

QUESTIONING WHAT EVERYONE KNOWS: THE ART OF POLITICAL INQUIRY*

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Students of politics are often uncertain what reward they will receive from their effort. I do not mean to say that they differ from biologists, or musicologists, or engineers, or any of the other arts which men pursue. They all are in the same boat when it comes to praying that following their natural bent or the lure of opportunity will be not only good for them but good, simply. Still, students of politics have a special problem and are therefore special. For they alone pursue an inquiry the subject of which and the necessity to come to terms with which are manifest not only to them but to everyone. Is there any other liberal study regarding which people in general are so largely unwilling to concede the possibility of an expertise beyond their comprehension?

The student of politics begins, then, with the knowledge that he will expend great labor to acquire a knowledge which all others believe to have virtually by birth. Little wonder he occasionally hears footsteps behind him and noises in the night, anticipates the reproaches of his fellows, and causes endless confusions for his more orderly peers with insistent questioning about matters for which everyone already knows the answers. Remember, if you encounter one, to treat him with indulgence. He means you no harm, and the phase of his innocence is sure to pass.

I am, of course, aware that not all of you are students of politics. And I do not mean to be parochial in addressing myself to students of politics to the exclusion of your various intellectual pursuits. I could feebly excuse myself by stating that in speaking of a subject about which I know a good deal, although I might not capture your interest, I should at least speak of what could be of use to you if you were interested.

The truth, however, is that I address myself to students of politics—not students in the department of political science—in order to speak to the broadest cross-section of you which it is possible to reach in a single speech. Ultimately, I should encourage you all to be students of politics. But much spring flooding is yet to come before that flower opens to view.

Who, then, are the students of politics? You will note immediately the need for me to clarify two points to answer this question. First, what are students, or, which is the same, what is education? Second, what is politics?

I am afraid, however, that I must disappoint your expectations if you wait now for, what would be in good order, explicit definitions, followed by qualifications (3 on each side) and categorization (3 for

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each qualification). Rather, I expect to make clear in passing what I take to be liberal education (oops! qualification #1) and what I take to be politics.

Suffice it to say now that education at a minimum is the acquisition of understandings, and politics at a minimum is the constituting a way of life in order to live which humans require to see themselves as distinct from other humans.

There are two kinds of students. They who have learned to laugh about such things as ghosts and witches and who pursue their bents or opportunities while trusting to their consciences to keep them safe from evil-doing are one kind. The other kind are they who have learned to laugh about ghosts, witches, and consciences. The latter kind of student realizes the importance of seeking out guidance not to acquire an art but more importantly for deciding about which art to seek and how to pursue goodness.

We have a problem, though, in that the prevailing view of our time throws every man on his own resources with respect to goodness. We say that there is no rational ground for decisions about the just things, the good things. Science can teach us the truth about facts (experiences) but can say no more about “values” than that everybody seems to have some. It makes no difference how one gets them, nor what anyone else thinks of them. Of course, science also has faith that everyone has some. Science cannot conceive that people exist who laugh not only at ghosts and alchemists but also at conscience.

The scientific “world view” is inadequate to the crisis of our time, and all of the arts, all of the disciplines of our time are based on the scientific “world view”—the fact-value distinction. We may summarize the crisis of our time by saying that we rely upon freedom to preserve our chance to achieve goodness of craft and character, but we are unable to defend freedom against the value of tyranny or totalitarianism. We have denied the authority of that rational argument which holds that freedom alone both begets and requires goodness by denying *a priori* the rational authority of every possible moral *proposition*. The only defense we will accept—and therefore will make—for the kind of life we live is that it is what we want, for now. The greatest sin of our time is not lust or lechery, greed or wanton, murder or mayhem, nor even racism or imperialism. The greatest sin of our time—in the eyes of that opinion which counts because it rules, the opinion of intellectuals—is moral absolutism. And because moral absolutism always aims at a conception of general human goodness (whatever its actual result), and alone does so, the greatest evil of our time is the idea of general human goodness.

There have been two outstanding sources of this evil in human history, religion and philosophy. In fact, both have subserved a single historical phenomenon, the city or, properly speaking, politics. Politics, therefore, is the outstanding force of evil in human history. There is, and always has been, but one discipline whose task it is to understand and articulate the claim of goodness, and that is political philosophy.

The pre-eminent example of the subject matter and aim of political philosophy is the opening sentence of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*: “Every art and every inquiry, equally practice and pursuit, seems to be aimed at some good.” Just as politics is the architectonic or ruling art, which aims to comprehend all the lesser arts in the pursuit of what is in fact good, so political philosophy is the ruling science. Insofar as one becomes a student of politics, his craft will be political philosophy. To the degree that one submits his natural bent or the lure of opportunity or both to the test of goodness, the meter he must employ is political philosophy. If the purpose of a liberal education (and that is the education which suits a free man, the *liber*) is to bring one to submit his inclinations or prejudices to the test of reason, then liberal education will always be incomplete without political philosophy.

