

## *What is Political Theory?*

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The expression 'political theory' or 'a theory of politics' is familiar to us. Our question this afternoon is: What are we to understand by it? Or rather, How are we to begin to think about what we are to understand by it? because I want to put the emphasis, not upon a conclusion, but upon an enquiry about how such a question may be answered.

Here, two words, 'theory' and 'politics', are made to qualify one another. We know that each may have other qualifications: we speak of 'political manoeuvre', 'political party' and 'a style of politics'; and of 'economic theory', 'games theory' and 'a theory of knowledge'. Consequently we may suppose that the expression 'political theory' or 'theory of politics' is intended to point to something distinct. And what this may be will, I think, appear only by considering each of these ideas, 'theory' and 'politics', in separation. I will begin with 'theory'. The word, of course, is Greek; and in the Greek language it belongs to a short vocabulary of five words which is worth considering:

*Thea*: something seen, a 'spectacle', an occurrence.

*Theorein*: to look at, to observe what is going on.

*Theoros*: an intelligent observer; one who looks at what is going on, asks himself questions about it and tries to understand it.

*Theoria*: the act or procedure of seeking to understand what is going on: 'theorizing'.

*Theorema*: what may emerge from 'theorizing'. A conclusion reached by a *theoros*. 'An understanding' of what is going on. A 'theorem'.

Now, the first virtue of this vocabulary is that it distinguishes between the activity of 'theorizing' and any possible

out-come of the activity, a 'theorem'. This distinction is obscured in our own usage where 'theory' (e.g., in the expression 'political theory') may mean an activity or a conclusion, indifferently.

Secondly this vocabulary centres upon the activity - 'theorizing' - which is identified as an effort to understand. 'Theorizing' is not validating or 'proving' a conclusion reached, it is a procedure of discovery or enquiry. It is, briefly, the urge to inhabit a more intelligible or a less mysterious world.

Now, this vocabulary makes several important suggestions about this activity of understanding.

(1) Theorizing begins with something already in some degree understood. The *thea*, the occurrence with which it starts, is not merely 'looked at'; it is 'perceived', 'noticed', 'attended to', 'identified', perhaps even named. The *thea* itself is the first account we give to ourselves of what is going on. It is already in some sense 'intelligible' or it could not and would not be 'noticed' and 'distinguished'. It is what we ordinarily call a 'fact'. Thus, what is being suggested is that understanding is not something which we either enjoy or lack completely: we are never wholly without it, and we are always liable to want more than we have. We can never get back to any 'thing' which is not an account that we give to ourselves of an occurrence.

(2) Secondly, it is suggested that this *thea*, this 'fact', is not only understood, but is also waiting to be understood. It is the contingent starting place for an activity of 'theorizing'. And 'theorizing' takes place because the *theoros* is in some respect, or in some degree, dissatisfied with his first understanding of what is going on. A mystery, an unintelligibility remains which he wants to dispel. He does not know in advance what the *thea* will look like when it has become entirely intelligible; all he knows is that it is not entirely intelligible as he at present understands it. He has something to do.

(3) Thirdly, it is suggested that 'theorizing' is an effort to understand in a procedure of *enquiry*. That is to say, the *theoros* does not sit gazing at the occurrence merely wondering what is really going on; his urge to make it more intelligible springs from specific dissatisfactions with his present understanding. There is mystery still to be dispelled, and this

mystery consists of specific questions which his present understanding leaves unanswered.

(4) Fourthly, it is suggested that in any conclusion he may reach, his 'theorem' will be nothing more than an improved understanding of what was, from the beginning, in some degree understood.

Thus, there is no absolute distinction between 'fact' and 'theorem'; both are conclusions, both are understandings of what is going on, but one is a more satisfying understanding than the other. And there is no absolute difference between *theorein* ('observing' what is going on) and 'theorizing' what is going on; both are reflective activities in which an understanding of what is going on is being sought.

