

---

## UNIT 1 UNDERSTANDING THE POLITICAL

---

### Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Politics as a Practical Activity
  - 1.2.1 Politics Difficult to Define Precisely
  - 1.2.2 Nature of Politics
  - 1.2.3 Politics: An Inescapable Feature of the Human Condition
- 1.3 What is Politics?
- 1.4 What is State?
  - 1.4.1 State: Differences on Account of Political Institutions/ Social Context
  - 1.4.2 Ralph Miliband's Views on the State
- 1.5 Politics as a Vocation
- 1.6 The Legitimate Use of Power
  - 1.6.1 Max Weber on Legitimation
  - 1.6.2 Legitimation: Central Concern of Political Science
  - 1.6.3 Process of 'Delegitimation'
  - 1.6.4 Manipulated Consent
  - 1.6.5 Personnel of the State Machine: The Elite
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Some Useful References
- 1.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

---

### 1.0 OBJECTIVES

---

This introductory unit of the first book of the new course in political theory at the Bachelor's Degree level tells you about the basic meaning of politics and thus, about the fundamentals of the discipline of political science. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Explain what is politics;
- Explain the meaning of state;
- Describe and explain the concept of power; and
- Discuss legitimation and delegitimation.

---

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

---

The main objective of this unit is to understand the concept of 'political'. The essence of political is the quest for bringing about an order that men consider good. The term politics is derived from the Greek word *polis* meaning both 'city' and 'state'. Politics among the ancient Greeks was a new way of thinking, feeling and above all, being related to one's fellows. As citizens they all were equal, although the citizens varied in positions in terms of their wealth, intelligence, etc. It is the concept of political which makes the citizens rational. Politics is the activity specific to this new thing called a citizen. A science of politics is possible, because politics itself follows regular patterns, even though it is at the mercy of the human nature from which it arises.

Greek political studies dealt with constitutions and made generalisations about the relations between human nature and political associations. Perhaps, its most powerful component was the *theory of recurrent cycles*. Monarchies tend to degenerate into tyranny, tyrannies are overthrown by aristocracies, which degenerate into oligarchies exploiting the population, which are overthrown by democracies, which in turn degenerate into the intolerable instability of mob rule, whereupon some powerful leader establishes himself as a monarch and the cycle begins all over again. It is Aristotle's view that some element of democracy is essential to the best kind of balanced constitution, which he calls a *polity*. He studied many constitutions and was particularly interested in the mechanics of political change. He thought that revolutions always arise out of some demand for equality.

Ancient Rome is the supreme example of politics as an activity conducted by human beings holding offices that clearly limit the exercise of power. When the Romans thought about power, they used two words in order to acknowledge an important distinction.

---

## 1.2 POLITICS AS A PRACTICAL ACTIVITY

---

Politics as a practical activity is the discourse and the struggle over organisation of human possibilities. As such, it is about power; that is to say, it is about the capacity of social agents, agencies and institutions to maintain or transform their environment, social and physical. It is about the resources, which underpin this capacity, and about the forces that shape and influence its exercise. Accordingly, politics is a phenomenon found in all groups, institutions and societies, cutting across private and public life. It is expressed in all the relations, institutions and structures that are implicated in the production and reproduction of the life of societies. Politics creates and conditions all aspects of our lives and it is at the core of the development of collective problems, and the modes of their resolutions.

### 1.2.1 Politics Difficult to Define Precisely

A crisp definition of politics—one that fits just those things we instinctively call 'political' - is impossible. Politics is a term with varied uses and nuances. Perhaps, the nearest we can come to a capsule statement is this: *politics is the activity by which groups reach binding collective decisions through attempting to reconcile differences among their members. There are significant points in this definition.*

### 1.2.2 Nature of Politics

Politics is a collective activity, involving people who accept a common membership or at least acknowledge a shared fate. Thus, Robinson Crusoe could not practice politics.

Politics presumes an initial diversity of views, if not about goals, then at least about means. Were we all to agree all the time, politics would be redundant.

Politics involves reconciling such differences through discussion and persuasion. Communication is, therefore, central to politics.

Political decisions become authoritative policy for a group, binding members to decisions that are implemented by force, if necessary. Politics scarcely exists if decisions are reached solely by violence, but force, or its threat, underpins the process of reaching a collective decision.

The necessity of politics arises from the collective character of human life. We live in a group that must reach collective decisions: about sharing resources, about relating to other groups and about planning for the future. A family discussion where to take

its vacation, a country deciding whether to go to war, the world seeking to limit the damage caused by pollution - all are examples of groups seeking to reach decisions which affect all their members. As social creatures, politics is part of our fate: we have no choice but to practice it.

### 1.2.3 Politics: An Inescapable Feature of the Human Condition

So although the term ‘politics’ is often used cynically, to criticise the pursuit of private advantage under the guise of public interest, politics is in fact, an inescapable feature of the human condition. Indeed, the Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that ‘man is by nature a political animal’. By this, he meant not just that politics is unavoidable, but rather that it is the essential human activity; political engagement is the feature which most sharply separates us from other species. For Aristotle, people can only express their true nature as reasoning, virtuous beings through participation in a political community.

Members of a group rarely agree; at least initially, on what course of action to follow. Even if there is agreement over goals, there may still be a skirmish over means. Yet a decision must be reached, one way or the other, and once made it will commit all members of the group. Thus, politics consists in procedures for allowing a range of views to be expressed and then combined into an overall decision. As Shively points out,

‘Political action may be interpreted as a way to work out rationally the best common solution to a common problem - or at least a way to work out a reasonable common solution.’ That is, politics consists of public choice.

#### Check Your Progress 1

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What is politics as a practical activity?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

2) Discuss the essential nature of politics.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

---

### 1.3 WHAT IS POLITICS?

---

Everybody has some idea about the meaning of the term politics; to some people the question may even appear quite superfluous. 'Politics' is what one reads about in the papers or watches on television. It deals with the activities of the politicians, notably the leaders of political parties. What is politics all about? Why, precisely, are these activities 'political' and what defines the nature of politics? If one starts with a definition couched in terms of the activities of politicians, one might say that politics concerns the rivalries of politicians in their struggle for power. This would certainly be the kind of definition with which most people would agree. There would, also, probably be agreement that politics refers to the relationship between states on an international scale.

'Politics is about power and how it is distributed.' But power is not an abstract entity floating in the void. It is embodied in human beings. Power is a relationship existing wherever a person can impose his will on other persons, making the latter obey whether they want to or not. Hence, arises a situation characterised by leadership, a relation of domination and subordination. Max Weber, in his famous lecture of 1918, 'Politics as a Vocation', started by proposing that the concept of politics was 'extremely broad-based and comprises any kind of independent leadership in action.' In whatever context such leadership in action exists, politics is present. In our terms, political would include any situation where power relations existed, i.e. where people were constrained or dominated or subject to authority of one kind or another. It would also include situations where people were constrained by a set of structures or institutions rather than by the subjective will of persons.

Such a broad definition has the advantage of showing that politics is not necessarily a matter of government, nor solely concerned with the activities of politicians. Politics exists in any context where there is a structure of power and struggle for power in an attempt to gain or maintain leadership positions. In this sense, one can speak about the politics of trade unions or about 'university politics'. One can discuss 'sexual politics', meaning the domination of men over women or the attempt to alter this relation. At present, there is much controversy about **race politics** with reference to the power, or lack of it, of people of different colour or race in various countries. In a narrower sense, however everything is politics, which affects our lives through the agency of those who exercise and control state power, and the purposes for which they use that control. In the lecture quoted above, Weber after initially giving a very broad definition of politics in terms of general leadership, went on to produce a far more limited definition: 'We wish to understand by politics', he wrote, 'only the leadership, or the influencing of leadership, of a political association, hence today, of a state'. In this perspective, the state is the central political association. A political question is one that relates to the state, to the topic of who controls state power, for what purposes that power is used and with what consequences, and so on.

---

### 1.4 WHAT IS STATE?

---

A new issue comes here: what is state? The question is by no means an easy one to answer, nor is there a general agreement as to what the answer should be. It must first be noted that there are various forms of the state, which differ from one another in important ways. The Greek city-state is clearly different from the modern nation-state, which has dominated world politics since the French Revolution. The contemporary liberal-democratic state, which exists in Britain and Western Europe, is different from the fascist-type state of Hitler or Mussolini. It is also different from the state, which existed in the former USSR and in Eastern Europe. An important part of the study of politics, and certainly an integral element of this book, is the

explanation of what is meant by those terms. The purpose is to show how each form distinguishes itself from the other and what the significance of such distinction is.

### 1.4.1 State: Differences on Account of Political Institutions/Social Context

States differ in terms of their political institutions as well as in terms of the social context within which they are situated and which they try to maintain. So, while the liberal-democratic state is characterised by representative institutions such as a parliament and an independent judiciary, the leader controls the fascist state. With respect to the social context, the crucial contrast is between Western and Soviet type systems in so far as the former are embedded in a society which is organised according to the principles of a capitalist economy, while in the latter case the productive resources of society are owned and controlled by the state. In each case, therefore, the state is differently structured, operates in a social framework of a very different kind, and this affects and influences to a large extent the nature of the state and the purposes, which it serves.

There are different forms of the state, but whatever form one has in mind, the state as such is not a monolithic block. To start with, the state is not the same as the government. It is rather a complex of various elements of which the government is only one. In a Western-type liberal-democratic state, those who form the government are indeed with the state power. They speak in the name of the state and take office in order to control the levers of state power. Nevertheless, to change the metaphor, the house of the state has many mansions and of those, the government occupies one.

### 1.4.2 Ralph Miliband's Views on the State

In his book *The State in Capitalist Society*, Ralph Miliband registers those different elements, which together constitute the state. The first, but by no means the only element of the state apparatus, is the government. The second is the administrative element, the civil service or the bureaucracy. This administrative executive is, in liberal-democratic systems, supposed to be neutral, carrying out the orders of politicians who are in power. In fact, however, the bureaucracy may well have its own authority and dispose of its own power. Third, in Miliband's list come the military and the police, the 'order-maintaining' or the repressive arm of the state; fourth, the judiciary. In any constitutional system, the judiciary is supposed to be independent of the holders of government power; it can act as a check on them. Fifth, come the units of sub-central or local government. In some federal systems, these units have considerable independence from the central government, controlling their own sphere of power, where the government is constitutionally debarred from interfering. The relationship between the central and the local government may become an important political issue, as witnessed by the controversy in recent British politics over the abolition of the Greater London Council and the metropolitan counties, the argument about financing local government, 'rate capping', and so on. Sixth and finally, one can add to the list representative assemblies and the parliament in the British system. One may also mention political parties, though they are not normally part of the state apparatus, at least not in a liberal democracy. They play their obvious role in the representative assembly and it is there that, at least partly, the competitive fight between the government and the opposition is enacted.

### Check Your Progress 2

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What do you understand by the term politics?

What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) Describe Ralph Miliband’s views on the state.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

### 1.5 POLITICS AS A VOCATION

---

The point brings us back to Weber and his already quoted lecture, ‘Politics as a Vocation’. After arguing that politics is concerned above all with the central political association, the state, Weber continued by maintaining that a definition of the state could not be given in terms of the tasks which it undertakes or of the ends it pursues. There was no task, which specifically determined the state. Therefore, one had to define the state in terms of the specific means, which it employed, and these means were, ultimately, physical force. The state, Weber wrote, ‘is a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’.

There are three distinct elements combined here: a given territory, or geographical area, which the state controls; the use of physical force to maintain its control and thirdly, but most important, the monopoly of the legitimate use of such force or coercion. This legitimacy must be acknowledged by most, if not all, of those who are subject to the state’s power. Weber concluded that for him politics meant ‘striving to share power or striving to influence the distribution of power either among states or among groups within a state.’

It was also mentioned that each state exists within a particular social context. The study of politics is vitally concerned with the relationship of state and society. A state centered perspective on politics does not imply that its study should neglect what happens in the wider sphere of society and how that may, as Weber says, ‘influence the distribution of power’.

A further fact cannot be ignored: this is the continued growth and centralisation of state power. If one sees the state in terms of a specialised apparatus of domination, then the history of modern times has been marked by the extension of its scale and grip. The modern state requires an increasingly complex bureaucracy dealing with a mounting variety of tasks. It needs larger and more sophisticated armed forces, more regulative welfare agencies, and engages in a wider range of activities than was the case before. This extension of the state’s sphere of action, its growth and development, applies both to liberal-democratic systems in their capitalist socio-economic context, and to socialist systems with their collective economic framework. Weber saw such growth manifested above all in the emergence of a trained, skilled and rationally

effective bureaucracy. Someone of quite a different political and theoretical background, Marx, agreed with him on this point. Marx wrote in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* of the growth of state power in France, which he saw as typical of the modern state. He described how through socialism, eventually the state would be abolished and society would govern itself without a specialised apparatus of repression. Weber, on the contrary, believed that socialism would need even more officials to administer a collectivised economy and society.

---

## 1.6 THE LEGITIMATE USE OF POWER

---

The point is that, although the state depends on force, it does not rest on force alone. Here, the notion of the legitimate use of power comes in. Power, in general, and so the power of the state, can be exercised in different ways. Coercion is one form of power and perhaps the easiest to understand, but it is not the only one. Not all power relations are to be understood on the basis of the same crude model. If a lecturer through force of argument and breadth of knowledge helps students to form their ideas, such a person exercises a kind of power, though not against the students' will. More to the point, all holders of power try to get those who are subject to their rule to believe in the rightness and justness of the power they wield. This attempt at justification in order to make people consent constitutes the process of legitimation.

One can refer to such justified or accepted power as 'authority' to distinguish it from such power as is obeyed only because of a fear of sanctions. In such a situation of legitimate power, or authority, people obey because they think it is right to do so. They believe, for whatever reason, that the power-holders are entitled to their dominant role. They have the legitimate authority, a right to command. In the words of one recent analyst of power, 'Legitimate authority is a power relation in which the power holder possesses an acknowledged right to command, and the power subject, an acknowledged obligation to obey.'

### 1.6.1 Max Weber on Legitimation

According to Weber, there are three types of legitimation, i.e. three methods by which the wielding of power can be justified. The first type pertains to *traditional domination*. There, power is justified because the holders of power can appeal to tradition and habit; authority has always been vested in them personally or in their families. The second type is *charismatic legitimation*. People obey the power-holder because of the exceptional personal qualities displayed by the leader. Finally, the third type is of the *legal-rational* kind. People obey certain persons who are authorised by specific rules to command in strictly defined spheres of action. One might also say that the first two types are of a personal nature, while the legal-rational type shows a procedural character. As such it corresponds to the modern conception of political authority. It is, as Weber says, 'domination as exercised by the modern "servant of the state" and by all those bearers of power who in this respect resemble him.'

It is obvious that the power-holders in any system will wish to have their power accepted as legitimate. Seen from their point of view, such an acceptance will permit a considerable 'economy' in the use of force. People will obey freely and voluntarily. The means of coercion, then, will not need to be constantly displayed; they can rather be concentrated on those who do not accept the legitimacy of the power structure. In any political system, there will be those who comply with the rules only because non-compliance will be punished. Clearly, however, the stability of any political system is enhanced to the degree that people voluntarily obey the rules or laws because they accept the legitimacy of the established order. Hence, they recognise the authority of those empowered by the rules to issue commands. In reality, all political systems are maintained through a combination of consent and coercion.

