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On Politics

Introduction

Most of Western political thought from the classical period to the present has taken the concept of government as a fundamental presupposition. Indeed, the very word “political” means “having to do with forms of government” (polities), where the word “polities,” in turn, comes from the Greek *polis*, the ancient Greek city-state and its citizens.¹ Like the axioms of Euclid’s geometry, government has been an implicit starting point, always assumed and never justified—the transcendental condition of possibility for thinking, writing, and talking about human social organization.

The government of which I speak, however, is not a political so much as an ontological force, preceding and constituting the *polis* and not the other way around. The earliest Greek philosophers believed that the universe as a whole was subject to government by a fundamental organizing principle known as the *archē*, a term which means “chief,” “authority,” or “head.” The *archē* brings order from chaos, defining the laws, relations, and hierarchies of nature. Human beings, no less than rocks, plants, and animals, are bound by and subject to its authority, our own authorities being mere expressions or extensions of a more basic natural order. It is this thought—which is *archic* in the purest and most literal sense of the word—that has been so foundational in Western politics.

Nowhere is this clearer, perhaps, than in Aristotelian political philosophy. For Aristotle *politikê* (politics) is a shorthand for *politikê epistêmê* (the science of politics). Like ethics (the things concerning customs of habits), politics belongs to the third of the three main categories of Aristotelian science, which are distinguished according to their respective ends (*teloi*): Contemplative or theoretical science (*theorêtikê epistêmê*), which includes physics and metaphysics and is directed toward knowledge for its own sake; productive science (*poiêtikê epistêmê*), which is directed toward the creation

of useful or beautiful objects; and practical science (*praktikê epistêmê*), which is directed toward good or virtuous action.²

In *Nicomachean Ethics* I.2 Aristotle famously defines the highest good as that end which all human beings desire for its own sake.³ Were the highest good desired solely as a means to something else, he argues, there could be no end to our search for it, and our desire to attain it would forever remain unfulfilled.⁴ For Aristotle this is an obvious logical problem, as an infinite chain of means-ends relationships (desiring X as a means to Y, which is in turn desired as a means to Z, and so on) is, strictly speaking, impossible. Thus there must be a highest good which is desired for its own sake, and this good, whatever it is, “belongs to the most sovereign and most comprehensive master science.”⁵ The highest good is *eudaimonia*, usually rendered as “happiness” or “flourishing,”⁶ and its “master science” is politics.⁷

Aristotle assigns politics this role because it legislates all the activity—whether theoretical, productive, or practical—of the *polis*. To this extent, the various ends of these activities are all subordinate means to the ultimate political end, which for Aristotle is nothing less than the highest human good. This idea is reinforced in Book X of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle suggests that politics involves the teaching and implementation of ethics at the level of human social communities.⁸ The treatise known as the *Politics* is largely devoted to analyzing, explaining, and directing the role of the statesman (*politikos*) in bringing this about.⁹ There Aristotle compares the statesman in his capacity as lawgiver (*nomothetês*) to a physician who must diagnose social ills and prescribe treatments (e.g., laws, habits, customs, mores, and institutions) with a mind to achieving the common good.¹⁰ These prescriptions are the constitution (*politeia*), “a certain ordering of the inhabitants of the *polis*.”¹¹ For this reason the statesman is also likened to an artisan (*dêmiourgos*) who creates the constitution of the city-state from the “raw materials” of individual citizens and natural resources.¹²

I need not go into extensive detail about the *Politics* here, though I will have occasion to return to it from time to time below. For present purposes, it is sufficient to note three general characteristics of Aristotelian politics, which is my point of departure in analyzing the history of Western politics as such. First, politics is “politicocentric”; it is always concerned with, and to a certain degree presupposes, the state under some description or other. Second, politics is always and already a normative discourse. It does more than merely describe the various forms human social relations can and do take;¹³ rather, it is concerned with how human social relations *ought* to be organized in order to achieve the highest good. Third, politics generally presupposes the concept of political force or power or else renders it secondary in the order of explanation. Political concepts are not defined in terms of a specifically *political* type of force or power, and political power as such is generally not subject to any sort of independent analysis. Let us explore these three characteristics in greater detail.

Political naturalism in Aristotle

In describing Aristotelian political theory as “politicocentric” I do not mean that it completely ignores other forms of interpersonal relationships and social organization. On the contrary, Aristotle provides a very extensive analysis of the forms of rule by which individuals or groups exert power over other individuals and groups—for example, despotic rule (slavery),¹⁴ marital rule,¹⁵ and paternal rule.¹⁶ In general, however, Aristotle regards marriage, the family, the institution of slavery, the village, and all other such relations as simple and primitive arrangements that come about for specific reasons but eventually and naturally evolve into the city-state.¹⁷ As I noted above, Aristotle views such relations as “raw material,” the components or parts of a community (*koinônia*) that are molded into a *polis* by the lawmaker through the implementation of the constitution.¹⁸ The entire process is directed toward the achievement of the good, which is its single *telos* and final cause.¹⁹

To a limited extent, this outlook prefigures later thinkers like Hobbes for whom social relations may be seen as “solutions” to various sorts of problems and conflicts that arise among individuals in a state of nature. The crucial difference, of course, is that for Aristotle human beings are always and already social and political by nature.²⁰ As Todd May helpfully notes:

In ancient philosophy, the question was: How should one live? . . . the question of how one should live is asked within a context that assumes the existence of a cosmological order to which a good life must conform. A human life does not exist divorced from the cosmological whole within which it is embedded. It has a role to play that ought to converge with or at least complement the movement of the rest of the universe. For Plato, that role consists in seeking the Good; for Aristotle it is a matter of living out a specifically human teleology. Neither doubts . . . that the universe has an order to it, a stability and a general form that ought to be mirrored and conformed to by the lives of human beings.²¹

The city-state is prior to individuals and is contained, if only as a potentiality, within their nature as social creatures.²² Because the city-state is the natural end of all human association, the concrete actualization of the city-state by the lawgiver isn’t an arbitrary exertion of power but a necessary consequence of human nature.²³ Furthermore, insofar as human beings have a nature or natural function (*ergon*) that is directed toward the natural end of *eudaimonia*,²⁴ and insofar as the city-state is the fullest expression of this nature and its corresponding end, it follows necessarily that the existence of the city-state is, *ceteris paribus*, naturally good and just.²⁵

As to the second characteristic noted above, my point is merely that politics is not what one would call an empirical science but rather a kind

of social ethics. Insofar as ethics proper is concerned with the good of the individual, politics may be seen as pertaining to the good of the community as a whole. For this reason, it is no surprise that Aristotelian politics tends to focus on “statesmanship”—namely, on questions concerning the proper governance of extant political communities, where “proper” refers not to expedience but to virtue. In other words, the purpose of political science is to offer a kind of moral compass to “the good lawgiver and the true politician.”²⁶ Again, this is not to say that Aristotelian political theory is purely nondescriptive. As we have already seen, Aristotle provides a very extensive analysis of different forms of political and nonpolitical rule. The ultimate goal of his analysis, however, is to discover which of these forms are most conducive to the practice of virtue²⁷ and, by extension, to the achievement of the good life.²⁸ Put simply, the most important question for Aristotle is not what states are or how they come into existence, but rather how they *ought* to operate once they do, in fact, exist.

