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# UNIT 1 WHAT IS POLITICAL THEORY AND WHY STUDY IT?

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## Structure

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 What is Political Theory?
  - 1.2.1 What is Theory?
  - 1.2.2 Political Theory: Implications
  - 1.2.3 Political Theory: Contents
- 1.3 Nature of Political Theory
  - 1.3.1 Political Theory as History
  - 1.3.2 Political Theory as Philosophy
  - 1.3.3 Political Theory as Science
- 1.4 Political Theory: Growth and Evolution
  - 1.4.1 Classical Political Theory
  - 1.4.2 Modern Political Theory
  - 1.4.3 Contemporary Political Theory
- 1.5 Why Study Political Theory?
  - 1.5.1 Tasks Before Political Theory
  - 1.5.2 Significance of Political Theory
- 1.6 Summary
- 1.7 Exercises

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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Political theory is not only a *theory* of/about politics, it is also the *science* of politics, the *philosophy* of politics at that. As a theory, Bluhm explains, political theory “stands for an abstract model of the political order... a guide to the systematic collection and analysis of political data” (*Theories of Political System*, 1981). Andrew Hacker, enlarging the point of view, says that political theory as a “theory, in ideal terms, is dispassionate and disinterested. As science, it will describe political reality without trying to pass judgement on what is being depicted, either implicitly or explicitly. As philosophy, it will describe rules of conduct which will secure good life for all of society...” (*Political Theory: Philosophy, Ideology, Science*, 1961).

Political theory is not fantasy, though it may contain an element of political vision. It is not politicking, though it does take into account political realities for its study and analysis. It is not all scientism, though it seeks to reach the roots of all political activity analytically and systematically. It is not ideology, though it attempts to justify a political system and condemns another. It is theoretical, scientific, philosophical and at the same time dynamic with a clear objective of attaining a better social order. It thus, has in varying degrees, elements of ‘theory’, ‘science’, ‘philosophy’ and ‘ideology’.

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## 1.2 WHAT IS POLITICAL THEORY?

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Political theory is a theory about what is “political”, the science and philosophy of what is political. George Sabine says, “It is anything about politics or relevant to politics”. This being the broader meaning, he refers to its narrow meaning, saying that it is “the disciplined investigation of political problems” (*A History of Political Theory*, 1973). David Held defines political theory as “a network of concepts and generalizations about political life involving ideas, assumptions and statements about the nature, purpose and key features of government, state and society and about the political capabilities of human beings”. (*Political Theory Today*, 1991) A very elaborate definition of political theory has been given in *Political Science Dictionary*, describing it as “a body of thought that seeks to evaluate, explain and predict political phenomena. As a sub-field of Political Science, it is concerned with political ideas, values and concepts, and the explanation of prediction of political behaviour. In its broad sense, it has two main branches: one is political philosophy or normative theory, with its value, analytic, historical and speculative concerns. The other is empirical theory, with its efforts to explain, predict, guide, research and organize knowledge through the formulation of abstract models, and scientifically testable propositions.”

Political theory is all about politics. It is an overview of what the political order is about. It is a symbolic representation of what is “political”. In its *nature*, it is a formal, logical and systematic analysis of processes and consequences of political activity. It is, in its *method*, analytical, expository, and explanatory. It is, in its *objective*, an attempt to give order, coherence and meaning to what may be referred to as “political”.

### 1.2.1 What is Theory?

The meaning of political theory necessitates the meaning of theory: to know what political theory really is to know, first, what is theory? Originating from the Greek word “*theoria*”, theory means or at least, may mean a well-focussed mental look taken at something in a state of contemplation with the intention to grasp or understand it. Arnold Brecht (“*What is Theory?*”) refers to both the broad and the narrow meaning of the word “theory”. In the broader sense, he says, theory means “A thinker’s entire teaching on a subject”, including the description of facts, his explanation, his conception of history, his value-judgements, and the proposals of goals, policies and principles. In the narrow sense, he says, theory means “explanatory” thought only or at least primarily. In his book, *Political Theory*, Brecht uses theory in the narrow sense, saying, “... explaining is the function of theory.” Thus, for him, theory means a proposition or a set of propositions designed to explain something with reference to data or inter-relations not directly observed or not otherwise manifest. Theory has to be scientific, without the quantum of science, it is unthinkable. But theory, without theory or say philosophy, is as meaningless as it is, without science. Theory is a combination of elements characteristic of both science and philosophy. Theory is not practice, because doing too needs thinking. Theory involves a theoretical frame which practice really lacks. Theory is not merely ‘description’ because “describing” is only a part of “thinking”, its other parts, for example, include “discovering”, “determining”, “augmenting”, “explaining” and “framing” a phenomenon. Theory is not hypothesis, for hypothesis denotes a tentative assumption of facts, and, therefore, lacks what theory really has, “definiteness”. Theory is not philosophy because while theory is about “something”, philosophy is about “everything”. Theory is not thought because it is a thought about thought, and not an entire thought itself. There is, indeed, much that is common between theory and reason, for both have a claim on being scientific, yet theory looks beyond reason, beyond science.