### 1.6.2 Legitimation: Central Concern of Political Science

These are the reasons because of which, as C. Wright Mills puts it, 'The idea of legitimation is one of the central conceptions of political science.' The study of politics is centrally concerned with the methods by which holders of power try to get their power justified, and with the extent to which they succeed. It is crucial in studying any political system to investigate the degree to which people accept the existing power structure as legitimate, and thus, how much the structure rests on consent as distinct from coercion. It is also important to ascertain the actual justifications of power, which are offered; that is to say, the methods by which a system of power is legitimised. This, as the elitist theorist Mosca points out, is the 'political formula' of any political system. The question of legitimacy, furthermore, is highly important in dealing with the topics of stability and change of political systems. Consent may be granted or withdrawn. It is true that political systems can survive in situations where large sections of the population cease to accord any legitimacy to the system. The case of South Africa in the recent past may be cited as an example; similarly, that of Poland, where it seemed that the Jaruzelski regime had little legitimacy in the eyes of substantial popular elements. The point is that in such a situation, a regime has to rely mainly on force. It then finds itself in a more precarious position, vulnerable and open to the impact of fortuitous events. The system may survive for quite a time. However, once it rests on force far more than on consent, one condition for a revolutionary change presents itself.

### 1.6.3 Process of 'Delegitimation'

This explains why a revolution is often preceded by a period when the dominating ideas of the system are subjected to sustained criticism. One may call this a process of 'delegitimation' whereby the ideas, which justify the existing structure of power, come under attack. Long before the fall of the ancient regime in France, the ideas of *Divine Right* and of autocracy were ridiculed and refuted by the philosophers, the critics of the absolute state. Such a movement of delegitimation contributed to undermine the foundations of the old order. It prepared the way for its revolutionary overthrow.

A case in point in modern times would be the fate of the Weimar Republic when large sections of the German population lost confidence in the democratic regime and, fearing a communist alternative, gave their support to Hitler's National-Socialist party. The result was the fall of the republic without much of a struggle. Similar causes had similar effects all over the European Continent. Many western systems of liberal democracy were overthrown and replaced by fascist or semi-fascist authoritarian systems as happened in Italy, Spain, Austria and Hungary. The conclusion, in a general sense, must be that any system loses its stability once it ceases to enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of its subjects.

Finally, it must be noted that even in normal times, processes of legitimation and delegitimation are permanent features of any political system. The process of legitimation is carried on in more or less subtle ways through many channels available for the legitimation of the existing order. Legitimising ideas are absorbed from the earliest stages of education, diffused through a variety of forms of social interaction, and spread especially through the influence of the press, television and other mass media. Views, which are accepted or considered to be within the boundaries of the system, are almost forced on readers, listeners and viewers. Action, which goes beyond those limits, is presented as illegitimate. Being made to look very unattractive blocks off a range of political alternatives.

### 1.6.4 Manipulated Consent

There are still more effective methods available to prevent subversive ideas from even arising. They may be intercepted at source, the source being the conscious and



even the subconscious mind. An important dimension of power is the capacity to affect and mould people's consciousness so that they will accept the existing state of affairs without ever becoming aware of alternative possibilities. Consent, then, becomes manipulated consent. To a certain extent we are all affected by the prevailing 'climate of opinion'. From there an ascending scale leads to a position where the moulding of minds, manipulation, is made the deliberate purpose of the state in order to create a monolithic popular mentality. Such was the purpose of Goebbels' propaganda machine in Nazi Germany and this is still, the purpose of any totalitarian regime.

Manipulation is 'power wielded unknown to the powerless', as C. Wright Mills defines it. Peter Worsley points out that 'the mechanisms by which consciousness is manipulated are of growing importance in modern society.' In Marxist language, such manipulated consent would eventually produce a 'false consciousness'. Against that, it could be argued that where people are free to choose and to express their choice as in liberal-democratic systems, the manipulation of consciousness is not possible. Manipulation can only occur where free choice does not exist, as in one-party systems. It is also argued that wherever people are free to choose, but do not in fact choose an alternative to the existing order—for example, by supporting parties committed to radical changes—it is safe to assume that the existing structure of society is broadly 'what people want'. This would lead to the conclusion that the importance of political choice and the ability to freely express that choice cannot be overrated. However, 'what people want' is to some extent conditioned by various factors. Choice does not take place in a vacuum. In short, the choice itself cannot be considered as completely free from the impact of a process of legitimation.

### 1.6.5 Personnel of the State Machine: The Elite

From the short survey we have so far made of political problems, a few points of importance emerge which will recur in the following discussion. They chiefly stem from the fact that state power is structured or broken up, so to speak, into distinct sectors. It has already been mentioned that the specific relationship of the various sectors is determined by the political system within which they operate. The internal structure, say, of a communist state. A further question involves the personnel of these sectors. The state, after all, is not a machine; though the phrase 'machinery of the state' may be used. The state is a set of institutions staffed by people whose ideas and basic attitudes are largely influenced by their origin and social environment. The composition of the state elite is an important problem in the study of politics. J.A.C. Griffith in *The Politics of the Judiciary*, exemplifies what is meant by the term 'state elite' with reference to a recent study. It shows that in Britain, 'in broad terms, four out of five full-time professional judges are products of the elite. It is not surprising that while discussing 'judicial opinion about political cases', Griffith finds 'a remarkable consistency of approach in these cases concentrated in a fairly narrow part of the spectrum of political opinion.'

It must be noted here that from different theoretical points of view, different answers will be given to the question as to how decisive the nature and composition of the state elite are. Elitist theories accord the highest importance to this factor. In their perspective, the nature of a political system is best explained by an analysis of its elite, that ruling minority, which controls the state apparatus. In this perspective, almost everything depends on the talents and abilities of the leaders. A low quality of leadership will have disastrous consequences. For that reason, Max Weber was much concerned with the nature of Germany's political leadership. He was in favour of a strong parliament, which, he believed, would provide an adequate training ground to produce leaders willing and capable of responsible action. Alternatively, leadership would fall into the hands of the bureaucracy whose training and life style made them unsuitable material for creative leadership.

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

Marxist theories would view the matter differently. They would accord less importance to the nature of the state elite. The argument would rather be that the purpose and the aims of state activity are determined less by the elite, but far more by the social context and the economic framework within which the state system is located. This structure is of greater significance, in this view, than the character of the personnel that staff the state machine. Generally, 'structural' theories would emphasize the constraints on the government stemming from the social structures within which the government has to operate. Nevertheless, the two types of interpretation need not be mutually exclusive.

This brings us to a final question, which deals with the relation of state and society. The phrase, which Marx applied to the Bonapartist state, that its power was not 'suspended mid-air', can be generalised to apply to all types of state systems. Then, several problems present themselves. How does the power structure of society affect and constrain the political leaders? To what extent does the state interfere to maintain and legitimise or, alternatively, mitigate the inequalities of the social system? To what extent indeed is 'civil society' independent of the state? For some theorists, the concept of 'totalitarianism' is meant to suggest a situation where society is totally controlled by state power and, therefore, has no independence at all.

**Check Your Progress 3**

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What is understood by politics as a vocation?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

2) What is legitimation? What are Max Weber's views on it?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

3) What is deligitimation?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

4) How is consent manipulated?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

---

## 1.7 LET US SUM UP

---

It may be conceded that understanding the political means understanding the needs, objectives and goals of human life. It is related with the political activities of human beings. Politics is the game of power. Various players play this game at the same time and compete with each other. The state forms the central point of this whole activity, since in the national affairs it is within the state and in the international affairs, it is among the states. The state is authorised for the legitimate use of power. Authority is the right to rule. Authority is a broader notion than power. The dictates of the situation mean the understanding of the political. It is the product of a situational event.

---

## 1.8 SOME USEFUL REFERENCES

---

Alan R. Ball, *Modern Politics and Government*, Macmillan, London, 1988  
Carl J. Friedrich, *An Introduction to Political Theory*, Harper and Row, New York, 1967  
David Held (ed), *Political Theory Today*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991  
Lynton Robins (ed), *Introducing Political Science: Themes and Concepts in Studying Politics*, Longman, London, 1985  
Nevil Johnson, *The Limits of Political Science*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989

---

## 1.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

---

### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 1.2
- 2) See Section 1.2 and esp. sub-section 1.2.2

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Section 1.3
- 2) See sub-section 1.4.2

### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) See Section 1.5
- 2) See Section 1.6 and sub-sections 1.6.1 and 1.6.2
- 3) see sub-section 1.6.3
- 4) see sub-section 1.6.4

---

## UNIT 2 THEORISING THE POLITICAL

---

### Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Historical Approach
- 2.3 The Sociological Approach
- 2.4 The Philosophical Approach
- 2.5 An Integrated Approach
- 2.6 Autonomous Character of Political Science
- 2.7 Empirical Vs Normative Theory
- 2.8 Contemporary Relevance of Classics
- 2.9 Continuity of Traditional Political Thought
- 2.10 The New Science of Politics
  - 2.10.1 Views of Eric Voegelin
  - 2.10.2 Views of Christian Bay
- 2.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.12 Some Useful References
- 2.13 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

---

### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

---

This Unit deals with the various relevant concerns of political philosophising/theorising. After going through the unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the various approaches to studying political phenomena
- Distinguish between empirical and political theory
- Examine as to how far political science is an autonomous discipline
- Comment on the relevance of traditional political thought including classics and finally,
- Discuss the new science of politics

---

### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Without trying to attempt a precise definition of the nature and scope of political science, one might say that there is a “broad” view and a “narrow” view of politics and political phenomena – the one placing its main emphasis on political functions and treating politics as a process or a type of activity, and the other on political structures and orienting itself towards various types of political institutions. Aristotle was clearly taking a broad view of politics, when he searched for it not only in the state, but also in the family, the corporation, the association or the church, whereas the discussion of politics in the subsequent centuries was limited, by and large, to its narrow view, which interpreted politics as the study of the political and the governmental sub-systems of society. We find the contemporary writers, like Catin, once again breaking away from this narrow view and emphasising the phenomenal struggle for control as their central concern. With the emergence of this view, political scientists are no longer satisfied with merely descriptive categories, though accurate description is a necessary first step to other steps, but would like to take up more refined and sophisticated techniques of analysis. They would like to convert, in other words, what

was regarded as political philosophy or political thought or political theory into political science. Catlin, for example, would think of political science as “indistinguishable – on any intellectually respectable grounds from sociology”, and maintain that the sociologists’ study of “myriads of individual acts and thousands of relations between groups” afforded the basis “for authentic comparisons and, in the best tradition of Aristotle and Machiavelli, for the observation of constants”. One might, however, wonder whether a concept of politics which included the family control system and the ecclesiastical polity was not so broad as to be meaningless and think that it might perhaps be better to strike a balance between the two extreme views.

---

## 2.2 THE HISTORICAL APPROACH

---

The traditional or the historical approach to political science is best represented by George H. Sabine. Sabine proceeds with his definition of political science in a very practical manner. He suggests that we include in political science all those subjects which have been the major themes of discussion in the writings of well-known political philosophers – Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Bentham, Mill, Green, Hegel, Marx, and others. In the writings of these philosophers, we may try to search out those questions which they have raised about the truth or the validity of political theories. Questions concerning goods or ideals to be realised in or through the state, meaning of freedom, why men obey the government, the sphere of government activities, meaning of equality – these are some of the questions which have agitated the minds of political philosophers throughout the ages. In addition, we may also make an inventory of questions regarding the state, the relationship between state and society and between the individual and the state, and discuss them at length if they have not been fully discussed by these political philosophers. These form the bases of political theory, according to the traditionalist thinkers. Sabine and other traditional writers have attached a great deal of importance to the historical approach. A political theory, according to Sabine, is always advanced in “reference to a pretty specific situation” and, therefore, reconstruction of “the time, place and the circumstances in which it was produced” is essential to understand it. The fact, that a political theory is always rooted in a “pretty specific situation” does not mean that it does not have significance for the future. Great political theory excels both in the “analysis of a present situation and in suggestiveness for other situations”. As such, a good political theory, even though it is the outcome of a peculiar set of historical circumstances, has a significance for all times to come. It is exactly this universal character of political theory which makes it respectable.

A typical political theory includes, according to Sabine, (a) “factual statements about the postures of affairs that gave rise to it”, (b) statements of “what may be roughly called a causal nature”, and (c) statements that “something ought to happen or is the right and desirable thing to have happened”. Political theories, thus, constitute, according to Sabine, three elements – the factual, the causal and the valuationary. Political theories of great significance have generally been evolved during periods of stress and strain. In the known history of more than twenty-five hundred years, there have been two periods of about fifty years each in two places of quite restricted areas where political philosophy has thrived most – (1) in Athens, in the second and the third quarters of the fourth century B.C., when Plato and Aristotle wrote their great works, and (2) in England, between 1640 and 1690, when Hobbes, Locke and others evolved their political theories. Both these periods have been periods of great changes in the social and intellectual history of Europe. Great political theories are, thus, “secreted”, as Sabine would put it, “in the interstices of political and social crises”. They are produced, not by the crises as such, but by the reaction they leave on the minds of the thinkers. In order, therefore, to understand political theory, it is necessary to understand clearly, the time, the place and the circumstances in which it has evolved. The political philosopher may not actually take part in the politics of his

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

times, but he is affected by it and, in his own turn, he tries vigorously to affect it. Political theories, according to Sabine, “play a double role”, in the sense that while they belong to the abstract world of thought, they also influence beliefs which become causes and serve as causal events in historical situations. It is also necessary to understand whether a political theory is true or false, sound or silly, valid or unreliable. This involves the question of values. It is, therefore, necessary that in the understanding of political theory we should try to bring in the factual, the causal as well as the valuational factors.

---

### **2.3 THE SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH**

---

The historical approach has been generally criticised as one which is much too deferential to tradition. It is also pointed out by many of the modern writers that this approach takes a narrow view of politics and restricts it to the domain of the state. Several contemporary writers have tried to widen the scope of political science so as to include not only the state but the society as well, a point of view which is very clearly brought out by Catlin. Catlin would like to use politics in the Aristotlean sense, in the sense in which it includes all those activities which are carried out within the auspices of society. Catlin regards political science as indistinguishable from sociology, and has pointed out a number of advantages of this approach: (1) It allows the student to deal with the relations and structure of society as a whole and not with a segment of it artificially created between the fifteenth and the seventeenth century in a part of Europe and now described as the “modern state”. (2) It links up his studies with a general theory of society which the political scientists can ignore only at their peril, something which most modern political scientists have not done. (3) If the political scientist deals with the state as his unit of analysis, he is likely to neglect the trivial and the common details regarding political events taking place from day to day, which he cannot understand unless he relates them to happenings in society. A large number of states exist today, but they cannot all be treated as individual units for the purposes of political analysis. One has to go to their basic characteristics. (4) If the political scientist decides to go beyond the study of institutions and undertakes the study of functions and processes he would find it easier to pick up a unit of analysis. Catlin, on his part, has opted for the study of the phenomenon of control as the central concern for the study of politics. By the act of control, he means “the act of individuals”. Catlin would have no objection to define politics, as V.O. Key has done as “the study of government”, provided we accept “government” as a synonym for ‘control’ and not institutions, like that of President or Cabinet. One could also call politics “the study of power and influence”, if we clearly understood that “influence is not government”, or in Max Weber’s words, “the struggle for power or the influencing of those in power”, and embracing “the struggle between states as such and between organised groups within the state”.

