coherent practical philosophy. Not everyone feels the need for it. There are doubtless some people—and who knows how many they are?—who are quite content to drift through life. There are others who need guidance but are incapable of philosophy. They seek guidance from churches, from political parties, and from other organizations, and also from friends. There are still others who make for themselves a practical philosophy without engaging in controversy or adding anything to the stock of ideas and arguments. But some there must be who do the systematic thinking which goes to the making of practical philosophies. They are not scientists; their business is not to explain

what happens in the world. And they are not philosophers in the rather narrow contemporary sense; their business is not to explain how we use language or how we get knowledge or what exactly it is that we are doing when we pass moral or aesthetic judgements or when we make decisions. They are philosophers in a quite different sense: they try to produce a coherent system of principles and to establish what needs to be done to enable men to live in conformity with them. They do not merely examine and compare the principles, showing where they are incompatible and explaining their consequences; they do not, like honest shopkeepers, display a large variety of goods, describing them all accurately and leaving it to the customer to choose what pleases him best. They produce a hierarchy of principles, and try to explain how men should use them to make their choices. This is how they help to provide them with a practical philosophy.

If the producers of these theories were like honest shopkeepers, if they were mere purveyors of ideas, they could not meet the need which it is their function to meet. If their business were merely to explain what this or that principle amounts to, how it fits in with other principles, and what is likely to happen when it is acted upon; if their business were to offer a large variety of principles, or even philosophies, for consideration, inviting every man to make his own choice among them, they would only bewilder and annoy. But they are not mere purveyors of ideas; they are preachers and propagandists. They are people who have, or who believe they have, discovered how men should live; and they will not be listened to unless they speak with conviction. They need not all speak with one voice, but each of them must take his stand. This is a condition of their effectiveness. If every missionary were to explain several different religions to his listeners, leaving it to them to make a choice, religion would take no hold. A man must already be committed before he can do much to help other people to commit themselves. As it is with missionaries, so it is with philosophers of this kind. Their business is to help people commit themselves. Freedom of thought is preserved, not because each thinker offers several theories for inspection and choice, but because different thinkers offer different theories with equal conviction. It is not the variety of strongly held convictions among the intellectual *élite* which is bewildering and depressing; it is the lack of conviction among them. Strong convictions attract and repel; they do not leave people indifferent. They encourage those who have the ability to do so to make up their own minds, to know where they stand. They do what science and linguistic analysis cannot do.

It is not enough that practical philosophies should be strongly held; they should also be well thought out and realistic. They should aim at self-consistency and at taking account of the facts.¹ The more thoughtful they

¹ Practical philosophy is deeply affected by psychology and the social sciences. Though

are, the more they encourage thought in the persons who take stock of them. It does not matter that very few people should swallow them whole. Whoever considers them seriously will usually want to do more than establish their merits and defects; he will also want to construct a practical philosophy for himself, and the more they challenge thought in him, the more thoughtful that philosophy will be.

The more men live in societies which change quickly, the more mobile they are in those societies, and the more accustomed to the idea that they can, by taking thought, change their social environment to come closer to their ideals, the greater the part of social and political thought in practical philosophy. Its business is to relate a coherent body of principles to government; its business is to tell us what government should do to realize those principles and how it should be organized to do it. Political theory, as distinct from political science, is not fantasy or the parading of prejudices; nor is it an intellectual game. Still less is it linguistic analysis. It is an elaborate, rigorous, difficult, and useful undertaking. It is as much needed as any of the sciences. Its purpose is not to tell us how things happen in the world, inside our minds or outside them; its purpose is to help us decide what to do and how to go about doing it. To achieve that purpose, it must be systematic, self-consistent, and realistic. We learn to cope with the world, not by collecting principles at random, but by acquiring a coherent practical philosophy, which we acquire largely in the process of considering other philosophies of the same kind.

No doubt only a small minority acquire, or are capable of acquiring, a coherent practical philosophy. But then only a small minority are capable of becoming scientists. We do not show that an activity is unnecessary or useless by showing that only a few persons engage in it.

IV

It may well be that no practical philosophy, and therefore no political theory, is universally acceptable. There may be no set of principles of which we can say: if men understood these principles, and also understood

we do not logically derive our values from what we know (or think we know) about ourselves and our social environment, we do change them as we change our minds about the facts. No one has done more than Freud to change our standards of sexual morality. Though these changed standards do not follow logically from his psychological theories, people who accept the theories are more disposed than they would otherwise be to accept the standards. But this detracts nothing from the importance or the distinctive character of practical philosophy. Art, too, is deeply affected by science and by practical philosophy, and yet it is an activity of a quite different kind which seems unimportant only to people who do not understand what it is. The more our standards are liable to change, the greater our need for practical philosophy. The greater our need, not just to understand how they have changed, but to introduce order among them. The need for practical philosophy is part of man's need to be his own master, to make up his own mind how he shall live and what he shall be.

what human nature is and might be, they would accept them. I suspect that Marx and Engels believed the contrary. They denied that a practical philosophy can be derived logically from theology or from the nature of man, but they believed, none the less, that the fundamental rules and values of the classless society are universally acceptable, in the sense that men who understand what man and society are and might become do accept them. They expected the morality of classless societies to be everywhere the same and unchanging.

To defend my thesis I need not go as far as Marx and Engels went. I say only that the need for practical philosophy exists in all sophisticated societies. Just as sophisticated man is a scientist and an artist and an analytical philosopher, so too is he a practical philosopher and a political theorist. Most men, of course, are not so, but some are. Modern society creates a need for what they do which can neither be destroyed nor met by science and analytical philosophy.

There is nothing illiberal about practical philosophy and political theory, thus conceived. Admittedly, they are indoctrination; they are not the mere sorting out of ideas and their implications. But there need be no monopoly of indoctrination. In a liberal society there are some principles common to all or most of the political theories current in it. There is both community and variety of beliefs. But the beliefs held in common are as much open to question as the others. For society to remain liberal, it is not necessary that these beliefs should not be questioned; all that is needed is that they should be widely accepted. The more men differ, and the longer they have been accustomed to differing, the more likely they are to accept principles which make it possible for those who differ to live peacefully together. The principles commonly accepted are not more strongly held than the others; they are merely held along with the others. The Catholic or the Protestant who believes in toleration is not a liberal first and a Catholic or a Protestant afterwards, nor is he a less fervent believer than he would be if he were intolerant. So it is also with political creeds; they are not the less strongly held merely because those who hold them are tolerant.