

Meaning of Political Theory

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 (where liberals saw equality and social harmony, Marx saw conflict and oppression). Different conclusions result: for example, a constitutionalist, who views 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. According to Michael Oakeshott, diverse conceptualizations of power, therefore, generate diverse political ideals and problems.

Political theory is a theory about what is 'political'. It can be termed as a science and philosophy of what is political. George H. Sabine in his celebrated work *A History of Political Theory* has termed it as anything about politics or relevant to politics. In a narrow sense, he also called it 'the disciplined investigation of political problems'. Political theory is not only a theory of or about politics; it is also the science of politics and the philosophy of politics. Bluhm in his classic work *Theories of Political System* (1981) pointed out that 'political theory stands for an abstract model of the political order . . . a guide to the systematic collection and analysis of

political data'. Another political scientist, Andrew Hacker, says in his famous book

Political Theory: Philosophy, Ideology, Science (1961) that political theory as a

theory, in ideal terms, is dispassionate and disinterested. As science, it will describe

political reality without trying to pass judgement on what is being depicted, either

implicitly or explicitly. As philosophy, it will describe rules of conduct which will

secure good life for all of society. Political theory by nature is a formal, logical and

systematic analysis of processes and consequences of political activity. The method

of the political theory is analytical, expository and explanatory. Broadly speaking,

political theory is concerned with three types of statements:

- Empirical statement, which is based on observation, through sense-experience alone

- Logical statement, which is based on reasoning (e.g., two plus two is four)

- Evaluative statement, which is based on value-judgment (e.g., 'men are born free and equal')

Sheldon Wolin, in his famous book Politics and Vision (1960), identifies three contents

of political theory:

- It is a form of activity centring around the quest for competitive advantage between groups, individuals or societies

- It is a form of activity conditioned by the fact that it occurs within a situation

- A form of activity in which the pursuits of advantage produce consequences

of such magnitude that they affect in a significant way the whole society or a

substantial portion of it

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 which is so often accorded final authority

in political arguments. Often, in debate, an insubstantial 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.

Exponents of 'logical positivism' argue that evaluative statements have no empirical content or logical structure. They are expression of subjective reflection

or emotional preference. Likewise, champions of scientific method for the study of

politics insist on a 'value-free' or 'value-neutral' approach. In any case, political

theory cannot be confined to the so-called scientific knowledge. It is equally concerned

with determining values which come within the scope of philosophy. The view that

values are based on individual or group preferences cannot be accepted.

On the

contrary, values do have a sound logical structure, unless we mistake them for
biased statement. Determination of values is the basis of a sound public
policy or
decision. If we renounce this responsibility, it may fall in irresponsible
hands, with
disaster consequences. Hence, political theory must comprehend both
political science
and political philosophy. The major characteristics of political theory are the
following:

- It is concerned with the arena of politics only. However, it attempts to understand politics in relation to social, psychological, economic, moral and ecological, etc.
- Its methods include description, explanation and investigation.
- Its objective is to build a good state in a healthy society.
- It is not only descriptive but also explanatory.
- It attempts to explain, evaluate and predict political phenomena.

The term political theory is often confused with the terms like political
philosophy,
political ideology and political thought. It needs a proper understanding of these

related terms. Dwelling on the nature of political theory, George Catlin
(Political

Quarterly, March 1957) significantly observed: 'The theory (of politics) itself
is

divided into political science and political philosophy.' Political science and
political

philosophy play complementary role in the realm of political theory.

Significance of

political theory may, therefore, be sought in both of these areas. According
to D. D.

Raphael the author of book, Problems of Political Philosophy, the term
political

theory and political philosophy are often used interchangeably, but there is a recognizable difference between the theoretical work of political scientists and that of political philosophers.