#### **Check Your Progress 1**

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What are the ‘broad’ and the ‘narrow’ view of politics/political phenomenon?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

- 2) Enumerate and describe the salient features of either the historical or the sociological approach to studying politics.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

## 2.4 THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

---

Besides the traditional and the contemporary view-points regarding political science, there is a third view point advanced by Leo Strauss, which may be described as the philosophical approach. Leo Strauss makes a distinction between political theory and political philosophy and believes that they are both parts of political thought. Political theory, according to Strauss, is “the attempt truly to know the nature of political things”. Philosophy being the “quest for wisdom” “or quest for universal knowledge, for knowledge of the whole”, political philosophy is “the attempt truly to know both the nature of political things and the right, or the good, political order”. Political thought extends to both political theory and political philosophy. Political theory and political philosophy are complementary to each other, since “generally speaking, it is impossible to understand thought or action or work without evaluating it”. Strauss is critical of both “historicism” as advocated by Sabine and “social science positivism” for which Catlin has been pleading, the former being in his view “the serious antagonist of political philosophy”.

Values, Strauss believes, are an indispensable part of political philosophy, and cannot be excluded from the study of politics. All political action aims at either preservation or change, and is guided by some thought or evaluation of what is better and what is worse. A political scientist is expected to possess more than opinion. He must possess knowledge, knowledge of the good – of the good life or the good society. “If this directedness becomes explicit, if men make it their explicit goal to acquire knowledge of the good life and of the good society, political philosophy emerges”. “The assumptions concerning the nature of political things, which are implied in all knowledge of political things”, writes Strauss, “have the character of opinions. It is only when these assumptions are made the theme of critical and coherent analysis that a philosophic or scientific approach to politics emerges.” Political philosophy, according to him, is the “attempt to replace opinion about the nature of political things by knowledge of the nature of political things”, “the attempt truly to know both the nature of political things and the right, or the good, political order.” Political philosophy in the comprehensive form has been cultivated since its beginnings, almost without any interruption, till very recently when the behaviouralists started raising disputes about its subject-matter, methods as well as functions, and challenging its very possibility.

---

## 2.5 AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

---

If it is important not to allow political science to be lost in scientism or moralism, it is also important that both the scientific and the philosophic aspects of political theory should be properly understood and emphasised. But before we try to understand the scientific aspect of political theory, we should first understand what we mean by science, just as before we try to understand the philosophical aspect of political theory, we must understand what we mean by philosophy. Science has been variously

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

described as “a branch of knowledge or study dealing with a body of facts or truths systematically arranged and showing the operation of general laws”, “knowledge, as of facts of principles, gained by systematic study”, “a branch or body of organised knowledge”. A scientific approach to the study of a problem, therefore, involves two things: (a) the agreement on methods, and (b) the training of the human beings in scientific work. Taking these two aspects into consideration, Friedrich would define science as “a body of ordered knowledge, known to and progressively enlarged by the specialists in that field of knowledge through the use of methods which they as a group accept as workable ways for arriving at that particular kind of knowledge”. Science is, thus, “organised” knowledge and because there is a consistency of methods employed in the gathering of the particular knowledge of that science by various scholars, which gives it a logical coherence, scientific statements are capable of validation by other scholars. This definition of science, which it would be hardly possible to challenge, does not say that the same methods would be applicable to all the science. In fact, the method of one may not be applicable to another. Taking the simple matter of generalisation, no two sciences agree in the degree of generalisation which would make them true sciences. Methods which are highly successful in the study of physics and chemistry may not be equally applicable to astronomy, but that does not take away from the “scientific-ness” of astronomy. One might argue that they are similar at least in the sense that they both operate with precise quantitative data. Science, however, demands not only accuracy but also relevancy and adequacy of results. History has been made highly scientific during the last few decades. But the evolution of its “scientific” character has nothing to do with quantification – it is on the basis of a more scientific study of sources and a more critical use of the other types of evidence which has led to greater progress in the use of scientific methods in history. Friedrich makes it very clear that, “neither the degree of generalisation, nor the degree of quantification, are in themselves ‘absolute’ criteria of scientific progress, but must be evaluated in relation to the material in hand and to be assessed.” He quotes Aristotle with approval when he describes it as “the mark of an educated man” “to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits”.

**Check Your Progress 2**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Distinguish between the philosophical and the integrated approaches to studying politics.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

---

**2.6 AUTONOMOUS CHARACTER OF POLITICAL SCIENCE**

---

The close identification of political science with either science or philosophy raises, in the opinion of Norman Jacobson, another kind of danger, the danger of political theory ending up in some kind of ‘scientism’ or ‘moralism’. Jacobson has tried to



make it clear that political science is neither scientism nor moralism – neither completely identified with science nor with morality – but separate from both of them and maintaining an identity of its own. Those who try to mould political science in the perfect image of science and try to apply methods and procedures of science to it do not always understand what science means. One may not deny the advantage of utilising the knowledge of one field for the better understanding of another, but one has to also understand the distinction between the two fields. Jacobson is of the view that contemporary political scientists are trying to make of political science anything but political science. “It would seem”, he writes, “that politics is psychology, or it is sociology, that it is moral philosophy or theology” – that it is “almost anything but politics”. Politics, in his view, is a special kind of intellectual activity. There is no harm in trying to pursue it more effectively by drawing upon the best that fields of enquiry in other disciplines have to offer, but this should be done only so far as it helps us in better understanding of politics. Politics, in fact, has got to be studied in its own right. If “science” is taken out of political theory, it might become a worthless “ethical” residue; if “philosophy” is taken out of it, it might be reduced to mere methodology. Those who emphasise either the scientific or the philosophical character of political science to the extent of identifying political science with one or the other, may be good advocates of “scientism” or “moralism”, but they certainly lack in a sense of commitment to political science itself.

---

## 2.7 EMPIRICAL VS NORMATIVE THEORY

---

While several approaches to political science have been advocated from time to time, and many of them have often co-existed simultaneously, they might be broadly divided into two categories – the **empirical-analytical** or the **scientific-behavioural** approach on one side and the **legal-historical** or the **normative-philosophical** approach on the other, and each of these two approaches has been mainly demarcated from the other by the emphasis it lays on facts as against values or on values as against facts. Two opposing positions are taken up in this respect by those who have been described by Robert Dahl as **Empirical Theorists** and **Trans-empirical Theorists**. The empirical theorists believe that an empirical science of politics based on facts alone is possible, whereas the others, the trans-empirical theorists, are of the opinion that the study of politics neither can nor should be purely scientific. The controversy mainly revolves around two major issues:

- i) Can political analysis be neutral?
- ii) Should political analysis be neutral?

Regarding the first, the empirical theorists are certain that it is possible to isolate and to test the empirical aspect of our beliefs about politics without the necessity of going into the value-laden question of whether the empirical propositions are true or false. A ‘correct’ decision on what is empirically true is not the same as a ‘correct’ decision on what ought to be. Whether values are derived from God’s will, or natural laws, or are purely subjective in nature, as the existentialists believe. Facts are there for all to see and can be subjected to empirical tests, whereas values cannot be tested this way. Whether the stability of popular governments in general or in a particular country is in any way dependent on literacy, multi-party systems, proportional representation, a two-party system, whether it can best function under single-member constituencies, are questions which can be tested empirically, irrespective of the fact whether they are concerning the right or the wrong political systems. The trans-empiricists, on the other hand, believe that whatever be the situation in the natural sciences, facts and values are so closely inter-twined with each other that, in the study of politics, one can not separate them except in the most trivial instances. Whatever one might pretend, they would say, one is making value judgements all the time. Any comprehensive theory about politics, they argue, must inevitably contain

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

evaluations not merely of the empirical validity of the factual statements in the theory, but also of the moral quality of the political events, processes or systems described in the theory. It is, therefore, an illusion to think, according to the trans-empiricists, that there can be a completely objective theory of politics.

**Check Your Progress 3**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

- 1) Comment on the autonomous character of political science.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

- 2) Distinguish between normative and empirical political theory.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

---

**2.8 CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF CLASSICS**

---

While the empirical theorists, under the impressive, scientific garb of “behaviouralism”, seemed to be dominating the discipline of political science during the fifties and the sixties, the “uses” as well as the “relevance” of classical political philosophy continued to be widely recognised and a number of influential contemporary political thinkers continued to defend and uphold the traditional-classical political theory and severely criticise the empirical-analytical approaches. They may not be very large in numbers, but they belong to different countries and exercise a great deal of influence over a large number of their students and admirers. The names which immediately strike one’s mind in this connection are those of Michael Oakeshott, Hannah Arendt, Bertrand Jouvenel, Leo Strauss, Christian Bay and Eric Voegelin.

A classic has been defined as a work in a “class” by itself, a work “of the first rank and of acknowledged excellence”. Works like Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws*, Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics*, Augustine’s *City of God*, Aquinas, *Treatise on Law* in the *Summa Theologica*, Machiavelli’s *Prince* and *Discourses*, Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, Locke’s *Second Treatise*, Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* and Marx’s *Philosophic-and Economic Manuscripts of 1844* and *German Ideology* come under the category of ‘classics’. The very use of the word in plural involves a ‘conversation of many voices’, a dialogue between different perspectives and interpretations of reality as a whole. “A conversation”, as Dante Germino has pointed out, “is not a battle of voices, but rather a reflection of certain predominant lines of argument, which can be identified by those who will listen.” It is a “conversation of

mankind” which extends beyond the modern into the medieval and the ancient ages and the quality of which is not affected by the context of time or space in which a particular political philosopher was located. All that was necessary was that one taking part in this “conversation of mankind” was directly involved in the issues of the day which, whether in politics or in philosophy, are issues of all time, was capable of deep thinking, or contemplation, on these issues and could express himself in a language which would appeal to men in all ages.

---

## 2.9 CONTINUITY OF TRADITIONAL POLITICAL THOUGHT

---

Michael Oakeshott, who took over the chair of political science in the London School of Economics and Political Science from Harold Laski in 1951, has been identified with the resurgence of conservative thinking in England. But it would be wrong to regard Oakeshott as merely a conservative, though conservative he was in every sense of the term. His major contribution was to recover political theory as a tradition of enquiry and regain for political science, the possibility of a critical, theoretical analysis. As different from the behaviouralists, who were beginning to make a mark in the United States of America when he was enunciating a different kind of doctrine in his lectures and seminars to his students at the London School of Economics and through his publications. Oakeshott based his philosophical analysis on experience which seeks to rediscover the multi-dimensionality that had been denied to experience by the ideological and positivist writers. Oakeshott treats philosophy and science as basically two different kinds of activities and believes that it would be wrong to attempt to transfer the methods and concerns of the one to the other. “The notion that philosophy has anything to learn from the methods of scientific thought,” he writes, “is altogether false.” Philosophy, according to him, must be pursued for its own sake, and must “maintain its independence from all extraneous interests, and in particular from the practical interest”.

Oakeshott believes that political philosophy – or, as he would like to call it, *philosophising about politics* – is a limited activity within the context of the larger role of philosophising – the attempt “to see one particular mode of experience – practical experience – from the standpoint of the totality of experience”. Reflection about political life, as he mentions in his introduction to Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, can be at a variety of levels, and was apt to flow from one level to another, but in political philosophy we have in our mind, the world of political activity and also “another world” and our endeavour is to explore “the coherence of the two worlds together”. Political philosophy for him is “the consideration of the relation between politics and eternity”. “Politics is contributory to the fulfilment of an end which it cannot itself bring about”. Political philosophy for Oakeshott is not, what it is to the behaviouralist, a “progressive” science which accumulates solid results and reaches conclusions upon which further research may be based. It is, on the other hand, closely integrated to history – “indeed, in a sense it is nothing but a history, which is a history of the problems philosophers have detected and the manner of solution they have proposed, rather than a history of doctrines. . . .”

Hannah Arendt is a more prolific writer. A person of enormous erudition, she has published extensively on the major problems of political theory and established her reputation as a thinker of exceptional originality. Believing in the uniqueness and responsibility of the individual human person, she is not only opposed to totalitarianism of all kinds, but also to the behaviouralist approach in social sciences, which, according to her, prepares the ground for totalitarianism. In its search for uniformity in human behaviour, she warns, it will itself contribute to the making of a uniform stereotyped “man”.

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

The name of Bertrand de Jouvenel may perhaps be mentioned along with that of Hannah Arendt. Both believe that politics has a potentiality for creative activity and should not be transformed into the dead uniformity of administration. Both are against totalitarianism, which threatens to become the predominant phenomenon of the twentieth century, and have tried to examine its intellectual and moral roots.

Leo Strauss, Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, whose death in October 1973 was a great loss to political philosophy, is one of the most outstanding contemporary theorists and a staunch critic of the behaviouralist approach. His impact on American philosophy and political science has been very great. In Chicago, there are a large number of political scientists who regard it their privilege to be considered his disciples.

**Check Your Progress 4**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

- 1) Comment on the contemporary relevance of classics of politics.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

- 2) Discuss the views of either Michael Oakeshott or Hannah Arendt.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

---

**2.10 THE NEW SCIENCE OF POLITICS**

---

**2.10.1 Views of Eric Voegelin**

Among the modern political thinkers who have taken flights into the heights of political philosophising, the name of Eric Voegelin stands out as the most prominent. He is a prolific writer, though his style is somewhat complicated and it is not always easy to follow him. He does not make a distinction between political theory and political science –to him political theory would mean a critical reflection on politics, without which there can be no political science. Voegelin is strongly of the view that we never had the materials available and the intellectual climate suitable for great advances in theoretical analysis, as now. Voegelin is against system building in modern philosophy and believes that the system-constructors are ignorant of the basic experience of existence.

It is the duty of the political theorist, according to Voegelin, to empirically examine, and critically evaluate, man’s experiences through history with a view to seeking the

light which they shed upon his own search for truth about order in human society, a task which was superbly done by the Greek philosophers and the Christian theologians. Voegelin sharply disagrees with the modern political theorists who would treat political theory as essentially methodology and its task as merely acting “as the hand-maiden of research into behavioural regularities on the phenomenological level”. He would rather regard political theory as “an experimental science of right order, based on the total experience of the existing human person”. The task of political theory, according to Voegelin, is to elaborate “empirically and critically, the problems of order which derive from philosophical anthropology as part of a general ontology”.