Theory, we may sum up with Karl Deutsch (*The Nerves of Government*, 1963), attempts to

explain, order and relate disjointed data, identifies what is relevant and, therefore, points out what is missing in any phenomenon; predicts on the basis of observable facts. Theory is a guide to practice, adds much to what is merely description, clarifies hypothesis, and as a part of philosophy, explains an issue which meets the requirements of both reason and vision.

### **1.2.2 Political Theory: Implications**

Theory implies both science as well as philosophy. It is, against this background, that one may say that a theorist is both a scientist and a philosopher; a theorist is more than a scientist; he is more than a philosopher. To understand theory when applied to politics would mean understanding politics as a theory, as a science and also as a philosophy. Bluhm would, thus, explain political theory as “an explanation of what politics is all about, a general understanding of the political world, a frame of reference. Without one we should be unable to recognize an event as political, decide anything about why it happened, judge whether it was good or bad, or decide what was likely to happen next. A theory helps us identify what is happening in a particular case of politics... It helps us to explain why an event occurred and to predict future events ... Theory also is a tool for evaluating what is happening and for guiding our political choices...”. The job of the political theorist is really important. Brecht makes a note of it saying, “It is the function of the political theorist to see, sooner than others, and to analyze, more profoundly than others, the immediate and the potential problems of the political life of society; to supply the practical politicians, well in advance, with alternative courses of action, the foreseeable consequences of which have been fully thought through; and to supply him not only with brilliant ideas, but with a solid block of knowledge on which to build.” When political theory performs its function well, he continues, “it is one of the most important weapons in our struggle for the advance of humanity.”

The discussion on what a theory is or what political theory is would help us identify the characteristic implications or the major aspects of political theory. Some of these can be stated as under:

- i) The area in which political theory works extends to the realms of politics only – political life of the citizen, his political behaviour, his political ideas, the government that he seeks to establish, and the tasks expected from such a government.
- ii) The methods, which political theory adopts, include description, explanation and investigation of the political phenomenon.
- iii) Though political theory is all about what is ‘political’, yet it attempts to understand ‘political’ in relation to ‘social’, ‘economic’, ‘psychological’, ‘ecological’, ‘moral’, and the like.
- iv) The objective which political theory seeks to achieve is to build a good state in a good society, and in the process, create processes, procedures, institutions and structures historically tested and rationally attained.
- v) As a body of thought, political theory attempts to explain, evaluate and predict political phenomena, and in the process builds not only scientifically testable models, but suggests values as rules of human conduct.
- vi) Political theory is both prescriptive and explanatory.

### 1.2.3 Political Theory: Contents

Politics, as a political activity, is usually associated with cynicism, and skepticism, demonstrating self-seeking behaviour, hypocrisy, and manipulation of attitudes. This negative connotation hardly holds any ground. Political theory is neither a theory of politicking, nor a theory of political intrigues. It is a disciplined investigation of what constitutes the 'political'. Its contents have varied from time to time. From the early Greeks, in the Western political tradition, to the end of the eighteenth century, political theory concerned itself mostly with what politics 'ought to be'. Almost during the whole nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, political theory dealt, largely, with the nature and structure of government as a decision-making body. Then came a period when some of the American political scientists, under the influence of scientism, declared the demise of political theory as against those, mostly the British, the traditionalists, who advocated the value of political theory as a guide to political action. With the fast changing complexion of the world, political theory, has happily, survived the onslaughts of 'the end of ideology', and 'the end of history' debates. The concern of political theory, today, has been both the nature and proper ends of the government.