. . . fate or chance, we see, is the prudent exercise of favored ambitions. His ambition is to be able to do anything, but its realization forces him to seek what to do. Only the perfect human being can know what to will. The statesman is imperfect for he remains dependent upon earthly honor. That is, in wishing to will all, he reveals that those things which are the objects of will constitute his highest ambitions. Those things have to do with pleasures and pains and, as such, are inferior to the true purpose or end of the 'great and immortal soul.' Yet, this last alone can properly answer the question as to what should be willed; in virtue of its superiority to though not detachment from those ambitions.

A complete education requires education in political philosophy, albeit in this critical time we do not generally demand a complete education. If we are ever to demand a complete education, it will be that we have become alive to the insufficiency of our lives—lives still fetid with the desiccated spirit of positivism. If we are to be so persuaded it will be because we have acquired the capacity to gaze upon possibilities long since hidden by the soiled gauze of history or, more correctly, historicism. Political philosophy must be liberated from the thought-denying prison of historicism in order to display its proper wares to new merchants of goodness.

Leo Strauss, our late teacher, characterized the problem of the "historicist assumption" in these words:

. . . there are two opposed ways in which one can study the thought of the past. Many present-day scholars start from the historicist assumption, namely, that all human thought is "historical" or that the foundations of human thought are laid by specific experiences which are not, as a matter of principle, coeval with human thought as such. Yet there is a fatal disproportion between historicism and true historical understanding. The goal of the historian of thought is to understand the thought of the past "as it really has been," i.e., to understand it as exactly as possible as it was actually understood by its authors. But the historicist assumption approaches the thought of the past on the basis of the historicist assumption which was wholly alien to the thought of the past. He is therefore compelled to attempt to understand the thought of the past better than it understood itself. In one way or the other, his presentation will be a questionable mixture of interpretation and critique. It is the beginning of historical understanding, its necessary and, one is tempted to add, its sufficient condition that one realizes the problematic character of historicism. For one cannot realize it without becoming seriously interested in an impartial confrontation of the historicist approach that prevails today with the nonhistoricist approach of the past. And such a confrontation in its turn requires that the nonhistoricist thought of the past be understood on its own terms, and not in the way in which it presents itself within the horizon of historicism. (*On Tyranny*, p. 24)

We may see now that the possibility of political philosophy, and hence of a complete education, hinges on our acquiring a sense of the delusions under which we live—which is just another way of saying it depends on our having the intellectual fortitude to recognize and consider alternative models of political discourse and analysis. In addition to recovering sight of the aim of politics and political philosophy, we must also recover a sense of the subject matter—political speech—as it conceived itself, fully colored with sentiments of piety and revenge, anger and gratitude, indignation, honor, and shame—in a word, single-mindedness. Just as souls are the subject matter of politics or statesmanship, regimes (hierarchical orderings of souls) are the subject matter of philosophy.

Xenophon's *Agesilaus*, a celebration of a monarch, serves to provide an example of the possibilities for interpretation. I offer you chapters 8 through 10 as proper material upon which to found a comparative analysis of present techniques and alternative possibilities. Xenophon closes the first of these

chapters with the words, “he formed his soul so as to be impregnable to money, voluptuous pleasures, and fear.” He thereby distinguishes Agesilaus’ justice, moderation or continence, and courage (wisdom) from the virtues of piety and patriotism. By bringing the reach of the former virtues within range of a monarch’s will Xenophon elevates them, at least insofar as what is both good for us and accessible to us is higher than what is merely good. The following chapters show Agesilaus putting his virtues to good use, or, properly, faring well on account of his virtues; they show the political image of a Socrates (See Xenophon’s *Apology*). Xenophon recaptures the opening question of the work, concluding in chapter 10 that Agesilaus is “rightly believed to be a completely good man.” The closing chapter, the summary, completes the account of his complete goodness. He was in awe of the gods, even among enemies, and in awe of what gods could do for men. Hence, his piety. After the first half of the summary, the gods vanish. From paragraph 9 to the end the reader revels in the man the monarch, for whom the good he could himself do was an obsession.

