PART I

INTRODUCTION
WHAT IS POLITICAL THEORY?

This chapter sets out to define terms such as political theory, political philosophy and ideology, and to clarify the meaning of various specialist terms used by political theorists. It offers examples of contentious or fallacious arguments to illustrate the fact that any political argument advanced can be contested from a different ideological perspective and to demonstrate the importance of political theory for evaluating the validity of ideological arguments.

Should people be more equal? Is the state more important than the individual? Can a socialist society be free? Is political violence ever justified? Must we tolerate the intolerant? Can the majority dictate to the minority? Is it right that the rich should also be powerful? Such questions are the concerns of political theory. Although they sound deceptively simple, susceptible to ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ answers, when we try to answer them it becomes evident that each conceals a wealth of disputable assumptions and that the meaning of its key words is also disputable. Furthermore, the answers inevitably express opinions on what ought to be the case, rather than describing what is the case. Political values and ideals are at stake here, and choices between ideals must be made. I may give priority to freedom rather than equality because I think it more vital to human happiness, you may judge the opposite. Most of us are influenced by political
ideology, whether we knowingly subscribe to it or unconsciously absorb it as part of received opinion, so not only do the answers to political questions vary according to individual opinion, they also differ with the individual’s ideological position.

The practice of political theory helps us to set about answering such questions logically, and to criticize the answers which others give, by dealing with political matters at a more abstract and general level than does political science. Take the question ‘Is political violence ever justified?’ A ‘scientific’ answer would be an emphatic negative since violence is outlawed both legally and constitutionally. But political theory asks if justification might not be advanced according to circumstance. Does not an oppressed minority, denied the freedom to state its case, have a justification for using violence? Does not the validity of that justification further depend on what sort of violence and against whom it is directed? And so on. The usefulness of political theory is that it allows us to consider such problems without always returning to the factual replies of the constitutionalist or lawyer. It frees us to think critically, normatively, speculatively or idealistically, instead of being trapped into describing what exists as if it could never be changed. A critical approach rests on the ability to escape from the existent.

At first it appears that most ‘great’ political theorists are engaged not in criticism but in a permanent struggle to legitimize rulers or governments and to justify the phenomenon of power. Plato looked to absolute justice to justify his Guardians as rightful rulers, Christian theologians of the Middle Ages looked to God’s intentions to sanction the rule of kings, while contract theorists such as Hobbes and Locke saw government as founded on the people’s rational choice. But Plato, Hobbes and Locke were also among the foremost critics of the politics of their own societies and voiced this opposition in their descriptions of government as it should be: ideal government. Naturally, there have also been theoretical apologists for most existing regimes, but propagandists are intrinsically less interesting, except to the social historian, and rarely end up on political theory syllabuses. Political theory is a technique of analysis which can be used to overturn, as well as to uphold. Departing from fact and detail, it describes and explains politics in abstract and general terms, which allow scope for the critical imagination.

Political theory may therefore be defined as the discipline which aims to explain, justify or criticize the disposition of power in society. It delineates the balance of power between states, groups and individuals. ‘Power’ is used broadly here: even ‘obedience’ is an aspect of power, for it connotes deliberate self-restraint by citizens who might otherwise resist the government. Essentially, power lies where resources (personal, economic, moral, ideological, etc.) lie, and operates through inducements as much as through threats and through the withholding as well as the deployment of resources. Sociologists often analyse power in terms of individual interaction, as A’s capacity to get B to comply with her (A’s) desires; political theory sets these familiar, everyday machinations in a formal power structure. However, even theorists observing the same phenomena may conceptualize the power structure differently.

The term literally means ‘the science of ideas’ but in the early nineteenth century a more critical usage was established: it came to mean an abstract, visionary or speculative way of thinking; today, it signifies an action-guiding set of beliefs, though often with the connotation that these beliefs are erroneous or deluded.
(where liberals saw equality and social harmony, Marx saw conflict and oppression). Different conclusions result, for example, a constitutionalist who viewed politics in terms of institutions might consider that unions should not be politically active, while someone viewing politics as pressure group activity would think it inevitable that they should be. Diverse conceptualizations of power therefore generate diverse political ideals and problems.