Political theory, as a disciplined investigation of political phenomena, is closely related to *why* and *what* of the institutions of the government, and the whole political system in which the government operates. To study political theory is to study the context in which it exists. We need to understand political theory within the realm of the political system, the political system within the realm of the social system, the social system within the realm of the period it exists, and in the environment it breeds.

The contents of political theory include understanding of what is really 'political', to link 'political' with what is 'non-political', and to integrate and coordinate the results of the numerous social sciences for knowing its own nature. Its scope is not limited to what it constitutes, but to what exists in the periphery and beyond.

Suggesting that the task of defining what is political is a continual one, Sheldon Wolin (*Politics and Vision* 1960) includes the following in the contents of political theory:

- (i) a form of activity centering around the quest for competitive advantage between groups, individuals, or societies;
- (ii) a form of activity conditioned by the fact that it occurs within a situation of change and relative scarcity;
- (iii) a form of activity in which the pursuits of advantage produce consequences of such magnitude that they affect in a significant way the whole society or a substantial portion of it.

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## 1.3 NATURE OF POLITICAL THEORY

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To know clearly as to what political theory really is, is to know its nature. Political theory is said to be political thought, and that is why there are some who describe political theory as denoting the works of numerous thinkers. But it is not what political thought is. There are others who equate political theory with political philosophy. It is true that political theory constitutes a part of political philosophy, but it is only a part; a part can never be a whole, and as a part, it remains only a part, a part of the whole. There are still others who after incorporating science in politics, prefer to call it Political Science. But those who insist on a science of politics, refuse to admit

if there ever had been a history of politics, or a culture of politics. Brecht, therefore, would say, "... political philosophy, political theory, and political science are no longer interchangeable terms..., with the emphasis placed on science and a distinction from political philosophy, political science now refers to efforts limited by the use of scientific methods, in contrast to political philosophy, which is free to transcend these limits. Likewise political 'theory' when opposed to political 'philosophy' now is usually meant to refer *scientific* theory only in distinction from political philosophy. Any speculative thesis that is proposed by political philosophy can be part of (scientific) political theory only as a "working hypothesis", an auxiliary in the scientific kit, and not ... or not yet.... as a piece of scientific knowledge."

Political theory is not all history, but it is history in the limited sense; it is not all philosophy, but it is philosophy in some degree; it is not all science, but it is science in so far as it responds to reason. A political theorist has to be a part historian, a part philosopher, and a part scientist.

### 1.3.1 Political Theory as History

That political theory is history has been emphatically advocated by scholars like George Sabine, but all history is not political theory just as all political theory is not history. Political theory without history is a structure without a base. In studying and analysing politics, what we learn to understand is a political tradition, and a concrete way of behaviour. It is, therefore, proper that the study of politics should essentially be a historical study. History, we should know, is more than the tale of the dead and the buried; it is a storehouse of experience and wisdom; successes and failures, of what has been achieved, and what has been lost. It is the sum-total and simultaneously the formation-head of a new development, something, as Professor L.S. Rathore says, "eternally significant and instructive, inseparably linked with contemporaneity in the perpetual progress of mankind." "Ignore history", he warns, "and the delight of political theory is never to be retrieved."

Political theory as history defies what has lost its value. No one cries now that the state has been a divine creation or the result of a contract in the state of nature. As history, political theory conserves what has significance and helps posterity to cherish it for a long time to come. Concepts such as justice, liberty, equality, obligation, as evolved through the annals of time, are being held high by political theory today and shall continue to be so in future. Indeed, history never repeats, but it can hardly be ignored. In the attempt to divorce itself from history, political theory loses its own significance, for there can be no fruits without roots as Seeley had said long ago. It is through history that political theory explains what is what. One can never understand a text without its context. Plato's communism was significantly different from what is claimed to be Marx's communism, and one can understand communism of each by understanding the history of their respective times. It is one's age that prompts and propels one's political theory: history shapes and reshapes political theory. How can, then, political theory ignore its one aspect, the historical aspect? Sabine writes that great political theory excels both in "an analysis of a present situation and in suggestiveness for other situations". As such, "a good political theory", Professor S.P. Varma (*Modern Political Theory*, 1987) writes, "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". (See George H. Sabine, "What is Political Theory?" *Journal of Politics*, Vol. I, No. 1, February 1939).

