

The only standard we have for judging all of our social, economic, and political institutions and arrangements as just or unjust, as good or bad, as better or worse, derives from our conception of the good life for man on earth, and from our conviction that, given certain external conditions, it is possible for men to make good lives for themselves by their own efforts. —Mortimer Adler

THE COMMON SENSE OF POLITICS

by Mortimer Adler

Introduction:

(4)

I TRUST that I have now roughly indicated the scope and subject matter of this book—what it will try to do and what it will not attempt. I know, of course, that full clarity about this cannot be achieved at the outset; I can only hope that it will develop.

Nevertheless, it may be useful to call attention here to three additional points that will prepare for what is to follow.

First of all, let me say that unless I specifically indicate some other meaning, I will always use the word “politics” to stand for political philosophy—a branch of practical or moral philosophy. Philosophy is practical rather than speculative when it is concerned with *what ought to be* rather than *what is or happens*—with the norms or standards of action rather than with the modes of being or becoming. And practical philosophy is, in my conception of it, identical with moral philosophy. Questions about what is good and bad, or right and wrong, whether with regard to individual conduct or with regard to the institutions and operations of society, are moral questions. The word “ethics” is sometimes used as if it were identical in meaning with “moral philosophy.” But, clearly, ethics does not exhaust moral philosophy when the latter is understood as covering questions about the good society as well as questions about the good life. I will presently discuss ethics and politics as the twin branches of moral philosophy—how they are related to each other and how they differ. For the moment, the only point that I wish to reiterate is that moral philosophy is not to be identified with ethics exclusively, for it includes politics as well.

Second, let me comment briefly on the two meanings that I will attach to the adjective “political.” One is the narrow meaning that we employ when we distinguish the political from the economic or the social. In this narrow meaning, political institutions are the institutions of government—its framework, its constitution, its offices, its laws. Used narrowly, “political” does not apply to all the aspects of society; it does not cover social arrangements, customs, or practices that lie outside the sphere of government and law, though they may be affected by it; nor does it cover the economic institutions and processes of society, though these too may be affected by government and law. We have this narrow meaning in mind when we speak of political as contrasted with economic or social justice, or distinguish between political and economic or social revolutions.

The other and broader meaning with which I will use the word “political” covers all aspects of society—not only the institutions of government, but social and economic institutions as well, *insofar as the latter are in any way affected by the institutions of government*. Please note the proviso that I have just mentioned: “insofar as social and economic institutions are in any way affected by the institutions of government.” According to this stipulation, whatever social or economic arrangements or practices are *in no way affected* by the institutions of government lie outside the sphere of the political, even in the broad sense of that term.

The term “political economy” was once used to signify the consideration of the economic aspects of society insofar as these are affected by the institutions of government. The parallel term, “political sociology,” might have been invented to signify the consideration of social arrangements and practices that are similarly conditioned or affected. If one were to add the further stipulation that political economy and political sociology, thus conceived, are, like politics itself, normative disciplines and parts of moral philosophy, there would be little danger of confusing them with scientific economics and sociology as these are now pursued in our universities. The latter are descriptive, not normative disciplines; they are branches of behavioral science; and they do not limit themselves to the study of those economic and social phenomena that are affected by the institutions of government. In what follows, I will always indicate whether I am using the term “political” in the narrow or the broad sense whenever, for clarity, it becomes necessary to do so.

Third, and most important of all, I must call attention to the strict limitation that I will observe in this treatment of the problems of political philosophy. Not only will it deal with normative questions exclusively, but it will also limit itself to such answers as can be found on the level of universal principles, applicable to every variety of circumstance. It will not go below that level to questions of policy or to matters that call for decisions in particular cases. Let me explain this threefold division of the levels of normative or practical thought—thought aimed at action and concerned with what goals should be sought and what means should be chosen to achieve them.

The highest level is the level of universal principles. In the sphere of ethics, this is the level on which we deal with the conception of the good life as the ultimate end that men should seek and with the means that they should employ in seeking it. Statements about the end and the means constitute the universal principles of ethics, applicable to men at all times and places, without regard to the vast range of individual differences among men and the wide variety of external circumstances under which men live at different times and places. Politics, on this highest level of practical thought, deals with the ideal of the good society as a means to the good life and with the shape that its institutions must take in order to realize the ideal thus conceived. Here, as in the case of ethics, statements about the end and the means constitute the principles of politics, having a universality that is comparable to that of the principles of ethics, even though historic circumstances critically condition our discovery and acknowledgment of them. I will have more to say on this last point, for it represents a major difference between ethics and politics as related branches of practical or moral philosophy.