'Theorizing', then, is being represented here as a continuous, unconditional activity of trying to understand. It begins with an occurrence which is both understood and waiting to be understood. It is making more sense out of what already has some sense. And its principle is: 'Never ask the end'. It will go on until the occurrence becomes transparent, until the last vestige of mystery has been dispelled, until the *theoros* runs out of questions.

On the way it is to be expected that he will reach various platforms of conditionally satisfactory understanding; that is, situations in which one whole set of questions has received answers. But each of these platforms of conditional intelligibility will be, not only a temporary landing-stage, but also a taking-off ground; because the *theoros* cannot prevent the conditions themselves from becoming the subject of a whole set of new questions.

Let me illustrate:

This Greek vocabulary of 'theorizing' was connected with what may be called an 'inspectorate' of religious, dramatic and legal performances, and the word *thea* stood, among other things, for something to be observed going on in a 'theatre'. Thus, we may conveniently recognize a *theoros*, in the first place, not as a mere play-goer, but as a person specifically engaged in trying to understand what is going on - a dramatic critic, say, observing a performance, say, of Sophocles' 'Antigone'.

His business will be to try to understand the play as a piece of dramatic writing, and to consider the interpretation of it offered in this performance. He will be concerned with the

work of the author, the producer and the actors. And the understanding he achieves will be contained within considerations which, as a dramatic critic, he has no impulse to question. For example, he may consider the emotions aroused by the play and the skill with which the author and the actors achieve this; but he won't go on to enquire: 'what is an emotion?' That is to say he will occupy a fairly well-defined platform of understanding in which his attention is focused upon an actual performance.

But beginning from roughly the same *thea* as the dramatic critic, Aristotle in the *Poetics* occupies and explores a different and much more general platform of understanding. He is not concerned with the virtues and vices of a particular performance; he is concerned with 'drama'. He understands 'drama' as a certain sort of 'art', and 'art' as a certain sort of 'techne', and 'techne' as a certain sort of knowledge. Whereas the critic might say that the jokes in a comedy were good jokes and made him laugh and express his understanding in laughter - he 'sees the joke', Aristotle would be concerned to construct a *theorēma* of laughter itself. The critic might remark on the ineffectual 'timing' of an entrance or an exit; but Aristotle is concerned with 'time' as a component of drama. And so on. But the important point is that the serious *theoros*, the man who really wants to understand, will always begin to question the conditions of any conditional platform of understanding he may have reached. In other words, 'theorizing' is, itself, an unconditional, continuously critical attempt to achieve complete intelligibility.

Now, having insisted upon the continuous and unconditional character of the engagement to 'theorize', there is something else to be said.

This commitment to go on asking questions, to be critical of the conditions of every conditional understanding, may be arrested, stopped short.

(1) First, it may be *arbitrarily* arrested. The *theoros* may say: 'I have a particular and limited purpose in wanting to understand what is going on, and the understanding I have now achieved satisfies this purpose and I do not propose to proceed with the enquiry any further. I have achieved *an* understanding of what is going on; I can see that it rests upon certain conditions or assumptions, but I do not propose to

subject these conditions to enquiry; I propose to *use* the understanding I have achieved and not to try to improve it'.

There was once a girl being instructed about a slide-rule who said to her instructor: 'I don't want to understand it, I only want to know how to use it'. Now, she was calling for an arbitrary arrest in the commitment to understand, and she had a good, if arbitrary, reason for doing so; she only went wrong in not recognizing 'Knowing how to use it' a specific platform of understanding, inhabitable, inextinguishable, capable of its own conditional perfection, but unable to defend itself against further enquiry.

Now, this kind of arbitrary arrest in the activity of 'theorizing' is common enough, and we could not get on without it. For example, if courts of law were unable to accept the conditionality of the expression 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth', and if their proceedings were, always and as a matter of course, suspended while the magistrate (assisted by his clerk) considered the question, 'What is truth', no case would ever be decided.

But the genuine *theoros* has no urge to arrest the enquiry in any such arbitrary manner. He has no limited purpose to satisfy; he is not concerned to reach an understanding which he can *use*; he is simply concerned to understand as completely as may be.

(2) Secondly, there may be forms of what may be called systematic *arrest* in the engagement to understand.