The last characteristic, which is closely related to the first two, is that Aristotelian politics is generally not concerned with questions of power. In fact, one could argue that Aristotle simply takes the existence of political power for granted. This follows directly from a rudimentary feature of Aristotelian science—namely, the method of explaining how things come to exist and why they behave as they do in terms of natural functions, causes, and ends.²⁹ For Aristotle, individual human beings are naturally directed toward the good by internal causal principles such as appetite. Political power, in turn, is simply the internal causal principle which directs human communities toward their natural end. Thus it makes no sense to inquire whether and to what extent political power as such is “justified” or “legitimate.” For Aristotle this would be tantamount to asking whether human appetites, animal behavior, or the motion of the spheres are “justified” or “legitimate.” Such questions are specious precisely because whatever is natural is, *ceteris paribus*, good. Again, the principal goal of politics is not to justify political power nor even to explain its operation, but rather to show how political power ought to be implemented by the statesman (whose possession of, and claim to, political power is always and already presupposed).

Furthermore, there is a sense in which Aristotle regards political power (variously referred to as *kratos*, *dynamis*, *exousia*, etc.) as one more natural relation of force among many such forces—for example, motion.³⁰ In Book III of the *Physics*, he defines motion as “the fulfillment of what is potentially, as such.”³¹ Taken by itself, this definition is highly ambiguous and readily open to misinterpretation. As Joseph Sachs has pointed out, “[it] is constructed at the limits of thought and speech, and inadequate translation makes it crumble away to nothing. It did not travel well in Latin, and in the form in which it came into English from Latin it is scarcely intelligible.”³² Particularly problematic is the word *entelecheia*, translated above as “fulfillment,” which Aristotle uses on three separate occasions

at the beginning, middle, and end of his account. The standard English translation of this word as it appears throughout the Aristotelian corpus is “actuality.” This seems, for the most part, to be a sound exegetical strategy. When Aristotle uses *entelecheia* in Book IX of the *Metaphysics*, for example, he specifically identifies it with the related word *energeia*,³³ which refers to the actuality of a potency or, to use Joseph Sachs’s clever expression, “the being-at-work-staying-itself of a potency, as material.”³⁴ Thus the actuality of a potency is not a definition of motion here, but rather a definition of *being a thing*—namely, “thinghood.”³⁵

If we translate *entelecheia* as “actuality” in the unique context of *Physics* III, then motion is defined as the actuality of what is potentially as such. This seems to imply that motion is somehow the end result or final product of a potentiality having become actual—in other words, that the motion of building a house (that is, the actuality of bricks and stones *qua* potentially a house) *just is* the house itself.³⁶ But this seems absurd; surely the product of building is ontologically distinct from the process by which it is built. In order to circumvent this spurious conclusion, W.D. Ross argues, we must interpret *entelecheia* in the sense of motion not as *actuality*, but rather as the *actualization* of that which potentially is as such—namely, “if something is actually *x* and potentially *y*, motion is the making actual of its *y*-ness.”³⁷ According to this view, motion is the *process* by which the potential *y*-ness in *x* is actualized—not the actuality of the potential *y*-ness in *x*.

Speaking very generally, power or force (*dynamis*) is understood as the capacity to be or become something. To use a simple example, a seed has the power to become a tree but not a dog. Motion itself, however, may also be seen as a form of *dynamis*. It is, in fact, the most basic and fundamental form of *dynamis* insofar as it underlies all particular instances of motion (i.e., the process by which a potential *x* becomes an actual *x*). From this it follows that political power (*kratos*) is the *dynamis* by which a collection of individuals becomes a city-state, and this in at least two senses: first, all human groups have the natural power to become a state through the formal causation of the constitution, the efficient causation of the statesman, and the final causation of *eudaimonia*; and second, the process by which human groups are transformed into states is dynamic (i.e., brought about by motion).

Here an important distinction must be made. In *Metaphysics* 5: 1015a–b, Aristotle introduces the concept of *bia*, “a kind of necessity which hinders and impedes the course of impulse and purpose.”³⁸ In Aristotelian physics, as is well known, the natural state of objects is stasis or rest.³⁹ Objects belonging to nature (*physis*) possess the ability to set themselves in motion by means of growth, accidental change, displacement, generation, and destruction.⁴⁰ Thus, for example, the process by which a seed grows into a tree does not involve the application of any sort of external power but is rather guided by internal principles of causation. Artificial objects, in

contrast, belong to “convention” (*nomos*) and so require *bia*, the external force that causes them to move against their own natural tendency toward rest.⁴¹ Consider, for example, the process by which a pile of stones becomes a house. This requires the work of builders, which is a form of efficient causation involving the application of external force or *bia*. (Simply put, the house does not and cannot build itself.) The formation of a city-state is analogous to the construction of a house insofar as the process of uniting human beings into a cohesive political entity requires the intervention of a ruler whose application of political power is the efficient cause of said entity.

At first glance such an analogy seems accurate; Aristotle does claim that the statesman creates city-states through the application of political power. The problem, as we have seen, is that for Aristotle the distinction between “internal” and “external” principles of causation is not so simple and straightforward. Though it is true that piles of stones cannot and do not become houses on their own, the process of building houses (i.e., bringing about the motion by which actual piles of stones are transformed into actual houses) would not be possible unless piles of stones already possessed an internal capacity (power, *dynamis*) to become houses. This capacity requires the application of *bia* to be actualized, but the application of *bia* itself is impossible in its absence. No matter how much *bia* a builder applies to a pile of stones, he cannot transform it into, say, a pack of dogs. Again, this is because it is not in the nature of stones to become dogs; stones do not have such a *dynamis* and so cannot be moved in this way.

