WHAT IS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY?

We can safely start with a few harmless, petty and widely
neglected points. In the widest sense philosophy, or the philosophical
attitude, is just the questioning of assumptions, the attempt to dis-
cover and examine the assumptions on which any particular argument in
any particular sphere is based. So political philosophy is the at-
ttempt to discover and criticize all the assumptions in the sphere of
politics. These assumptions are of three kinds: about facts, about
trends, and about values.

1. Facts. It is unfortunately true that it is not possible by
simply reading the daily papers and listening to them, to know
enough about any event in the world to be able to make an informed
judgment about it. The reasons for this are, firstly, the obvious
one that the newspapers has a limited amount of space, secondly, the
fact that newspapers apparently feel themselves under some obligation
to print dramatic news and bad news, which means that we get all
reports out of the context of mundane events and small items of good
news in which they, in fact, occur and, thirdly, and most importantly,
the fact that the news is relayed to us by reporters who select and
interpret facts, sometimes consciously, but generally quite uncon-
sciously in terms of theoretical assumptions of which they are not
even aware. So the philosophical approach should be the critical
one of always checking facts, leading widely to fill in the necessary
background, and always looking for the implicit interpretations.

This brings us to my second point - the necessity for
questioning the assumptions in terms of which we interpret facts.
Karl Popper criticizes the theory that science proceeds by induction,
that is that we first watch things happening and that only then do we
formulate theories about what is happening. He says "at no stage of
scientific development do we begin without something in the nature of
a theory, such as a hypothesis, or a prejudice, or a problem - often
a technological one - which in some way guides our observations"
(Fav. Hist., 134). He is here referring to the experimental science,
but what he says is even more true of politics. We always interpret
political experiences and political phenomena in terms of our iso-
lettes. There can be no purely empirical approach to politics.
This doesn't mean at all that we cannot have any objective knowledge
in the sphere of politics. What it does mean is that not only must
political philosophy criticize any assumptions, it must also help
to build new assumptions, that is a new and this time, one hopes,
true ideology.

Before going on to discuss this in more detail I should
just mention my third point, before it gets lost - that is, the
necessity of criticizing assumptions about values. There are
roughly three kinds of value systems - selfish values, in-group values,
and universal values. I don't think philosophical argument can show
which of these is best - I simply take it for granted that universal
values are. Here there are two possible attitudes open to us. The first
is to show that people's judgements aren't consistent with their pro-
claimed universalist ethic; for example, many British people were, and
still are, because of the position from which they look at it, unable
to see that the British Empire was not an expression of universalist
brotherly love as far as the subject peoples were concerned.

The second and more important point is that it is neces-
sary to show what a universalist ethic implies, in terms of practical
action. For two people with identical moral views will behave very
differently if they understand the situation differently. For
example, if my moral principle is "love thy neighbour as thyself" and
I happen to be a capitalist in Nineteenth Century England, I may
either interpret the misery of my employees and ex-employees during
a slump as being part of the nature of things, as something to be
alleviated, but not fundamentally changed; or I may see it as the
alleviated, but not fundamentally changed; in which case my love will take the form of soup and rolled socco; or I may see it as the result of a man-made political system for which I am partly respon-
sible, and so my love will take the very different form of a com-
mitment to the overthrow of the system.

So moral principles are useless without an understanding of the situation. This brings us back to point 2: political phil-
osophy as a search for an ideology, for a general understanding of society.

Let me first briefly discuss this word 'ideology'. There is a common belief that an ideology is an artificial and imposed set of beliefs and motives, with the implication that there are also natural motives and beliefs which contradict the ideologies. For example, I've seen people writing about the Sino-Soviet border dis-
paly refer to the motives of the Chinese as a 'conflict between ideology and nationalism' as though the former were something artifi-
cial and the latter a natural drive. But of course that complex of beliefs and principles which is nationalism is itself an ideology. (The very concept 'nation' is a recent historical development.)