The second or intermediate level of practical thought is the level of rules or policies, which have a generality that is relative to a given set of circumstances. In the sphere of ethics, this is the level of practical thinking on which a certain type of man formulates general rules or policies for applying universal principles to his own life, different from that of other men by virtue of the type of man he is and also, perhaps, by reference to the type of circumstances beyond his control that condition his life. On this level, practical thinking in politics is concerned with adapting universal principles to the contingent circumstances of a particular historic society. Thus, for example, the institution of political liberty may be an indispensable means for realizing the ideal of a good society, but understanding and acknowledging the truth of this universal principle leaves open many difficult and complex questions about the establishment and operation of political liberty in a given society under its special set of historic circumstances—questions of policy about which reasonable men can disagree.

The third and lowest level of practical thought is the level of decisions, the level at which the thinking we do is proximate to action. It is the level on which we make a judgment about what is to be done here and now in this singular case that confronts us and calls for action on our part. In the sphere of ethics, this is the level on which universal principles, mediated and adapted by general rules or policies, are applied by the deliberation in which we engage when we have to decide how we should act here and now in our effort to make a good life for ourselves. It is on this level that political decisions are made, whether by the officials or by the constituents of government. The members of a legislature enacting a law, the judge deciding a case, the executive determining for or against a particular administrative act, and the citizen voting for this candidate and the policy he stands for rather than for his opponent—all are operating on this level, and they do so more or less wisely to the extent that their decision is reached by deliberations that involve the consideration of the universally applicable principles of politics and the relevant general policies which makes those principles applicable to a particular society.

In the strict sense in which practical philosophy consists of such wisdom as men can achieve about the problems of action, practical philosophy is necessarily limited to the first or highest level—the level of universal principles. At its very best, it consists of no more than a slim body of fundamental truths. This is not a limitation that I am imposing arbitrarily or as a matter of convenience. It is a limitation that philosophy must impose upon itself if it wishes to make good its claim that its formulations have the character of practical wisdom.

I am not saying that philosophers have always observed this limitation. On the contrary, they have usually transgressed it, espe-

cially in the sphere of politics. From Aristotle to Mill, the great political philosophers or theorists have not restricted themselves to questions of principle at the highest level; they have also dealt in detail and at length with problems that occur at the two lower levels. The solutions of such problems do not have the universality and cannot be demonstrated with the degree of certitude that is requisite for wisdom. In consequence, they have also introduced into their writings matters that belong to descriptive political science rather than to normative political philosophy.

I am going to try scrupulously to observe the limitation that I think a political philosopher should impose upon himself. If I succeed, one consequence will be the omission of many matters that are traditionally discussed in treatises on political theory. I hope that I can retain the reader's interest even though I will not touch on many of the issues or deal with many of the problems that occur to him when he thinks about politics—problems that are genuine, important, and urgent on the second and third level, but which are, in my judgment, beyond the special competence of philosophy as such.


(5)

May I anticipate the objection or protest that will probably occur to the reader? Does not such purism prevent political philosophy from being practically useful? And from being of vital interest? How can it be said that political philosophy is practical when the universal principles that exclusively occupy its attention, even if they constitute the best wisdom we can achieve, are obviously inadequate by themselves for the solution of the practical problems of society and social life?

The answer to that question must begin by admitting—more than that, by emphasizing—the inadequacy of practical philosophy, be it ethics or politics, to solve the difficult, complex practical problems that arise for men living in a particular society, under the special circumstances prevailing at a given historic time and place. Universal principles do not by themselves decide what is to be done in particular cases; nor do they automatically determine our choice of the best among conflicting policies, all reasonable, and all applicable to a particular set of circumstances. Failing in these two respects, the universal principles of political philosophy are woefully inadequate for the solution of practical problems.

However, though ethical or political wisdom is inadequate for the solution of the practical problems that confront us, it is nevertheless indispensable for achieving sound solutions to them. Universal principles constitute the framework—the broad outline or plan—within which sound solutions can be and must be developed. They point us in the right direction. The framework they provide is

like a map that helps us to find our way to our destination, even though it does not tell us everything that we need to know in order to get there. This framework of universal principles cannot tell us which of two sound policies to adopt or which of two reasonable courses of action to take, but it does provide us with the basis for discriminating between sound and unsound policies and between reasonable and unreasonable courses—those that fall within the framework of principles and so are wise decisions and those that do not and so are unwise.

Thus it is political wisdom, achieved only at the level of universal principles, that safeguards against making fundamental errors and keeps us from going in the wrong direction. As I have written elsewhere, “without it we would have no assured guidance at all, even though the guidance it does provide does not suffice at every turn of the road.” Hence when we confess that political wisdom is by itself inadequate for practical purposes, we should be quick to add that it is also practically indispensable. 

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