### 2.10.2 Views of Christian Bay

At a time when the behaviouralists were trying to rationalise and justify the elitist concept of democracy through their “applied” studies and collection of statistical data, Christian Bay, in the best tradition of classical political philosophers, was questioning their “wisdom” and raising some fundamental questions regarding problems and perspectives of enquiry, which seem to have been neglected by them. He agreed with David Easton’s definition of politics as consisting of “all the processes by which public values are promoted and distributed by means of power and authority”, but objected to a virtual absence in such a definition of any reference to the *relatedness* of politics to human needs and problems. The mass of behavioural research in political science today, he writes, “deals with voting and with opinions and attitudes on social, political and economic issues. But we should not mistake the political horizon we encounter in this research for the whole realm of the political. There is too much that gets lost when attention is focussed on what we can readily measure by the standard kinds of sociological techniques – individual meanings of political commitments, for example”. He was critical of the prevailing tendency in current research of not trying to relate behavioural data meaningfully to normative theories of democracy. He quoted in this connection the “painstaking analysis of political behaviour with an astonishingly superficial attempt at bringing their data to bear on democratic theory” that Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee had made when they concluded that the American system of democracy “does meet certain requirements for a going political organisation” and that “it often works with distinction”. “With a more adequate conception of politics”, he wrote, “It will become clear, I believe, that what these and many other authors of books on political behaviour are looking at is only a limited range of data, which badly needs to be supplemented by a more intensive scientific inquiry, and also by a much larger canvas of political theory that includes a place for concepts such as needs, growth, and the common good, to name a few only.” It was even more shocking for Bay to find a “highly respected writer” like S.M. Lipset cheerfully claiming that democracy “is the good society itself in operation”, or that “the give-and-take of a free society’s internal struggles” was the best man could hope for on this earth. Quoting a few more examples, he wrote, “Determined to utilise the available arsenals of sociological techniques, this line of research has stressed the phenomena that can be weighed and counted to the exclusion of more diffuse and elusive aspects of politics. In their desire to be scientific, these investigators have shied away from normative inquiry to such an extent that they unblushingly relate their fine empirical work to the crudest notions of, and assumptions about, democracy – either as an end in itself or as a means to even vaguer conceptions of human wants”.

#### Check Your Progress 5

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss the views of either Eric Voegelin or Christian Bay.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

### 2.11 LET US SUM UP

---

Political science was treated as distinct from other social sciences in as much as it dealt with the phenomenon of control of power within society. Max Weber regarded an organisation or association as political “if and in so far as the enforcement of its order is carried out continually within a given territorial area by the application and threat of physical force on the part of the administrative staff”. Institutions, however, continued to be regarded as the primary units of analysis, though the focus of interest had shifted from institutions themselves to the accumulation and exercise of power. “The focus of interest”, of the political scientist, writes Robson, “is clear and unambiguous, it centres on the struggle to gain and retain power, to exercise power or influence over others, or to resist that exercise”. In more recent years, the centre of interest has shifted more particularly to the relations and patterns of interaction among individuals, politics being now regarded as “an aspect of human behaviour in an environment”. Within the broad frame-work of the concept of politics as the authoritative allocation of values, emphasis has varied from (1) the making and execution of decisions with decisionmaking as the unit of analysis, to (2) policymaking, involving a discussion of both policy content and political process, and, finally, to (3) the determination, and attainment of society’s goals, the principal difference between the second and third aspect being that while the second focuses primarily on the precise nature of political processes as they are carried on within the state, the last one is concerned with goals and teleology.

---

### 2.12 SOME USEFUL REFERENCES

---

Bellany R., *Theories and Concepts of Politics: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993)

Blondel, J., *The Discipline of Politics* (London: Butter-worths, 1981)

Leftwich, A., (ed), *What is Politics?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984)

Mouffe, C., *The Return of the Political* (London: Verso, 1993)

Plan, R., *Modern Political Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991)

---

### 2.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

---

#### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 2.1
- 2) See Sections 2.2 and 2.3

**Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) See Section 2.4 and 2.5

**Check Your Progress 3**

- 1) See Section 2.6
- 2) See Section 2.7

**Check Your Progress 4**

- 1) See Section 2.8
- 2) See Section 2.9

**Check Your Progress 5**

- 1) See sub-sections 2.10.1 and 2.10.2



ignou  
THE PEOPLE'S  
UNIVERSITY

---

## UNIT 3 THE NEED FOR POLITICAL THEORY

---

### Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Political Theory and Other Inter-related Terms
- 3.3 Usages of Political Theory
  - 3.3.1 As the History of Political Thought
  - 3.3.2 As a Technique of Analysis
  - 3.3.3 As a Conceptual Clarification
  - 3.3.4 As Formal Model Building
  - 3.3.5 As Theoretical Political Science
- 3.4 Importance of Key Theoretical Concepts
- 3.5 Is Political Theory Dead?
- 3.6 Revival of Political Theory
- 3.7 Recent Developments
- 3.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.9 Some Useful References
- 3.10 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

---

### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

---

This Unit concerns itself with the need for political theory. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Distinguish political theory from other similar terms;
- Discuss the different usages of political theory, viz, as the history of political thought, as a technique of analysis; etc. and
- Examine whether political theory is dead.

---

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Political theory is one of the core areas in political science. It is only in recent times that it has emerged as an academic discipline. Earlier, those who engaged in this enterprise styled themselves as philosophers or scientists. From ancient Greece to the present, the history of political theory has dealt with fundamental and perennial ideas of political science. The first modern usage of the term 'Political Science' was in the works of Charles-Louis de Secondat Montesquieu (1689-1755), Adam Smith (1723-90), Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) and David Hume (1711-76), where it meant the 'Science of the Legislator'.

Political theory is the most appropriate term to employ in designating that intellectual tradition which affirms the possibility of transcending the sphere of immediate practical concerns and 'viewing' man's societal existence from a critical perspective. Political theory was political science in the full sense, and there could be no science without theory. Just as we may speak of theory as either the activity of theorising, so political theory may legitimately and accurately be used as synonymous with political science.



---

### 3.2 POLITICAL THEORY AND OTHER INTER-RELATED TERMS

---

A distinction can be made between political theory and similar terms. Such as political science, political philosophy and political ideology, though many treat them interchangeably. The differentiation between political theory and political science arises because of the general shift in intellectual perceptions brought about by modern science. Political Science has tried to provide plausible generalisations and laws about politics and political behaviour. Political theory reflects upon political phenomenon, processes and institutions and on actual political behaviour by subjecting it to philosophical or ethical criterion. It considers the question of the best political order, which is a part of a larger and a more fundamental question; namely, the ideal form of life that a human being ought to lead within a larger community. In the process of answering immediate and local questions, it addresses perennial issues, which is why a study of the classical texts form an important component of the discipline. A classic in political theory has the essential ingredients of a great literary work, which inspite of its local setting, deals with the perennial problems of life and society. It contains the quintessence of eternal knowledge and is an inheritance not of any one culture, place, people or time, but of the entire humankind.

Specific political theories cannot be considered as the correct or final understanding of an event. The meaning of an event is always open to future interpretations from new viewpoints, each explaining and analysing from a particular standpoint or concern in political life. Furthermore, political theory is critical in its endeavour, for it gives an account of politics that rises above those of ordinary people. There is no tension between political theory and political science, for they differ in terms of their boundaries and jurisdiction, and not in their aim. Political theory supplies ideas, concepts and theories for the purpose of analysis, description, explanation and criticism, which in turn are incorporated in political science.

Political philosophy provides general answers to questions such as what is justice, concepts of right, the distinction between 'is' and 'ought' and the larger issues of politics. Political philosophy is a part of normative political theory, for it attempts to establish inter-relationships between concepts. It is, perhaps, accurate to say that every political philosopher is a theorist, though every political theorist is not a political philosopher. Political philosophy is a complex activity, which is best, understood by analysing the many ways that the acknowledged masters have practiced it. No single philosopher and no one historical age can be said to have defined it conclusively, any more than any one painter or school of painting has practiced all that we mean by painting.

Political thought is the thought of the whole community that includes the writings and speeches of the articulate sections such as professional politicians, political commentators, society reformers and ordinary persons of a community. Thought can be in the form of political treatises, scholarly articles, speeches, government policies and decisions, and also poems and prose that capture the anguish of the people. Thought is time bound; for instance, the history of the twentieth century. In short, political thought includes theories that attempt to explain political behaviour, and values to evaluate it and methods to control it.

Political theory, unlike thought, refers to the speculation by a single individual, usually articulated in treatises as models of explanation. It consists of theories of institutions, including that of the state, law, representation and of election. The mode of enquiry is comparative and explanatory. Political theory attempts to explain the attitudes and actions arising from ordinary political life and to generalise about them in a particular context : this political theory is concerned about/with the relationships between concepts

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

and circumstances. Political philosophy attempts to resolve or to understand conflicts between political theories, which might appear equally acceptable in given circumstances.

Political ideology is a systematic and all embracing doctrine, which attempts to give a complete and universally applicable theory of human nature and society along with a detailed programme of attaining it. John Locke is often described as the father of modern ideologies. Marxism is also a classic example of an ideology summed up in the statement that the purpose of philosophy is to change and not merely interpret the world. All political ideology is political philosophy, though the reverse is not true. The twentieth century has seen many ideologies like Fascism, Nazism, Communism and Liberalism. A distinctive trait of political ideology is its dogmatism, which unlike political philosophy, precludes and discourages critical appraisal because of its aim to realise the perfect society. According to Gamine and Sabine, political ideology is a negation of political theory because an ideology is of recent origin, and under the influence of positivism is based on subjective, unverifiable value preferences. Gamine, furthermore, distinguishes a political theorist from a publicist. According to him while the former has a profound understanding of issues, the latter is concerned with immediate questions.

Furthermore, Germino, like Plato also distinguishes between opinion and knowledge, the latter being the starting point of a political theorist. Every political theorist has a dual role; that of a scientist and a philosopher and the way he divides his roles will depend on his temperament and interests. Only by combining the two roles can he contribute to knowledge in a worthwhile manner. The scientific component of a theory can appear coherent and significant, if the author has a preconceived notion of the aims of political life. The philosophical basis is revealed in the manner in which reality is depicted.

Political theory is dispassionate and disinterested. As a science, it describes political reality without trying to pass judgement on what is being depicted either implicitly or explicitly. As a philosophy, it prescribes rules of conduct which will secure a good life for all in the society and not simply for certain individuals or classes. The theorist, will not himself have a personal interest in the political arrangements of any one country or class or party. Devoid of such an interest, his vision of reality and his image of the good life will not be clouded, nor will his theory be special. The intention of an ideology is to justify a particular system of power in society. The ideologue is an interested party : his interest may be to defend things as they are or to criticise the status quo in the hope that a new distribution of power will come into being. Rather than disinterested prescription, we have rationalisation. Rather than dispassionate description, we have a distorted picture of reality.

**Check Your Progress 1**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Distinguish political theory from other inter-related terms.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

### 3.3 USAGES OF POLITICAL THEORY

---

Political theorists since Aristotle try to define the political to understand political practices and their application. Aristotle's remarks that 'man is a political animal' takes account of the inherent human desire for society and the fact that human beings need and can find fulfillment only through a political community. For Aristotle, the political is important for it stands for a common political space in which all citizens participate. However, the ambit of politics has to be limited.

The political dimension of political theory concerns itself with the form, nature, organisation of the state or government and its relationship with the individual citizen. Though inter-linked, the political is treated as a specific area distinct and different from the other spheres like the economy and culture. This is the primary focus of the liberal tradition. On the contrary, Marxism categorically rejects the liberal distinction between the political and the non-political by arguing that political power is a hand-maiden of economic power. It identifies affinity between the economic power and the state.

#### 3.3.1 As The History of Political Thought

Usually, courses in political theory offer a detailed and elaborate study of books or particular political philosophies, from Plato to contemporary times, from a historical perspective. These books are studied for their normative statements about the desirability of certain types of institutions, governments and laws, which are usually accompanied by rational arguments. The classics are portrayed as timeless in quality, permanent in relevance and universal in their significance. In the course of analysing texts from a historical perspective, it is important to see how a particular idea or concept has evolved in the course of time; and the different meanings and interpretations it has been subjected to. While it is important to know who said something for the first time, it is equally important to know the new ramifications of an idea or a concept. It is for this reason that Wolin rightly describes the history of political theory as marked by both continuity and innovation.

#### 3.3.2 As a Technique of Analysis

Aristotle's remarks that the individual is a political animal indicates the primacy of politics and the fact that political thinking takes place at various levels and in a variety of ways. The political in such a view not only becomes all pervasive, but the highest kind of activity. Politics symbolises a collective public life wherein people create institutions that regulate their common life. Even deceptively simple common sense questions and political opinion merit an answer; for instance, are individuals equal? Is the state more important than the individual? How to justify violence employed by the state? Is this an inherent tension between freedom and equality? Is the minority justified in dictating terms to the majority and vice-versa? One's response to these statements often reflect what ought to be the case rather than what is the case. At stake here is a choice between values and ideals. By exercising one's preferences, one also inadvertently subscribes to a political ideology which means that answers to questions will vary not only according to individual opinion, but would also diverge depending on one's value preferences. It is because of this basic reason that political theory is to be a part of an open society, for there would always be liberals and conservatives training in political theory who would help one to answer the aforesaid questions logically, speculatively and critically.

#### 3.3.3 As a Conceptual Clarification

Political theory helps to understand the concepts and terms used in a political argument and analysis: like the meaning of freedom, equality, democracy, justice and rights. These terms are not only frequently used in daily conversation, but also in political

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

theory discourse. An understanding of these terms is important for it helps one to know the way these terms have been employed, the shifts in their definition and their usage in a structure of argument. Many, like Weldon stress on the need to scrutinise concepts in ordinary pre-theoretical language. Analyses of concepts also reveal the ideological commitment of a speaker or/and writer. Liberals define freedom as implying choice, absence of restraints while socialists like freedom with equality. Liberals define a state as an instrument of human welfare, while for a socialist a state is an instrument of oppression, domination and class privileges. Conceptual classification is definitely possible, but cannot be neutral. Those engaged in it overtly or covertly subscribe to value preferences, and in this sense their task is not different from the authors of classics in political theory who help one to understand the underlying basis of human, political and moral actions.

**3.3.4 As Formal Model Building**

This perception is particularly popular in the United States, for it considers political theory as an exercise in devising formal models of political processes; similar to the ones in theoretical economics. These models serve two purposes : first they are explanatory, offering systematically the factors on which political processes are based. Second, they are normative, for they try to show the consequences that accrue from following a certain rule. A good example of such an exercise is Antony Down’s ‘theory of electoral competition’ which perceives voters as trying to gain maximum utility from an election result and parties as teams trying to maximise their probability of winning. Downs then shows how parties, in order to win, devise ideological stances. Another important model is Kenneth Arrow’s ‘impossibility theorem’, which states that among other things being equal, where a democratic choice has to be made between more than two alternatives, the outcome would very likely be an arbitrary one and influenced by the procedure employed to exercise the choice. Joseph Schumpeter’s elitist theory of democracy is based on the assumption that a human being takes his economic life more seriously than his political one.

**3.3.5 As Theoretical Political Science**

The emergence of political science in the twentieth century has led some political scientists to look upon political theory as a mere theoretical branch of the discipline. An attempt is made to integrate empirical observations with a systematic explanation of one’s everyday experiences in the world. This view dispenses with the normative content of traditional political theory. Though mere explanation of political phenomena is possible but grounding it in empiricism is not adequate. Any attempt to formulate a political theory free of normative elements would inherently fail. This is because any explanation of political events would mean an interpretation of the intentions and motives of the participants and such an interpretation would bring forth, normative issues.