A *systematic* arrest appears when the *theoros*, for the purpose of understanding, settles upon some general condition which he refuses to criticize, and when he understands whatever he is called upon to understand in terms of that condition.

The simplest example of this kind of arrest in 'theorizing' appears in the determination to understand everything and anything in terms of settled scales of measurement, in terms of *quantities*. Things understood simply as quantities compose a conditional platform of understanding, inhabitable and capable of its own conditional perfection. 'Theorizing' here is a determination to explore this systematically conditional platform of understanding.

This, perhaps, is the only absolutely transparent example of a systematic arrest in the activity of 'theorizing'. But there are other, somewhat vaguer, but nevertheless recognizably

the same kind of thing: for example, what is called a 'psychological' understanding or explanation. Exactly what conditions are being posited here, is difficult to say; but I think it is clear that when a *theoros* says he is seeking a 'psychological', or a 'chemical' understanding, he is laying down for himself *some* systematic conditions, and that this is the meaning of such expressions as 'psychological', 'chemical' 'physical', 'biological' and perhaps 'sociological' when combined with the words 'theory', or 'understanding' or 'explanation'. And, in all such cases, the occurrence which sets on foot the enquiry is merely the contingent starting place of the enquiry. The *same* enquiry could have started from any one of a limitless number of other *theai*; and the conclusion of this enquiry is not a theorem about the *thea* which happened to be its actual starting place.

(3) Now, there is a third kind of arrest of the unconditional urge to theorize which is neither arbitrary, nor systematic. I haven't got a word for it, but I will try to describe it.

Every engagement to understand has an acknowledged starting-place in some ostensibly identified 'fact' of experience. It begins in an enquiry *about* an occurrence, a *thea*. And it proceeds by asking questions. These questions may be contained or limited by arbitrarily chosen conditions, or by a systematically chosen general condition, but they may also be contained or limited by the manner in which the 'fact' of experience to be understood has been identified. What is *accepted* by the *theoros* is the identification of the 'fact' of experience. And the questions he asks are conditioned by this 'fact'. This, for example, is the case when the questions asked are: 'What other occurrences is this occurrence like or unlike?' or, 'What other occurrences may this occurrence be connected or correlated with?' When such questions as these are being asked, what is being sought is a more exact appreciation or understanding of an occurrence in terms of the qualities or features which already constitute it as a 'fact' of experience. And when this is the case, the *thea*, the occurrence is not merely a *contingent* starting place for the enquiry; it is a necessary anchor of the enquiry.

Let me give you an example. Aristotle, at one point in the *Politics*, recognized or identified a *polis* as a collectivity of human beings, and he asks the question: What other collectivities is it like or unlike? Is it like the collectivity of a swarm

of bees, or a colony of ants, or a 'tribe', or a 'household'? He finds that there is something wrong with each of these comparisons, but by asking this sort of question he has tied himself to a specific identification of a *polis*, and the only conclusion he can reach is a better appreciation of a *polis as a collectivity*. In short, the conclusion to the enquiry is *exactly* tied to the 'fact', the recognition, the identification of *polis* with which he began. He has, no doubt, learned more about a *polis*, but only about a *polis* identified as a collectivity of human beings.

In this kind of arrested 'theorizing' the condition which specifies the arrest is that the *thea* as originally identified should not be changed, dissolved, reduced to something else, understood in other terms or explained away. The principle here is that, in understanding it, the appearance of the 'fact' of experience must be saved. This, for example, is the principle which prevails in any simple classificatory understanding, such as Linnean 'botany': the terms of the classifications are given in the observed features of the occurrences. 'Vertebrates' compose a 'class' because they share a common observed feature.

Now, there will be more to be said about this in a moment, but that is all I have to say about the activity of 'theorizing'. 'Theorizing' is an urge to understand which may suffer various different sorts of arrest or suspension, but in principle is unconditional and continuous and has no ulterior purpose to serve. But it is enough, perhaps, to suggest some lines to go upon in thinking about the expression 'political theory' or 'theory of politics'.

