Does Political Theory Still Exist?

I

Is there still such a subject as political theory? This query, put with suspicious frequency in English-speaking countries, questions the very credentials of the subject: it suggests that political philosophy, whatever it may have been in the past, is today dead or dying. The principal symptom which seems to support this belief is that no commanding work of political philosophy has appeared in the twentieth century. By a commanding work in the field of general ideas I mean at the very least one that has in a large area converted paradoxes into platitudes or vice versa. This seems to me no more (but also no less) than an adequate criterion of the characteristic in question.

But this is scarcely conclusive evidence. There exist only two good reasons for certifying the demise of a discipline: one is that its central presuppositions, empirical, or metaphysical, or logical, are no longer accepted because they have (with the world of which they were a part) withered away, or because they have been discredited or refuted. The other is that new disciplines have come to perform the work originally undertaken by the older study. These disciplines may have their own limitations, but they exist, they function, and have either inherited or usurped the functions of their predecessors: there is no room left for the ancestor from whom they spring. This is the fate that overtook astrology, alchemy, phrenology (positivists, both old and new, would include theology and metaphysics). The postulates on which these disciplines were based either were destroyed by argument or collapsed for other reasons; consequently they are today regarded merely as instances of systematic delusion.

The original version of this article appeared in French as 'La théorie politique existe-t-elle?', Revue française de science politique 11 (1961), 309–37. It was then revised by the author for publication in English, and he is grateful to S. N. Hampshire, H. L. A. Hart, F. Rossi Landi, P. L. Gardiner, G. J. Warnock, and most of all to M. W. Dick, for reading and commenting on it in its earlier form.

F

143
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

This type of systematic parricide is, in effect, the history of the natural sciences in their relation to philosophy, and so has a direct bearing upon the question before us. The relevant consideration is this: there exist at least two classes of problems to which men have succeeded in obtaining clear answers. The first have been so formulated that they can (at least in principle, if not always in practice) be answered by observation and by inference from observed data. These determine the domains of natural science and of everyday common sense. Whether I ask simple questions about whether there is any food in the cupboard, or what kind of birds are to be found in Patagonia, or the intentions of an individual; or more complicated ones about the structure of matter, or the behaviour of social classes or international markets; I know that the answer, to have any genuine claim to truth, must rest on someone’s observation of what exists or happens in the spatio-temporal world. Some would say ‘organised observation’. I should be inclined to agree. But differences on this issue, while they are crucial for the philosophy of science and the theory of knowledge, do not affect my argument. All the generalisations and hypotheses and models with which the most sophisticated sciences work can be established and discredited ultimately only by the data of inspection or introspection.

The second type of question to which we can hope to obtain clear answers is formal. Given certain propositions called axioms, together with rules for deducing other propositions from them, I can proceed by mere calculation. The answers to my questions will be valid or invalid according to whether the rules that I accept without question as part of a given discipline have been correctly used. Such disciplines contain no statements based on observation of fact, and therefore are not nowadays expected to provide information about the universe, whether or not they are used in providing it. Mathematics and formal logic are, of course, the best-known examples of formal sciences of this type, but heraldry, chess, and theories of games in general, are similar applications of the formal methods which govern such disciplines.

These two methods of answering questions may be, very generally, denominated empirical and formal. Among the characteristics of both are at least these:

1. That even if we do not know the answer to a given question, we know what kinds of methods are appropriate in looking for the answer; we know what kinds of answers are relevant to these questions, even if they are not true. If I am asked how the Soviet system of
DOES POLITICAL THEORY STILL EXIST?

criminal law functions or why Mr Kennedy was elected President of the United States, I may not be able to answer the question, but I know within what region the relevant evidence must lie, and how an expert would use such evidence to obtain the answer; I must be able to state this in very general terms, if only to show that I have understood the question. Similarly, if I am asked for the proof of Fermat's theorem, I may not be able to give it, indeed I may know that no one has yet been able to provide it, but I also know what kinds of demonstration would count as answers to this problem, even though they may be incorrect or inconclusive, and can discriminate these from assertions which are irrelevant to the topic. In other words, in all these cases, even if I do not know the answer, I know where to look for it, or how to identify an authority or expert who knows how to set about looking for it.

2 This means, in effect, that where the concepts are firm, clear and generally accepted, and the methods of reasoning, arriving at conclusions etc. are agreed between men (at least the majority of those who have anything to do with these matters), there and only there is it possible to construct a science, formal or empirical. Wherever this is not the case – where the concepts are vague or too much in dispute, and methods of argument and the minimum qualifications that constitute an expert are not generally agreed, where we find frequent recriminations about what can or what cannot claim to be a law, an established hypothesis, an undisputed truth, and so on – we are at best in the realm of quasi-science. The principal candidates for inclusion into the charmed circle, who have not succeeded in passing the required tests, are the occupants of the large, rich and central, but unstable, volcanic and misty region of 'ideologies'. One of the rough and ready tests for finding out which region we are in, is whether a set of rules, accepted by the great majority of experts in the subject, and capable of being incorporated in a textbook, can be applied in the field in question. To the degree to which such rules are applicable, a discipline approaches the coveted condition of an accepted science. Psychology, sociology, semantics, logic, perhaps certain branches of economics, are in a no-man's-land, some nearer to, some further from, the frontier which demarcates, less or more clearly, the territory of the established sciences.

3 But besides these two major categories, there arise questions which fall outside either group. It is not only that we may not know the answers to certain questions, but that we are not clear how to set about trying to answer them – where to look – what would constitute
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

Evidence for an answer and what would not. When I am asked ‘Where is the image in the mirror?’ or ‘Can time stand still?’ I am not sure what kind of question it is that is being asked, or whether indeed it makes any sense at all. I am in not much better plight with some traditional questions which have probably been asked since the dawn of thought, such as ‘How did the world begin?’ and, following that, ‘What happened before the beginning?’ Some say that these are not legitimate questions; but then what makes them illegitimate? There is something that I am trying to ask; for I am certainly puzzled by something. When I ask ‘Why can I not be in two places at once?’, ‘Why can I not get back into the past?’ or, to move to another region, ‘What is justice?’ or ‘Is justice objective, absolute etc.?’, or again ‘How can we ever be sure that an action is just?’ – no obvious method of settling these questions lies to hand. One of the surest hallmarks of a philosophical question – for this is what all these questions are – is that we are puzzled from the very outset, that there is no automatic technique, no universally recognised expertise, for dealing with such questions. We discover that we do not feel sure how to set about clearing our minds, finding out the truth, accepting or rejecting earlier answers to these questions. Neither induction (in its widest sense of scientific reasoning), nor direct observation (appropriate to empirical inquiries), nor deduction (demanded by formal problems) seem to be of help. Once we do feel quite clear about how we should proceed, the questions no longer seem philosophical.

The history – and indeed the advance – of human thought (this is perhaps a truism) have, in fact, largely consisted in the gradual shuffling of all the basic questions that men ask into one or the other of two well-organised compartments – the empirical and the formal. Wherever concepts grow firm and clear and acquire universal acceptance, a new science, natural or formal, comes into being. To use a simile that I cannot claim to have invented, philosophy is like a radiant sun that, from time to time, throws off portions of itself; these masses, when they cool down, acquire a firm and recognisable structure of their own and acquire independent careers as tidy and regular planets; but the central sun continues on its path, and does not seem to diminish in mass or radiance. The ‘status’ and vitality of philosophy is another matter, and seems to be directly connected with the extent to which it deals with issues that are of concern to the common man. The relation of philosophy to opinion and conduct is a central question of both history and
sociology, too large to be considered here. What concerns us is that philosophy in one state of development may turn into a science in the next.