**Check Your Progress 2**

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

- 1) Discuss any two usages of political theory.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

---

### 3.4 IMPORTANCE OF KEY THEORETICAL CONCEPTS

---

A reader getting introduced to political theory for the first time may think it sufficient to study the institutions rather than abstract concepts in order to understand the character and nature of society. While a study of institutions is possible, one has to realise that institutional arrangements vary from society to society because they are based on divergent sets of ideas. This realisation takes us to the heart of the matter as to what is more important, reality or ideas, facts or concepts. Do ideas reflect reality or is reality based on ideas?

---

### 3.5 IS POLITICAL THEORY DEAD?

---

In the middle of the twentieth century, many observers readily wrote an obituary of political theory. Some spoke of its decline. Others proclaimed its death. One referred to political theory as being in the doghouse. This dismal view is because the classical tradition in political theory is, by and large, loaded with value judgements beyond the control of empirical testing. The criticism of normative theory came from logical positivists in the 1930s and from behaviouralism, subsequently. Easton contends that since political theory is concerned with some kind of historical form, it had lost its constructive role. He blames William Dunning, Charles H. McIlwain, and George M. Sabine for historicism in political theory. This kind of political theory has dissuaded students from a serious study of value theory.

In the past, theory was a vehicle whereby articulate and intelligent individuals conveyed their thoughts on actual direction of affairs and offered for serious consideration, some ideas about the desirable course of events. In this way, they revealed to us the full meaning of their moral frame of reference. Today, however, the kind of historical interpretation with which we are familiar in the study of political theory has driven from the latter its only unique function; that of constructively approaching a valuational frame of reference. In the past, theory was approached as an intellectual activity whereby the student could learn how he was to go about exploring the knowable consequences and, through them, the ultimate premises of his own moral outlook. Scrutiny of the works by American political theorists reveals that their authors have been motivated less by an interest in communicating such knowledge than in retailing information about the meaning, internal consistency and historical development of past political values.

Dunning in his three volumes entitled *A History of Political Theories* (1902) set the tone for research in political theory. This training as a historian enables him to approach political theory primarily as offering problems of historical change and to unfold the role of political ideas in this process. As a result political theory, for Dunning, becomes a historical account of the conditions and consequences of political ideas. He seeks to uncover the cultural and political conceptions of an age and to isolate the influences of these ideas, in turn, on the social conditions.

Easton describes Dunning as a historicist, for he deflects political theory from moral considerations and consciously avoids dealing with moral issues in a purely historical context. Dunning perceives political theory as essentially historical research into issues that arise from observation of political facts and practices. He confines his study to the legal rather than the ethical dimensions of political life, though subsequently his students broadened it to encompass theories of political activity. He considers moral views as a product of caprice, dogmas without justification and hence, not worthy of analysis or interpretation. He neglects the meaning and logical consistency of ideas.

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

McIlwain's *The Growth of Political Thought in the West* (1932) uses historical research, for he regards political ideas as an 'effect rather than an influential interacting part of social activity'. Being virtual ciphers in the changing patterns of actual life, ideas can have meaning only as a part of a history of theories in which ideas may condition, subsequent ideas, but in which they leave no impact upon action. Political theory is construed here as a branch of the sociology of knowledge, which deals primarily with the circumstances shaping knowledge as it has varied over time. The task of the political theorist is to show the way in which a social milieu moulds and shapes political thought. It is concerned with the exclusively empirical task of uncovering the determinants of ideology.

Sabine's *A History of Political Theory* (1939) has singularly influenced studies in political theory more than any other book written during the thirties. Like Dunning and McIlwain, Sabine considers the historical study of theory as an appropriate approach to the subject matter. The impression that one gets from the book and from a description of his method is 'that a historical study of theory provides its own self-evident justification'. Sabine combines the approach of both Dunning and McIlwain. Like Dunning, he believes that political thought is a part of the political process which interacts and influences social action. He shares McIlwain's belief that it is necessary to describe and analyse moral judgement in each theory as these are the determining factors in history and not mere rationalisations of an activity. Moral judgements are not inferior to factual propositions as Dunning contends. Though Sabine reiterates Dunning's interpretation of the relation between ideas and action, he differs in his conception of the nature of history of political theory by his emphasis on the role of ethical judgement.

For Sabine, every political theory can be scrutinised from two points of view: as a social philosophy and as an ideology. As an ideology, theories are psychological phenomena precluding truth or falsity. Theories are beliefs, 'events in people's minds and factors in their conduct irrespective of their validity or verifiability'. Theories play an influential role in history and therefore, the task of a historian is to ascertain the extent to which these theories help in shaping the course of history. A theory has to be examined for its meaning rather than for its impact on human actions. Viewed in this perspective, a theory comprises of two kinds of propositions : factual and moral. Sabine focuses on factual rather than moral statements for the latter precludes descriptions of truth or falsity. He regards values as reflecting human preferences to 'some social and physical fact'. They are not deducible from facts, nor can they be reduced to facts or rationally discovered as being expressions of emotions. Since political theory advances some statements of preference, value judgements form the case of theory and explain the reason for its existence. The moral element characterises political theory, which is why it is primarily a moral enterprise. In spite of factual propositions within a theory, a political theory on the whole can hardly be true in depicting a particular episode or period.

Easton examined the reasons for the decline of political theory in general and its decline into historicism in particular. First, and foremost, is the tendency among political scientists to conform to the moral propositions of their age leading to a loss of the constructive approach. The emphasis is to uncover and reveal one's values which imply that there is no longer the need to enquire into the merit of these moral values, but merely understand their 'origins, development and social impact'. History is used to endorse existing values. Secondly, moral relativism is responsible for the attention a theory received with history.

**Check Your Progress 3**

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss any two usages of political theory.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

### 3.6 REVIVAL OF POLITICAL THEORY

---

In the 1930s, political theory began studying the history of ideas with the purpose of defending liberal democratic theory in opposition to the totalitarian tenets of communism, fascism and nazism. Lasswell tried to establish a scientific political theory with the eventual purpose of controlling human behaviour, furthering the aims and direction given by Merriam. Unlike the classical tradition, scientific political theory describes rather than prescribes. Political theory in the traditional sense was alive in the works of Arendt, Theodore Adorno, Marcuse, and Leo Strauss. Their views diametrically differed from the broad ideas within American political science for they believed in liberal democracy, science and historical progress. All of them reject political messianism and utopianism in politics. Arendt focussed mainly on the uniqueness and responsibility of the human being, with which she initiates her criticism in behaviouralism. She contended that the behavioural search for uniformities in human nature has only contributed towards stereotyping the human being.

Strauss reaffirms the importance of classical political theory to remedy the crisis of the modern times. He does not agree with the proposition that all political theory is ideological in nature mirroring a given socio-economic interest, for most political thinkers are motivated by the possibility of discerning the principles of the right order in social existence. A political philosopher has to be primarily interested in truth. Past philosophies are studied with an eye on coherence and consistency. The authors of the classics in political theory are superior because they were geniuses and measured in their writings. Strauss scrutinises the methods and purposes of the 'new' political science and concludes that it was defective when compared with classical political theory, particularly that of Aristotle. For Aristotle, a political philosopher or a political scientist has to be impartial, for he possesses a more comprehensive and clearer understanding of human ends. Political science and political philosophy are identical, because science consisting of theoretical and practical aspects is identical with philosophy. Aristotle's political science also evaluates political things, defends autonomy of prudence in practical matters and views political action as essentially ethical. These premises Behaviouralism denies, for it separates political philosophy from political science and substitutes the distinction between theoretical and practical sciences. It perceives applied sciences to be derived from theoretical sciences, but not in the same manner as the classical tradition visualises. Behaviouralism like positivism is disastrous, for it denies knowledge regarding ultimate principles. Their bankruptcy is evident, for they seem helpless, unable to distinguish the right from the wrong, the just from the unjust in view of the rise of totalitarianism. Strauss counters Easton's charge of historicism by alleging that the new science is responsible for the

decline in political theory, for it pointed to and abetted the general political crisis of the West because of its overall neglect of normative issues.

Vogelin regards political science and political theory as inseparable and that one is not possible without the other. Political theory is not ideology, utopia or scientific methodology, but an experiential science of the right order in both the individual and society. It has to dissect critically and empirically the problem of order.

Theory is not just any opining about human existence in society, it rather is an attempt at formulating the meaning of existence by explicating the content of a definitive class of experiences. Its argument is not arbitrary, but derives its validity from the aggregate of experiences to which it must permanently refer for empirical control.

---

### **3.7 RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**

---

Since the Seventies, political theory has revived largely due to the efforts of Habermas, Nozick and Rawls. The themes that figure prominently since its revival are broadly social justice and welfare rights theory within a deontological perspective, utilitarianism, democratic theory and pluralism, feminism, post-modernism, new social movements and civil society, and the liberalism-communitarian debate. Infact, communitarianism has tried to fill the void left by the declining popularity of Marxism. However, this unprecedented lease of life that political theory has received is restricted to the academia and as a result, it is 'a kind of alienated politics, an enterprise carried on at some distance from the activities to which it refers'. This resurgence suggests that earlier pronouncements about its decline and/or demise are premature and academically shortsighted. However, one has to be careful in distinguishing contemporary political theory from the classical tradition, as the former derives its inspiration from the latter and in this sense, they are attempts to refine rather than being original, adjusting the broad frameworks of the classical tradition to the contemporary complexities.

This new found enthusiasm has been confined to liberal political discourse, mainly due to the seminal work of Rawls fulfilling Germino's wish of a need to strengthen the open society. Recent liberal theory, in its revived sense, focuses on the idea of impartiality and fairness in the belief that 'discrimination must be grounded on relevant differences'. It is no coincidence that a well formulated and detailed analysis of the concept of justice, long over due since the time of Plato, emerges in Rawls for whom justice means fairness. Rawls in the classical tradition deals with what ought to be, for he confronted the vexed problem of distribution of liberties, opportunities, income, wealth and the bases of self-respect. Among the competing ideologies which ushers in the twentieth century, only liberalism, unlike fascism and communism, permits free exchange of ideas. It synchronizes, and adapts if necessary, theory in light of practice and identifies the elements that constitute a just political and social order without being doctrinaire and dogmatic. However, much of this new liberal political theory has been in the nature of refining and clarifying the earlier theoretical postures. Moreover, the loss of challenge by both fascism and communism, the first, because of its defeat in the second world war, and the second, which collapsed due to its own internal contradictions, also prove that utopian and radical schemes are no longer theoretically and practically desirable and feasible alternatives. Nonetheless, liberalism faces challenges in recent times from communitarianism, post-modernism and feminism.

#### **Check Your Progress 4**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss the revival of political theory.



.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

### 3.8 LET US SUM UP

---

Political theory, since the time of Plato, has been influenced by its time and place. Our own time is no different. The better part of the last one hundred years has seen a keen contest between liberal democracy, fascism and communism. The fascist challenge was short lived, ending with its defeat in the second world war, but the communist challenge continued even after the war for another four decades. During this period, there were fresh insights into the nature of totalitarianism by Arendt and Friedrich, defense of liberal democracy by Berlin, Hayek and Popper and Plamentaz’s contrast between German Marxism and Soviet Communism. There were penetrating criticisms of Marxist theory and practice by Avineri, Berlin, Dahl, Popper and Tucker, Miliband and the East European dissidents who highlighted the libertarian aspect of the socialist discourse. The post-second world war period saw the emergence of convergence theory and the end of ideology debate emphasizing the commonalties between advanced capitalism and developed socialism. Thus, contemporary political theory became global with important contributions from practically every corner of the world. Colonialism and imperialism led to an impressive flowering of non-western input to political theory reflected by the denunciation of western materialistic civilization in Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj*, refinement, rejection of euro-centricism in the writings of Mao Zedong, Amiclar Lopes Cabral, Edward Said and in the concept of negritude and African identity of Leopald Senghor.

The most impressive contributions were by twentieth century liberals inaugurated by Hobhouse’s liberalism and culminating in Rawl grand theory. They classified and refined earlier positions rather than initiate new paths of enquiry. This is virtually inevitable because ‘by Hegel’s time all fundamental positions have been taken up; after Hegel, they reappear in new guises and new variations but the reappearance is a testimony to the impossibility of fundamental innovation’. The political theory of our times has stood over the rich tradition of theorising of the last two thousand years and the recent scholarly works in applied politics more than normative theory have dealt with the important aspects of our political life. Our age also differs from the ones that precede it in a fundamental manner. It is an age of technology, manifest in microchip revolution and satellite networks. With nation–states becoming more porous and receptive to outside influences, political theory has to respond to the increasing sweep of globalisation and the role of technology. However, as Keynes pointed out, the influence of ideas will always be widespread and contemporary political theory dealing with complexities of our time within the framework of the rich heritage of political theory will have its rightful place in the history of political theory.

---

### 3.9 SOME USEFUL REFERENCES

---

B. Barry, 'The Strange Death of Political Philosophy' in *Democracy, Power and Justice : Essays in Political Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989

Sir I. Berlin, 'Does political theory still exist?' in P. Laslett and W.G. Runciman, *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, 2nd series (eds.) Blackwell, Oxford, 1964

D. Marsh and G. Stoker, *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, Macmillan, London, 1995

Vincent, *Political Theory: Tradition and Diversity*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997

---

### 3.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

---

#### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Section 3.2

#### Check Your Progress 2

- 2) See Section 3.3

#### Check Your Progress 3

- 1) See Section 3.5

#### Check Your Progress 4

- 1) See Sections 3.6 and 3.7

---

## UNIT 4 CONCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL THEORY

---

### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Development of Political Theory
- 4.3 Towards a Definition of Political Theory
- 4.4 Dominant Conceptions in Political Theory
  - 4.4.1 Historical Conception
  - 4.4.2 Normative Conception
  - 4.4.3 Empirical Conception
  - 4.4.4 Contemporary Conception
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Some Useful References
- 4.7 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

---

### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

---

This Unit deals with the various conceptions of political theory. After going through the unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss efforts to define political theory;
- Discuss various conceptions of political theory; and
- Give an overview of the recent effort at political theorisation.

---

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

---

The main objective of this unit is to explicate different conceptions which are found in political theory. At the very outset, it should be mentioned that political theory is that enterprise which seeks to analyse political phenomena of various shades and descriptions which occur in real-world political life. In other words, political theory does effect the world in which we live and influences the choices we make therein. It helps us in improving and refining our understanding about social and political life. It is a different matter that there is a misconception about political theory in general, and the political theorist in particular, which imagines a political theorist as secluded and isolated entity who is least bothered about the problems of real life and lives in an imaginary world of his own from where he or she churns out theories about society and politics.

But the fact is otherwise. Political theory is always situated in the actual world about which it speaks, to which it addresses itself and the problem it seeks to resolve. Society is the runway from where the flight of its imagination takes off. Therefore, activists, indulging in public – political life make significant contributions to political theory as trained political scientists. Political theory, as a vocation is as important as political theory as a profession and the testimony that such a vocation has not only existed, but has also enriched the corpus of knowledge can be had from the long line of writers from Plato to Marx. Political theory as a vocation “sharpens our sense about complex interplay between political experience and thought” and “provides thoughtful political action and widens political vision” as Sheldon Wolin has pointed out in his book *Politics and Vision*.

---

## 4.2 DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL THEORY

---

Developments in political theory always reflect the changes which occur in society. Political theories are produced in response to the challenges which emerge at different times. Hegel's symbolic characterisation of political theory as 'the owl of Minerva takes flight when shadow of darkness falls' is very apt.