In this expression, the word 'political' or 'politics' clearly stands for some kind of condition or limitation or focus of attention for the activity of 'theorizing'. And the first question is: what kind of condition or limitation does it stand for?

Is it an arbitrary condition? No. At least it is not like the examples of arbitrary limitation I have given. In qualifying the idea 'theorizing' by the idea 'politics', the *theoros* is not saying: 'I have a limited purpose in wanting to understand, and the word 'politics' stands for an intelligibility sufficient to satisfy that limited purpose'.

Is it a systematic condition? No. The word 'politics' is not like the word 'quantitative', or 'psychological' or 'chemical', or 'physical'. It does not stand for a general condition of

understanding which the *theoros* has accepted and does not propose to question.

Surely, the word 'politics', here, stands for an identification of 'that which is to be "theorized"' or understood, an *explicandum*, not for a method or kind of understanding. But, in the vocabulary I have used so far, 'that which is to be "understood"' or 'theorized' is a *thea*, an identified 'fact' of experience. And it would appear that the expression 'political theory' stands for an activity of 'theorizing', an urge to understand, *tied* to an identified 'fact' of experience.

Thus, we may imagine the *theoros* saying something like this: 'I have been able to distinguish an occurrence, or a whole kind of occurrence, going on in the world, a *thea*. And I have announced this achievement by giving a name to what I have distinguished: I call it a "political occurrence". Don't rush me into telling you exactly how I have distinguished and identified this sort of going-on. That will come later. For the moment all I can tell you is that what I mean by a "political" occurrence is *not*, for example, a performance of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', or a class of children being taught arithmetic in a village school. I have got something distinct, and I hope to make it more distinct, and in doing so I am already embarking upon an activity of "theorizing". As a *theoros* I am interested in "understanding" what I have provisionally identified as "politics", and having taken this as my engagement I announce myself as a "political theorist".'

Now, if this is the case, a 'political theorist' is a *theoros* engaged in exploring a conditional platform of understanding, the specifying conditions of which are those of an activity going on which he has managed to make distinct and has called 'politics'. In fact, he will be like a 'theorist' of 'art' or 'education'. He is going to 'theorize' an already specified activity or occurrence.

He will, of course, always be tempted to question the conditions he has imposed upon himself: 'theorizing' is, itself, an unconditional engagement. But his only hope of achieving a better understanding *of* what he has identified as politics lies in being able to resist the temptation to question the limits he has imposed upon himself.

This, I take it, is what Aristotle meant when he says that a theorist who engages himself to understand some 'fact' of experience must *not* say anything which denies that 'fact' of

experience. The 'fact' of experience is, in some sense, the master of the undertaking, or at least the *condition* of the undertaking.

Now, this is a somewhat odd situation. If the 'theorist' is genuinely *tied* to the identification of the 'fact' of experience with which he begins his enquiry, what is there for him to say which he has not already said in identifying the 'fact' of experience? The theorems he composes about 'politics' will, of course, be continuous with his identification of 'politics': observing, distinguishing and so on are only the early stages of a continuous engagement to understand. But what is being said here is, not merely that identifying and theorizing are a single continuous engagement, but that when the 'fact' of experience has been clearly distinguished, there is nothing more to be said.

But if 'political theory' is not an empty expression, there must be more to be said. And the question is: What is it?

I think I can answer this question best in an example. Aristotle's *Ethics* purports to be a theoretical understanding of a 'fact' of experience. This 'fact' of experience is identified in various ways, the simplest, perhaps, by utterances like: 'That action (which I see being performed) is a good action', or 'This is virtuous conduct, this is vicious'.

Now, we hear statements of this sort being made every day. They are intelligible; we know what they mean. They are 'facts' of human experience. But if we know what they mean, what is there for a 'theorist' to do? How can they be understood *better* than they are understood?

It is clear that Aristotle thought there was something more to be said which was not simply saying the same thing in other words. There is something to be said about moral judgments which moral judgments do not themselves enunciate. And he thought of the business of the *theoros* as that of elucidating the *postulates* of moral conduct or moral utterances. The business of a theorist here is to understand a 'fact' of experience in terms of its *postulates*, and, if possible, in terms of a *system* of postulates – a set of related concepts such as: deliberation, choice, purpose, intention, action, outcome, duty, responsibility, justification, excuse, freedom, happiness etc. etc.