It is no confusion of thought that caused astronomy, for example, to be regarded as a philosophical discipline in, say, the time of Scotus Erigena, when its concepts and methods were not what we should today regard as firm or clear, and the part played by observation in relation to *a priori* teleological notions (e.g. the yearning of each body to realise the full perfection of its nature) made it impossible to determine whether the amalgam that went under the name of the knowledge of celestial bodies was empirical or formal. As soon as clear concepts and specific techniques developed, the science of astronomy emerged. In other words, astronomy in its beginning could not be relegated to either compartment, even if such compartments as the empirical and the formal had been clearly distinguished; and it was, of course, part of the 'philosophical' status of early medieval astronomy that the civilisation of that time (Marxists would say 'the superstructure') did not permit the distinction between the two compartments to be clearly demarcated.

What, therefore, is characteristic of specifically philosophical questions is that they do not (and some of them perhaps never will) satisfy conditions required by an independent science, the principal among which is that the path to their solution must be implicit in their very formulation. Nevertheless, there are some subjects which clearly are near the point of taking flight and divorcing themselves from the main body in which they were born, much as physics and mathematics and chemistry and biology have done in their day. One of these is semantics; another is psychology; with one foot, however reluctantly, they are still sunk in philosophical soil; but they show signs of a tendency to tear themselves loose and emancipate themselves, with only historical memories to tell them of their earlier, more confused, if in some respects richer, years.

Among the topics that remain obstinately philosophical, and have, despite repeated efforts, failed to transform themselves into sciences, are some that in their very essence involve value judgements. Ethics, aesthetics, criticism explicitly concerned with general ideas, all but the most technical types of history and scholarship, still live at various points of this limbo, unable or unwilling to emerge by either the empirical or the formal door. The mere fact that value judgements are relevant
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

to an intellectual pursuit is clearly not sufficient to disqualify it from being a recognised science. The concept of normal health certainly embodies a valuation, and although there is sufficient universal consensus about what constitutes good health, a normal state, disease and so on, this concept, nevertheless, does not enter as an intrinsic element into the sciences of anatomy, physiology, pathology, etc. Pursuit of health may be the strongest sociological and psychological (and moral) factor in creating and promoting these sciences; it may determine which problems and aspects of the subject have been most ardently attended to; but it is not referred to in the science itself, any more than the uses of history or logic need be mentioned in historical or logical works. If so clear, universally accepted, 'objective' a value as that of desirable state of health is extruded from the structure of the natural sciences, this fact is even more conspicuous in more controversial fields. The attempts, from Plato to our own day (particularly persistent and numerous in the eighteenth century), to found objective sciences of ethics and aesthetics on the basis of universally accepted values, or of methods of discovering them, have met with little success; relativism, subjectivism, romanticism, scepticism with regard to values, keep breaking in.

What, we may ask at this point, is the position of political theory? What are its most typical problems? Are they empirical, or formal, or neither? Do they necessarily entail questions of value? Are they on the way to independent status, or are they by their very nature compelled to remain only an element in some wider body of thought?

Among the problems which form the core of traditional political theory are those, for instance, of the nature of equality, of rights, law, authority, rules. We demand the analysis of these concepts, or ask how these expressions function in our language, or what forms of behaviour they prescribe or forbid and why, or into what system of value or outlook they fit, and in what way. When we ask, what is perhaps the most fundamental of all political questions, 'Why should anyone obey anyone else?', we ask not 'Why do men obey?'—something that empirical psychology, anthropology and sociology might be able to answer—nor yet 'Who obeys whom, when and where, and determined by what causes?', which could perhaps be answered on the basis of evidence drawn from these and similar fields. When we ask why a man should obey, we are asking for the explanation of what is normative in such notions as authority, sovereignty, liberty, and the justification of their validity in political arguments. These are words in the name of which orders are issued, men are coerced, wars are fought, new societies are
DOES POLITICAL THEORY STILL EXIST?

created and old ones destroyed — expressions which play as great a part as any in our lives today. What makes such questions prima facie philosophical is the fact that no wide agreement exists on the meaning of some of the concepts involved. There are sharp differences on what constitute valid reasons for actions in these fields; on how the relevant propositions are to be established or even rendered plausible; on who or what constitutes recognised authority for deciding these questions; and there is consequently no consensus on the frontier between valid public criticism and subversion, or freedom and oppression and the like. So long as conflicting replies to such questions continue to be given by different schools and thinkers, the prospects of establishing a science in this field, whether empirical or formal, seem remote. Indeed, it seems clear that disagreements about the analysis of value concepts, as often as not, spring from profounder differences, since the notions of, say, rights or justice or liberty will be radically dissimilar for theists and atheists, mechanistic determinists and Christians, Hegelians and empiricists, romantic irrationalists and Marxists, and so forth. It seems no less clear that these differences are not, at least prima facie, either logical or empirical, and have usually and rightly been classified as irreducibly philosophical.

This carries at least one important implication. If we ask the Kantian question ‘In what kind of world is political philosophy — the kind of discussion and argument in which it consists — in principle possible?’ the answer must be ‘Only in a world where ends collide.’ In a society dominated by a single goal there could in principle only be arguments about the best means to attain this end — and arguments about means are technical, that is, scientific and empirical in character: they can be settled by experience and observation or whatever other methods are used to discover causes and correlations; they can, at least in principle, be reduced to positive sciences. In such a society no serious questions about political ends or values could arise, only empirical ones about the most effective paths to the goal. And indeed, something amounting to this was, in effect, asserted by Saint-Simon and Comte; and, on some interpretations of his thought, by Marx also, at any rate after ‘prehistory’, i.e. the class war, is over, and man’s true ‘history’ — the united attack on nature to obtain goods upon whose desirability the whole of society is agreed — has begun. It follows that the only society in which political philosophy in its traditional sense, that is, an inquiry concerned not solely with elucidation of concepts, but with the critical examination of presuppositions and assumptions, and the questioning of the order of
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

priorities and ultimate ends, is possible, is a society in which there is no total acceptance of any single end. There may be a variety of reasons for this: because no single end has been accepted by a sufficient number of persons; because no one end can be regarded as ultimate, since there can, in principle, exist no guarantee that other values may not at some time engage men’s reason or their passions; because no unique, final end can be found — inasmuch as men can pursue many distinct ends, none of them means to, or parts of, one another; and so on. Some among these ends may be public or political; nor is there any reason to suppose that all of them must, even in principle, be compatible with one another. Unless political philosophy is confined to the analysis of concepts or expressions, it can be pursued consistently only in a pluralist, or potentially pluralist, society. But since all analysis, however abstract, itself involves a critical approach to the assumptions under analysis, this distinction remains purely academic. Rigid monism is compatible with philosophical analysis only in theory. The plight of philosophy under despotism in our own times provides conclusive concrete evidence for this thesis.

Let me try to make this clearer. If we could construct a society in which it was believed universally (or at least by as many people as believe that the purpose of medicine is to promote or maintain health and are agreed about what constitutes health) that there was only one overriding human purpose: for example, a technocratic society dedicated to the single end of the richest realisation of all human faculties; or a utilitarian society dedicated to the greatest happiness of men; or a Thomist or communist or Platonic or anarchist, or any other society which is monistic in this sense — then plainly all that would matter would be to find the right roads to the attainment of the universally accepted end.