The reader new to political theory could raise the following objection to the subject: surely it would be better to study political institutions rather than abstract concepts, since ideas must be incarnated in institutions if they are to have any meaning? We can best discover the meaning of ‘democracy’, it could be thought, by examining the institutions of our own and other democratic countries and extrapolating their crucial features, rather than by reading Plato et al. This raises a fundamental problem which haunts all social science subjects: which comes first, concept or fact, theory or reality? Is there an essence of democracy or is it constituted by a configuration of the institutions observed in Western-style democracies? This is a modern reiteration of the most ancient philosophical controversy: does reality reflect ideas, or vice versa?

This perennial question cannot be answered satisfactorily here, but it provides an opportunity to define some of the mysterious labels which are tied to various arguments in political theory. Plato’s view, also associated with Descartes and others, that reality approximates to unchanging transcendental ideas, is labelled idealist (not to be confused with the more familiar ‘idealist’, which means ‘promoting ideals or values’). In social science, an idealist approach means that ideas and theory precede factual observation. The opposing view, originally associated with Locke, that our concepts and ideas derive from our observation of physical or material reality, is generally called materialist (again, differing from ‘materialistic’, which means ‘concerned with material wealth or goods’).

A materialist outlook is often associated with the empirical and inductive scientific method, although not invariably. Empiricism requires that natural scientists and social scientists should first observe reality and then induce a general theory based on a large number of instances or facts. It is associated with philosophical positivism, which insists that the only meaningful statements are those which are verifiable by reference to the real world; moral, religious and metaphysical statements are, as a consequence, held to be meaningless and empty. Empiricism is the dominant scientific method in the Anglo-Saxon world. The Greek root of ‘empirical’ means ‘trial’, which suggests that the empiricist rejects preconceptions and acts as a naive observer who makes discoveries through experiment: this contrasts with the procedure of the rationalist, who starts with a theory. The conflict between the empiricist and rationalist viewpoints is one of epistemology, that is, it is concerned with the criteria by which knowledge can be established and so with truth, falsehood and proof. This debate, although philosophical, is closely related to issues in political theory, as we shall see.

Meanwhile, the objector who wants to define democracy by observing democratic states still awaits an answer. She is evidently advocating an empirical approach which would supply the general
principles of democracy by investigating its organizational features. The obvious drawback is that to analyse the idea by examining countries or institutions which are reputedly democratic leaves us with no independent criterion to judge whether they are so or not. And how would this approach cope with non-Western, self-proclaimedly democratic countries which seem authoritarian to the Western observer, such as Singapore and Tanzania? It has no obvious justification for excluding them from its analysis. To define ‘democracy’ through a study of existing, self-proclaimed democracies assumes that we already know what democracy is and that they instantiate it. A theory so formed can only mirror observed phenomena, whereas a theory which is to have critical power needs to make reference to the ideal composition of democracy.

The case against the empirical or ‘concrete’ approach to political concepts was well put by the left-wing philosopher Marcuse. He contended that our political vocabulary had become increasingly ‘closed’, with key words being defined in concrete, factual terms (e.g. ‘democracy means one man one vote, the secret ballot, equal constituencies. . .’), so that critical usages have become impossible.

Such nouns as ‘freedom’, ‘equality’, ‘democracy’, and ‘peace’ imply, analytically, a specific set of attributes which occur invariably when the noun is spoken or written. . . The ritualized concept is made immune against contradiction. 1

In other words, political concepts have become like the minor characters in Dickens’ novels, each with his or her distinguishing trait. We cannot imagine freedom without consumer choice any more than we can picture Mrs Gamp without a gin bottle, hence we have a ‘one-dimensional’ view of freedom. Marcuse cited research about factory workers’ grievances in which the researchers made the complaints concrete, transforming vague grumbles about conditions and pay into specific complaints about dirty washrooms or the financial problems of particular workers. By such devices (which employers also use), heartfelt alienation is dissolved into concrete trivia and the critical element of the grievances is banished. Marcuse’s general thesis was that the concrete approach to political matters deliberately precludes the proper use of abstract concepts as open-ended tools for criticism and protest. Even if Marcuse’s attack on capitalism is rejected, his point, that the critical dimension is essential to thought and argument, is indisputable.