Political power, too, reflects this interplay of internal and external components. Aristotle acknowledges the existence of *bia* in human conduct in “cases where the cause of action lies in things outside the actor and the actor contributes nothing.”⁴² The statesman may exert a kind of political *bia* upon citizens to form and maintain a city-state, but no amount of *bia* can achieve the same result with a pile of stones or a pack of dogs. Only human beings have the natural and internal power to unite as a city-state, even if this unification must be brought about by *bia* or other forms of efficient causality.

The upshot of all this is that a collection of individual human beings, at least under ideal conditions, tends naturally toward the formation of a city-state. The formation of the state is not the result of chance or an arbitrary exertion of power even though particular states come into being at different times and under different circumstances. In all cases, it is just as natural for collections of human beings to develop into states as it is for seeds to develop into trees, even though the causal processes involved are somewhat different. This is, at least in part, why Aristotle does not define politics in terms of power nor devote any independent analysis to political power as such.

On a final note, although Aristotle takes for granted that political power is necessarily coercive to the extent that *bia* must be exercised by statesmen

in order to initiate and enforce the constitution, maintain order, protect the citizenry from outside aggression, and so forth, he does not seem to regard this as ethically problematic. In his discussion of the various constitutional forms, Aristotle defines democracy as the rule (or, more precisely, the power) of the people (*demos*).⁴³ Here the *demos* does not signify the sovereign body of citizens, or at least that is not all it signifies. (In fact, Aristotle defines the *demos* in a variety of ways in the *Politics*—for example, as the large mass of poor and/or unskilled people who do not own property⁴⁴). The defining principles of at least certain forms of democracy for Aristotle are liberty and equality conceived as ends in themselves.⁴⁵ These democracies assume that a more or less equal distribution of political power—usually by means of what we would call “direct democracy”—is necessary to preserve individual freedom. This in turn implies that democrats regard coercive political power as a threat to, or outright forfeiture of, liberty.

I need not rehearse all of Aristotle’s criticisms of democracy here,⁴⁶ but at least one important point is worth noting. As I mentioned above, Aristotle does not view coercive political power as such as repressive. Rather, he seems to believe that genuine freedom is impossible outside the city-state or, more precisely, that the city-state is a necessary precondition to freedom. (His ideas in this respect are somewhat of a piece with Hegel, as we shall see later.) Furthermore, freedom and equality are *not* ends in themselves for Aristotle. Indeed, they are quite meaningless apart from virtue and, by extension, the city-state, since virtue can only be cultivated by and through the formation of the city-state. If freedom and equality have any value at all for Aristotle, it is precisely because they are preconditions for the pursuit of the good life. Put simply, freedom and equality exist for the sake of the *polis* and not the other way around.

Classical and medieval political thought

Although Aristotle’s (and, for that matter, Plato’s) view of politics, which is best described as a kind of “political naturalism,” is in many ways representative of classical thought, there are notable exceptions.⁴⁷ In the *Memorabilia*, for example, Xenophon notes that Aristippus, the founder of the Cyrenaic school, denied having any desire to govern or to be governed, as he considered government an impediment to the pursuit of the good life (which, in his case, turns out to be *hēdonē* or pleasure).⁴⁸ “In order that I may not suffer such treatment,” Aristippus says to Socrates, “I shall not shut myself up in one state, but shall be a traveler everywhere.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, although Stoics such as Zeno of Citium shared Aristotle’s valorization of reason and nature,⁵⁰ they denied the natural necessity of the state and similar institutions, claiming instead that rational beings that live in accord with nature have no need for them. In the Stoic utopia, society would be governed

by natural law and the rule of reason rather than human convention. Unlike the Aristotelian *polis*, however, there would be no slavery, marriage, private property, law courts, police, soldiers, or any other mechanisms of authority, domination, or institutionalized violence.⁵¹

Many Stoics believed in the existence of an ancient “golden age” in which human beings had actually lived in the manner described above but were subsequently perverted by avarice, ambition, and other such moral vices.⁵² This view, along with its explicit critique of political naturalism, proved enormously influential on early medieval philosophy and theology. Given the centrality of biblical exegesis within this milieu, controversial questions concerning the obedience owed to rulers, the sanctity of property, the justifiability of slavery, and the legitimacy of warfare were all analyzed and debated, at least in part, through recourse to relevant passages from scripture.⁵³ On the basis of such discussions, many early Christian thinkers denied that political practices and institutions, especially those which are explicitly or implicitly condemned in the New Testament, are in any sense “natural” but are rather a consequence of Original Sin.⁵⁴ Such institutions, they believed, did not exist before the Fall (a view which very closely follows that of the Stoics).

The development of medieval jurisprudence, which was initiated in part by the revival of Roman civil law in the eleventh century, maintained certain influential Stoical ideas concerning natural freedom and the communal ownership of property.⁵⁵ With the rediscovery of Aristotle in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, such ideas needed to be reconciled not only with Aristotelian political naturalism but also with authoritative religious texts (most importantly the Book of Genesis).⁵⁶ The cumulative result of this process, as is well known, was the development of medieval natural law theory.⁵⁷ For present purposes I need not discuss this theory at length. It is worth noting, however, that for certain natural lawyers, especially those of an Averroist bent, the absence of slavery, private property, and so forth, in the Garden of Eden presented an interesting problem. Such features, after all, are also found in the primitive *koinonia* that precedes Aristotle’s *polis*. From a strictly Aristotelian standpoint, then, it would seem to follow that the Garden of Eden, like the primitive *koinonia*, would have eventually led to the formation of the *polis* even in the absence of Original Sin.⁵⁸ Such a view, however, is at odds with scripture, in which the abolition of private property, the institution of slavery, and all the other features of the Aristotelian *polis* are inflicted on Adam and Eve by God as a punishment. This, in turn, would seem to imply that the *polis* is not natural in the way Aristotle suggests. (For the sake of brevity I shall not discuss the solutions offered in response to this problem, though I should note in passing that many of them are incredibly clever.)

To greater or lesser extent, late antique and medieval political thought, whether Stoic or Aristotelian in orientation, can be said to inherit the first

two of the characteristics we ascribed to Aristotle's politics—that is, it is a straightforwardly normative discourse that generally regards the state as the primary locus of political analysis.⁵⁹ As to the third characteristic, medieval thought differs somewhat from pure Aristotelianism insofar as it devotes a degree of independent analysis to the nature of political power, if only to distinguish it conceptually from ecclesiastical and/or divine power. From the perspective of intellectual history this is an unquestionably important difference, but for my purposes it is mostly irrelevant. Medieval thinkers, no less than their Stoic forebears, were every bit as “archic” as Aristotle. They tended in large part to take the existence of political power (again, under some description or another) for granted and concerned themselves more with its proper exercise than with its origin or operation, its underlying structures and processes.