This statement needs to be qualified in at least two respects. The schema is in the first place artificially over-simplified. In practice, the kind of goal that can command the allegiance of a society — happiness, power, obedience to the divine will, national glory, individual self-realisation, or some other ultimate pattern of life, is so general that it leaves open the question of what kind of lives or conduct incarnate it. No society can be so ‘monolithic’ that there is no gap between its culminating purpose and the means towards it — a gap filled with secondary ends, penultimate values, which are not means to the final end,
DOES POLITICAL THEORY STILL EXIST?

but elements in it or expressions of it; and these in their turn incarnate themselves in still more specific purposes at still lower levels, and so on downwards to the particular problem of everyday conduct. 'What is to be done?' is a question which can occur at any level — from the highest to the lowest: doubts and disputes concerning the values involved at any of these levels, and the relationships of these values to one another, can arise at any point.

These questions are not purely technical and empirical, not merely problems about the best means to a given end, nor are they mere questions of logical consistency, that is, formal and deductive; but properly philosophical. To take contemporary examples: what is claimed for integration of Negroes and whites in the Southern states of the United States is not that it is a means towards achieving a goal external to itself — social justice or equality — but that it is itself a form of it, a value in the hierarchy of values. Or again 'One man one vote', or the rights of minorities or of colonial territories, are likewise not simply questions of machinery — a particular means of promoting equality which could, in theory, be equally well realised by other means, say by more ingenious voting devices — but, for those who believe in these principles, intrinsic ingredients in the ideal of social equality, and consequently to be pursued as such, and not solely for the sake of their results. It follows that even in a society dominated by a single supreme purpose, questions of what is to be done, especially when the subordinate ends come into conflict, cannot be automatically answered by deductive reasoning from accepted premises, aided by adequate knowledge of facts, as certain thinkers, Aristotle at times, or Bertrand Russell in his middle phase, or a good many Catholic casuists, seem to have assumed.

Moreover, and this is our second qualification, it might well be the case that although the formulas accepted by a society were sacred and immutable, they might carry different — and perhaps incompatible — meanings for different persons and in different situations; philosophical analysis of the relevant concepts might well bring out sharp disagreements. This has been the case conspicuously where the purpose or ideal of a society is expressed in such vague and general terms as the common good, or the fulfilment of the law of God, or rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and the like.

Nevertheless, and in spite of these qualifications, the stylised model of a society whose ends are given once and for all, and which is merely concerned with discovery of means, is a useful abstraction. It is useful because it demonstrates that to acknowledge the reality of political
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

questions presupposes a pluralism of values – whether ultimate ones, or on the lower slopes of the hierarchy of values – recognition of which is incompatible with a technocratic or authoritarian everything-is-either-an-indisputable-end-or-a-means, monistic structure of values. Nor is the monistic situation entirely a figment of theory. In critical situations where deviation from the norm may involve disastrous consequences – in battles, surgical operating rooms, revolutions, the end is wholly concrete, varying interpretations of it are out of place, and all action is conceived as a means towards it alone. It is one of the stratagems of totalitarian regimes to represent all situations as critical emergencies, demanding ruthless elimination of all goals, interpretations, forms of behaviour save for one absolutely specific, concrete, immediate end, binding on everyone, which calls for ends and means so narrow and clearly definable that it is easy to impose sanctions for failing to pursue them.

To find roads is the business of experts. It is therefore reasonable for such a society to put itself into the hands of specialists of tested experience, knowledge, gifts and probity, whose business it is, to use Saint-Simon’s simile, to conduct the human caravan to the oasis the reality and desirability of which are recognised by all. In such a society, whatever its other characteristics, we should expect to find intensive study of social causation, especially of what types of political organisation yield the best results, that is, are best at advancing society towards the overriding goal. Political thought in such a society would be fed by all the evidence that can be supplied by the empirical sciences of history, psychology, anthropology, sociology, comparative law, penology, biology, physiology and so forth. The goal (and the best ways of avoiding obstacles to it) may become clearer as the result of careful studies of human thought and behaviour; and its general character must not at any stage be obscure or doubtful; otherwise differences of value judgement will creep into the political sciences as well, and inject what can only be called philosophical issues (or issues of principle) incapable of being resolved by either empirical or formal means. Differences of interpretation of fact – provided these are uncontaminated by disagreements about the ends of life – can be permitted; but if political theory is to be converted into an applied science, what is needed is a single dominant model – like the doctor’s model of a healthy body – accepted by the whole, or the greater part, of the society in question. The model will be its ‘ideological foundation’. Although such a model is a necessary condition for such a science, it may not, even then, begin to be a sufficient one.
DOES POLITICAL THEORY STILL EXIST?

It is at this point that the deep division between the monists and pluralists becomes crucial and conspicuous. On one side stand Platonists and Aristotelians, Stoics and Thomists, positivists and Marxists, and all those who seek to translate political problems into scientific terms. For them human ends are objective: men are what they are, or change in accordance with discoverable laws; and their needs or interests or duties can be established by the correct (naturalistic, or transcendental, or theological) methods. Given that we can penetrate past error and confusion by true and reliable modes of investigation — metaphysical insight or the social sciences, or some other dependable instrument — and thereby establish what is good for men and how to effect this, the only unsolved problems will be more or less technical: how to obtain the means for securing these ends, and how to distribute what the technical means provide in the socially and psychologically best manner. This, in the most general terms, is the ideal both of the enlightened atheists of the eighteenth century and the positivists of the nineteenth; of some Marxists of the twentieth, and of those Churches which know the end for which man is made, and know that it is in principle attainable — or at least is such that the road towards it can be discerned — here, below.

On the other side are those who believe in some form of original sin or the impossibility of human perfection, and therefore tend to be sceptical of the empirical attainability of any final solution to the deepest human problems. With them are to be found the sceptics and relativists and also those who believe that the very efforts to solve the problems of one age or culture alter both the men who strive to do so and those for whose benefit the solutions are applied, and thereby create new men and new problems, the character of which cannot today be anticipated, let alone analysed or solved, by men bounded by their own historical horizons. Here too belong the many sects of subjectivists and irrationalists; and in particular those romantic thinkers who hold that ends of action are not discovered, but are created by individuals or cultures or nations as works of art are, so that the answer to the question ‘What should we do?’ is undiscoverable not because it is beyond our powers to find the answer, but because the question is not one of fact at all, the solution lies not in discovering something which is what it is, whether it is discovered or not — a proposition or formula, an objective good, a principle, a system of values objective or subjective, a relationship between a mind and something non-mental — but resides in action: something which cannot be found, only invented — an act of will or faith or creation obedient to no pre-existent rules or laws or facts.
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

Here too stand those twentieth-century heirs of romanticism, the existentialists, with their belief in the free self-commitment by individuals to actions or forms of life determined by the agent choosing freely; such choice does not take account of objective standards, since these are held to be a form of 'illusion or 'false consciousness', and the belief in such figments is psychologically traced to fear of freedom — of being abandoned, left to one's own resources—a terror which leads to uncritical acceptance of systems claiming objective authority, spurious theological or metaphysical cosmologies which undertake to guarantee the eternal validity of moral or intellectual rules and principles. Not far from here, too, are fatalists and mystics, as well as those who believe that accident dominates history, and other irrationalists; but also those indeterminists and those troubled rationalists who doubt the possibility of discovering a fixed human nature obedient to invariant laws; especially those for whom the proposition that the future needs of men and their satisfaction are predictable does not fit into an idea of human nature which entails such concepts as will, choice, effort, purpose, with their presupposition of the perpetual opening of new paths of action—a presupposition which enters into the very definition of what we mean by man. This last is the position adopted by those modern Marxists who, in the face of the cruder and more popular versions of the doctrine, have understood the implications of their own premises and principles.