The term ‘criticism’ is frequently given a pejorative undertone, but in defining criticism as the central task of political theory, I view it in the neutral sense in which Enlightenment philosophers saw it, as the tool by which our reason appraises the social order. Only by taking an abstract, conceptual approach, starting from ideals or theory, can we achieve an appraisal which is detached from existing society, even if it cannot be entirely impartial. Political science and political sociology often lack such detachment; political theory is important because it can offer this perspective.
Such arguments may convince the sceptic that political theory is indeed worthwhile, but she may still doubt its relevance to real life. Is it not an ivory-tower subject of no interest to ordinary citizens, a subject whose detached approach prevents it from influencing the world below? The next few pages are intended to show not only that political theory can sharply analyse current political controversies but also that even the crudest political argument relies on the fundamental concepts and ideals supplied by theory. Often these are unvoiced, but their role in determining the forms which political argument and Realpolitik take is crucial. Consequently, the political theorist has the important task of exposing these hidden mechanisms.

The long-running debate about workers’ participation in management, alias ‘industrial democracy’, appears to concern industrial relations but is really a contemporary rehearsal of age-old arguments as to the best form of government. The advocates of workers’ management (including some employers) see participation as a positive good. It increases the number of viewpoints considered, gives the workers the sense that they are controlling their own destinies, increases the acceptability of decisions and emphasizes workers’ responsibility to follow management policies. (The idea of workers’ representatives on boards of directors could in this sense be said to draw implicitly on Hobbes’ view that the elector has a duty to abide by what his/her representative decides.\(^2\)) Against this, opponents assert the value of specialist and expert management, reflecting the justification of elite government which, since Plato’s time, has often rested implicitly on an assumed division between mental and manual labour. In the context of this argument, workers are said to be preoccupied with their own short-term wellbeing, and unable to make the strategic industrial choices which require economic know-how and managerial experience. By contrast, a board of experts, managers and informed outsiders would supposedly make unself-interested decisions benefiting both firm and employees.\(^3\)

The two underlying principles in this debate were familiar even in classical times, when both government by experts and participation by the people were tried in the Greek polis, or city-state, of ancient Athens. The former emphasizes the benefits that knowledge and wisdom bring to mankind, while the more egalitarian principle spells out the subjective importance for individuals of having a voice in public affairs. Expertise and efficiency or participation and greater satisfaction? These rival values are incommensurable and cannot be simultaneously realized; a choice about worker participation (or, more generally, about good governance) requires an ordering of priorities. A change of priorities, or values, changes the social institutions which embody the values, so the ability to identify and evaluate the old and new values is important for participants in such political debate.

I now turn to a set of arguments based on less reputable principles. It is often argued that immigrants in Britain have no right to be here, even ‘third-generation immigrants’, and that they consume resources to which indigenous British people are entitled. Underpinning this assertion is a view of natural justice, which deems that being born in a country gives one a special right to its resources, including a right to welfare and a right to work. This is an instinctive or ‘gut’
conception of justice, hence the epithet ‘natural’, a term often invoked when rationality offers no support to an argument.

In times when there was little transport or mobility and people lived in village economies which were locally self-sufficient, there was some basis for the view that they had a primary claim to the local resources which they themselves processed and relied on (although there were also traditions of generosity between communities in hard times). Now that migration is common and mobility almost universal, at least in the West, and economies are not local or national but global, how could we substantiate such a claim to natural entitlement? Anyone who maintained that only native Mancunians had the right to work in Manchester or consume its precious manufactures would rightly be found guilty of absurdity. But this patently absurd argument differs only in degree from the claim that immigrants should not live or work in Britain. There has been a series of acts restricting immigration (in particular, 1971, 1981, 1988 and 2006); most notably the 1971 Act, which turned on a controversial notion of ‘patrial’, made plain the incongruity of the idea of natural entitlement. In what sense is a ‘patrial’, someone with at least one British grandparent, entitled to come to Britain and work? Grandpaternity may be a natural relationship, but it is also arbitrarily chosen – why not cousinhood, or aunthood? – and bears a tenuous link to the right or need to immigrate. The principle of labour mobility established by the European Union has established a different kind of entitlement to immigrate, also at odds with natural justice – an entitlement which the West European countries are still striving to restrict as more of the former communist countries gain access to the EU.