Machiavelli

In many important respects the work of Niccolò Machiavelli represents a crucial turning point in the history of politics. At first glance, Machiavelli's most famous work, *The Prince*, resembles the countless “mirror-of-princes” books which were produced during the Middle Ages, the central goal of which was to provide counsel to rulers.⁶⁰ In the “mirrors-of-princes,” however, this counsel is always moralistic in nature. They advise the prince to cultivate a virtuous character and to rule justly and benevolently, not only to ensure a peaceful and successful reign, but also to fulfill various temporal and religious duties that are fundamentally ethical in nature. *The Prince*, too, offers advice to rulers, but it does so from a prudential and self-interested vantage devoid of genuine ethical considerations. To this extent, Machiavelli severs politics from the built-in normativity of earlier theories.

In the first place, Machiavelli completely jettisons the idea of “legitimate authority” (i.e., authority that is justified to the extent that it meets certain moral or ethical criteria). For him, political authority is coextensive with the *de facto* possession of power; the right to rule belongs to whoever has the capacity to rule. (“Since there cannot be good laws without good arms, I will not consider laws but speak of arms.”⁶¹) Moral virtue does not always provide a ruler with power and, in any case, does not lend any further “legitimacy” to his authority. On Machiavelli's view, therefore, the idea of a moral right to rule that implies corresponding moral obligations to obey is an academic fiction.

Subjects obey their ruler first and foremost because they fear the consequences of disobedience, and this fear is always proportionate to the ruler's power to bring such consequences about.⁶² For this reason, the acquisition and maintenance of political power requires the capacity to effectively compel obedience through fear. Effectively compelling obedience,

in turn, requires the ability to vacillate between moral and immoral action “as fortune and circumstances dictate.”⁶³ The successful ruler is one who acts solely for the sake of preserving his authority, but in so acting he is always guided by discretion, prudence and strategic acumen rather than moral principle.

The foregoing overview, however cursory, demonstrates the radical extent to which Machiavelli departs from his predecessors. For one thing, he completely repudiates several of the foundational ideas of political naturalism: for example, that human beings accept political subjection because they are naturally inclined toward the good; that political authority exists for the sake of the good, that it naturally desires the good, and that it is justified to the degree that it achieves the good; that political authority is something that evolves *sui generis* from nature itself. Machiavelli argues, on the contrary, that human beings submit to authority not because of any natural inclination toward the good but because of self-interest and fear; that political authority exists solely for its own sake, that it is coextensive with coercive power, and that its only goal is to maintain and augment that power by any means necessary; and that political authority comes about haphazardly from power, ambition, and the vicissitudes of fortune rather than from any sort of natural teleological process.

Insofar as Machiavellian politics retains any sort of normativity at all, it is at best an instrumental or pragmatic normativity—a kind of means-ends rationality comprised solely of hypothetical imperatives. Such a politics, however, has no teleology and is fundamentally uninterested in questions of ethics. Its sole concern is the operation of power—what power is, how it is acquired, how it is maintained, and so forth. For this reason, Machiavellian politics can reasonably be said to lack the second and third characteristics associated with Aristotelian politics, but not the first. Machiavelli is far more politicocentric than Aristotle. He tends to ignore extrapolitical social relations or else views them in the same way he views individual persons: as objects to be manipulated, subjugated, and controlled by the state.

Nevertheless, by divesting politics of normativity Machiavelli laid the foundation for several important developments that would come to pass several centuries later. At the level of policymaking, for example, he is rightfully called the father of modern *Realpolitik*, a model of politics and diplomacy that emphasizes practicality over ideological or moral considerations. In an important sense he is also the unwitting inventor of what we now call “political science.” To be sure, the mere fact that Machiavelli employs descriptive rather than ethical analysis does not make him a social scientist on the modern empirical model. He was not a dispassionate observer of political phenomena so much as a shrewd tactician. (To this extent he has more in common with Henry Kissinger than, say, John Kenneth Galbraith.) Nevertheless, by separating political analysis from metaphysics and moral

philosophy, Machiavelli opened the door to a distinction between politics and political philosophy.

Social physics

As we know, it took several centuries for the “natural philosophy” of Galileo and Newton to develop into the distinct fields of inquiry collectively referred to as “science.” The same is true of politics. Four hundred years of political philosophy separates Machiavelli from the first self-described political scientists of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, there is an important sense in which the political scientists picked up where Machiavelli left off. Like him, their analyses concentrated on the operation of power within and between states. The crucial difference, of course, is that political scientists are, at least in theory, concerned with the collection, observation, and analysis of ostensibly “objective” phenomena. They are neither tacticians nor diplomats but “scientists.”

The object of their inquiry, moreover, is *political* power. Political scientists are generally uninterested in the operation of power within other spheres of human existence, a subject which was eventually taken up by other social scientists working in the disciplines of psychology, economics, and sociology. Until fairly recently, the predominant tendency among social scientists was to attempt to maintain these supposedly tidy distinctions. Early sociologists, for example, made a point of avoiding “politics” in their analyses, focusing instead on allegedly extrapolitical phenomena such as culture, marriage, and the family.⁶⁴ The underlying assumption throughout was that “political power” represents a unique category which can be distinguished from and studied independently of other sorts of power. This is precisely because politics has been understood, and continues to be understood, principally in terms of the state.⁶⁵

In spite of this, it is not uncommon for people to refer to “politics” in contexts that have nothing whatever to do with states. Most every form of human association, from university departments to bowling leagues, seems to have a singular brand of “politics” that is not reducible to the kind of power we attribute to governmental or juridical institutions.⁶⁶ This is not just an idiosyncrasy of ordinary language. It is no mistake that people refer to “departmental politics” rather than, say, “departmental sociology,” and this reveals something extremely important—namely, that politics is not concerned with any particular type of association but rather with social relations in general as well as the forms of power that operate within and among said relations. For this reason, the word “politics” is better defined, despite its etymology, as referring generally to power relations between and among human beings.⁶⁷

Until fairly recently the extent to which power penetrates every aspect of human thought and activity has tended to be understated. This is due in large part to a longstanding and widespread tendency to think of power in terms of the Aristotelian *bia*—that is, as a coercive or repressive force which is “inflicted” upon otherwise passive objects from without. In ordinary experience, the most palpable manifestation of this force, at least in the Western world, is and always has been the government with its rules and regulations, its prisons and policemen. For this reason it is not surprising that power has always been associated with politics and that politics, in turn, has always been associated with the state. The point, in any case, is that the politics of everyday life is not simply analogous to the politics of the state. As the schoolmen would say, power is predicated univocally. (I shall say much more about this below.)