IV

Men's beliefs in the sphere of conduct are part of their conception of themselves and others as human beings; and this conception in its turn, whether conscious or not, is intrinsic to their picture of the world. This picture may be complete and coherent, or shadowy or confused, but almost always, and especially in the case of those who have attempted to articulate what they conceive to be the structure of thought or reality, it can be shown to be dominated by one or more models or paradigms: mechanistic, organic, aesthetic, logical, mystical, shaped by the strongest influence of the day — religious, scientific, metaphysical or artistic. This model or paradigm determines the content as well as the form of beliefs and behaviour. A man who, like Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas, believes that all things are definable in terms of their purpose, and that nature is a hierarchy or an ascending pyramid of such purposive entities, is committed to the view that the end of human life consists in self-fulfilment, the character of which must depend on the kind of nature
DOES POLITICAL THEORY STILL EXIST?

that a man has, and on the place that he occupies in the harmonious activity of the entire universal, self-realising enterprise. It follows that the political philosophy and, more particularly, the diagnosis of political possibilities and purposes of an Aristotelian or a Thomist will ipso facto be radically different from that of, let us say, someone who has learned from Hobbes or Spinoza or any modern positivist that there are no purposes in nature, that there are only causal (or functional or statistical) laws, only repetitive cycles of events, which may, however, within limits, be harnessed to fulfil the purposes of men; with the corollary that the pursuit of purposes is itself nothing but a product in the human consciousness of natural processes the laws of which men can neither significantly alter nor account for, if by accounting is meant giving an explanation in terms of the goals of a creator who does not exist, or of a nature of which it is meaningless to say that it pursues purposes — for what is that but to attempt to apply to it a subjective human category, to fall into the fallacy of animism or anthropomorphism?

The case is similar with regard to the issue of freedom and authority. The question ‘Why should I obey (rather than do as I like)’? will be (and has been) answered in one way by those who, like Luther, or Bodin, or the Russian Slavophils and many others whose thoughts have been deeply coloured by biblical imagery, conceive of life (although in very different fashions) in terms of the relations of children to their father, and of laws as his commands, where loyalty, obedience, love, and the presence of immediate authority are all unquestioned, and surround life from birth to death as real and palpable relationships or agencies. This question will be answered very differently by the followers of, say, Plato, or Kant (divided by a whole heaven as these thinkers are), who believe in permanent, impersonal, universal, objective truths, conceived on the model of logical or mathematical or physical laws, by analogy with which their political concepts will be formed. Yet other, and wholly dissimilar, sets of answers will be determined by the great vitalistic conceptions, the model for which is drawn from the facts of growth as conceived in early biology, and for which reality is an organic, qualitative process, not analysable into quantitative units. Others again will originate in minds dominated by the image of some central force, thrusting forward in many guises, like some gnostic or Brahmin notion of perpetual self-creation; or be traceable to a concept drawn from artistic activity, in which the universe is seen not as an unconscious quasi-biological process of the spirit or the flesh, but as the endless
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

creation of a demiurge, in which freedom and self-fulfilment lie in the recognition by men of themselves as involved in the purposive process of cosmic creation - a vision fully revealed only to those beings to whom the nature of the world is disclosed, at least fragmentarily, through their own experience as creators (something of this kind emanated from the doctrines of Fichte, Schelling, Carlyle, Nietzsche and other romantic thinkers, as well as Bergson and in places Hegel, and, in his youth, Marx, who were obsessed by aesthetico-biological models); some among these, anarchists and irrationalists, conceive of reality as freedom from all rules and set ideals - fetters, even when they are self-imposed, upon the free creative spirit - a doctrine of which we have heard, if anything, too much. The model itself may be regarded as the product of historical factors: the social (and psychological) consequences of the development of productive forces, as Marx taught, or the effects in the minds of individuals of purely psychological processes which Freud and his disciples have investigated. The study of myths, rationalisations, ideologies and obsessive patterns of many kinds, has become a great and fertile preoccupation of our time. The fundamental assumption underlying this approach is that the 'ideological' model has not been arrived at by rational methods, but is the product of causal factors; it may disguise itself in rational dress, but, given the historical, or economic, or geographical, or psychological situation, must, in any case, have emerged in one form or another.

For political thinkers, however, the primary question is not that of genesis and conditions of growth, but that of validity and truth: does the model distort reality? Does it blind us to real differences and similarities and generate other, fictitious ones? Does it suppress, violate, invent, deceive? In the case of scientific (or commonsense) explanations or hypotheses, the tests of validity include increase in the power of accurate (or more refined) prediction or control of the behaviour of the subject-matter. Is political thought practical and empirical in this sense? Machiavelli, and in differing degrees Hobbes, Spinoza, Helvétius, Marx, at times speak as if this were so. This is one of the interpretations of the famous doctrine of the unity of theory and practice. But is it an adequate account of the purpose or achievements of - to take only the moderns - Locke or Kant or Rousseau or Mill or the liberals, the existentialists, the logical positivists and linguistic analysts and natural law theorists of our own day? And if not, why not?

To return to the notion of models. It is by now a commonplace that the data of observation can be accommodated to almost any theoretical
DOES POLITICAL THEORY STILL EXIST?

model. Those who are obsessed by one model can accept facts, general propositions, hypotheses and even methods of argument, adopted and perfected by those who were dominated by quite a different model. For this reason, political theory, if by theories we mean no more than causal or functional hypotheses and explanations designed to account only for what happens—in this case for what men have thought or done or will think or do—can perfectly well be a progressive empirical inquiry, capable of detaching itself from its original metaphysical or ethical foundations, and sufficiently adaptable to preserve through many changes of intellectual climate its own character and development as an independent science. After all, even mathematics, although bound up with—and obstructed by—metaphysics and theology, has nevertheless progressed from the days of the Greeks to our own; so too have the natural sciences, at any rate since the seventeenth century, despite vast upheavals in the general Weltanschauungen of the societies in which they were created.

But I should like to say once again that unless political theory is conceived in narrowly sociological terms, it differs from political science or any other empirical inquiry in being concerned with somewhat different fields; namely with such questions as what is specifically human and what is not, and why; whether specific categories, say those of purpose or of belonging to a group or of law, are indispensable to understanding what men are; and so, inevitably, with the source, scope and validity of certain human goals. If this is its task, it cannot, from the very nature of its interests, avoid evaluation; it is thoroughly committed not only to the analysis of, but to conclusions about the validity of, ideas of the good and the bad, the permitted and the forbidden, the harmonious and the discordant problems which any discussion of liberty or justice or authority or political morality is sooner or later bound to encounter. These central conceptions, moral, political, aesthetic, have altered as the all-inclusive metaphysical models in which they are an essential element have themselves altered. Any change in the central model is a change in the ways in which the data of experience are perceived and interpreted. The degree to which such categories are shot through with evaluation will doubtless depend on their direct connection with human desires and interests. Statements about physical nature can achieve neutrality in this respect; this is more difficult when the data are those of history, and nearly impossible in the case of moral and social life, where the words themselves are inescapably charged with ethical or aesthetic or political content.
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

To suppose, then, that there have been or could be ages without political philosophy, is like supposing that as there are ages of faith, so there are or could be ages of total disbelief. But this is an absurd notion: there is no human activity without some kind of general outlook: scepticism, cynicism, refusal to dabble in abstract issues or to question values, hard boiled opportunism, contempt for theorising, all the varieties of nihilism, are, of course, themselves metaphysical and ethical positions, committal attitudes. Whatever else the existentialists have taught us, they have made this fact plain. The idea of a completely *wertfrei* theory (or model) of human action (as contrasted, say, with animal behaviour) rests on a naïve misconception of what objectivity or neutrality in the social studies must be.