If, on the other hand, there is a principle of natural justice, it may equally support immigration. Much immigration since World War II was a consequence of the colonization which created the British Empire: the extension of British nationality to inhabitants of the colonies gave them a right, and an incentive, to migrate to Britain. Britain’s present wealth, it could be argued, is substantially derived from its exploitation of those colonies’ resources, to which the forebears of today’s immigrants may have considered that they had a natural entitlement. Does not natural justice therefore decree that their grandchildren should come and share our prosperity? This argument may be as poor as the opposing one, but it shows that citing natural justice to substantiate a moral and non-legal claim against someone is a double-edged process, because the notion of entitlement by birth, geography or similar accident can usually be countered by another, equally ‘natural’, claim. There may be pragmatic and tactical reasons for limiting immigration, but we should refrain from thinking that such a limitation is necessarily based on justice.

The emotional and intuitive appeal of claims to natural justice is evidently strong, but the concept collapses under scrutiny. Bentham argued in the eighteenth century that ‘natural rights’ were nonsense, the only rights being those established in positive law. He would have said that the same goes for natural justice. Malthus wrote of the pauper, ‘At Nature’s mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone.’ In one respect, Malthus was right: in no sense does the world ‘naturally’ owe us a living, even less does a particular corner of the world owe some people, rather than others, a livelihood. The fact that such claims have been established by
social and legal convention does not make them naturally just. There is no justice in
nature, although we have contended against the intractability of the natural world
and its imperviousness to our needs by creating the idea of human rights and, more
recently, those of ‘welfare rights’ and the ‘social minimum’. But crucial to the idea
of human rights is their ‘universality’, that is, every individual’s claim to life and
livelihood – a claim which ‘natural justice’ arguments often reject.

Prominent among contemporary political movements are nationalism, separatism,
regionalism and devolutionism. Kurds, Basques, Armenians, Kashmiris, the IRA and
many other minority groups demand, or fight for, autonomy, and many such groups
in the former USSR and Eastern Europe have succeeded, such as the peoples of
Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia and the Croatians. The justifications for these demands
and struggles all rest on an ideal of self-determination, supported by a notion of the
‘natural’ geographical, racial or cultural unit. The axiom ‘what is natural is good’
prevails. When we consider how arbitrarily and for what Machiavellian and strategic
reasons many national boundaries were drawn, especially in colonial Africa or in post-
1918 and post-1945 Europe, it is small wonder that internecine wars and separatism
are now rife. At first, the idea of the natural social unit seems valid, because members
of racial or language groups, for example, clearly have salient cultural characteristics
which unite them and differentiate them from others. But it is not easy to devise a
general political principle on this basis of natural affinity. ‘The people’s right to self-
determination’ which created free Balkan states in 1919 also provided justification for
Hitler’s march into Austria and his invasions of Czechoslovakia and Poland to ‘protect’
German-speaking citizens. After 1989 similar problems arose again in Eastern Europe,
where each country contains minorities whose ethnic allegiance is to a neighbour-
ing state. The most aggressive forms of nationalism are often based on a dogmatic
assertion of the naturalness of the national unit. Certainly, many nations today suff er
from unsuitable or inconvenient boundaries, or are unhappy agglomerates of different
cultural groups (as was the former Yugoslavia), yet the destruction of their territorial
integrity can have worse consequences for everybody, separatists included. In the face
of such intractable problems, political theory can at least analyse the arguments about
‘natural units’, to see whether they are well founded or universally applicable. It can
also offer alternative ways of conceptualizing such situations, which may be more
appropriate or fruitful. Nationalism is discussed further in Chapter 11.