Now, what are these postulates, and what is their relation to the 'fact' of experience – moral conduct or moral judgment – which they purport in some manner to 'explain'?

They are general concepts, which signify states of mind or dispositions, which do not, or need not, actually appear in moral utterance, but which are required to 'explain' or to give transparency to moral utterances. Perhaps, they might be called the *unstated assumptions* of moral utterance, which, when they are selected and the relations between them are explored, make larger, or superior, or better sense of moral utterances as a 'fact' of experience. Not more sense of *this* moral utterance distinguished from *that*, but of all moral utterances. A postulate of moral conduct is not an idea which a man who performs a moral action – that is an action recognized to be either right or wrong – must be supposed to have in his consciousness when he acts; it is an idea without which his acting in the way he does act remains opaque, or improperly understood.

Now, I don't think it can be denied that to understand an occurrence or a kind of occurrence in terms of its necessary postulates is understanding it better than it would otherwise be understood. This is certainly the sort of activity appropriate to a 'theorist'. But it will be what it purports to be, that is a superior understanding of the 'fact' of experience concerned, only if this 'fact' is *accepted* in the sense that nothing in it is denied by the postulates; and if the postulates are stated as theorems, *related to* the 'fact' of experience.

That is to say, theorizing here is not exactly *tied* to the 'fact' of experience to be theorized, but it is *tethered* to it; and the 'fact' of experience itself supplies conditions to be observed by the theorist. If, for example, 'freedom of choice' is asserted to be a postulate of moral conduct, then this concept must be limited to what is required to make sense of *moral conduct*. In other words, this sort of theorist, in exploring a set of postulates, must deny himself the luxury of an unconditional examination of them. He is occupying and exploring a conditional platform of understanding, the conditions being in some way supplied by the 'fact' to be understood. The 'fact' itself, being, of course, an understanding.

Let me give you another brief example of what I mean by this kind of 'theorizing'.

Let us suppose that the 'fact' of experience is recognized as the performance of a ritual, and, on closer inspection, is identified as a religious ritual – the Mass. This 'fact' of experience is, up to a point, intelligible; it is a combination of individually recognizable, identifiable movements and utterances. Yet, clearly it is also waiting to be understood: there is mystery to be dispelled. How can it become more intelligible? What is there for a 'theorist' to do? What questions can he seek answers to?

Well, to begin with, recognizing this as a performance of ordered movements, he may ask himself: What rules are being followed? The answer to this question will not be achieved without enquiry, because what is going on does not explicitly announce the rules, if any, being followed: indeed, the *theoros* may have to make the rules – that is to say, there may be no rule book in which they are formulated. But if he can see what is going on in terms of rules recognized as reasons for what is going on, he certainly understands this 'fact' of experience better.

But what else may he do? He may ask: what are the postulates of this performance? But what are these postulates? Surely, they are beliefs. And what the theorist has now undertaken to do is to uncover the beliefs which may be given as the reasons both for what he sees to be going on and for the rules which he thinks are being followed. And these beliefs require to be uncovered because they are only referred to, not enunciated, in what is going on. In short, the 'theory' of this ritual is a 'theology' – a set of theological 'theorems' required to make sense of what is going on.

But if this theology *is* to make sense of what is going on, what is going on itself provides limits within which the theologian must work. The beliefs he offers as reasons for what is going on must be related to what is going on and shown to be related.

This, then, is how I construe the expression 'political theory' or 'theory of politics'. It stands for a genuine but qualified activity of 'theorizing' or 'understanding; the qualification is supplied by the word 'politics', which is neither an arbitrary, nor a systematic qualification. It stands for a 'fact' of experience, recognized, identified, understood. And the most extended understanding of this fact of experience is in terms of its necessary postulates.

**EDITORIAL NOTES**

<sup>i</sup> LSE 1/1/54. Autograph.