V

The notion that a simile or model, drawn from one sphere, is necessarily misleading when applied to another, and that it is possible to think without such analogies in some direct fashion – 'face-to-face' with the facts – will not bear criticism. To think is to generalise, to generalise is to compare. To think of one phenomenon or cluster of phenomena is to think in terms of its resemblances and differences with others. This is by now a hoary platitude. It follows that without parallels and analogies between one sphere and another of thought and action, whether conscious or not, the unity of our experience – our experience itself – would not be possible. All language and thought is, in this sense, necessarily 'metaphorical'. The models, once they are made conscious and explicit, may turn out to be obsolete or misleading. Yet even the most discredited among these models in politics – the social contract, patriarchalism, the organic society and so forth, must have started with some initial validity to have had the influence on thought that they have had.

No analogy powerful enough to govern the concepts of generations of men can have been wholly specious. When Jean Bodin or Herder or the Russian Slavophils or the German sociologist Tönnies transfer the notion of family nexus to political life, they remind us of aspects of relationships between men united by traditional bonds or bound by common habits and loyalties, which had been misrepresented by the Stoics or Machiavelli or Bentham or Nietzsche or Herbert Spencer. So too, assimilation of law to a command issued by some constituted authority in any one of the three types of social order distinguished by Max Weber throws some light on the concept of law. Similarly, the
DOES POLITICAL THEORY STILL EXIST?

social contract is a model which to this day helps to explain something of what it is that men feel to be wrong when a politician pronounces an entire class of the population (say capitalists or Negroes) to be outside the community — not entitled to the benefits conferred by the state and its laws. So too, Lenin’s image of the factory which needs no supervision by coercive policemen after the state has withered away; Maistre’s image of the executioner and his victims as the cornerstone of all authority, or of life as a perpetual battlefield in which only terror of supernatural power keeps men from mutual extermination; the state’s role as traffic policeman and night-watchman (Lassalle’s contemptuous description of the liberal ideal); Locke’s analogy of government with trusteeship; the constant use by Burke and the entire romantic movement of metaphors drawn from organic growth and decay; the Soviet model of an army on the march, with its accompanying attributes and values, such as uncritical loyalty, faith in leadership, and military goals such as the need to overtake, destroy, conquer some specified enemy — all these illuminate some types of social experience.

The great distortions, the errors and crimes that have sought their inspiration and justification in such images, are evidence of mechanical extrapolation, or over-enthusiastic application of what, at most, explains a sector of life, to the whole. It is a form of the ancient fallacy of the Ionian philosophers, who wanted a single answer to the question ‘What are all things made of?’ Everything is not made of water, nor fire, nor is explained by the irresistible march towards the world state or the classless society. The history of thought and culture is, as Hegel showed with great brilliance, a changing pattern of great liberating ideas which inevitably turn into suffocating straitjackets, and so stimulate their own destruction by new, emancipating, and at the same time enslaving, conceptions. The first step to the understanding of men is the bringing to consciousness of the model or models that dominate and penetrate their thought and action. Like all attempts to make men aware of the categories in which they think, it is a difficult and sometimes painful activity, likely to produce deeply disquieting results. The second task is to analyse the model itself, and this commits the analyst to accepting or modifying or rejecting it, and, in the last case, to providing a more adequate one in its stead.

It is seldom, moreover, that there is only one model that determines our thought; men (or cultures) obsessed by single models are rare, and while they may be more coherent at their strongest, they tend to collapse more violently when, in the end, their concepts are blown up by reality
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

experienced events, 'inner' or 'outer', that get in the way. Most men
wander hither and thither, guided and, at times, hypnotised by more
than one model, which they seldom trouble to make consistent, or even
fragments of models which themselves form a part of some none too
coherent or firm pattern or patterns. To drag them into the light makes
it possible to explain them and sometimes to explain them away. The
purpose of such analysis is to clarify; but clarification may expose
shortcomings and subvert what it describes. That has often and quite
justly been charged against political thought, which, at its best, does
not disclaim this dangerous power. The ultimate test of the adequacy
of the basic patterns by which we think and act is the only test that
common sense or the sciences afford, namely, whether it fits in with the
general lines on which we think and communicate; and if some among
these in turn are called into question, then the final measure is, as it
always must be, direct confrontation with the concrete data of observa-
tion and introspection which these concepts and categories and habits
order and render intelligible. In this sense, political theory, like any
other form of thought that deals with the real world, rests on empirical
experience, though in what sense of 'empirical' still remains to be
discussed.

VI

When one protests (as we ourselves did above) that the application of
such (social or political) models or combinations of overlapping models
which at most hold a part of our experience, causes distortion when
applied beyond it, how do we set about justifying this charge? How do
we know that the result is distortion? We usually think this because
the universal application of a simile or a pattern — say that of the general
will, or the organic society, or basic structure and superstructure, or the
liberating myth — seems to those who reject it to ignore something
that they know directly of human nature and thereby to do violence
to what we are, or what we know, by forcing it into the Procrustean
bed of some rigid dogma; that is to say, we protest in the name of our
own view of what men are, have been, could be.

How do we know these things? How do we know what is and what
is not an adequate programme for human beings in given historical
circumstances? Is this knowledge sociological, or psychological? Is it
empirical at all, or metaphysical and even theological? How do we
argue with those whose notions are different from ours? Hume,
Helvétius, Condorcet, Comte, are clear that such knowledge must be
Does Political Theory Still Exist?

based on empirical data and the methods of the natural sciences; all else is imaginary and worthless.

The temptation to accept this simple solution was (and is) very great. The conflict of the rival explanations (or models) of social and individual life had, by the late eighteenth century, grown to be a scandal. If one examines what answers were offered, let us say, between the death of Newton and the birth of Darwin, to a central political question – why anyone should obey anyone else – the babel of voices is appalling, perhaps the most confused in recorded history. Some said that I should obey those rules or institutions submission to which alone would fulfill my nature, with the rider that my needs and the correct path to their satisfaction were clear only to those privileged observers who grasped at least some part of the great hierarchy of being. Others said that I should obey this or that authority or law because only in that way could I (without aid of experts) fulfill my ‘true’ nature, or be able to fit into a harmonious whole. Some supposed this whole to be static; others taught that it was dynamic, but could not agree on whether it moved in recurrent cycles, or a straight, or spiral, or irregular evolutionary line, or by a series of oscillations leading to ‘dialectical’ explosions; or again, whether it was teleological or functional or causally determined.