In order to articulate this idea a bit more clearly I should like to briefly invoke the name of Heraclitus, as Nietzsche once did, with special reverence.⁶⁸ This might strike the reader as somewhat jarring. What, after all, has an ancient sage, obscure in both life and work,⁶⁹ and remembered principally as a metaphysician, to do with political theory? The answer, simply put, is that Heraclitus was arguably the first philosopher to recognize, albeit in a different context, the very point I have just propounded. For Heraclitus, no less than for Aristotle, all power is a species of motion, which is in turn a species of change. And because ancient thinkers like Aristotle generally do not acknowledge any fundamental distinction between political power and power as such, it follows that political power is itself a category of motion and change. The famed Heraclitean dictum—“all things are in motion and nothing remains still”—is not only ontological but political as well.

The study of power—that is, of force, motion, and change—appears in a variety of distinct contexts in the Aristotelian corpus ranging from ontology to physics (which Aristotle understood as the general study of nature). Thanks in part to the revolution of Newtonian mechanics, however, we are nowadays accustomed to thinking of physics more narrowly as the study of forces, motion, and change within and among physical objects. If, as we noted above, politics is to be understood as referring to power relations between and among human beings, and if it is true on some description or other that all power relations involve relations of force, motion, and change, it would seem to follow that politics is a kind of “social physics.” Unlike physics proper, which is concerned with power relations within and among physical objects, social physics is concerned with power relations between and among human beings.

The Heraclitean insight is that everything is what it is and does what it does because of change, motion, activity—in short, power. At first glance this may seem controversial. When we stop to consider it, however, it becomes clear that all of our relations and interactions with other people involve power. This is perhaps most obvious in those instances in which we use

direct force to compel others to do our bidding or are compelled in turn. But it is true even of exchanges which do not seem to involve any explicit coercion at all—for example, purchasing food at the grocery store, asking a friend for a loan, making a promise, inviting someone on a date, and so forth. All such circumstances involve subtle and complicated intersections and relays of power. These intersections, in turn, are situated in even more subtle and complicated networks of cultural, social, political, economic, and moral rules, all of which are underwritten by power.

If we go a step further and examine the general history of human thought, we find that proposed answers to the perennial (and not so perennial) questions of science, religion, and philosophy almost invariably end up invoking the concept of power, if only implicitly. Here are some token examples with relevant terms highlighted:

- Question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” Answers: (1) “Because reality is a perfection and an omnipotent God *seeks to bring about* the highest possible amount of perfection in the universe.” (2) “Because possible things *strive* to become actual.”
- Question: “How did the universe come to exist?” Answers: (1) “Because God *created* it.” (2) Because the primordial bird Nyx *laid* a golden egg whence Eros was born, and Eros *divided* the halves of the hatched egg into Earth (Gaia) and Sky (Uranus).” (3) “A singularity of infinite density and temperature began to *expand and cool* very rapidly; approximately 10^{-32} seconds later a phase transition *occurred* which *caused* an exponential cosmic inflation.”
- Question: “Why does the lightning flash and the thunder roll”? Answers: (1) “Because Thor *swings* his hammer.” (2) “Because Indra (or Zeus or Xoxotl, etc.) *throws* his thunderbolts.” (3) “Because God is *expressing* his wrath.” (4) “Because colliding atmospheric particles are *charged* by electrostatic induction and *react* via electrical discharge with oppositely charged particles.”

Notice that every answer cited above involves activity or motion—hence, power—of some kind or another. This lends considerable credibility to Heraclitus’s dictum, or at least to a slightly modified version of it according to which all things are *explained* by motion and change. Such a dictum would seem to hold true even of definitions. The question “what is X?” is very often answered by referring to X’s powers and capacities, to its actual or possible movements and transformations—in short, to what it does or is capable of doing. To this we may add the somewhat obvious Foucauldian point that power is often responsible for making certain answers “acceptable” and others “unacceptable.” (The Spanish Inquisition comes immediately to mind here.)

Lest we push the point too far, it must be emphasized that social physics is not and should not be reduced to physics proper. For example, consider the question “Why did John push Mary down the stairs?” As theorists of action repeatedly point out, there are several ways of answering this question, none of which are necessarily reducible to any of the others.⁷⁰ To be sure, we could provide a strictly physical explanation of John’s action, which focuses entirely on neural signals, muscular contractions, momentum, gravity, and so forth. However, we could also explain John’s action by pointing out that Mary is Jewish and John happens to be virulently anti-Semitic. Although both explanations involve the exertion of physical force, we cannot reduce John’s racially motivated act of violence to purely physical explananda. From the standpoint of social physics, John’s action must be explained in terms of social rather than physical relations. This requires, among other things, analyses that fall outside the scope of conventional physics, whether or not such analyses are ultimately grounded in a materialist ontology.⁷¹

All human relations are, to greater or lesser degree, relations of power, and to this extent all human relations—friendships, sexual affairs, business transactions, marriages, and so forth—may be viewed as analogous to physical relations of power (hence my use of the heuristic term “social physics”). Furthermore, this social physics is coextensive with what is conventionally called “politics.” Thus all human social relations *qua* relations of power are political and “politics” is simply a generic descriptive term for the myriad ways in which human beings affect and are affected by sociophysical power.

Just as physics proper contains various subfields that are distinguished according to their objects of analysis, so social physics contains various subfields that we call “social sciences.” The aim of these sciences, simply put, is to analyze and describe particular types of sociophysical (i.e., political) relations. From this it follows that what is typically called “political science” is more properly termed “juridical science” (or something of that sort) insofar as its principal object of study is juridical or governmental power. Like all social sciences, the goal of juridical science is to analyze and describe particular types of political relations in terms of their basic structure and operation.⁷² To this extent it is incapable of answering any questions that fall within the scope of moral or normative discourse, a fact that is often cited as the fundamental distinction between political philosophy and the social sciences generally. It is true that political philosophy extends the analysis of social physics into the normative realm, but it is capable of doing far more than that. As I shall argue below, political philosophy is better seen as a holistic analysis of social physics which combines both descriptive and normative elements. Just as quantum physics reveals that matter and energy are infinitely more chaotic, unstable, and uncertain than Aristotelian ontology, Ptolemeian astronomy, Newtonian mechanics, and all other earlier systems surmised, such an analysis reveals that the power underlying social

existence is dynamic, volatile, unpredictable, pliable, decentered—in short, *an-archic*.