The goodness of what is natural is an adage which has not lost its appeal in our
highly artificial civilization. In politics, it is used to sanction gut convictions and prop-
ositions for which no evidence can readily be advanced. But the implication that society
is as natural as trees and rocks is totally misleading. Certainly, human beings are
part of nature, subject to the same needs and ageing processes as other mammals,
but society is an artificial environment not subject to inexorable natural laws: we can
manipulate and change society. However fond some politicians may be of the analogy of the Body Politic, society does not function like a living organism. So claims
about what is natural in society are misleading. Equally, it is wrong to cite nature as
the moral yardstick by which to measure our social arrangements: there is no morality in nature, and not much that is natural in society.
One of the tasks of political theory must be to dispel popular delusions of the kinds just described and to expose misleading ideas. In this connection, it is relevant to consider briefly the other misleading idea so often accorded final authority in political arguments: human nature. Often, in debate, an insubstantiable hypothesis about human nature is invoked to refute a theory or ideology. (How often is it argued that socialism is impossible because people are greedy by nature?) In common with other social science subjects, political theory itself must make suppositions about people’s character or motivation, or, at least, minimal assumptions about regularities in their behaviour. This is necessary for a consistent explanation of political life. But such assumptions, whether covert or explicit, hypothetical or well grounded in fact, determine from the start which form a theory will take.

Mediaeval Christian theorists, convinced of mankind’s original sin and depraved, bestial nature, saw the power hierarchy as the curse of imperfect humanity: heaven would need no politics. Hobbes, believing in people’s natural aggressiveness, depicted political institutions as barriers against a floodtide of violence. But optimists of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and after, among them Rousseau, the utopian socialists and various anarchists, viewed the individual as a tabula rasa at birth, innocent of evil and only corrupted later, by invidious social institutions. In consequence, they imagined ideal societies – utopias – resting on the natural faculty of human reasoning and requiring no political or legal control. Some even believed that in ideal circumstances people could become morally perfect, hence they were labelled ‘perfectibilists’ or ‘optimists’ by contrast with the pessimists, who thought humankind irredeemably corrupt.

By contrast with these moralistic accounts of human nature, the fundamental liberal assumption that our natural inclination is to maximize our own wellbeing seems morally neutral, until we recognize that the scarcity of resources may mean that one person’s maximization is necessarily another’s minimization. This unpalatable implication is often ignored, although many liberals contend that it is inevitable anyway because people are ‘naturally competitive’. The evidence offered is that they compete in competitive situations, which is hardly conclusive. An interesting twist has been given to the human nature argument by some feminists who argue that politics is virtually an all-male activity and political theory nearly an all-male subject because men, the dominant partners in society since time immemorial, have shaped both in the image of their own salient characteristic: aggressiveness, hence the emphasis on power, competition, assertiveness and domination, with the correlative, despised ‘female’ counterparts of obedience, cooperation, conciliation and acquiescence. Negotiation and peaceful compromise are regarded as loss of face in politics and political language reflects this contempt.
Arguments from behaviour do not constitute evidence for there being an *innate* human nature and individuals are surely moulded by institutions, rather than vice versa. Most theorists derive their generalizations about human nature from how people currently behave in society: this is by definition socially determined behaviour, so it does not necessarily reflect a fundamental ‘human essence’. Vandalism and violence are not proof of original sin – or are they? This debate is a species of the more general controversy as to whether we are formed by heredity or environment, nature or nurture. Different political consequences stem from whichever assumption is made. My own preference is for the environmental explanation, partly because of the scientific evidence supporting it, partly because of the impossibility of even conceiving of a human being *outside* society who could serve as an exemplar of untainted human nature and partly because it has positive implications for social amelioration. We can change and improve our environment more easily than our genes. Indeed, the most radical and revolutionary socio-political theories date from Locke’s promotion of the *tabula rasa* concept, which implies that individuals will improve if their environment is improved. For similar reasons, Marxist theorists say that it is reactionary to claim that human nature is fixed; they argue that the individual is formed by socio-economic factors and can change or be changed. As this brief account of the ‘human nature’ debate suggests, we should beware when confident claims are made about what people are ‘really’ like, and should carefully scrutinize any political argument or work of political theory for concealed assumptions of this kind. Theorists as well as politicians must make some such assumptions, but at least we can uncover them and evaluate their validity.