Political theory is history in the sense that it seeks to understand the time, the place and the circumstances in which it evolves. If it ignores its historical context, it loses its strength, its focus and its message. Any political theory has to have facts as the basis (the factual-historical factor

as Sabine would say), circumstances in which it develops (the causal factor as Sabine describes it), and the message, i.e., political theory (the valuational factor, as Sabine would insist). Political theory is not merely or only history (the statement of facts on which it works and has worked in the past, i.e., history), it is a science in so far as it is not understood in isolation, and also a philosophy in so far as it motivates.

### 1.3.2 Political Theory as Philosophy

That political theory is a philosophy has been very well enunciated by scholars like Leo Strauss, (“What is Political Philosophy?” *Journal of Politics*, XIX, August 1967), but all philosophy is not political theory as all political theory is not philosophy. Philosophy, as an abstract study encompassing the whole universe in general, and morals, norms, and values in particular, is the sum-total of general laws governing the whole world. It has served political theory well through the ages as its valuational factor, as Sabine has said. Philosophy, as Kant says, has answered three questions: “What can I know?” “What must I do?” and “What can I hope for?” and this is what makes philosophy a lodestar of life. Without philosophy, no political theory can ever hope to exist; without an eye on future, no present can ever afford to stay as no present stands without its past.

Political theory is a philosophy, for it not only seeks to know the nature of things but also attempts to explain as to why things really exist. One understands an action or a thought only by evaluating it. Evaluation is a part of understanding. Philosophy as distinct from theory is a ‘quest for wisdom’ or as Strauss holds the view, “quest for universal knowledge, for knowledge of the whole”. Political theory as philosophy is “the attempt truly to know both the nature of political things and the right, or the good, political order” (Strauss). Politics is not what one assumes or opines. In fact, a political theorist is expected to possess more than an assumption or an opinion; he has to have knowledge. Philosophy emerges when opinion/assumption attains the heights of knowledge, and that is what exactly is the task of political theory. Political theory as philosophy is an “attempt to replace opinion/assumption about the nature of political things by knowledge of the nature of political things” (Strauss).

Values, Strauss believes, are an indispensable part of political theory as they are, of philosophy. Every political philosopher has to be a teacher in his own right: he must profess; he must teach; he must persuade. Professor Varma, therefore, writes that the object of persuasion is always there before the political theorist. “What some of the modern writers have described as “the folk-lore of political philosophy’, or mere ‘ideology’, is vital for the understanding of political theory.” Political theory not only explains, but also affects, favourably or adversely. Evaluational aspects of a political activity are as important as its factual aspects. It is, in this sense, that *values* and *facts* form an integral part of any political theory.

### 1.3.3 Political Theory as Science

That political theory is a science has been forcefully emphasised by scholars from Arthur Bentley (*The Process of Government*, 1908) to George Catlin (*The Science and Method of Politics*, 1927); David Easton (*The Political System*, 1953) and Robert Dahl (*Modern Political Analysis*, 1963); but all science is not political theory, just as all political theory is not science. Political theory is not science in the sense Chemistry or Physics or Mathematics is a science. It is not as exact a science as these natural or physical sciences are, because there are no universally recognised principles, no clear cause-effect relationships, no laboratories and no predictions are made in political theory the way these are found in natural and exact sciences.

It is a science in so far as it admits concepts and norms which are both observable and testable, and in so far as it responds to the requirements of reason and rationalism. The American social science researchers in general, and the Behaviouralists in particular, sought to create a science of politics and in the process, indulged in what may be called 'reductionism'. Political theory is a science in so far as it can, and in fact, is applied to a social gathering and the definitive rules of the exact sciences are applicable within the limitations as in any social science. Political theory as a science is only a social science. It is a science in its methodology, in its approach and in its analysis. To that extent, it is a science, a prime science as Aristotle had described it. It is a science in so far as its conclusions are drawn after 'study', 'observation', 'experiments', features which go along with any normal definition of science. There is no need to go a long way to make a 'science' of politics, and to find 'techniques', and 'tools' to make politics an exact science, no matter whether there remains, in the process, any political theory or not. The role of science in political theory should be limited to the extent that it helps understand a political phenomenon, and to that extent, science should have an entry in the realms of political theory. Political theory admits objectivity in association with subjectivity, facts in relation to values, research together with theory. Political theory as science generates neutral, dispassionate and objective knowledge (See, Colin Hay, *Political Analysis*, 2002).