However, we will do well to remember that political thought, which also emerges due to societal challenges, is bound by time as well as space, and is therefore, different from theory which breaks such barriers and proves its worth in understanding and explaining political phenomena of different nature and origin. This happens, because theories are purged and purified from ideologies and biases and arrive at certain principles, which are not only timeless, but may even be called knowledge. Political theorists, while indulging in theorisation, pursue ideas not for the sake of fulfillment of their fads and fantasies, but in order to search those principles whose understanding can make life better. And in this enterprise, theorists, by and large, are motivated by the concrete political situation. The history of political theory bears out how ills and maladies afflicting societies have lubricated the tools of theorisation, through which various accepted principles and practices and the assumptions behind them were questioned and the blueprint for the future was drawn.

It is, however, true that the stimulus for theory always comes from some sort of failure and a related conviction that things can be bettered through an improved understanding and may, ultimately be resolved. Hence, political theory's task is not limited to providing a fleeting response and getting contented with a compromise. Rather, it has to reach at the root of the problem and has to discover remedies in the form of an alternative set of principles. Hence, any project on theory requires a 'vision' through which a theorist could think not only about the problems at hand, but also beyond them.

It is here that political theory might be differentiated from art or poetry. In terms of vision, reflections and ruminations, there is not much difference between political theory and other creative activities like art and poetry. But what sets apart the political theorist from the poet is that his urge and search are a conscious act with a definite design, whereas a poetic act is one of spontaneity. Therefore, it is not creativity, but consciousness that denies poetry the status of a theory.

---

## 4.3 TOWARDS A DEFINITION OF POLITICAL THEORY

---

Political theory is defined in different ways by different people. The definitions vary on the basis of emphasis and understanding of its constitutive elements. Sabine's well known definition of political theory is that it is something 'which has characteristically contained factors like the factual, the causal and the valuational'. To Hecker, political theory is 'dispassionate and disinterested activity. It is a body of philosophical and scientific knowledge which regardless of when and where it was originally written, can increase our understanding of the world in which we live today and we live tomorrow'.

Therefore, one may say that what we mean by political theory is a coherent group of propositions, with some explanatory principle, about a class of political phenomena. It implies that a theory *unlike* thought, cannot consider a multitude of phenomena at a time, and will have to get concerned with a class or type of issues only.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.  
ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.
- 1) Write a few lines on the development of political theory.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

---

**4.4 DOMINANT CONCEPTIONS IN POLITICAL THEORY**

---

It is quite difficult to identify and categorise various conceptions of political theory which are put into use by theorists. The difficulty emanates from a tendency among theorists to go for an exercise in which they start drawing on different conceptions and traditions. This is more true, as we will see later, with contemporary political theory than with the ones which preceded it. In the past, theorists somewhat maintained a purity of conception in theory – building and seldom outstepped the framework they had chosen. But this does not apply to the contemporary times, which are a witness to a crop of theory which appears hybrid in nature.

But broadly speaking, three different conceptions emerge in political theory on the basis of which both the past and the present theories can be conceptualised, judged and evaluated. They are: **Historical, Normative, and Empirical.**

**4.4.1 Historical Conception**

Many theorists have attempted theory – building on the basis of insights and resources from history. Sabine is one of the main exponents of the historical conception. In his opinion, a question such as what is the nature of political theory can be answered descriptively; that is, how theory has responded to historical events and specific situations. In other words, in this perspective, political theory becomes situation-dependent in which each historical situation sets a problem, which in turn is taken care of through solutions devised by the theory.

This conception of political theory is deferential to tradition. Cobban also believes that the traditional mode, in which a sense of history is instilled to the full, is the right way to consider the problems of political theory.

It is true that the past acts as a valuable guide in our endeavour of theory – building and teaches us not to be too sure of our originality. It also hints that it is possible to think in ways other than those which are fashionable and dominant, besides shedding light on the sources. The historical understanding also sensitises us about the failings of the past generations and ties them with the collective wisdom of the present and promotes imaginativeness in us.

Over and above this, the historical conception also contributes significantly to our normative vision. The history of ideas may tell us that our social and political universe is a product of things whose root lies in the past. And knowing them better would tell us how we have certain values, norms and moral expectations and from where they have come. With this sense in us, it is possible to interrogate these values and critically assess their utility.

But a blind adherence to this conception is not without its folly. The novelty of the project called political theory is that each specific situation is unique, riddled with new challenges. Hence, worth of the past sometimes becomes redundant and could even be a hindrance, if one is oblivious of this aspect. Therefore, the utility of this approach in political theory beyond a certain level is doubtful as it is always wedded to outmoded ideas from outmoded ages. The suggestive values of the ideas remain, but the theoretical function recedes considerably.

#### 4.4.2 Normative Conception

The normative conception in political theory is known by different names. Some people prefer to call it **philosophical theory**, while others refer to it as **ethical theory**. The normative conception is based on the belief that the world and its events can be interpreted in terms of logic, purpose and ends with the help of the theorist's intuition, reasoning, insights and experiences. In other words, it is a project of philosophical speculation about values.

The questions, which are asked by the normativists, would be: what should be the end of political institutions? What should inform the relationship between the individual and other social organisations? What arrangements in society can become model or ideal and what rules and principles should govern it?

One may say that their concerns are moral and the purpose is to build an ideal type. Hence, it is these theorists who have always conceived 'utopia' in the realm of political ideas through their powerful imagination.

Normative political theory leans heavily towards political philosophy, because it derives its knowledge of the good life from it and also uses it as a framework in its endeavour to create absolute norms. Infact, their tools of theorisation are borrowed from political philosophy and therefore, they always seek to established inter-relationships among concepts and look for coherence in the phenomena as well as in their theories, which are typical examples of a philosophical outlook.

Leo Strauss has strongly advocated the case for normative theory and has argued that political things by nature are subject to approval or disapproval and it is difficult to judge them in any other terms, except as good or bad and justice or injustice.

But the problem with the normativists is that while professing values which they cherish, they portray them as universal and absolute. They do not realise that their urge to create absolute standard for goodness is not without pitfalls. And that ethical values are relative to time and space with a heavy subjective content in them, which precludes the possibility of any creation of absolute standard. We will do well to remember that even a political theorist is a subjective instrument in the assessment of the world and these insights are conditioned by many factors, which may be ideological in nature.

The exponents of empirical theory take normativists to task for (a) relativity of values (b) cultural basis of ethics and norms (c) ideological content in the enterprise and (d) abstract and utopian nature of the project

It is true that the proponents of the normative conception get preoccupied with the inquiry in to the internal consistency of theory and that pertains, mostly to the nature

of ideas and rigour in the method, while remaining unmindful and sometimes, even negligent about the empirical understanding of the existing social and political reality. It is more agonising and distressing, when one finds that this proclivity among them is accompanied by another syndrome, under which they prefer to respond to a theorist and undertake only a review of his work by turning away their eyes from the empirical reality which stares at them. Thus, it turns out to be an illusory and deceptive exercise in theory-building in the name of high and noble normative concerns.

But in the distant past those who championed normative theory always tried to connect their principles with the understanding of the reality of their times. Therefore, all normative enterprises in the past had direct or indirect empirical referents and Plato's theory of justice could be a good example to illustrate it.

In recent times, again the old sensibility within the normative theory has reemerged and the passion for good life and good society has been matched by methodological and empirical astuteness. John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* is a case in point which attempts to anchor logical and moral political theory in empirical findings. Rawls, with his imagination, creates 'original position' to connect normative philosophical arguments with real world concerns about distributive justice and the welfare state. Some other theorists are also attending to the tasks of developing moral theories about equality, freedom and democracy by rooting them to every day concerns and marrying them to specific situations.

Some normative theorists of the new generation have also started discarding the well known inclination of theory, more a characteristic of the older days, under which either exuberant justification for the existing arrangements was offered or they hesitated to critique them and thus, carried the level of status – quoism in their thought. Now, a new crop of theory has surfaced known as *critical theory*, which as a part of the normative project, is engaged with political events and tries to combine ideas with practice, and also makes effective interventions to facilitate changes for the better in society and politics.

#### 4.4.3 Empirical Conception

What has dominated political theory in the twentieth century is not normativism, but another conception known as empirical political theory which derives theories from empirical observations.

Empirical political theory refuses to accord the status of knowledge to those theories which indulge in value judgements. Naturally, therefore, normative political theory is debunked as a mere statement of opinion and preferences.

The drive for value – free theory started in order to make the field of political theory scientific and objective and hence, a more reliable guide for action. This new orientation came to be known as *positivism*.

Under the spell of positivism, political theorists set out to attain scientific knowledge about political phenomena based on the principle which could be empirically verified and proved. Thus, they attempted to create a natural science of society and in this endeavor, philosophy was made a mere adjunct of science. Such an account of theory also portrayed the role of a theorist as of a disinterested observer, purged of all commitments and drained of all values.

This empirical project in political theory was premised on the empiricist theory of knowledge which claims to have the full blown criteria to test what constitutes truth and falsehood. The essence of this criteria is lodged in the experimentation and the verification principle.

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

When political theory was reeling under this influence, a so called revolution started and became popular as 'Behavioural Revolution'. This revolution reached a commanding position within political theory in the 1950's and engulfed the entire field of study and research by advocating new features. They included : (a) encouragement to quantitative technique in analysis (b) demolition of the normative framework and promotion of empirical research which can be susceptible to statistical tests (c) non – acceptance and rejection of the history of ideas (d) focus on micro–study as it was more amenable to empirical treatment (e) glorification of specialisation (f) procurement of data from the behavior of the individual and (g) urge for value – free research.

Infact, the behavioural climate got surcharged by an anti – theory mood and those who lambasted theory in a conventional sense had a field day. Theory was caricatured and made synonymous with ideology, abstraction, metaphysics and utopia. Some adventurists even advocated farewell to theory as an enterprise.

Later on, when *logical positivism* appeared as a revitalised incarnation of positivism and included in its ranks such heavy–weights as Wittgenstein, not much change could occur in outlook. The only difference was that the positivists wanted to make the area of political theory scientific, while the logical positivists declared it metaphysical, non – rational and therefore, outside the purview of scientific knowledge.

But this mood did not last long as the entire understanding was erroneous. So much so that in the zeal of attaining objective knowledge, they even reduced thought to an aspect of reality and blurred the distinction between thought and reality. Thus, they soon attracted the ire and fire of some philosophers of science who offered a vision for a post – positivist approach to science. Karl Popper set the new mood by laying down the principle of 'falsification' as a criterion of scientific knowledge and argued that all knowledge was conjectural, tentative and far from the final truth.

The real turn or breakthrough came in the philosophy of science when Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos and Mary Hesse blasted the so called scientific theory which was playing havoc with political theory and discredited the positivist model by rejecting the notion of unified science and declared it as an improper understanding of natural scientific practice. The crux or the argument was that science as a form of human activity was impregnated with interpretation, which consisted of meaning, communication and translation.

Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolution* was a pioneer in bringing out the shortcomings and failures of the positivist theory and it demonstrated how all cognitions were dependent on understanding and interpretation as a means of inter-subjective communication. Kuhn cogently argued that it was not only the irrational conventions which lurked behind the construction of the semantic framework, but were also informed by rational discourses framed by interpretation and criticism.

This new Kuhnian perspective, thus, broke new grounds in the philosophy of science and subjected the positivist account of knowledge and theory to rigorous criticism and scrutiny. But the 'philosophy of the social science' was not to lag behind, and soon new churnings started which brought the problem of understanding under scanner and contested the attempt to perceive the problem within the framework of a unified science.

Peter Winch, Alfred Schutz and Charles Taylor heralded this new perspective, which suggested that understanding in the social science was loaded with problems and two of them deserved special attention : (a) all sciences are a form of interpretative undertaking and hence, it has a theory – laden nature of all understanding (b) the object of the social science is distinctively subjective, which implies an agent who is a self – interpreting social being. Therefore, the problem of social science, according to this perspective, snowballs in to a 'double hermeneutics'.



This new approach brought the problem of understanding, interpretation and the issue of how to look at the symbolic world of the subject into the discussion. This also infused new meaning in the interpretative project of the political theorists by sensitising them to the symbolic world. Hence, what got problematised was not only the understanding of meaning, but also the issue of explaining them. This reminds us of Max Weber, who had long wrestled with this problematic through his categories of ‘causal adequacy’ and ‘adequacy of meaning’.

**Check Your Progress 2**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Distinguish between the empirical and normative conceptions of political theory

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

**4.4.4 Contemporary Conception**

It is a veritable challenge to map out the terrain traversed by the political theorists and the theoretical apparatus deployed by them in contemporary times. The challenge emanates from many sources. Contemporary political theory does not neatly follow the commonly accepted category of classification, viz, historical, normative and empirical and does not stay within a particular tradition, as the earlier theorists did. Sometimes, they appear to be making use of different conceptions in their enterprise and employ them in a manner which was not seen earlier. Contemporary theorisation in political theory has grown in reaction to the limitation of the earlier projects, mostly falling under the two great traditions, namely, Liberalism and Marxism and interrogates them and their category of analysis by selectively borrowing from them. But in the course of building the theoretical edifice, they break new grounds and create new sites for political investigation and also innovate new tools for searching and establishing the principles of politics. Nonetheless, the contemporary project on political theory does not move beyond the terms of trade called political theory as discussed earlier; that is, historical, normative and imperial but the mode of employing them has some hybridness in character.

Contemporary political theory made its appearance on the intellectual scene in the 1980s and 90s, mostly as a reaction against the established traditions in theory and put the categories of Enlightenment like reason and science to which all traditions in political theory were tied, to a scathing and searching criticism they brought in many aspects which were conquered as the foundation of truth by political theory under the scanner and set out to lay down the new principles to understand and imagine the new social and political universe which some of them put as ‘post – modern condition’.

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

It is true that the engagement of contemporary writers with political theory has been critical, but not equally transformative, imaginative or visionary. Although the 'New Social Movements' in contemporary times have been given moral and intellectual support by many of these theorists in the name of transforming society and overcoming the maladies of the new situation.

However, it would be arbitrary to yoke the various theoretical trends visible today under one broad frame of analysis. For example, discussing post – structuralism and post- modernism with communitarianism and multiculturalism together would amount to intellectual atrocity against them and their concerns and commitments. Because their history, their normative concern as well as the theoretical apparatuses and empirical referents have a significant dissimilarity and diversion. But still one can lay out the theoretical terrain on which their engagement with political theory takes place.

The broad thrusts which bring many of the contemporary theorists and theories together could be put under the following:

**1) Opposition to Universalism**

Political theorisation in contemporary times has gone for subjecting the universal claims of political theory of yesteryears, irrespective of the tradition to which they belonged, to critical scrutiny. Liberal universalism has appeared to them as devoid of a social and temporal context and in their opinion, the hidden 'particularism' mostly based on the experience of western society has masqueraded as universal values and norms. They argue that the appeal to universal principles are tantamount to standardisation; hence, violative of justice which may be inherent in a particular community or form of life and which may embody its own values and normative principle. The communitarian theory and the multicultural theory in recent times have highlighted it quite forcefully and called this so called universalist theories as 'exclusivist' at the core, which has always presented one vision of 'good' as the only vision of mankind.