In the sphere of human conduct there are no natural drives simply because human beings are almost by definition anti-natural, because they can think.

Let me also give an example of how a political event is interpreted in ideological terms and how, because of the zero or less unconscious nature of one's assumptions, we can be led to invent exceedingly wild theories so as not to have to question them.

George Kennan, after the lecture he gave us on the Cold
War last year, was asked a question about current events in China:-
the Red scares, the proletarian culture revolution and so on - and he replied, with apparent seriousness, that it was difficult to understand, but as far as he could see the Chinese leaders (or the Chinese people, I don't quite remember which) had gone literallY insane, and that this insanity, manifesting itself in a hatred for every-
thing foreign, had roots in an intense self-hatred.

Now, as a matter of fact, the Cultural Revolution is quite easily understandable in terms of the stress laid in Marxian theory on the level of consciousness of the masses as being a determining factor in politics, the idea that this level should be raised, and the idea of the relationship between theory and practice, whereby consciousness of a problem comes first through grasping with it, rather than just being told about it. By saying that the cultural revolution can be understood in this way I don't mean to imply that this proves Marxian theory to be right. What I do mean is that Mao Tse-Tung honestly believes that this theory is right and is honestly trying to put it into practice. But now why was Kennan unable to accept the simple solution that the Chinese leaders can't think what they say, and instead had to find a palpably ridiculous solution to the problem?

The reason is that he had certain assumptions about human behaviour - roughly on the lines that men necessarily seek their own power interests - according to which the theory of Marxism could only be a smokescreen for the practice of power, something which tended to refute his assumption was, rather, considered in terms of his assumptions as insanity.

So let me just repeat, there is no ideological (non-
philosophical) approach to politics. Philosophical analysis is always required. (It is perhaps worth noticing that to deny this is a con-
servative position, since it necessarily gives the existing situation, and the ideology which expresses it, a privileged status).
You we must consider how one should approach the job of discovering the true ideology, of understanding society sufficiently to grasp the true significance of events and to see how one might, if necessary, change it.

The point that I want to stress is that, while it is important to have an adequate description as possible of the society, of its institutions, of the way in which it produces and distributes wealth, of how it is ruled, and so on, it is perhaps even more interesting to know why it is as it is.

And if we want to change the society, it is absolutely necessary to know why it is as it is. Until we know what causes operate beneath the surface, as it were, we cannot know what changes are possible and what changes are impossible. For example, according to laissez-faire liberal political theory, men are naturally self-centred, and so the social system must allow for this by laying great stress on the profit motive; if this drive is neglected, by the attempt to introduce the idea of the collective welfare as the utility for working, then the whole system will stagnate and break down. Socialist theory argues, on the other hand, that the considerable devotion to the profit motive which we see around us is not the cause, but the result of the capitalist system, and that since man is rational he is not necessarily arrested by any internal drive and so he could work for the general good rather than for his particular good.

So to decide who is right and what is possible we have to discover what 'human nature' is, and to find out how social institutions have an independent life of their own, and also to find out what other factors condition the development of society.

If I am somewhat labouring this point of the necessity of formulating a general theory of society, involving references to the nature of man and perhaps even, as in Plato and in Aquinas, to the nature of the universe, it is because there is a rather popular school of thought which denies both the possibility and the desirability of such an undertaking.

One of the patron saints of this school is Karl Popper and I would like to discuss his criticism in a little detail because it will clarify further why I have been trying to say. The point I wish to deal with is his distinction between "Utopian Engineering" and "Piecemeal Engineering". First, a word of warning and of apology. Popper does not use these concepts in any clear or precise way (at least in his "The Poverty of Historicism" on which I am basing these remarks). Sometimes "piecemeal engineering" seems to mean any attempt to societally change short of the attempt to achieve a total cataclysmic reorganisation of society in a single day, whereas at other times he seems the attempt to continually change bits of society here and there, one by one. As this seems to be the approach to which he is emotionally attached, I shall assume that this is what he means all the time, and politely ignore his inconsistencies.