Some conceived the ultimate universal pattern in mechanistic, others in organic, others still in aesthetic terms. There were those who said that men must obey because they had promised to do so, or others had promised on their behalf; or that they were behaving as if they had promised and this was tantamount to having promised, whether they admitted this or no; or, if this seemed unconvincing, that it were best that they should behave as if they had so promised, since otherwise no one would know where he was and chaos would ensue. Some told men to obey because they would be happier if they did, or because the majority, or all men, would be happier; or because it was God’s will that they should obey, or the will of the sovereign, or of the majority, or of the best or wisest, or of history, or of their state, or their race, or their culture, or their church.

They were told also that they must obey because the natural law laid down that they must do so, but there were differences about how the precepts of natural law were to be discovered, whether by rational or by empirical means, or by intuition, and again, by common men or only by the experts; the experts in their turn were identified by some with natural scientists, by others with specialists in metaphysics or
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

theology, or perhaps in some other discipline - mass psychology, mystical revelation, the laws of history, of economics, of natural evolution, of a new synthesis of all or some of these. Some people supposed that truth in these matters could be discovered by a faculty which they called moral sense, or common sense, or the perception of the fitness of things, or that it consisted in what they had been told by their parents or nurses or was to be found in accepted views which it was mere perversity to question, or came from one or other of many sources of this sort which Bentham mocks at so gaily and effectively. Some (and perhaps these have always been the majority) felt it to be in some degree subversive to raise such questions at all.

This situation caused justified indignation in a country dominated by free inquiry and its greatest triumph, Newtonian science. Surely this monstrous muddle could be cleared away by the strong new broom of scientific method - a similar chaos had, after all, not so long ago prevailed in the natural sciences too. Galileo and Newton - and the light of reason and experiment - had silenced for ever the idle chatter of the ignoramus, the dark muttering of the metaphysician, the thunder of the preacher, the hysterical shrieks of the obscurantist. All genuine questions were questions of discoverable fact - calculemus, Condorcet declared, was to be the motto of the new method; all problems must be so reformulated that inspection of the facts - aided by mathematical techniques - would answer them decisively, with a clear, universally valid, empirical statement of verifiable fact.

VII

Nevertheless, attempts by the philosophes of the eighteenth century to turn philosophy, and particularly moral and political philosophy, into an empirical science, into individual and social psychology, did not succeed. They failed over politics because our political notions are part of our conception of what it is to be human, and this is not solely a question of fact, as facts are conceived by the natural sciences; nor the product of conscious reflection upon the specific discoveries of anthropology or sociology or psychology, although all these are relevant and indeed indispensable to an adequate notion of the nature of man in general, or of particular groups of men in particular circumstances. Our conscious idea of man - of how men differ from other entities, of what is human and what is not human or inhuman - involves the use of some among the basic categories in terms of which we perceive and
DOES POLITICAL THEORY STILL EXIST?

order and interpret data. To analyse the concept of man is to recognise these categories for what they are. To do this is to realise that they are categories, that is, that they are not themselves subjects for scientific hypotheses about the data which they order.

The analogy with the sciences which dominates the pre-Kantian thinkers of the eighteenth century — Locke, Hume and Condillac, for example, is a typical misapplication of a model that works in one sphere to a region where it will obscure at least as much as it illuminates.

Let me try to make this more specific. When the theological and metaphysical models of the Middle Ages were swept away by the sciences of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they disappeared largely because they could not compete in describing, predicting, controlling the contents of the external world with new disciplines. To the extent to which man was regarded as an object in material nature the sciences of man — psychology, anthropology, economics, sociology and so on — began to supplant their theologico-metaphysical predecessors. The questions of the philosophers were affected by this; some were answered or rendered obsolete: but some remained unanswered. The new human sciences studied men’s actual habits; they promised, and in some cases provided, analyses of what men said, wanted, admired, abhorred; they were prepared to supply empirical evidence for this, or experimental demonstration; but their efforts to solve normative problems were less successful. They tried to reduce questions of value to questions of fact — of what caused what kind of men to feel or behave as they did in various circumstances. But when Kant or Herder or Dostoevsky or Marx duly rejected the Encyclopedists’ answers, the charge against them was not solely that of faulty observation or invalid inference; it was that of a failure to recognise what it is to be a man, that is, failure to take into account the nature of the framework — the basic categories — in terms of which we think and act and assume others to think and act, if communication between us is to work.

In other words, the problem the solutions of which were found insufficient is not in the usual sense empirical, and certainly not formal, but something that is not adequately described by either term. When Rousseau (whether he understood him correctly or not) rejected Hobbes’s account of political obligation on the ground that Hobbes seemed to him to explain it by mere fear of superior force, Rousseau claimed not that Hobbes had not seen certain relevant empirical, psychologically discoverable, facts, nor that he had argued incorrectly from what he had seen — but that his account was in conflict with what,
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

in thinking of human beings as human, and distinguishing them, even the most degraded among them, not only in explicit thought, but in our feelings and in our action, from beings that we regard as inhuman or non-human, we all know men to be. His argument is not that the facts used to construct Hobbes's model had gaps in them, but that the model was inadequate in principle; it was inadequate not because this or that psychological or sociological correlation had been missed out, but because it was based on a failure to understand what we mean by motive, purpose, value, personality and the like.

When Kant breaks with the naturalistic tradition, or Marx rejects the political morality of Bentham, or Tolstoy expresses a low opinion of the doctrines of Karl Marx, they are not complaining merely of empirical ignorance or poor logic or insufficient experimental evidence, or internal incoherence. They denounce their adversaries mainly for not understanding what men are and what relationships between them — or between them and outside forces — make them men; they complain of blindness not to the transient aspects of such relations, but to those constant characteristics (such as discrimination of right from good for Kant, or, for Marx, systematic self-transmutation by their own labour) that they regard as fundamental to the notion of man as such. Their criticisms relate to the adequacy of the categories in terms of which we discuss men's ends or duties or interests, the permanent framework in terms of which, not about which, ordinary empirical disagreements can arise.

What are these categories? How do we discover them? If not empirically, then by what means? How universal and unchanging are they? How do they enter into and shape the models and paradigms in terms of which we think and respond? Do we discover what they are by attention to thought, or action, or unconscious processes, and how do we reconcile these various sources of knowledge? These are characteristically philosophical questions, since they are questions about the all but permanent ways in which we think, decide, perceive, judge, and not about the data of experience — the items themselves. The test of the adequate working of the methods, analogies, models which operate in discovering and classifying the behaviour of these empirical data (as natural science and common sense do) is ultimately empirical: it is the degree of their success in forming a coherent and enduring conceptual system.

To apply these models and methods to the framework itself by means of which we perceive and think about them is a major fallacy, by the
DOES POLITICAL THEORY STILL EXIST?

analysis of which Kant transformed philosophy. In politics it was committed (by Hume and Russell, for example) when enquiry into the empirical characteristics of men was confounded with the analysis of the notion of man (or ‘self’ or ‘observer’ or ‘moral agent’ or ‘individual’ or ‘soul’ etc.) in terms of which the empirical characteristics were themselves collected and described. Kant supposed these categories to be discoverable a priori. We need not accept this; this was an unwarranted conclusion from the valid perception that there exist central features of our experience that are invariant and omnipresent, or at least much less variable than the vast variety of its empirical characteristics, and for that reason deserve to be distinguished by the name of categories. This is evident enough in the case of the external world: the three-dimensionality of (psychological, commonsense) space, for example, or the solidity of things in it, or the ‘irreversibility’ of the time order, are among the most familiar and inalienable kinds of characteristics in terms of which we think and act. Empirical sciences of these properties do not exist, not because they exhibit no regularities—on the contrary they are the very paradigm of the concept of regularity itself—but because they are presupposed in the very language in which we formulate empirical experience. That is why it seems absurd to ask for evidence for their existence, and imaginary examples are enough to exhibit their structure; for they are presupposed in our commonest acts of thought or decision; and where imaginary examples are, for the purpose of an inquiry, as good as, or even better than, empirical data drawn from actual experience, we may be sure that the inquiry is not, in the normal sense, an empirical one. Such permanent features are to be found in the moral and political and social worlds too: less stable and universal, perhaps, than in the physical one, but just as indispensable for any kind of intersubjective communication, and therefore for thought and action. An inquiry that proceeds by examples, and is therefore not scientific, but not formal, that is deductive, either, is most likely to be philosophical.