The arguments of the last few pages illustrate that political theories, ideologies and opinions conceal a wealth of assumptions and arguments, not always well founded, which a student of political theory is better equipped to uncover than a bystander. In this respect, academic political theory is more a technique than an end in itself: it cuts sharply through the verbiage and factual confusions of political debate to the core of beliefs and prejudices, and raises such questions as ‘Is this assumption tenable?’ and ‘Do these values really represent what is valuable?’

In common with other philosophical subjects, political theory has various inner logics which need to be exposed and a number of conventions which must be understood before the subject can be fully intelligible and stimulating. Unfortunately, many writers use shorthand to denote familiar theoretical positions, which may confuse or annoy the uninitiated. References to idealism, naturalism, relativism, etc., which carry a wealth of connotations for the *habitué*, have zero, or negative, explanatory force for the newcomer. I shall try to demystify some of these obscure terms. Idealism, materialism, empiricism and rationalism have already been mentioned. Most such concepts come in contrasted pairs and supposedly exhaust the logical possibilities between them. One such pair is descriptive and evaluative, adjectives used of statements or theories. This distinction was implicit in earlier paragraphs of this chapter, where political science, which *describes* reality and builds explanatory theories on the facts, was contrasted with political theory, which analyses and
evaluates ideas by reference to other concepts and values. Similar to this is the descriptive/normative distinction, which may generate confusion for anyone familiar with the sociologist’s use of ‘normative’ to mean ‘conforming to a norm or average’. In political theory ‘normative’ simply means ‘bearing or promoting norms (in the sense of “values”)’, as opposed to ‘descriptive’. ‘Descriptive’ may also be contrasted with ‘prescriptive’; a prescriptive theory prescribes what ought to be the case.

The opposition between the descriptive and evaluative approaches is mirrored in the distinction which is often made in political debate between facts and values. Facts which are established empirically are said to be beyond dispute – as if nobody knew how to lie with statistics, or present a one-sided case! Values, by contrast, are often considered insubstantial and unverifiable, mere opinion, and therefore inadmissible as evidence in debate; it follows that an evaluation is merely an expression of opinion. In social science, it is now more generally acknowledged that facts are not such innocent entities, since any framework of social investigation dictates which facts shall be singled out, and which ignored. Indeed, some philosophers would argue that the fact/value distinction has been conceptually dissolved. However, political polemics, both academic and popular, are frequently conducted as if facts were facts and values were values, and never the twain should meet.

The fact/value dispute relates back to the choice of methodology in social science: an empiricist approach naturally purports to deal in facts, whereas a theoretical method admits insubstantiable, even metaphysical, hypotheses and values. (A purely empiricist approach could not have achieved the Copernican revolution. It required a conceptual shift.) Two other terms which also relate to this fundamental methodological division are appearance and essence. These terms had strongly technical connotations for scholastic philosophers and others such as Kant, but in the present context they denote differing approaches to the analysis of a political idea. The imaginary objector who contended that democracy could be defined by studying the attributes of democratic countries was recommending an empirical examination of the appearance, the contingent or accidental characteristics, of democratic systems, such as the secret ballot, regular elections and the existence of at least two parties. The alternative is to consider theoretically the essence of democracy, its necessary or defining characteristics (abstractly conceived), such as political equality and the responsiveness of government to the will of the people. In practice, one approach to political analysis needs correction by the other and the distinction between appearance and essence becomes blurred, but for the purposes of argument they are often presented as irreconcilable opposites, as are facts and values.

The meaning of ‘relativism’ is further discussed in Chapter 2. Relativism is an epistemological position which repudiates the view that objective, universal or timeless
knowledge is possible. It asserts that there are no absolute, indisputable criteria for truth, and hence for knowledge; such criteria are relative to time, place and culture, and knowledge is only valid within the context which generates it. This doctrine undermines some of the distinctions already made – today’s value may be tomorrow’s fact. Relativism can be intellectually liberating, but it can also culminate in total uncertainty or an unwillingness to adhere to any principle or position.