There are limits of social sciences. In contrast, the rules of the game (that of the exact sciences) do not change with time. The laws of physics, for instance, can be assumed to pertain to all situations at all times – past, present and future. But this is not true of the social sciences. "The nature of the 'economic' and the 'political' is," Colin Hay says, "different after Keynes and Marx in a way that the 'physical' and the 'natural' is not after Newton and Einstein". We must remember that (i) "Social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the activities they govern", (ii) "social structures, unlike the natural structures, do not exist independently of the agent's conceptions of what they are doing in their activity." (iii) "social structures, unlike natural structures, may be only relatively enduring." (See R. Bhaskar, *The Limits of Naturalism*, 1979). This is where the social sciences are different from the natural sciences. The limits of political theory are worked out within the ethics of political analysis.

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## **1.4 POLITICAL THEORY: GROWTH AND EVOLUTION**

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Political theory has, in the West, passed through different stages. There was a time when, during the ancient Greek and the medieval period, political theory would concern itself with identifying the ethical goals of the state, i.e., the objectives which the state would cherish to achieve. Both Plato and Aristotle would insist on the functions of the state to establish justice or give the individual, a good life. The medieval political theory associated as it was with religion, demanded of the state to prepare and train the individual to seek a place with god. The early modern age political theory sought to discuss theories of the origin of the state, followed by philosophers with whom the organisation and functions of the state were major concerns of the state. The mid-twentieth century political theory dealt largely with the institutions of the state, making the concept of power to be the basic theme of the state.

The growth and evolution of political theory can be elaborated in three major streams. These are: (i) classical political theory, (ii) modern political theory, and (iii) contemporary political theory. The classification of political theory into classical, modern and contemporary is, indeed, thematic. What divides the classical or the traditional from the modern is the element of *science* in the latter and its absence in the former. Philosophy dominates the classical tradition of political theory whereas science and its methodology dominate the modernist. As an exception, there may be an Aristotle and a Thomas in the ancient and the medieval periods of the West who

might have emphasised the science element while discovering the laws of public life, and there may be a Strauss in our times who might see the utility of philosophy in the study of politics. Likewise, modern political theory and contemporary political theory are somewhat different, at least in their essence. Modern political theory is empirical and scientific, whereas contemporary political theory is philosophical and historical. Contemporary political theory attempts to synthesise the essence of both the classical and modern political theory.

### 1.4.1 Classical Political Theory

Classical political theory emerged in the ancient Greek culture, in the writings of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, and continued until the beginning of the nineteenth century. The classical paradigm, according to Sheldon Wolin, relating to political theory, consisted of the following:

- (i) Classical political theory aimed at acquiring reliable knowledge about matters concerning the people, a philosophical pursuit to establish a rational basis for belief; a politically inspired pursuit to establish a rational basis for action.
- (ii) It sought to identify the political with the public, the common: the Greek *polis*, the Roman *res publica*, and the medieval age usage of *commonweal* – all denoted a sharing of what was common among the people as partners.
- (iii) Its basic unit of analysis was always the political whole, the body-politic, the inter-related structure denoting activity, relationship, and belief: *activity* relating to ruling, warfare, education, religious practices; *relationships* involving those between social classes, between the rulers and the ruled, between the superiors and the inferiors; *belief*, such as justice, equality, natural law and the like.
- (iv) Relating itself to the political whole, the classical political theory laid emphasis on order, balance, equilibrium, stability and harmony. That is why, it, in the process, dwelt on terms such as conflicts, anarchy, instability and revolution.
- (v) Classical political theory laid stress on comparative studies for supplying a more comprehensive explanation of political phenomena and a wider range of alternatives. That was the reason that classical political theory developed a classification of political forms (e.g., monarchy, aristocracy, democracy, and their variants) and a set of concepts such as law, citizenship, justice and participation so as to explain differences and similarities between them.
- (vi) Classical political theory had been, largely, ethical in perspective. Its response was rooted in a moral outlook: Plato advocated the ideal state; Aristotle, a state that can achieve the best possible; St. Augustine, the city of god. Classical political theory undertook to appraise the various constitutional forms, to determine the form most suitable for a particular set of circumstances, and to decide, if any, absolutely the best form possible.
- (vii) Classical political theory, by projecting the best form of polity as the ideal, revealed the boldness and radicalism of classical theorising, though some dismissed such an attempt as merely utopian and visionary.