Whether normative or descriptive in emphasis, the greatest portion of ancient and modern political thought has adopted a teleological (which is to say, “*archic*”) view of power—namely, it has taken power to be always and already organized, constituted, distributed, and directed toward specific ends. As a result, it has tended to prioritize actuality (*what is the case*) at the expense of possibility (*what could be, what might be*), deriving the latter from the former. Politics has never been an art of the possible but a science of the actual.

From politics to political philosophy

Politics is not a field of inquiry. Rather, it is a descriptive term for power relations that are described and analyzed by various fields of inquiry including, but not limited to, political science, psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Because this distinction has largely been overlooked within the Western tradition, politics has often been conflated with the very disciplines that attempt to study it. A similar fate has befallen political philosophy, which is commonly regarded as a subordinate branch of moral philosophy that applies specifically to states or governments.⁷³ To the extent that philosophers have analyzed other forms of social relations, such as friendship or marriage, their analyses have tended, with a few notable exceptions,⁷⁴ to fall outside the scope of political philosophy *sensu stricto*.

This characterization of political philosophy is misguided. If politics refers not to the study of social power relations but to social power relations themselves, and if political philosophy is understood as the broadest and most general study of social power relations, it follows that moral philosophy is better viewed as a branch of political philosophy and not the other way around. (Thus Aristotle was on the right track after all in suggesting that political philosophy is the “highest” practical science, as this implies, among other things, that ethics is subordinate to it.) Although I will say more about the role of moral philosophy in the next chapter, let us describe it for the time being as a kind of micropolitical analysis that focuses on the actions of individual people. It is micropolitical, again, because human actions—especially the sort of actions that are studied by moral philosophers—always involve relations of power.

Todd May has suggested that political philosophy “is a project perpetually haunted by crisis . . . because it inhabits that shifting space between what is and what ought to be.”⁷⁵ Unlike moral philosophy (which May, following Kant, identifies with the study of “what ought to be”) and metaphysics (which he identifies with the study of “what is”), “the work of political philosophy is dictated by the tension between the two, rather than by one of the poles.”⁷⁶

May somewhat half-heartedly grants that it is impossible to study “what ought to be” without also studying “what is,” and vice versa.⁷⁷ All moral theories depend, to greater or lesser extent, on descriptive analyses, whether metaphysical or otherwise. Likewise, all metaphysical theories depend, to greater or lesser extent, on “the normativity inhabiting the epistemology that provides [their] foundation.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he contends, “political philosophy . . . has only discussed the ought *given what is*,” thus “as the social configuration shifts, so must the philosophical approach.”⁷⁹

May is right in suggesting that there is a “shifting space” or “tension” between ethics and metaphysics, but I do not agree that this is the locus of political philosophy, even if political philosophy has more often than not discussed ethics on the basis of metaphysical presuppositions. Rather, it is within political philosophy itself that the ethical and the metaphysical come into conflict. Whereas some forms of philosophy study the relations between human beings and the world, my claim, simply put, is that political philosophy studies social physics—that is, actual and potential power relations among human beings. It is therefore a holistic discourse that includes both descriptive and normative elements in its general analysis of power relations. As a descriptive discourse it comprises “all the activities of co-operation and conflict within and between societies, whereby the human species goes about organizing the use, production and distribution of human, natural and other resources in the production and reproduction of its biological and social life.”⁸⁰ As a normative discourse, it goes one step further by asking, for example, which of these activities ought to be promoted (or at least tolerated) and which ought to be condemned outright.

Although I suggested in my brief discussion of Heraclitus that metaphysical discourse almost always implies concepts of power, I would not go so far as to say that metaphysics (or, for that matter, logic and epistemology) should be regarded as forms of political philosophy, even if it turns out that such discourses are always situated in political contexts that affect and are affected by them. As I noted above, however, I *would* affirm this of moral philosophy which, when considered as a distinct type of inquiry, is generally concerned with “what ought to be” at the level of individual human actions. When this concern is applied to a wider range of social fields, it gives rise to new problems that collectively form the normative content of political philosophy.

The distinctive mark of political philosophy, then, is its overarching focus on the conflict between the realm of actual power relations (what Todd May calls the “*is* pole,” referring to the empirical or metaphysical) and the realm of possible power relations (the “*ought* pole,” referring to the moral or normative). Once again, I do not believe, as May does, that political philosophy occupies a medial space between these social-physical realms. Rather, political philosophy is precisely the arena in which the conflict between them emerges and is played out. It is within this framework that

we can draw distinctions among various approaches to political philosophy. May attempts something like this with his threefold taxonomy of political philosophy. The first type of political philosophy, which he calls “formal political philosophy,” aims at discovering “the nature, or at least the important characteristics, of a just society[.]”⁸¹ It does this by attaching itself to one or the other of the two “poles” (is versus ought, descriptive versus normative) mentioned above and builds its analysis upon this attachment.⁸² Most classical political philosophy can be seen as operating in this way. For example, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, and Locke all attempt to determine “what ought to be” on the basis of certain descriptive assumptions about human nature.

The same is true of much contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy. For example, John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice*⁸³ is founded on a variety of descriptive assumptions, most importantly the notion that human beings are by nature rationally self-interested. As May points out, “By utilizing the maximin principle of decision theory in a situation (the original position) of ignorance about one’s eventual place in society, Rawls tries to provide the principles which all rational beings would choose as the cornerstone of [a just] society.”⁸⁴ Like his classical forebears, Rawls begins with an account of what is allegedly the case (i.e., that human beings are rationally self-interested) and on this basis produces an account of what ought to be the case (i.e., a society governed by Rawls’ principles of justice).

Note that formal political philosophies that cleave to the “ought pole” (i.e., to normative claims about “what ought to be”) need not rely on descriptive accounts of human nature in the way that Rawls’ theory does. For example, Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*⁸⁵ provides “a prescription for a society that relies on no facts about the current composition of the world.”⁸⁶ Nozick’s principles of justice do not depend upon any decision-theoretical speculation about what rationally self-interested agents would or would not choose (this is what Nozick refers to as “end-state” reasoning).⁸⁷ Rather, the concept of justice is defined on the basis of what Nozick calls “historical principles.”⁸⁸ The difference between an “end-state principle” and a “historical principle” is analogous to the difference between a legal decision based on common law precedent and one that is based on concerns about what may or may not happen in the future as a result of said decision. For Nozick, justice is historically concerned with the just acquisition and transfer of property (where “just” means something like “pursuant to a contract freely entered into by reasonable parties”).⁸⁹ Again, this conception of justice examines how the world ought to be “regardless of what people are actually like and what kind of world they live in.”⁹⁰ As May notes, this is precisely what makes Nozick’s theory “utopian.”⁹¹