Interestingly, political theory of this variety has not discarded the normative world view, but the objection they have raised is that political theory, earlier, couched its value judgement in 'essentialist' terms and discriminated against relative values. Thus, they sacrificed the truth in social and political life. Therefore, these theories seek to deconstruct the normative category of political theory like justice, freedom and democracy and desist from prioritising judgement on them or privileging one over the other. The post-structuralist and the post-modernist indulge in this exercise.

**2) Critique of Grand Narratives**

The grand narratives of both the liberal and the marxist variety have come under fire on the premise that there is an overarching or transcendental 'foundation' of reality and truth. Some of the contemporary theories have been declared 'anti-foundational', because of the continuous contestation of all well accepted foundations in political theory, viz, state, sovereignty and power. In all fairness to them, they do not reject all foundations, but only transcendental ones.

The post-modernists are in the forefront in attacking the grand narratives and argue that there is nothing like objective pre-given reality or an objective social good which can support such grand narratives and their designs. Their opinion is that this is nothing but 'objectivist illusion'. Here, they look at the discursively constituted reality which opens it for subjective interpretation. We will do well to remember that the post- structuralist and the post-modernist break from the 'structural' argument once so popular in political theory and reject their notion of structure which was synchronic (located in space), universal and timeless and hence, was ahistorical. In its place, they deploy a new concept of structure called 'Discourse' which is diachronic (located in time), historical and relative in nature.

3) **Post – positivism**

It is reminiscent of the earlier engagement with value neutrality in social science once championed by the behaviouralists in political theory. The contemporary theories call valuefree enterprises as useless and believe that political theory is an inherently normative and politically engaged project, which is supposed to offer prescription and a vision for the future.

4) **Empirical and Comparative**

The post-positivist thrust among contemporary theorists do not stop them from advocating the need for empirical and comparative approaches before any generalisation attempt is made. Multiculturalism is one such example, which is sensitive to the context. Infact, this kind of empirical – comparative methodology would be a check on the broad generalisation across cultures and continents.

Inspite of the new insights which come from contemporary political theory, they suffer from many weaknesses. Unlike classical political theory, there is not much comparative – empirical inquiry as yet and the tendency among theorists to borrow from the other theorists is galore. The normative enterprise can be useful only when it is tied to reality. Therefore, the real challenge lies in grounding normative theory to empirical reality of society and politics. This is the only way a valid political theory with just generalisations can emerge, which would also overcome the limitation of the post-modernist perspective and its weaknesses of relativity and diffusion which are not always congenial for political projects. This may fructify what Sheldon Wolin calls ‘epic theory’.

**Check Your Progress 3**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Discuss some of the broad thrusts which bring contemporary theorists together.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

---

**4.5 LET US SUM UP**

---

Since we have different conceptions of political theory, they acquire different meanings in different traditions. We have seen why political theory emerges and how it shapes and decides the course of history by facilitating human intervention in politics. What are the different conceptions held by the theorists have also been discussed and their pitfalls highlighted. The contemporary enterprise, which claims to open new vistas in our understanding of social and political reality has been discussed along with its limitations. What emerges clearly from the preceding discussion is that philosophy

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

and science can not replace each other in the project called political theory, if a vision for the emancipation of mankind is the mission and that even in the absence of anything called objective 'good' or objective 'truth', the practical basis for theory should be attempted. It is not only desirable, but also derivable. Any project in political theory which unifies empirical findings with normative thinking by subjecting them to rigorous criticism can open the gate for creativity in political theory on the basis of which we can navigate into the future.

---

## **4.6 SOME USEFUL REFERENCES**

---

Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, (Little Brown, Boston, 1960)

Peter Lasslet and W. G. Runciman (ed) *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, (Blackwell Oxford, 1957)

G. H. Sabine, *What is Political theory*, *Journal of Politics*, (1) PP. 1-16,1939

W.E. Connolly *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1983)

David Miller (Ed) *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought*, (Oxford Blackwell 1987)

---

## **4.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES**

---

### **Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) See Section 4.2

### **Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) See sub-section 4.4.2 and 4.4.3

### **Check Your Progress 3**

- 1) See sub-section 4.4.4

---

## UNIT 5 POLITICAL ARGUMENTS AND CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

---

### Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Nature of Arguments in the Classical Tradition
- 5.3 Positivist Critique of Normative Theory
- 5.4 Nature of Arguments in the Empirical Tradition
- 5.5 Decline of Positivism and Interpretive Theory as an Alternative
- 5.6 Normative Turn in Political Theory
- 5.7 Nature of Arguments in Foundationalist and Post-Foundationalist Theories
- 5.8 Conceptual Analysis
  - 5.8.1 Positivist Approach
  - 5.8.2 Interpretive Approach
- 5.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.10 Some Useful References
- 5.11 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

---

### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

---

This Unit concerns itself with the nature of political arguments and the analysis of concepts. After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Discuss the nature of political arguments in the classical and the empirical,
- Examine the decline of positivism and the emergence of interpretive theory as an alternative,
- Comment on the nature of arguments in foundationalist and post-foundationalist theories and finally,
- Discuss the various approaches of conceptual analysis.

---

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

---

The prime objective of this unit is to understand the nature of political arguments and the purpose of conceptual analysis in political theory. We require political arguments and conceptual analysis as building blocks of theorising. About what we argue and how we argue are two crucial considerations that determine the nature of argument. Arguments refer to a set of reasoned propositions for justification of truth-claims. Since we have different traditions of political theory each marked by distinctive substantial and methodological concerns, the nature of political arguments differs across the traditions. As political arguments deal with justification or validation of truth claims, the theory of knowledge of different traditions and its methodology frames the nature of political arguments.

Political arguments and conceptual analysis are dialectically related. We form or create concepts on the basis of arguments on the one hand, and on the other, we base our arguments on concepts. Concepts are the terms or the vocabulary with which political discourse is conducted. It frames our inquiry as well as facilitates the discourse about political inquiry. Political arguments arise in and are carried forward through

concepts. Conceptual analysis, therefore, has two purposes; one, to arrive at as clear a meaning embodied in the concept as possible so as to facilitate unambiguous communication among scholars by ‘disciplining talk’ or obviating ‘loose talk’, and second, to examine and lay bare the contest over the meaning of a concept with a view to provide the complexities of political arguments in question and thus, enrich our understanding of politics. There can be a third purpose of conceptual analysis, namely to alert us against the subtle ways in which concepts can put blinders on our perceptions about reality and obfuscate critical perspective or impede alternate visions of political practices. At the most general level, the different traditions can be identified as the **normative** and **empirical** traditions. But within the normative tradition, the justification of truth claims, which is the purpose of argument, is based on different criteria, and therefore, we divide internally this tradition in terms of **foundational** and **post-foundational** theories. Thus, the nature of political arguments, we argue would be different even within a particular tradition; for example, political arguments within the normative tradition would differ between the foundationalist and post-foundationalist theories.

---

## 5.2 NATURE OF ARGUMENTS IN THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

---

From Plato to Marx, there are several philosophers, whose writings have been broadly accepted to constitute what is called as the **Western Classical Tradition**. Political arguments, in this tradition, have generally been of a normative nature due to the fact that the subjects of concern and reflection have been matters such as: what is justice? Are there human rights and if so, what are they? What is the role of the state? Do individuals have definable needs and if so, who has an obligation to satisfy them? Should the government seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number and, if it should, what is the place of the minorities within this rubric? What gives government legitimacy and a state sovereignty? What sorts of claims on resources does the recognition of merit or desert embody? How far is the majority justified in imposing its moral outlook on the rest of society? Can we give an adequate account of the social and political institutions? What is the best form of government?

By and large, the classical tradition has been concerned with the nature of good life, with the institutional arrangements that would be necessary for human beings to flourish, for their needs to be met or their rational capacities realised. At the same time, there has been a preoccupation with what is **politically right**-with the nature of law, justice, the best form of government, the rights and duties of the individuals, and with the distributive organisation of society. Political theories were about the right and the good and so were, the political arguments. Seen in this way, the subject matter of political philosophy was very much a part and parcel of moral philosophy. Political arguments assumed the form of moral reasoning with a clear purpose of settling moral issues or claims of moral and political truth on a rational basis.

Political arguments purported to convey some truths about the fundamental nature of politics, to make claims which could be regarded as objective and inter-subjectively valid. This truth and objectivity was based upon different assumptions: sometimes about reason, sometimes about empirical experience, sometimes about intuition, and occasionally, revelation. At the same time, some epistemological authority was also invoked such as reason or experience so that ultimately claims about fundamental human needs, goals, purposes, relationships and the forms of rule appropriate to these which entered in the political philosophy were supposed to be true. For example, Plato, Hobbes, Hegel and Mill, worked out, at least in part, the cognitive basis on which the claims in political philosophy were advanced.

Political arguments in this tradition, thus, proceeded from certain self-evident truth, axioms, or assumptions about the nature of truth or knowledge, towards conclusions about political truths or claim to truths. Since the philosophers themselves set up the standards of cognitive truth, the validity of their political arguments could only be judged internally. Appeal to some theory or independent criterion was out of question. If you accepted the premise of the philosophy or the theory, there was no way to escape from the validity of the conclusion. It would, however, be a different matter if the disputes were over the premises –if its cognitive claims were challengeable.

Indeed, the history of the classical tradition shows that there were major differences in the conclusions reached by political philosophers, on account of the fact that their premises or epistemology were different. Such being the case, a point emerged with regard to the significance of such philosophies. It began to be asked what is the relevance of all such rival theories of politics, each of which claimed to embody the truth about political morality, when there was no criterion to decide the adequacy of the cognitive basis of these political and moral theories. Positivists were in the forefront to pose such a question.

**Check Your Progress 1**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Bring out the nature of political arguments in the western classical tradition

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

**5.3 POSITIVIST CRITIQUE OF NORMATIVE THEORY**

---

Positivism, especially logical positivism that was influenced by linguistic philosophy, rejected much of the normative political theory as irredeemably subjective, lacking in cognitive basis and even meaningless or outright nonsense.

Wittgenstein, who inspired logical positivist theories, had advanced three theses, which are of interest to us here, in explicating the case against normative theory. The first was that logic and mathematics consist of tautologies; second, that language has truth-functional structure and that its basic elements are names, and third, no ethical or moral statements can convey definite cognitive information.

Elaborating the first, he said that the basic structure of mathematics could be derived from logic and in that sense, the truths of mathematics are conventional rather than revealing ‘facts’ about numbers and their relationships. That is to say, given certain definitions of the basic terms, and a particular understanding of the rules of inference, the whole structure of mathematical truth could be generated. But these forms of

truth depend upon their definitions of basic terms and the rules of inference. In a sense, they are true by definition. It may appear that we make new discoveries in mathematics, but this is only because the remote consequences of definition are difficult to foresee and have to be teased out with great complication and elaboration.

The second thesis is that language has a structure that can be laid bare by logical analysis. This analysis will reveal language as being truth-functional. That is to say that, complex propositions in language, which we use to convey information, can be shown to be analysable into component propositions. Obviously, this process has to stop and we are left with the basic building blocks of language, that he calls 'Elementary Propositions'. These elementary propositions consist of names. Names are important, because they give meaning to elementary propositions for (a) they give meaning directly rather than being mediated by other propositions, and (b) they relate directly to the world.

Consequently, if meaningful uses of language have to turn upon the fact that names refer directly to objects, then this has clear consequences for moral and political thinking. If the propositions contained in the normative political writings are not susceptible to this analysis, then they are not meaningful. Objects are either material objects or direct sense experiences. Political language, thus, gets in deep trouble, for in what sense terms like good, justice, right could be analysed so as to refer to objects?

The final thesis draws this above conclusion. Moral and evaluative languages generally do not admit of this truth-functional analysis and moral 'objects' cannot be spoken about in a cognitively meaningful manner. Thus, there can be no theory of values. Only those propositions describing basic experiences of material objects could be meaningful. It followed from this that, a proposition to be valid must be verifiable empirically, for which the proposition must refer to direct sense experience or the nature of that experience could, in principle, be specified if directly available sense experience was not involved.

It may be argued that some political theories of the classical tradition were based upon factual premises, such as those of Hobbes, Aristotle and Mill. Their theories were based on facts of human nature. To the extent the factual premises were empirical, they could in principle be verified and then be meaningful. Positivists would accept these premises as meaningful, but would rather concentrate on the nature of the support which these empirical propositions are supposed to give to normative and evaluative conclusions. And in this context, they invoked Hume who had argued that factual premises in an argument cannot yield normative, moral or evaluative conclusions to dismiss such theories. Hume's argument is usually known as the principle that 'ought' cannot be derived from an 'is'.

---

#### **5.4 NATURE OF ARGUMENTS IN THE EMPIRICAL TRADITION**

---

While positivism dismissed normative political theory, it encouraged a scientific study of political phenomena based upon the methodology of natural sciences. Within this tradition, the nature of political argument underwent a significant change, for now both the subject matter as well as the methodology on which it could justify its arguments were different from those in the normative theory.

As regards the subject matter of the arguments, political arguments could only be about empirical political behaviour and logical analysis of political concepts. With regard to the study of politics, the arguments required that the propositions be defined in terms of some empirical sense content. This, in turn, required that arguments be



based on the behavioral approach to the study of political attitudes as well as an individualistic reductionist approach to social and political phenomena. The latter, implied some kind of methodological individualism so that the concepts relating to social wholes such as the state, the community, the polity could be rendered into some set of statements that refer only to the empirically detectable behaviour of individuals. In effect, political arguments were sanitised of metaphysical suppositions and rendered wholly value-neutral, which could be tested and verified as these arguments were about empirical phenomena.

Political arguments, in this tradition, rejected a priori reasoning about human beings and society, and were based on factual and statistical enquires. It was grounded in the theory of knowledge that took experience as the only valid basis of knowledge. Within such a framework, the purpose of political arguments was to explain the observable phenomena and the validity of the arguments would be judged on the criteria of internal consistency, consistency with respect to the other arguments that seek to explain related phenomena and the capacity to generate empirical predictions that can be tested against observation. The truth claim of the arguments could be vindicated, if it either met the verification principle or Popper's falsification principle. Behaviouralists among the positivists followed the falsification principle. If the argument could not be falsified, then it was merely tautological; that is true by definition only, and hence meaningless. Arguments to be valid must be capable of being falsified, only then can they be said to be based on the scientific method.

**Check Your Progress 2**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) How is the nature of political argument in recent normative theories different from that in the classical tradition?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

**5.5 DECLINE OF POSITIVISM AND INTERPRETIVE THEORY AS AN ALTERNATIVE**

---

If all meaningful statements are, on the principle of verifiability, either tautologies or empirically verifiable, what of the formulation of the verification principle itself? Positivism had no satisfactory answer to this and it appeared that the very criterion for judging between sense and non-sense in statements began to appear non-sensical itself. As positivism lost at this basic epistemological level, a great deal of power, a much more permissive approach to meaning and sense emerged.