The distinction between subjective (personal, individual) and objective (impartial, impersonal) often plays a pivotal role in political theory, as when Rousseau argued that in an ideal democratic assembly men would put forward their subjective interests in discussion but vote according to the objective good of the community, thus becoming part of the General Will. Important parts of Marx’s political argument turned on his assertion that the proletariat, objectively the most exploited class under capitalism, had no subjective awareness of its situation and so had not yet become a revolutionary force. Political theory is usually concerned with the nature of the ‘Good Society’ and thus, directly or indirectly, with human happiness, and so the subjective aspects of life cannot be ignored by theorists, although they sometimes are by political scientists.

Political theory is a close relation of moral philosophy. Both are normative and evaluative and, although not all political values have moral origins (tradition, which Burke valued, and efficiency seem to be non-moral), they rely on moral language, since a value is something we would consider good, and would prefer to have more, rather than less, of. Although an ideal such as democracy is primarily political, its supporting values – freedom and equality – are as pervasive in moral as in political philosophizing. This shared area of concern and similarity of language is appropriate, since both moral and political philosophy attempt to define the Good Life, the first on an individual level, the second for the community at large. So the importation of moral terms into political theory is both permissible and necessary.

Is there also a necessary connection between political theory and ideology? Ideology, as will be argued, is crucial in forming the political theorist’s own view of the world. It would be convenient if we could distinguish clearly between ideology and theory – if we could label theory ‘ideological’ whenever values and prescriptive or persuasive elements were visible. But many ideological influences affect theory invisibly, pre-selecting which data the theory will explain, and dictating its conceptual vocabulary from the start. Likewise, much theory contains ideological bias without having ideology’s express aim of persuasion. So I shall assume that all political theory and theorizing is susceptible to greater or lesser ideological bias, and that a necessary task for commentators and students is to identify and evaluate that bias – and, of course, their own bias. The next chapter of this book sets out to analyse the concept of ideology: Part II gives a critical account of the major political ideologies and the problems which they encounter.
‘Political theory’ is an umbrella term. It comprehends the persuasive and normative doctrines called ideologies; it also embraces the analytical activity known as ‘political philosophy’, which styles itself ‘value-free’. Rather than propounding grandiose theses about the nature of political society and the Good Life, this examines the units of which political theory, including ideology, is composed, the ‘concepts’. Hence, it is sometimes called ‘conceptual analysis’. It has been held that its main endeavour is to ‘clear up confusions’ which result from a lack of clarity or inconsistency in the use of concepts such as freedom and equality by providing a clear and coherent account of their proper use. This activity often employs the methods established by the school of philosophy called ‘linguistic analysis’, which flourished for several decades after World War II but has more recently been generally rejected as too narrow and barren. A more normative and engaged kind of philosophy is now favoured. The other task of political philosophy is said to be to provide generally acceptable definitions of central political terms. These self-ascribed functions also rest on the conviction that even value-laden concepts are capable of a constant and definite meaning. Formulae such as ‘justice is giving every man his due’ and ‘democracy means “one man one vote”’ summarize attempts at comprehensive, foolproof definitions which appear to be factual and to describe justice, democracy and so on in terms of behaviour or institutions. But these formulæ can be shown to be disguisedly normative and therefore contentious. Some recent political philosophers have been sceptical about the search for fixed meanings and have argued that political concepts are ‘essentially contested’, that is, their meanings are necessarily disputed and vary according to the meaning of a cluster of related ‘contextual’ concepts, and are ineradicably dependent on values and ideologies. A postmodernist approach would also contend that concepts have no fixed meaning, and no meaning at all outside the ‘discourses’ or ‘narratives’ in which they are deployed. If no final definitions were possible, it would seem that political philosophy had no useful role to play. But it can still be maintained that the discipline deals with problems that are, in principle, open to theoretical solution, despite the contestability of the concepts which are its tools. In any case, the logical basis of the ‘essential contestability thesis’ has itself been called into question. Part III of this book illustrates how such disputes may arise by showing the range of meanings which political ideas can have in different ideological contexts.