There is an ultimate sense, of course, in which such facts as that space has three dimensions, or that men are beings who demand reasons or make choices, are simply given: brute facts and not a priori truths; it is not absurd to suppose that things could have been otherwise. But if they had been (or will one day be) other than they are now, our entire conceptual apparatus—thought, volition, feeling, language—and therefore our very nature, would have been (or will be) different in ways that it is impossible or difficult to describe with the concepts and
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

words available to us as we are today. Political categories (and values) are a part of this all but inescapable web of ways of living, acting and thinking, a network liable to change only as a result of radical changes in reality, or through dissociation from reality on the part of individuals, that is to say, madness.

VIII

The basic categories (with their corresponding concepts) in terms of which we define men – such notions as society, freedom, sense of time and change, suffering, happiness, productivity, good and bad, right and wrong, choice, effort, truth, illusion (to take them wholly at random) – are not matters of induction and hypothesis. To think of someone as a human being is ipso facto to bring all these notions into play: so that to say of someone that he is a man, but that choice, or the notion of truth, mean nothing to him, would be eccentric: it would clash with what we mean by 'man' not as a matter of verbal definition (which is alterable at will), but as intrinsic to the way in which we think, and (as a matter of 'brute' fact) evidently cannot but think.

This will hold of values too (among them political ones) in terms of which men are defined. Thus, if I say of someone that he is kind or cruel, loves truth or is indifferent to it, he remains human in either case. But if I find a man to whom it literally makes no difference whether he kicks a pebble or kills his family, since either would be an antidote to ennui or inactivity, I shall not be disposed, like consistent relativists, to attribute to him merely a different code of morality from my own or that of most men, or declare that we disagree on essentials, but shall begin to speak of insanity and inhumanity; I shall be inclined to consider him mad, as a man who thinks he is Napoleon is mad; which is a way of saying that I do not regard such a being as being fully a man at all. It is cases of this kind, which seem to make it clear that ability to recognise universal—or almost universal—values enters into our analysis of such fundamental concepts as 'man', 'rational', 'sane', 'natural' etc. — which are usually thought of as descriptive and not evaluative — that lie at the basis of modern translations into empirical terms of the kernel of truth in the old a priori natural law doctrines. It is considerations such as these, urged by neo-Aristotelians and the followers of the later doctrines of Wittgenstein, that have shaken the faith of some devoted empiricists in the complete logical gulf between descriptive statements and statements of value, and have cast doubt on the celebrated distinction derived from Hume.
DOES POLITICAL THEORY STILL EXIST?

Extreme cases of this sort are of philosophical importance because they make it clear that such questions are not answered by either empirical observation or formal deduction. Hence those who confine themselves to observation of human behaviour and empirical hypotheses about it, psychologists, sociologists, historians, however profound and original they may be, are not, as such, political theorists, even though they may have much to say that is crucial in the field of political philosophy. That is why we do not consider such dedicated empiricists as the students, say, of the formation and behaviour of parties or élites or classes, or of the methods and consequences of various types of democratic procedure, to be political philosophers or social theorists in the larger sense.

Such men are in the first place students of facts, and aspire to formulate hypotheses and laws like the natural scientists. Yet as a rule these thinkers cannot go any further: they tend to analyse men's social and political ideas in the light of some overriding belief of their own — for example, that the purpose of all life is or should be the service of God, however interpreted; or on the contrary that it is the pursuit of experimentally discoverable individual or collective satisfaction; or that it lies in the self-realisation of a historical (or psychological or aesthetic) pattern, grasp of which alone can explain men to themselves and give meaning to their thoughts and action; or, on the contrary, that there exists no human purpose; or that men cannot but seek conflicting ends; or cannot (without ceasing to be human) avoid activities that must end in self-frustration, so that the very notion of a final solution is an absurdity. In so far as it is such fundamental conceptions of man that determine political doctrines (and who will deny that political problems, e.g., about what men and groups can or should be or do, depend logically and directly on what man's nature is taken to be?), it is clear that those who are governed by these great integrating syntheses bring to their study something other than empirical data.

If we examine the models, paradigms, conceptual structures that govern various outlooks whether consciously or not, and compare the various concepts and categories involved with respect, for example, to their internal consistency or their explanatory force, then what we are engaged upon is not psychology or sociology or logic or epistemology, but moral or social or political theory, or all these at once, depending on whether we confine ourselves to individuals, or to groups, or to the particular types of human arrangements that are classified as political, or deal with them all in one. No amount of careful empirical observation
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

and bold and fruitful hypothesis will explain to us what those men see who see the state as a divine institution, or what their words mean and how they relate to reality; nor what those believe who tell us that the state was sent upon us only for our sins; or those who say that it is a school through which we must go before we are adult and free and can dispense with it; or that it is a work of art; or a utilitarian device; or the incarnation of natural law; or a committee of the ruling class; or the highest stage of the self-developing human spirit; or a piece of criminal folly. But unless we understand (by an effort of imaginative insight such as novelists usually possess in a higher degree than logicians) what notions of man's nature (or absence of them) are incorporated in these political outlooks, what in each case is the dominant model, we shall not understand our own or any human society: neither the conceptions of reason and nature which governed Stoics or Thomists or govern the European Christian Democrats today; nor the very different image which is at the heart of the holy war in which the national-Marxist movements in Africa or in Asia are or may soon be marching; nor the very different notions that animate the liberal and democratic compromises of the west.

It is by now a platitude to say that understanding human thought and action is in large measure understanding what problems and perplexities they strive with. When these problems, whether empirical or formal, have been conceived in terms of models of reality so ancient, widely accepted and stable that we use them to this day, we understand the problems and difficulties and the attempted solutions without explicit reference to the governing categories; for these, being common to us and to cultures remote from us, do not obtrude themselves on us; stay, as it were, out of sight. In other cases (and this is conspicuously true of politics) the models have not stood still: some of the notions of which they were compounded are no longer familiar. Yet unless we have the knowledge and imagination to transpose ourselves into states of mind dominated by the now discarded or obsolescent model, the thoughts and actions that had them at their centre will remain opaque to us. It is failure to perform this difficult operation that marks much of the history of ideas, and turns it into either a superficial literary exercise, or a dead catalogue of strange, at times almost incomprehensible, errors and confusions.