Formal political philosophy can also hew to the “is pole” (i.e., to empirical or descriptive claims about the way the world actually is). Of

particular interest here are certain Marxist theories that espouse strict historical determinism.⁹² If history is guided by necessity, as such theories suggest, then the moral responsibilities of individuals are “negated, if not severely diminished.”⁹³ This, in turn, implies that normative considerations are at best of secondary importance. In their place, these theories offer a description of society and proceed to demonstrate by means of dialectical analyses how society will naturally evolve. In Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*,⁹⁴ to cite just one example, bourgeois capitalism automatically introduces commodification (or “reification”) across society that, in turn, produces revolutionary class consciousness among the proletariat. As proletariat consciousness grows, it will eventually “overcome reification by overthrowing the capitalist order” and replacing it with a communist society.⁹⁵

The second type of political philosophy is what May calls “strategic political philosophy.”⁹⁶ Unlike the formal, which relies on one or the other pole of political philosophy, the strategic involves “an immersion into the tension between the two.”⁹⁷ For example, whereas the formal philosophy of Rawls employs normative analyses to determine what a just society would be like, strategic philosophy employs analyses of context, including historical and social conditions, in order to answer the question famously raised by Lenin, namely, “what is to be done?” According to May, although formal political philosophies seek to formulate conceptions of justice, they generally avoid devising concrete strategies for the realization of justice in society. Occasionally they provide critiques of extant political institutions or sketch out hypothetical “alternatives” that might be implemented in the future, but they seldom explain how we are to realize such alternatives in practice—a task that is instead left to activists, politicians, or policy analysts.

Strategic political philosophy sometimes produces normative critiques, which are in turn leveled against real historical, social, and cultural institutions. This is especially true of socialists of the early nineteenth century who criticized capitalism on squarely moral grounds. More often, however, such moral critique is simply assumed or otherwise taken for granted within strategic political philosophy.⁹⁸ Given that this or that institution is unjust, the predominant question for the strategic philosopher becomes “what are we going to do about it?” As May notes by way of summary:

Strategic political philosophy recognizes that history and social conditions unfold not of necessity but are mutable and perhaps even regressive at times. However, neither are history and social conditions secondary; they are consulted not merely to realize an ethical program but to determine what concrete possibilities present themselves for intervention. In this sense, not only is the historical and social situation read in terms of ethical demands, but the ethical program is limited and perhaps partially determined by the situation. This is why much—though by no means

all—political philosophy that falls under the category “strategic” addresses itself to the concrete historical conditions under which the philosophizing takes place.⁹⁹

The idea here is that the normative and programmatic analyses of strategic political philosophy are self-reflexive: they recognize their embeddedness within a particular context and the extent to which this context shapes and reshapes them. Consequently, as the context shifts, so must the philosophy that would seek to analyze and, ultimately, change it. This is generally not true of formal political philosophy, which attempts to arrive at abstract and universal principles and prescriptions by disentangling itself from the vicissitudes of history and context.

Another important feature of strategic political philosophy according to May is that it usually “involves a unitary analysis that aims towards a single goal.”¹⁰⁰ Marxist philosophy, for example, locates the source of power within the substructure of economic relations with a mind to the eventual abolition of capitalism: “Political and social change, if it is to be significant, must rest upon a transformation at the base . . . All problems can be reduced to the basic one.”¹⁰¹ The same is true of certain strands of radical feminism, which reduce all oppression to patriarchal dominance. Strategic feminist philosophy of this sort therefore relies on radical critique of gender relations with a mind to “overthrowing” patriarchy. In all cases, the basic idea is that oppressive power emanates from a unitary source that must be combated and destroyed in order to achieve the goal of liberation.

The third and final type of political philosophy that May discusses is “tactical political philosophy.”¹⁰² Like strategic philosophy, tactical philosophy subsists in the tension between the is-pole and the ought-pole, but it does not attempt to reduce political analysis to a central and foundational problematic. For the tactical philosopher, any attempt to locate power in a single center radically circumscribes the sphere of possible intervention. Tactical political philosophy instead acknowledges the “many different sites from which [power] arises and . . . the interplay among these various sites in the creation of the social world.”¹⁰³ Power does not originate in or flow from these sites but rather builds up around them in varying degrees.

One of the central theses of May’s *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* is that classical anarchism, as well as “poststructuralism, particularly as it is embodied in the works of Foucault, Deleuze, and Lyotard, has defined a tradition of the type of political philosophy . . . called ‘tactical.’”¹⁰⁴ Although I shall discuss this claim in greater detail later on, it is worth noting here that tactical political philosophy need not be associated exclusively with classical anarchism or “poststructuralism.” For example, the efforts of community organizers and activists to achieve concrete reforms in their immediate locales clearly involve a tactical orientation. In recognizing that it is wrong for industries to dump

harmful chemicals into local rivers, environmentalists are not necessarily committed to any kind of “central or foundational problematic.” They need not regard environmental degradation as a symptom of any larger disease (for example, capitalism) and their interventions need not be influenced by any overarching commitment to abolish it. Instead, they may simply regard pollution as a local problem, which requires a local solution. Whatever tactics they devise in this pursuit will inevitably be shaped by the specific situation in which the problem arises. The point, therefore, is that tactical political philosophy is often an important part, at least implicitly, of the campaigns and projects of “single-issue” activists who are simply striving to create change in their communities.

A critique of May’s taxonomy

As May points out, the formal question (“What is justice?”) has always been accompanied by the strategic question (“What kind of society should we try to create?”).¹⁰⁵ This claim, though unquestionably true, reveals a weakness in May’s taxonomy—namely, that it is not strong enough to sustain the kinds of hard and fast distinctions he seeks to draw among political theories. One problem, which I have already noted, is that May situates political philosophy *within* the tense and shifting space between ethics and metaphysics. As a result, political philosophy becomes something like a collection of particles caught between two electromagnetic forces, some of which are pulled in one direction, others in the opposite direction, still others trapped in a kind of inertial state between the two. As I said, I agree that there is a tension between the realm of what is and the realm of what ought to be. What that tension produces, however, is not political philosophy but *politics*.

The actual, concrete power relations experienced by millions of people in the world every day involve extraordinary oppression, corruption, and violence. Whenever people begin to believe in the possibility and desirability of alternative power relations, a tension emerges between what is and what ought to be. This tension expands ten-fold when people make efforts to act on those desires, producing everything from violent revolutions to peaceful reforms in their wake. Political philosophy stands above politics but not apart from or outside of it. It analyzes, but its analyses are never perfectly neutral or objective; they both affect and are affected by their object.