Newcomers to political theory deserve two cautions. The first concerns values and value-neutrality. Political philosophy sometimes appears unsatisfactory because it fails to deliver decisive answers to political questions. It can analyse the logic of liberalism and the concept of tolerance but cannot determine whether we should tolerate the intolerant, because this requires an ordering of values, which is said to be the task of the committed, ethical individual. Political ideology is a doctrine in which priorities are ordered and values asserted, but political philosophy strives to be a neutral tool of analysis and appraisal — so argue its partisans, although opponents see this neutrality as mere pretence. The ‘neutral’ approach associated with liberalism led to the unsatisfactorily inconclusive character of much of the political theory of the mid-twentieth century, and its concentration on the secondary or ‘meta’ level of debate and avoidance of substantive questions. However, not all political theorists
seek to be neutral, and indeed the current fashion is for a more committed theory which seeks to influence, stimulate and provoke.

The second caution concerns the idiosyncratic way in which political theorists argue. A case is stated and evidence offered, then various objections are raised and sustained with apparent conviction, only to be elegantly disposed of, whereupon the theorist reverts to a modified version of the original proposition. The process manifests a degree of showmanship, and the reader has the impression of receiving a guided tour of cul-de-sacs, followed by a smug arrival at a predetermined destination. The reason for this form of argument is that political theory, like other philosophical subjects, originated in the oral, dialectical tradition whose essence was argument, objection, modification, restatement and so on, and whose intent was to move rationally towards a final definition of a political idea, such as justice.

Plato's *Republic*, of which Socrates is the intellectual hero, is one of the earliest examples of this approach, and the dialogue form was still employed in some philosophical writing as late as the eighteenth century, long after oral debate had been replaced by printed polemics. Today, the writer of theory, unlike Socrates, has no troublesome interrogator such as Thrasymachus to interrupt and contradict her, and so she must anticipate, state and refute all likely objections to the theory. But the dialectical process, though circuitous, is essentially one of explanation, challenge and proof, rather than dogmatic assertion, and so these rehearsals of criticism and self-criticism are vital to political theorizing.

I have suggested that the political theorist cannot be value-free, and is not immune to ideological infection. You may therefore rightly wonder what the hidden values of this book will be, and where its bias lies. No doubt this becomes clear in the course of the book! I would, however, like to state one of my reasons for writing such a book, and to say where I believe its value lies. In my view, we in the West are all, as individuals, enmeshed in a complex socio-politico-economic-military network (which comprises states, superstate bodies and the global economy) against which there are few weapons except reason, information and intelligence. (The same is equally true of the citizens of the former communist countries and of countries in the developing world, which are willy-nilly embroiled in global politics and finance capitalism.) Our progress to advanced industrialism has created a form of socio-political organization which is neither manipulable nor controllable by individuals or groups and has its own logic and momentum. However, our *compliance* is necessary for its continuance and success. Compliance is as much a mental as a physical act: the ideas supporting and validating advanced industrial society must be propagated and internalized for it to survive. The study of political theory should make us more defensive and more sceptical of the justifications of the system which nourish our compliance, and more willing to contemplate alternative political and social forms. This book advocates a critical appraisal of political ideologies, concepts, habits of thought and prejudices: this in turn may lead readers to consider critically the political behaviour which certain political ideas generate – and even to behave differently.
NOTES


FURTHER READING


P. Laslett et al. (Eds), *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, Series 1–5, Blackwell, 1956–79. These volumes are a useful collection of classic articles on political theory in general, and on specific political concepts.


A. Quinton (Ed.), *Political Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 1967. Another collection of classic articles, useful for those interested in how political theory has developed. See especially the articles on political theory by P. H. Partridge and J. P. Plamenatz, which reflect the problems of the discipline at the time.


### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is it impossible to achieve a final definition of most political concepts?
2. Does the idea of ‘essentially contested concepts’ lead to a dangerous kind of relativism or is it just realistic?
3. Has modern political science superseded political theory?
4. Is there any point to political theory if it is not engaged or committed (i.e. normative or prescriptive)?
5. The following series of questions would be a useful basis for an introductory seminar:
   - What makes an argument political?
   - What counts as winning a political argument?
   - What sort of evidence is acceptable in such an argument?
   - What sort of evidence is unacceptable?
   - What is the purpose of having political arguments?
   - Is there such a thing as an unbiased argument?
   - If everyone is biased, what purpose can political argument serve?
   - Should we respect other people’s values in political debate, or may we dispute them?