It is manifest that, Xenophon’s praise of Agesilaus takes seriously Agesilaus’ purported concern for the common good. Would it not have been more likely for a 20th century Xenophon to see these same characteristics in the light of a mere attempt to gain influence over others, for the sake of some hidden agenda? Why then should we afford old-fashioned Xenophon’s naiveté any credibility? If we look again, we will note that old-fashioned Xenophon was not uncritical. In chapter 2 he allows that there might be some other way in which one could find fault with Agesilaus’ apparent confusing the common good of Sparta and the common good of Greece. Yet, he discerned an ultimate objective which he judged to be the controlling factor in Agesilaus’ mind and which, in any case, serves to bring us to reflect on the virtue and paradox of friendship as the aim of politics. Friendship as an end both necessitates and undermines justice. Defined by Aristotle as the preference of another’s good, in its ideal expression friendship is the relationship among all citizens, and something to be aimed at in legal arrangements. But, the stronger that passion, the more possible it is that someone might prefer a friend’s good to the city’s good. (Unlike Xenophon, Plutarch thought Agesilaus all too prone to that sin.) And there is a bigger problem to which Xenophon points in chapter 7. Listen:

Well then, a messenger came to him with news that in the Corinthian battle, eight Lacedemonians had died, while nearly ten thousand of the adversaries, he did not become evidently delighted, but he said then, “Alas for you, oh Greece! when the perished were sufficient, if living, to win in a fight against all the barbarians.

Indeed, when the Corinthian refugees said that they would give over the city to them, and made a display of the machine with which they were looking to take the wall, he still did not wish to throw his forces against it, saying that it was not necessary to bring the Greek cities to slavery but to their prudence. If we annihilate those of us who err, we must see that we are not left with no one to overpower the barbarian.

Again, if it is good to be a hater of the Persian because of old he set forth in order to enslave Greece and presently he forms alliances with whomsoever will do the greatest mischief, gives presents to whomever would, receiving them, do special evil to the Greeks, and would join in helping any peace through which he accounts we will make war with each other; all men see this. But who except Agesilaus ever made it his business, that any community should revolt from the Persian, or that the revolted should not be cut off, or that the King, suffering evil, will not be able to give trouble to the Greeks? Who, when his fatherland made war against Greeks, nevertheless did not neglect the common good of Greece . . .

Here, Xenophon shows Agesilaus’ elevation of soul, by revealing that he could consider the good of Sparta as compatible with the good of other peoples. The problem of every regime, the necessity of

exclusivity, is overcome by a large ability to relate the end of the city to the human end (True to the wildest imaginings of Socrates). It is the political philosopher, Xenophon, who enables us to consider this question in a way which is far more fruitful than merely to assume universality or common humanity and thence to fail to comprehend war as a necessary defense of the chance for goodness.

There is one other perspective from which to regard the work of politics and hence the business of political philosophy. Those of you familiar with Plato's *Republic* will recall that the ultimate definition of justice in that work is "minding one's own business." That notion plays a central role in developing the idea of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need." It naturally leads to the idea that each person is endowed to perform some task best, and that when all members of a society do so (at least in the relevant classes), not only will order prevail but all source of conflict of interest will be eliminated.

Now, you will also recall that Socrates ultimately stumbles in building his ideal city when, in books VIII through X, the subject of the conditions for realizing it come up. The great symbolic example of some inexplicable difficulty is Socrates' inability to generate a geometry of moving solids—the inability also to show the city in motion as opposed to speech. There is also a practical manifestation of this symbolic difficulty: After all was said, no one could be found whose special endowment it was to mind everyone else's business! Thus, the philosopher, the best citizen, had to be compelled to be monarch, a ruler.

What this reflects, for our purposes, is the sense of the regime or constitution as a device through which citizens are tutored to mind the business of the whole; that is, the purpose of politics at a practical level seems to be to make it everyone's business to mind the business of the whole. This shows in a dramatic way the significance of the claims about human goodness which every regime makes.

Political philosophy is that discipline which is able to articulate the regime's claims about goodness in such a way that every citizen, whatever his art or inquiry, may know how to assume his obligation to mind the business of the whole. There is a pre-condition to be sure: the citizen must be a student of politics before he can become a student of political philosophy—that is, only those who laugh at the delusions of mankind can recognize the prospects of an explanation and of guidance which political philosophy offers. I do not pretend that political philosophy is just one of many disciplines carrying out its assigned function. Rather, I mean to deny the conclusions drawn by those who think that a philosophical understanding is incompatible with a moral or political understanding. (I have tried to explain this, in a review of *Gibraltar Dialogues for Methodology and Science*, June/July, 1982).

Insofar as the human soul is, as may be, the only ordered whole which the human mind may grasp in its entirety, and insofar as it discloses itself never so fully as in comprehensive claims about human goodness or nature, political philosophy which articulates (cf., The dialogue with the "laws" in Plato's *Crito*) or investigates those claims will always be subordinate to its subject matter.

Even when political philosophy displaces it cannot replace revelation. For us, therefore, the problem is but to discover the necessity to include this study in a complete education. We have seen already that from the moment we perceive the need of education—that is, from the moment we are liberated from mere prejudice—we discover also the necessity of political philosophy. While not the historically first training we receive, it is the first education we receive. It follows, then, that where one has had no education in political philosophy, not only has he not had a complete education, his education has not yet begun.