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

Interpretive theory, or **Hermeneutics**, emerged in political inquiry as an alternative to positivist political science. Interpretive theorists point out several problems with the positivist method. They criticise the empiricist approach for assuming a disjuncture between political life and language of that political life. In other words, they criticise empiricism for its assumption that there is a political reality that exists and that in principle can be discovered independently of the language of that polity and for, downplaying internal connection between social/political life on the one hand, and the language that is embedded in it, on the other. Interpretive theorists maintain that our political practices are expressed and constituted by the language that is lodged in them (i.e. in political practices), and that the language lodged in them gets its sense from the form of political practices in which it grows. Charles Taylor says that our political practices cannot be identified in abstraction from the language we use to describe them, invoke them or carry them out. The vocabulary of the social dimension of the situation is grounded in the shape of the social practices in this dimension; that is to say that, vocabulary would not make sense if the range of practices did not exist. And yet, this range of practices would not exist without the prevalence of this or some related vocabulary. The language is, thus, constitutive of reality, is essential to its being the kind of reality it is.

When language is constitutive of reality, then the explanation of political life must go beyond empirically observable behaviour and subjective attitudes. Explanation must go deeper to uncover the meanings and practices of language and political life and form the social matrix against which subjective intentions are formed. These more basic inter-subjective and common meanings and practices require a deep hermeneutics that goes beyond the evidence (data) required of empirical inquiry. Hence, empirical social science is insufficient for explaining the most fundamental aspects of political and social life. Explanation in terms of subjective attitudes and empirical indicators of behaviour are too thin to identify and account for the most profound meaning and sense of political life.

To make manifest the meaning of social/political practices informed by language, we require interpretation, because they are often inchoate, tacit and imperfectly articulated. But then any such interpretation is contestable and because, to support a particular interpretation is to endorse one set of political alternatives, while undermining others. Interpretive theory, therefore, cannot be value-neutral. Gadamer in his *Truth and Method*, suggests that one appropriate model to understand the meaning of social/political practices is the model of interpreting a text: a model in which we are not interested in search for causes or framing of laws, but understanding a whole in terms of its parts, and its parts, in terms of the contributions they make to the meaning of the whole. Interpretive theory has cast a very strong influence in recent years on the normative theories of communitarians, feminists, and post-modernists.

---

## **5.6 NORMATIVE TURN IN POLITICAL THEORY**

---

The 1970's saw a normative turn in political theory at the hands of Rawls, Nozick, Walzer, Dworkin, Grewith and others. Perhaps, one of the most basic reasons for the change of fortune has been the decline of positivism as a potent force in philosophy. This decline in a large measure was due to the infirmity of the verification principle itself, which we noted above. Along with this, a conducive climate for revival of normative political theory was created by the deep moral crisis that the western civilisation was facing. A view had, therefore, gained ground that a society needs some kind of a moral foundation, a set of beliefs which either do or might hold it together, the idea here being that practical reason is rootless and arbitrary, if it is not based on a set of agreed values which are taken as authoritative for that society.

But if values are subjective, a matter of preference, as positivists will maintain, then how do we agree on values? Normative political theory, on the other hand, maintains

that this agreement is possible, if some general set of principles could be found which could then provide a basis for accommodation between subjective standpoints and / or adjudication between different values. The crucial question then is, how do we get that set of general principles? There are two answers or ways for this.

---

## 5.7 NATURE OF ARGUMENTS IN FOUNDATIONALIST AND POST-FOUNDATIONALIST THEORIES

---

The first answer is that we work out a set of values or standards of morality which is universal, transcultural and inter-subjectively valid. These standards of morality can be called the foundations, which are uncontaminated by specific cultures, circumstances and particular histories. Meta-narratives involving such entities as *Noumenal Self* (Kant), *Absolute Spirit* (Hegel), *Proletariat* (Marx), *Ideas Or Forms* (Plato) can provide one such foundation for judgement and justification on a rational basis. Other such universalistic foundational set of moral principles could be (i) utilitarianism, (ii) Kantian deontology and (iii) some conceptions of human nature and human rights. Apart from utilitarianism, most of these foundational theories are based on a priori, abstract reasoning. In more recent times, the attempt to produce universal rational morality has proceeded either by emphasising procedural devices, such as Rawls' *veil of ignorance*, or by trading on the idea of *minimum ethical commitment*, as in Rawls' idea of primary goods which any person is thought to want, or as in Grewith's idea of *minimum condition of agency*. Political arguments of the foundationalists are, thus, based on logos that give a general, but essentialised account of the nature of human beings, society and self, and whose criteria of rationality and objectivity are derived from such logos, which are construed to be universally applicable and valid.

The second answer is provided by the post-foundationalists, such as communitarians. There are several post-foundationalist theories, but we take here only the communitarians for explication of the nature of political argument involved. They argue that we do not require a universalistic, philosophical moral foundation, and that the set of principles required for adjudication between competing values is implicit in a particular community. The implicit has to be made explicit and clear. Political goods are not determined by abstract reasoning, nor can they be freely chosen by free atomised moral agents. These arise out of, and are implicit in the ways of life of particular communities. Communitarian arguments got support from the interpretive linguistic philosophy, for instance from the later writings of Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigation* and *The Blue Book*, which views the search for some external rational foundation for practical reasoning as misconceived, because even if they could be found, they would, in fact, be inert in relation to practical dilemma. We do not need a theoretical foundation for a way of life. Practical reason is not about *sophia* (wisdom), justified claims of objective knowledge, but rather about *phronesis* (judgement); the capacity of practical deliberative judgement in a particular situation. Since the nature of political argument is dependent upon the methodology within which it is made, let us briefly look at Rawls' methodology of *reflective equilibrium* for political theorising as an instance to explicate political argument in post-foundationalist political theory. A clarification is in order. Rawls has generally been labeled as a foundationalist for some of his assumptions as Michael Sandel's critique of Rawls' theory of justice brings this out, but by and large, his (Rawls') methodology of reflective equilibrium is accepted as post-foundationalist in nature.

The method of reflective equilibrium demands that we evaluate a given moral or political view by testing it against our 'considered judgements at all levels of generality'. That is, we consider the general coherence of the abstract principles comprising the theory in terms of its internal relations and general surface plausibility (given the arguments supporting them); we, then, examine the particular judgements that such

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

principles imply about specific cases in the world; and we consider the entire package for its' overall acceptability, considering its abstract plausibility, internal coherence, and 'intuitive adequacy' in particular cases.

Reflective equilibrium is a coherent account of the validity of normative claims. It is different from *foundationalism* in that it does not demand that we proceed from indubitable first principles and derive conclusions via a deductive argument from them alone. This means that normative claims are always subject to review in the light of new understandings, either of the moral principles themselves or aspects of the world to which these principles are meant to apply. Interpretation, thus, has a role to play in political theorising and that indicates that political judgements are seldom a hard and fast affair, but rather always open to reconsideration in the light of new insights or information.

Political arguments in post-foundational theories, thus, do not abandon general thinking or arguing about social truth. But the argument is always from a socially situated point of view, based on the belief that our social interest and social values shape our ideas and that our social understanding is also a part of the shaping of social life. There is a multi-leveled argumentation involved that moves between analytic reasoning, empirical data, normative clarification and interpretation. Political arguments are generally complex and draw from across disciplinary boundaries, particularly Wittgenstein's language game. The objectivity and rationality that political arguments invoke for justification are contextual, as there is no contextual free standpoint from which social practices can be judged. Thus, the criteria for truth, right and wrong in a political argument are all internal to the language game and the context.

**Check Your Progress 3**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) Examine Hermeneutics as an alternative to the empirical-behavioural tradition

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) What are the differences between the nature of arguments in foundational and post-foundational theories?

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

## 5.8 CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

---

About what we argue and how we argue have a bearing on why and how we do conceptual analysis. Concepts are crucial in two senses for scholarly endeavour: as means and as ends. As means, concepts are necessary for understanding; they are conditions for the possibility of knowledge. In this sense, science is inter-subjectively controlled understanding made possible through concepts. Concepts are also crucial for explanation and, therefore, how concepts are formed also becomes important. Hence, concepts are not only a means for understanding, but also a matter of understanding as an end.

There are three versions of conceptual analysis. The first version has the purpose to find as unambiguous a core meaning as possible; one which allows the best possible scientific statements, hypothesis formation and reproducible empirical analysis. The second version looks at how concepts are embedded in particular social theories; here, concept formation runs parallel to theory formation; more generally—theories understood as a framework for analysis. The first version looks at the conceptual history, which can lead to a better understanding of history, including the present.

The discussion on these versions can be subsumed under two approaches to conceptual analysis, the positivist approach and the interpretive approach.

### 5.8.1 Positivist Approach

As noted earlier, philosophers who followed the influential movement called logical positivism saw only two meaningful types of inquiry: empirical investigations into matters of fact, and conceptual discussions of the meanings and uses of terms. Since philosophy was not an empirical, fact-finding discipline, it was assigned the role of conceptual analysis.

The purpose of conceptual analysis was similar to what philosophers of science did with regard to the logical analysis of scientific concepts; namely, to clarify their meaning and help them give a wholly empirical, non-metaphysical and operational meaning.

In this sense, political philosophy was an adjunct of political science, clarifying the concepts used and arguments to attempt to evacuate them of anything other than descriptive and empirical meaning, so that the terms of political discourse could be used in ways that were neutral between ideological and moral perspectives. The hope was that in the same way as scientific theories could be advanced and scientific phenomena described and identified irrespective of the moral and other commitment of scientists, so too political science could go forward in a value-free manner, once the basic concepts of that science had been clarified and given a reductive empirical definition, and that political argument could proceed with clear concepts and agreed definitions. The quest was important, for unless it could succeed, it could not hope to have a science of politics and unless there was a science of politics, one could not hope to bring reason to political and moral debates. The goal was to reconstruct the language of political inquiry to make it a suitable medium for a science of politics.

However, political theorists outside the influence of positivism, find no merit in conceptual analysis whose purpose it is to create morally neutral concepts that will fill the same kind of descriptive operational role in political science as scientific concepts play in natural sciences. Apart from the merit of the case, they also think it to be undesirable.

### 5.8.2 Interpretive Approach

The purpose of conceptual analysis is not to reveal the necessary and sufficient condition (definition) of the concept or lay bare its internal structure, but to creatively

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

produce new ways of understanding them. Concepts are not freestanding entities and have to be understood in the larger context in which they are situated, the way a literary text is interpreted. Concepts become meaningful by the way they are used and this makes conceptual analysis a complicated, never-ending and contestable affair.

Connolly has argued that political concepts such as freedom, power, are ‘essentially’ contestable. They are contestable because the criteria of the concept and the point of its application are matters of contest. Criteria, here, refer to the conditions that should be met before an event or act can be said to fall within the ambit of the given concept. The point of application refers to the purpose of the concept and along with the purpose, are commitments attached to it. That concepts are ‘essentially’ contestable means that the ‘universal’ criteria of reason, do not suffice to settle these contests definitively.

The methodological postulates and norms of the positivist mainstream social science such as the distinctions between operational and non-operational vocabulary, analytic and synthetic statements, descriptive and normative concepts, empirical and conceptual argument are of doubtful validity. Connolly points out that recent works in linguistic philosophy have shown that these norms of research are in need of revision. Interpreting these norms in new light, which leads to, for instance, abandoning analytic-synthetic distinctions and fact-value dichotomy, Connolly maintains, helps us to understand more clearly why the central concepts of politics are so often a subject of controversy.

Moreover, he points out that neutral, descriptive and operationally definable concepts limit the understanding of politics. It not only flattens out the embodied meaning, but also obstructs efforts to explore alternative, radical perspectives on politics. The effort to have neutral operational concepts is born of a wish to escape politics. It emerges either as a desire to rationalise public life, placing a set of ambiguities and contestable orientation under the control of a settled system of understandings and priorities, or as a quest to moralise public life thoroughly, bringing all citizens under the control of a consensus which makes politics marginal and unimportant. To adopt without revision the concepts prevailing in the polity is, thus, to accept terms of discourse loaded in favor of established practices.

In the light of the above, the significance of the concept of contestedness is that it renders political discourse more self-reflective by bringing out contestable moral and political perspectives lodged in the language of politics and thus, opens the way for political change.

**Check Your Progress 4**

**Note:** i) Use the space given below for your answer.

ii) See the end of the unit for tips for your answer.

1) What do you understand by conceptual analysis? Bring out the difference(s) between the positivist and the interpretive accounts of conceptual analysis

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

## 5.9 LET US SUM UP

---

Since we have different traditions of political theory each marked by distinctive substantial and methodological concerns, the nature of political arguments differs across the traditions. As political arguments deal with justification or validation of truth claims, the theory of knowledge of different traditions and the methodology of relevant epistemology frames the nature of political arguments. Political arguments and conceptual analysis are dialectically related. Concepts are the terms or the vocabulary with which political discourse is conducted. Political arguments arise in and are carried forward through concepts. Normative political theories were about the right and the good and so were the political arguments. Political arguments assumed the form of moral reasoning with a clear purpose of settling moral issues or claims of moral and political truth on a rational basis. Political arguments in this tradition proceeded from certain self-evident truths, axioms, or assumptions about the nature of truth or knowledge, toward conclusions about political truths or claim to truths. The positivists critiqued normative theory. If the propositions contained in the normative political writings are not susceptible to empirical verification or falsification, then they are not meaningful. While positivism dismissed normative political theory, it encouraged a scientific study of political phenomena based upon the methodology of natural sciences. As regards the subject matter of the arguments, political arguments could only be about empirical political behaviour and logical analysis of political concepts. This, in turn, required that arguments be based on behavioral approach to the study of political attitudes as well as an individualistic reductionist approach to social and political phenomena. Interpretive theory, or Hermeneutics, emerged in political inquiry as an alternative to positivist political science. It criticised the empiricist approach for assuming a disjuncture between political life and the language of that political life. Explanation must go deeper to uncover the meanings and practices of language and political life that form the social matrix against which subjective intentions are formed. Hence, empirical social science is insufficient for explaining the most fundamental aspects of political and social life. Explanations in terms of subjective attitudes and empirical indicators of behaviour are too thin to identify and account for the most profound meaning and sense of political life.

Due to the influence of hermeneutics and the moral crisis experienced by western civilisation, political theory took a normative turn. However, the nature of political arguments differed within the normative theorisation on account of the differences with regard to the methodology and the epistemology between the foundationalists and the post-foundationalists. Lastly, we looked at conceptual analysis following two approaches. For positivists, conceptual analysis meant to produce neutral operational concepts. Interpretive theorists disapprove of such attempts. They highlight the 'essentially' contestable nature of political concepts and argue further that neutral concepts favor established practices and impede critical thinking on politics. The concept of contested-ness renders political discourse more self-reflective by bringing out contestable moral and political perspectives lodged in the language of politics.

---

## 5.10 SOME USEFUL REFERENCES

---

William Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*: Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1974.

John Gray's "On the Contestability of Social and Political Concepts", *Political Theory*, Vol. 5 (1977).

P.Laslett, *Introduction to Philosophy, Politics and Society*, series 1, Blackwell, Oxford, 1956.

**What is Political Theory and Why Do We Need It?**

M.Gibbons (ed), *Interpreting Politics*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1987.

John Christman, *Social and Political Philosophy, A Contemporary Introduction*, Routledge, London, 2002.

---

## **5.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES**

---

### **Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) See Section 5.2

### **Check Your Progress 2**

- 1) See Section 5.3 and 5.4

### **Check Your Progress 3**

- 1) See Section 5.5 and 5.6
- 2) See Section 5.7

### **Check Your Progress 4**

- 1) See Section 5.8



ignou  
THE PEOPLE'S  
UNIVERSITY