### 1.4.2 Modern Political Theory

Modern political theory encompasses in itself a host of diverse trends such as the institutional-structural, scientific, positivistic, empirical, behavioural, post-behavioural and the Marxist. These

trends dominated the greater part of the twentieth century. Classical political theory was, by and large, philosophical, normative, idealistic, and to an extent, historical; modern political theory, on the other hand, can be classified into two opposing divisions: the liberal including the individualistic, the elitist and the pluralist on one hand, and the Marxist, including the dialectical-materialist on the other.

Modern political theory, beginning with the liberal stance from the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries and later expressing itself in the institutional-positivist, empirical-behavioural and post-behavioural trends, dubbed the whole classical tradition as dull. Their advocates, from Merriam and Key to Dahl, Casswell and Easton, sought to lay stress on the 'present' rather than on the 'past'; the 'living' rather than the 'dull'; the 'immediate' rather than the 'remote'; the 'objective' rather than the 'subjective'; the 'analytic' rather than the 'philosophic'; the 'explanatory' rather than the 'descriptive'; the 'process-oriented' rather than the 'purpose-oriented'; the 'scientific' rather than the 'theoretical'. Modern political theory with its western liberal-democratic shade attempted to build a science of politics; objective, empirical, observational, measurable, operational and value-free. Its features can be summed up as under:

- (i) Facts and data constitute the bases of study. These are accumulated, explained and then used for testing hypothesis.
- (ii) Human behaviour can be studied, and regularities of human behaviour can be expressed in generalisations.
- (iii) Subjectivity gives way to objectivity; philosophical interpretation to analytical explanation; purpose to procedure; descriptive to observational; normative to scientific.
- (iv) Facts and values are separated; values are so arranged that the facts become relevant.
- (v) Methodology has to be self-conscious, explicit and quantitative.
- (vi) Inter-disciplinary synthesis is to be achieved.
- (vii) "What it is" is regarded as more important than either "what it was" or "what it ought to be or could be".
- (viii) Values are to support facts, substance to form, and theory to research, and status quo to social change.

At the other end of modern political theory stands the Marxist political theory, also called the 'dialectical-materialist' or the 'scientific-socialist' theory. It describes the general laws of motion in the development of all phenomena. Its importance lies in change through the struggle between opposites; between relations of production and productive forces with a view to have a better mode of production; development from the lower stage to the higher one; from, say, capitalistic to socialistic and from socialistic to communistic. It is a theory which provides a systematic and scientific framework of analysing and explaining social and political change. It is a method of interpreting the past, understanding the present, and projecting the future.

### **1.4.3 Contemporary Political Theory**

Highlighting the characteristic features of contemporary political theory, David Held refers to the following:

- (i) Contemporary political theory has been viewed as the history of political thought, involving an attempt to examine the significance of text in their historical context.
- (ii) It has sought to revitalise the discipline as a form of conceptual analysis, and in the process, finding political theory as a systematic reflection upon, and classification of, the meanings of the key forms and concepts such as sovereignty, democracy, justice and the like.
- (iii) It has been developed as the systematic elaboration of the underlying structure of our moral and political activities; the disclosure, examination and reconstruction of the foundations of political value.
- (vi) It has been revitalised as a form of argument concerned with abstract theoretical questions and particular political issues.
- (v) It has been championed as a critique of all forms of foundationalism, either the post-modernists or the liberal defenders. It, accordingly, presents itself as a stimulant to dialogue and to conversation among human beings.
- (vi) It has been elaborated as a form of systematic model building influenced by theoretical economics, rational choice theory and game theory; it aims to construct formal models of political processes.
- (vii) It has developed as the theoretical enterprise of the discipline of Political Science. As such it attempts to construct theory on the basis of observation and modest empirical generalisations.

Contemporary political theory is mainly concerned with the explanation, investigation and ultimately, with the comprehension of what relates to politics: concepts, principles and institutions. Brian Barry (*Political Argument*, 1965) says that political theory attempts to “study the relation between principles and institutions”. John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*, 1971) thinks that political theory can seek truth alongside the scientific-empirical methods. Robert Nozick (*Anarchy, State and Utopia*, 1974) believes that contemporary political theory can solve many political problems by combining the classical ends with empirical means. The consensus, for example, (John Plamenatz, *Democracy and Illusion*, 1973) is that empirical analysis and reflections of a logical and moral character can co-exist in political theory.