This may not matter too much in the empirical and formal disciplines, where the test of a belief is, or should be, verification or logical coherence; and where one can accept the latest solutions, and reject the falsified or
DOES POLITICAL THEORY STILL EXIST?

incoherent solutions of the past without bothering (if one is incurious) to understand why they were ever held. But philosophical doctrines are not established or discredited in this final fashion; for they are concerned with — indeed they owe their existence to — problems that cannot be settled in these ways. They are not concerned with specific facts, but with ways of looking at them; they do not consist of first-order propositions concerning the world. They are second- or higher-order statements about whole classes of descriptions of, or responses to, the world and man's activities in it; and these are in turn determined by models, networks of categories, descriptive, evalu- ative, and hybrids compounded of the two, in which the two functions cannot be disentangled even in thought — categories which, if not eternal and universal, are far more stable and widespread than those of the sciences; sufficiently continuous, indeed, to constitute a common world which we share with medieval and classical thinkers.

Ionian cosmology, the biology of Aristotle, Stoic logic, Arab algebra, Cartesian physics, may be of interest to historical specialists, but need not occupy the minds of physicists or biologists or mathematicians who are solely interested in the discovery of new truth. In these studies there is genuine progress: what is past is largely obsolete. But the political philosophy of Plato or Aristotle or Machiavelli, the moral views of the Hebrew prophets or of the Gospels or of the Roman jurists or of the medieval church — these, whether in the original or in the works of their modern expositors, are incomparably more intelligible and more relevant to our own preoccupations than the sciences of antiquity. The subject-matter of these disciplines — the most general characteristics of men as such, that is as beings engaged in moral or social or spiritual activities — seems to present problems which preserve a considerable degree of continuity and similarity from one age and culture to another. Methods of dealing with them vary greatly; but none have as yet achieved so decisive a victory as to sweep all their rivals into oblivion. The inadequate models of political thought evidently have, by and large, perished and been forgotten; the great illuminating models are still controversial today, stir us still to adherence or criticism or violent indignation.

We might take as examples Karl Popper's denunciation of Plato's political theory or Irving Babbitt's philippics against Rousseau, Simone Weil's violent distaste for the morality of the Old Testament, or the frequent attacks made today on eighteenth-century positivism or
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

'scientism' in political ethics. Some of the classical constructions are in conflict with one another, but, inasmuch as each rests on a vivid vision of permanent human attributes and is capable of satisfying some inquiring minds in each generation, no matter how different the circumstances of time and place, the models of Plato, or of Aristotle, or of Judaism, Christianity, Kantian liberalism, romanticism, historicism, all survive and contend with each other today in a variety of guises.

If men or circumstances alter radically, or new empirical knowledge is gained which will revolutionise our conception of man, then certainly some of these edifices will cease to be relevant and will be forgotten like the ethics and metaphysics of the Egyptians or the Incas. But so long as men are as they are, the debate will continue in terms set by these visions and others like them: each will gain or lose in influence as events force this or that aspect of men into prominence. One thing alone is certain, that save to those who understand and even feel what a philosophical question is, how it differs from an empirical or formal question (although this difference need not be explicitly present to the mind, and overlapping or borderline questions are frequent enough), the answers - in this case the main political doctrines of the west - may well seem intellectual fancies, detached philosophical speculations and constructions without much relation to acts or events.

Only those who can to some degree re-enact within themselves the states of mind of men tormented by questions to which these theories claim to be solutions, or at any rate the states of mind of those who may accept the solutions uncritically but would, without them, fall into a state of insecurity and anxiety - only these are capable of grasping what part philosophical views, and especially political doctrines, have played in history, at any rate in the west. The work of the logicians or physicists of the past has receded because it has been superseded. But there is something absurd in the suggestion that we reject Plato's political doctrines or Kant's aesthetics or ethics because they have been 'superseded'. This consideration alone should prevent facile assimilation of the two cases. It may be objected to this line of argument that we look upon old ethical or political doctrines as still worth discussion because they are part of our cultural tradition - that if Greek philosophy, biblical ethics, etc. had not been an intrinsic element in western education, they would by now have been as remote from us as early Chinese

1 What thinker today entertains violent emotions towards the errors of Cartesian physicists or medieval mapmakers?
DOES POLITICAL THEORY STILL EXIST?

speculation. But this merely takes the argument a step backwards: it is true that if the general characteristics of our normal experience had altered radically enough — through a revolution in our knowledge or some natural upheaval which altered our reactions — these ancient categories would probably by now have been felt to be as obsolete as those of Hammurabi or the epic of Gilgamesh. That this is not so is doubtless due partly to the fact that our experience is itself organised and ‘coloured’ by ethical or political categories that we have inherited from our ancestors, ancient spectacles through which we are still looking. But the spectacles would long ago have caused us to blunder and stumble and would have given way to others, or been modified out of recognition as our physical and biological and mathematical spectacles have been, if they had not still performed their task more or less adequately: which argues a certain degree of continuity in at least two millennia of moral and political consciousness.

IX

We may be told that whatever we may maintain about the sources, motives or justification of our beliefs, the content of what adherents of divers philosophies believe tends to be similar if they belong to the same social or economic or cultural milieu or have other — psychological or physiological — characteristics in common. The English philosophers, T. H. Green and J. S. Mill, preached philosophically contradictory doctrines: Green was a quasi-Hegelian metaphysician, Mill a Humean empiricist, yet their political conclusions were close to one another’s; both were humane Victorian liberals with a good deal of sympathy for socialism. This, we shall further be told, was because men are conditioned to believe what they believe by objective historical factors — their social position, or the class structure of their society and their position in it, although their own (erroneous) rationalisation of their beliefs may be as widely different as those of Mill and Green.

So, too, it has been said, the outlook — the ‘operational ideas’ — of Fascists and Communists display a surprising degree of similarity, given the extreme opposition and incompatibility of the official axioms from which these movements logically start. Hence the plausibility of some of the methods of the ‘sociology of knowledge’, whether Marxist or Pareian or psychoanalytic, and of the various eclectic forms which, in the hands of Weber, Mannheim and others, this instrument has acquired. Certainly such theorists have cast light on the obscure roots
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES

of our beliefs. We may be conditioned to believe what we believe irrationally, by circumstances mainly beyond our control, and perhaps beyond our knowledge too. But whatever may in fact causally determine our beliefs, it would be a gratuitous abdication of our powers of reasoning — based on a confusion of natural science with philosophical enquiry — not to want to know what we believe, and for what reason, what the metaphysical implications of such beliefs are, what their relation is to other types of belief, what criteria of value and truth they involve, and so what reason we have to think them true or valid. Rationality rests on the belief that one can think and act for reasons that one can understand, and not merely as the product of occult causal factors which breed 'ideologies', and cannot, in any case, be altered by their victims. So long as rational curiosity exists — a desire for justification and explanation in terms of motives and reasons, and not only of causes or functional correlations or statistical probabilities — political theory will not wholly perish from the earth, however many of its rivals, such as sociology, philosophical analysis, social psychology, political science, economics, jurisprudence, semantics, may claim to have dispelled its imaginary realm.

It is a strange paradox that political theory should seem to lead so shadowy an existence at a time when, for the first time in history, literally the whole of mankind is violently divided by issues the reality of which is, and has always been, the sole raison d'être of this branch of study. But this, we may be sure, is not the end of the story. Neo-Marxism, neo-Thomism, nationalism, historicism, existentialism, anti-essentialist liberalism and socialism, transpositions of doctrines of natural rights and natural law into empirical terms, discoveries made by skilful application of models derived from economic and related techniques to political behaviour, and the collisions, combinations, and consequences in action of these ideas, indicate not the death of a great tradition, but, if anything, new and unpredictable developments.