

WHAT IS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY?

We can safely start with a few harmless, trite and widely neglected points. In the widest sense philosophy, or the philosophic attitude, is just the questioning of assumptions, the attempt to discover and examine the assumptions on which any particular argument in any particular sphere is based. So political philosophy is the attempt to discover and criticise all the assumptions in the sphere of politics. These assumptions are of three kinds: about facts, about theories for interpreting the facts and, of course, about moral values.

1. Facts. It is unfortunately true that it is not possible by simply reading the daily papers and listening to the radio, to know enough about any event in the world to be able to make an informed judgement about it. The reasons for this are, firstly, the obvious one that the newspaper 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 unconsciously 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, reading widely to fill in the necessary background, and always looking for the implicit interpretations.

This brings me to my second point - the necessity for criticising the assumptions in terms of which we interpret facts. Karl Popper criticises 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" (Pop. Hist. 134). He is here referring to the experimental sciences, but what he says is even more true of politics. We always interpret political experiences and political phenomena in terms of our ideologies. 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 criticise any assumptions, it must also help to build new assumptions, that is a new, and this time, one hopes, a 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 criticising 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 possibilities open to us. The first is to show that people's judgements aren't consistent with their proclaimed 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 necessary to show what a universalist ethic involves, in terms of practical action. For two people with identical moral codes 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 Nineteen 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 wollen socks; or I may see it as the result of a man-made political system for which I am partly responsible, and so my love will take the very different form of a commitment to the overthrow of the system.

So moral principles are useless without an understanding of the situation. This brings me back to point 2; political philosophy 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 dispute refer to the motives of the Chinese as "a conflict between ideology and nationalism" as though the former were something artificial 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 of how, because of the more or less unconscious nature of one's assumptions, one 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 Guards, 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 as a hatred for everything foreign, had its 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 Marxist 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 best through grappling 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 Marxist theory to be right. What it does prove 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 mean 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.

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So let me just repeat, there is no non-ideological (non-philosophical) approach to politics. Philosophic analysis is always required. (It is perhaps worth noticing that to deny this is a conservative position, since it necessarily gives the existing situation, and the ideology which expresses it, a privileged status).

Now 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 as complete a 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 motive 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 dominated by any internal drives 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 to what extent 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 criticisms in a little detail because it will clarify further what I've 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/or apology. Popper does not use these concepts in any clear or precise way (at least in "The Poverty of Historicism" on which I am basing these remarks). Sometimes "piecemeal engineering" seems to mean any approach to social change short of the attempt to achieve a total cataclysmic reorganisation of society in a single day, whereas at other times he means the attempt to cautiously 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 redesigning it as a whole. Whatever his ends he tries to achieve them by small adjustments and readjustments which can be continually improved upon" (P.H 66). Why must he limit his approach to "small adjustments"? Popper gives two kinds of reason. Firstly, "The piecemeal engineer knows, like Socrates, how little he knows" (PH 67) and, secondly, there is a difference in method. "Instead of trying to find laws of social development, it would look for the various laws which impose limitations upon the construction of social institutions, or for other uniformities" (PH 46). He seems to fail to realise that "laws 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 we