David Held sums up by saying that contemporary political theory is: “first, the *philosophical* concerned, above all, with the *conceptual* and *normative*; second, the *empirical-analytic* concerned, above all, with the problems of *understanding* and *explanation*; third, the *strategic*-concerned, above all with an assessment of the feasibility of *moving from where we are to where we might like to be*. To these, one must add, the historical, the examination of the changing meaning of political discourse – its key concepts, theories, and concerns – over time.”

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## 1.5 WHY STUDY POLITICAL THEORY?

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Political Theory is no easy and simple enterprise. It is an elaborate and a consistent exercise, aiming to achieve a better world of politics. Philosophy and science have no privileged cognitive status in political theory. All political philosophy makes claims about the operation of the political world – claims which require detailed examinations within the model of enquiry which go beyond those available to philosophy alone. All political science raises normative questions which a dedication to the normative-explanatory does not eliminate. Political theory requires the philosophical analysis of concepts and principles, and the empirical understanding of political

processes and structures,. Neither philosophy nor science, in their individual capacity, can easily replace the other in the projection of political theory. This is so because systematic political knowledge embodying generalisations about patterns of political life is possible, and the efforts to achieve it are, rather should be, the major tasks of political theory.

Political theory is more than a discipline; it is an intellectual exercise as also an activity. It is needed as a philosophy just as it is needed as a science. Germino very aptly writes: “Turning his back to distortions, over-simplifications, sloganeering and demagoguery, the political theorist speaks out with honesty on the perpetual problems confronting man and his existence in society. Political theory as a philosophy will always attempt to find out the truth in every situation, and as a science, will always reach the truth.” Plamenatz holds the view that political theory is not fantasy or the parading of prejudices, nor an intellectual game. Still less it “is a linguistic analysis”, but, “is an elaborate, rigorous, difficult and useful understanding”, and “as much needed as any of science”.

### 1.5.1 Tasks Before Political Theory

There are definitive tasks before political theory. As a science, it has, as David Held explains, the following functions:

- (i) “To identify the significant political variables and describe their mutual relations. To ensure this, an analytic scheme is essential. This would render research meaningful and arrange facts leading to generalisations.
- (ii) The existence, and wide acceptance of and consensus by workers in the field, on a theoretical framework, would enable the results of the various researches to be compared. It would help in the verification of conclusions, drawn up by the earlier researches and may also reveal the areas of research which require empirical work.
- (iii) Finally, the existence of a theoretical framework, or at least, a relatively consistent body of concepts, making research more reliable.”

As a philosophy, political theory has to go beyond science. It has to *study*, as a science, a phenomenon, but as a philosophy it has to *understand* the phenomena. It has to study a *part* together with the *whole*. Its study is not confined to knowing clearly the present, but it has to extend its area to know as for what the present exists. Accordingly, political theory has to rise above the study of *status quo*; it has to go beyond the present, deep into the realms of future.

The tasks before political theory are enormous and differential. Some of these are:

- (i) With Rawls, political theory, as a branch of moral philosophy, has been described as essentially normative. Accordingly, the task of political theory is not only to develop general principles for evaluating the social structure, but also to design appropriate institutions, procedures, and policies (See Ackerman, *Social Justice in the Liberal State*, 1980; Barry, *A Treatise on Social Justice*, 1989; and Beitz, *Political Theory and International Relations*, 1979).
- (ii) Political theory is primarily contemplative and a reflective enquiry concerned to understand human existence in general.

So understood, political theory is neither a branch of moral philosophy nor normative in its orientation (See Taylor, *Philosophical Papers*, 1985; MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1981; Connolly,

*Political Theory and Modernity*, 1988)

- (iii) Political theory is primarily concerned with articulating the self-understanding of a particular community, and that it is necessarily municipal in its scope and interpretive in its orientation (See Walzer, *Sphere of Justice*, 1983).
- (iv) Political theory needs to be tentative, exploratory, conversational, open-minded, ironic and sensitive (See Rosty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, 1989).

