

Meaning of Political Theory

According to Robert E. Goodin, the author of *The Oxford Handbook of Political*

Science (2009), political theory is an interdisciplinary endeavour whose centre of

gravity lies at the humanities—its tradition, approaches and styles vary but the feel

is united by a commitment to theorize, criticize and diagnose the norms, practices

and organization of political action in the past and present, in our own places and

elsewhere. The twentieth-century use of the terms ‘Philosophy’, ‘Science’ and

‘Theories’ is not definitely settled. It could not be precise because the interrelation

between philosophy, science and theory is one of the fundamental problems in the

present crisis of scientific thinking. This is not to say that there is complete disagreement about the use of the three terms.

The term ‘theory’ has been derived from the Greek word ‘theoria’, which means a well-focussed mental look taken at something in a state of contemplation

with the intention to grasp or understand it. Karl Deutsch in his famous book *The*

Nerves of Government (1963) defines a theory as an attempt to explain, order and

relate disjointed data; identifies what is relevant; and points out what is missing in

any phenomenon predicted on the basis of observable facts. ‘Theory’ is always

used to designate attempts to explain phenomena, especially when that is done in

general and abstract terms. The theory may be ‘scientific’ or ‘non-scientific’ according

to whether or not scientific rules are followed. In explaining phenomena, a theory may refer to some general 'law', in the sense of 'regularity', or to several such laws. These laws may have been discovered earlier; the theory may be referring to them as known.

The theory may consist of the suggestion that some previously hidden general law explains the respective events. New theories often combine references to long-

established laws with the suggestion of some additional law. Therefore, a 'theory' is never a 'law'; it refers to laws and may suggest the existence of additional laws, but

it is not itself a law. It may try to 'explain' a law, of course; but if that is the intention,

the theory must refer to some more general law. A law can never be deduced

directly from a theory; it can be deduced only from a more general law offered in a

theory. Conversely, a 'law' is not a 'theory'; it is, rather, a 'fact' namely, the fact that

certain constituent facts or factors are always associated or, in a less strict sense of

the term 'law', that they are associated 'as a rule' or 'generally'.

According to Arnold Brecht, who authored, *Political Theory* (1965), the term may be meant to refer to a legal, moral, aesthetic or procedural 'norm'. The

theory implies both science and philosophy. The theory not merely is, it also discovers,

determines, explains, frames and argues over a phenomenon. There is also difference

between theory and thought. Theory can be termed as a thought about thought and

not entire thought itself. Theory is also different from hypothesis which lacks

definiteness. Theory and philosophy are different in the sense that while the former

talks about 'something', the latter talks about 'everything'.

Michael Oakeshott writes in his book, What is History and Other Essays, the word

theory is Greek; and in the Greek language it belongs to a short vocabulary of the

following 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'

The term 'theory' should be reserved for collections of statements that propose

causal explanations of phenomena and meet the following three criteria:

- Most political scientists would agree that the statements that compose a theory

should be internally consistent.

- Political scientists would also agree that theories should be logically complete

(i.e., the hypotheses deduced from the theory should follow logically from the

assumptions of the theory).

- Political scientists would agree that the set of statements must have falsifiable

implications.

The term 'theory' stands for a systematic knowledge. Thus, 'political theory' denotes a systematic knowledge of political phenomena. Political theory may 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