May confuses political philosophy with politics and, in so doing, divests political philosophy of any distinctive *raison d’être*. If we say that the goal of political philosophy is to provide normative analyses of political institutions, then political philosophy is nothing more than a specialized branch of ethics. If, on the other hand, we say that the goal of political philosophy

is to provide descriptive or empirical analyses of political institutions, then political philosophy is simply political science by another name. Clearly, then, political philosophy must be something that is both normative *and* descriptive. This, however, is not May's position. For him, political philosophy is somehow produced by and situated within the fluctuating gap between actuality and possibility. Strictly speaking, it belongs neither to the normative nor the descriptive; rather, it is a kind of *tertium quid* that is caused by their disjunction from one another. If this is the case, however, what could political philosophy possibly analyze from such a vantage other than itself?

Political philosophy is not Aristotle's god nor, in fairness, does May intend it to be. One of his goals in positing this framework is to carve out a special and distinctive place for political philosophy within human thought and, as I have said, it is not without some merit. The problem, as I see it, is with the way May pursues another of his goals, which is to provide categorical distinctions among competing political theories. Simply put, May's framework seems to be built atop these distinctions and not the other way around. Consider, for example, the distinction between formal political philosophy and strategic political philosophy. The former, we are told, cleaves either to the normative pole or the metaphysical pole, whereas the latter is "immersed" in the tension between them. Without providing the metaphor of mutually tense poles, and without situating political philosophy within this tension, there is no way to sustain the distinction between the formal and the strategic.

May acknowledges that there is a "spectrum" within formal political philosophy according to which "the more closely one pole dominates the philosophizing, the more formal it is."¹⁰⁶ Consequently, political thought that is more formal in this sense differs "in kind" from political thought that is less formal. On my view, however, this "spectrum" applies just as well to political thought which May excludes from the category of formal political philosophy. For example, there is no question that Marxist-Leninism, say, differs from Rawlsian liberalism in its emphasis on strategic praxis. (This is perhaps best summed up by Marx's vaunted eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.") However, the claim that a political theory should be excluded outright from the category of "formal political philosophy" simply because it includes strategic or practical considerations is baseless. As I argued earlier, all political philosophy includes normative analyses by definition, which means that all political theories stand in some relation to what May calls the "ought pole." Even in cases where a strategic political philosophy "assumes" its normative commitments rather than argues for them, such commitments are unquestionably "formal" elements of that philosophy, at least as May understands the term "formal."

I also take issue with May's characterization of "formal political philosophy" as a kind of academic game divorced from real world concerns. On the contrary, it is seldom the case that formal political philosophy is completely and totally devoid of strategic elements. This is true even of Aristotle who, as I showed earlier, is not only concerned with what sort of society ought to be created but also with *how* that society could and should be brought about (viz., by transforming oligarchs and tyrants into virtuous *aristoi* who, in turn, will cultivate virtue among the citizens of the *polis*). We might also cite Rousseau or Mill here. Both men were keenly concerned with the question of justice and to this extent are rightly called formal political philosophers *par excellence*. At the same time, both had much to say about how justice could and should be implemented in the real world—that is, about strategy.¹⁰⁷ This is precisely why their ideas had such an enormous impact on actual historical events. Rousseau, as is well known, was the *de facto* intellectual godfather of the French Revolution and, ironically, a celebrity within the aristocratic circles that the Revolution ultimately destroyed.¹⁰⁸ Mill, it is worth recalling, was not just a philosopher of, but also a member of, the British Parliament. During his tenure as an MP he attempted to put his ideas into practice by advocating on behalf of women's rights, proportional representation, labor unions, and the extension of suffrage.¹⁰⁹

As far as tactical political philosophy is concerned, it is not clear to me why May treats it as a separate and distinct category. The only difference between tactical political philosophy and strategic political philosophy is their respective conceptions of political power. In all other regards they appear to be more or less identical. As we have seen, however, power is not the conceptual basis of May's distinctions. Formal political philosophies are distinguished from strategic political philosophies not because they conceive of political power differently, but because they cleave to "what is" or "what ought to be" rather than immersing themselves in the tension between the two. This seems to imply that tactical philosophy is simply a species of the strategic genus rather than a category unto itself.

The point, in any case, is that these distinctions, at least as May articulates them, appear somewhat vacuous. All political philosophy is "formal" inasmuch as it is concerned with the relationship between "what is" and "what ought to be." And while I agree with May that formalism defined as such should be understood proportionately, it makes more sense to posit that political philosophies, regardless of whether or not they include "strategic" considerations, are more or less formal depending upon how closely they gravitate toward one pole or the other. *Mutatis mutandis*, evolutionary Marxism, with its emphasis on dialectical analyses of history, can be seen as gravitating strongly toward the "is pole." Rawlsian liberalism, with its emphasis on abstract normative analyses, can be seen as gravitating strongly toward the "ought pole." Other theories fall somewhere in the middle. This

would hold true, for example, of the Marxist humanism of Harry Cleaver, which combines normative analyses of a quasiliberal sort with more traditional Marxist analyses of historical and economic relations.¹¹⁰

For May, as we have seen, “formal” means little more than “nonstrategic.” Once we reconstruct his framework by abandoning this distinction, however, the term “formal” begins to seem somewhat moribund. Inasmuch as “formal” conventionally denotes a concern with forms or structures as opposed to substance or content, it seems odd to say that Lukács, for example, is more “formal” than Cleaver. Although Cleaver does tend to discuss normative questions more explicitly than Lukács does, this scarcely implies that he is somehow less concerned with forms and structures than Lukács is. In fact, because both are Marxists, both are keenly concerned with, and share the same basic view of, a variety of “formal” concepts (e.g., the structure and superstructure of economic relations, the material conditions of production, etc.) According to this line of reasoning, how exactly would one go about showing that Marxist theorist *X* is “more formal” than Marxist theorist *Y*? More importantly, why would one even bother? Such a task, even if possible, strikes me as rather pointless.

If we are to maintain the notion that political philosophies are spread out over a theoretical spectrum between “what is” and “what ought to be,” we would do well to abandon the concept of formalism altogether. It seems much simpler and clearer to posit that some political theories are more normatively inclined than others. Viewed in this way, political theories differ from one another in degree, not in kind. If, on the other hand, we want to produce more palpable, but not absolute, distinctions between political theories, we would do better to focus on the ways in which they analyze various kinds of power relations as well as their own normative and contextual positions with respect to said power relations. I shall attempt to do both in the next chapter.