### **1.5.2 Significance of Political Theory**

The significance of political theory has been under a cloud by scholars, mostly of the behaviouralist school. John Plamenatz, in his essay entitled "*The Ease of Political Theory*" does not agree. As he puts it: "Political philosophy (meaning here political theory) is dead, I have heard man say, killed by the logical positivists and their successors who have shown that many of the problems which exercises the great political thinkers of the past were spurious, resting in confusions of the sight and the misuse of the language." According to him, political theory has its uses which may be stated as under:

- (i) Political theory is a serious and difficult intellectual activity and the need for this kind of exercise, in modern times, is indeed much greater.
- (ii) It is a study of values, norms and goals, though it does not produce the same kind of knowledge as empirical political theory does.
- (iii) It is a study of theories which have, historically, powerfully influenced men's images of themselves, and of society, and profoundly determined their social and political behaviour.
- (iv) It has an element of socially conditioned ideology. This ideology may be an illusion, and yet, unless man had these illusions, the course of social development would not have been what it is and
- (v) It produces a coherent system of political principles which can guide us to an appropriate political action. Its political theorists, as Plamentaz says, "do not, like honest shopkeepers, display a large variety of goods, describing them all accurately and leaving it to the customer to choose what pleases him most. They produce a hierarchy of principles, and try to explain how men should use them to make their choices... They are not mere purveyors of ideas; they are the preachers and the propagandists."

C. Wright Mills (*The Marxists*, 1962) writes, "Political philosophies are intellectual and moral creations. They contain high ideals, easy slogans, dubious facts, crude propaganda, and sophisticated theories." He describes the significance of political theory, saying:

- (i) "Firstly, it is itself a social reality; it is an ideology in terms of which certain institutions and practices are justified and others attacked; it provides the phrases in which demands are raised, criticisms made, exhortations delivered, proclamations formulated, and at times, policies determined.
- (ii) Second, it is an ethic, an articulation of ideal, which, at various levels of generality and sophistication, is used in judging man, events and movements and as goals and guidelines for aspirations and policies.

- (iii) Third, it designates agencies of action, of the means of reform, revolution and conservation. It contains strategies and programmes that embody both ends and means. It designates, in short, the historical levels by which ideals are to be won or maintained after they have been won.
- (iv) Fourth, it contains theories of man, society, and history, or at least assumptions about how society is made up of, and how it works. It tells us how to find out where we stand, and where we may be going.”

Political theory aims at comprehending the world in which it comes into being. It tries to identify its salient character, to understand its crisis and it assesses its capacity to resolve that crisis. Political theory contributes to the capacity of man to understand himself and after himself, his polity and his history. It exhorts man to take command of his own common affairs. In short, it explains, illuminates, understands, evaluates, enlightens and alters.

By way of conclusion, one may say that political theory builds a model of the highest political order, serves as a guide to the systematic collection and provides an analysis of political data. As a science, political theory describes political reality without trying to pass judgement on what is being depicted. As a philosophy, it describes rules of conduct which help secure good life for all.

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## 1.6 SUMMARY

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Political theory is a theory that is related to what is ‘political’, the philosophy and science of something that is ‘political’. Sabine defines political theory, broadly, as anything about politics or relevant to politics. A more comprehensive definition of political theory has been given by Bluhm. He says, “... political theory is an explanation of what politics is all about, general understanding of the political world, a frame of reference. Without one, we should not be able to recognize an event as political, decide anything about why it happened, judge whether it was good or bad, or decide what was likely to happen next...”.

Political theory is history in so far as it is based on facts; it is philosophy in so far as it evaluates phenomenon; it is science in so far as it explains things scientifically.

Political theory has grown from its normative past to its scientific present. It looks forward to being a synthesis of history, philosophy and science, and of normativism and empiricism.

Political theory is not merely an illusion; it is not dead. Its relevance lies in its being a practical activity. It not only gives us a theory of man, society or history, but also gives us a theory of action – reform, revolution or conservation.

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## 1.7 EXERCISES

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1. What is meant by the word ‘theory’?
2. What is political theory?
3. What, in your opinion, should be the subject-matter of political theory?
4. Distinguish between political theory, political philosophy and political science.

5. Can we understand political theory without history?
6. How does political theory process the contents of Philosophy and Science?
7. Mention the important characteristics of classical political theory.
8. Explain the major features of modern political theory.
9. State briefly the broad themes with which contemporary political theory is concerned.
10. What, in your opinion, are the major tasks before political theory?
11. Describe briefly the significance of political theory.