He says "The characteristic approach of the piecemeal engineer is this. Even though he may perhaps cherish some ideals which concern society as a whole — its general welfare perhaps — he does not believe in the method of reorganising it as a whole. Whatever his ends he tries to achieve them by small adjustments and readjustments which can be continually improved upon" (p. 68). Why must he limit his approach to "small adjustments"? Popper gives two kinds of reasons. Firstly, "the piecemeal engineer knows, like Sorbets, how little he knows" (p. 57) and, secondly, there is a difference in method. "Instead of trying to find lines of social development, it would look for the various lines which impose limitations upon the construction of social institutions, or for other uniformities" (p. 66). He seeks to fail to realise that "love of social development" might impose limitations on the construction of social institutions.

That is, the problem is not, as the first quotation implies, that we don't know enough about society to be able to risk making general assumptions. Rather, it is that even when we make the attempt at piecemeal engineering as
cannot possibly avoid making either implicit or explicit general assumptions about the nature of society, including the way in which society changes.

Let us take the problem of poverty in a relatively rich society. How does one deal with it? If you decide to combat it by, say, increased welfare payments, while retaining the general social structure, in the hope of boosting the employability of the new generation, you are making a number of assumptions about the cause of poverty, and particularly the assumption that the state of poverty is largely accidental to the individual, that it does not change his personality in any fundamental way, so that he will react 'rationally' to the welfare measures, as you or I would.

An American sociologist, Oscar Lewis, argues, on the other hand, that the entire personality is changed by certain states of poverty, that there is a "culture of poverty". The poor, he says, "create their own culture in which they install themselves, withdraw and organize themselves, and in which they remain despite to themselves" (K.124 p.26). This culture of poverty is transmitted from generation to generation. "By the age of six, the children in the poor quarters of East Side, P.V., have built themselves a modus of life to which they will try to conform, and which takes very precisely into account the available opportunities ... the result is that they are frozen into rigid behavior patterns which lower their possibility of evolving, even if society offers them the means" (K.124 p.26).

This sort of analysis would seem to indicate that a piecemeal approach might simply not work, that only large changes designed to alter the psychology of the people living in the culture of poverty would be effective. This is a certain extent borne out by some remarks of Oscar Lewis about Cuba, in a recent interview, where he says that for the first time he had found people who had broken out from the culture of poverty when he revealed families on what he had previously done research, still living in the poor quarters of Havana. He says: "For the first time I found myself faced with very poor people who did speak with satire, who really seemed to believe in the future, who were full of hope for their children, who did not mean about their government and, above all, who had the feeling of being organized" (K.124 p.26). That is, it was only the feeling that they were associated with the rest of the society in an attempt to build a new system which enabled them to break out of the culture of poverty.

I am not here particularly concerned with arguing whether Oscar Lewis's approach is better than Johnson's. I want to stress simply that both piecemeal evolved and top-down engineering involve general assumptions about the nature of society, and so both require a priori philosophical analysis of politics. Of course, much of analysis might show that the cautious piecemeal approach is the best way to build the better society we want, but that is another question.

In this paper I have been trying, not to present any particular philosophical theory of politics, but just to show that it is impossible to avoid thinking about politics in terms of a particular theory - that is, in terms of an ideology. This helps to clarify an enormously important point which is often overlooked, which is that such political arguments which seem to be about moral judgments and about scale, is really about facts and about values. For example, liberals and conservatives do not disagree on the desirability of individual freedom and democracy. What they disagree about is what sort of institutions really permit government by the people for the people. They disagree about the circumstances in which a man can really be said to be free and about what social forces mitigate against this freedom. So the political philosopher has not done his duty if he only produces arguments to show that freedom and democracy are good things. He has to provide a detailed analysis of human beings and of how they form into societies, of what new forces are created by that social relationship, and of the influence on them of the world in which they live, of the things they have to do to stay alive, and so on, before he can give any genuine answer to the ideals of freedom and democracy.