

The Historical Enlargement of Our Vision of the Possible

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THE most striking difference between ethics and politics is that the development of political wisdom is dependent on history, as ethics is not.

I pointed out in *The Time of Our Lives* that the ethics of common sense is as old as the Greeks; Aristotle first expounded it. [1] We may be able to improve on his exposition a little, by adding philosophical refinement here and there, but its essential outlines remain unaltered 2500 years later. The extraordinary changes in the human environment that have taken place in that time—the myriad changes in the social institutions and in the technological conditions of human life—do not affect the answer that common sense, based on common experience, gives to the question, *How can I make a good life for myself?* In other words, what is really good for a man is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, because man is the same. Only a basic change in the nature of man, amounting to the emergence of another species, would call for fundamentally different answers to the question about the good life.

In contrast to ethics, political thought is conditioned by the shape of existing institutions at a given historic moment and by the limited vision that such institutions give us of the possibility for further changes in the future. Revolution and progress operate in the sphere of politics as they do not operate in the

sphere of ethics. What I have just said includes technological as well as institutional changes. Because it is so relevant here, let me recall a fundamental thesis advanced in Chapter 1, namely, that all the progress which has so far been made in the social life of man has been accomplished by cumulative improvements in technology and in social institutions, without any improvement in the nature of man. [2]

The familiar remark that politics is the art of the possible is also relevant here. We are concerned in political philosophy with the ideal—with the best society that is possible. The best society that is possible is a practicable or realizable ideal, as opposed to utopian ideals, which go beyond the bounds of possibility. The species-specific properties of human nature set limits to what is possible for man as he is specifically constituted; but this is purely *negative* in its effect. It tells us only what is *impossible* and so helps us to dismiss utopian dreams as impractical and unrealizable ideals. A knowledge and understanding of historical developments is needed to open our eyes to what lies within the bounds of possibility. Institutional and technological changes alter the positive content of our vision of the *possible*. Hence with such changes, advances can be made in political philosophy, as they are not made in ethics. [3]

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We observed earlier the apparent contradiction between maintaining, on the one hand, that political wisdom is a philosophical refinement of common-sense insights based on common human experience and holding, on the other hand, that political philosophy is dependent for its development on historical developments or changes in the institutions of society.

The paradox with which we are confronted cannot be bypassed. Even the most superficial study of the great works in political theory would help us to discern significant advances in political thought as one passes from antiquity to the present day. A closer study of political theory in relation to the events of

political history will find that the discovery or general acknowledgment of new truths that enlarge our fund of political wisdom has been occasioned by radical changes in the actual institutions of society.

How can there be such signal advances in political thought, productive of a growth or development of political wisdom, and how can such advances be conditioned by the basic institutional changes that history records, if the political wisdom available to men at any time is nothing but a refinement of common sense insights drawn from the common experience of mankind? That question, I repeat, cannot be avoided. Can it be answered?

To lay a basis for the answer I am about to give, I must first repeat what I have said elsewhere about the two distinct senses in which we refer to experience as *common* rather than special. Employing that distinction, I think I can show a basic difference between the way in which common sense and common experience operate in ethics and in politics. This will caution us to impose certain qualifications on the best formulation of political wisdom that may be attainable in the present century.

In *The Conditions of Philosophy*, I distinguished in the following manner between the negative and the positive senses of the term "common experience." [4] The negative sense relates to the clear difference between common and special experience. Special experience always depends upon deliberate and planned investigation in response to the explicit formulation of a question to be answered. All the observational data of the investigative or experimental sciences are, accordingly, elements of special experience. The scientist would not have obtained such data if he did not have a question in mind and had not deliberately tried to answer it by one or another act of observation. Common experience is the experience we have *without* asking a single question that calls for steps of observation especially contrived for the purpose. It is non-investigative in its origin; it is the experience we have during the hours when we are conscious and yet are not consciously trying to answer some specific question by making observations for that purpose; i.e., when we are not engaged in laboratory experiments or field research.

The positive sense in which one can speak of experience as common focuses on that small body of experience that is the *same* for all men everywhere at all times. Not everything that belongs to the common experience of a particular man is shared by all the rest of his fellow-men. The ordinary non-investigative day-to-day experiences of a twentieth-century Eskimo, New Yorker, and Hottentot are certainly not the same in all respects. The same must be said of an Athenian in the fifth century B.C., a Parisian of the eighteenth century, and a Muscovite of the twentieth. In other words, much of the experience that is common in the purely negative sense that it is non-investigative in origin does not satisfy the criterion for being common in the positive sense; namely, that it is the same for all men at all times and places, as is our experience of the shift from day to night, living and dying, eating and sleeping, losing and finding, giving and getting, standing still and moving about in space, and so on.

That small body of common experience which is universally the same, I shall refer to as "the core of common experience." When I speak of experience as common *without reference to the core of it*, I will have in mind only the negative sense of "common," whereby we understand that the experience does *not* result from any special effort of investigation on the part of the individual having it.

One further point must be added. The common (i.e., *non-investigative*) experience of an individual living under a particular set of conditions and in a particular physical and social environment at a given time and place will be shared to a great extent by many other individuals or even by all who share the same physical and social environment. Thus, while the common experience of an Athenian in the fifth century B.C. will differ from that of an eighteenth-century Parisian or that of a twentieth-century Muscovite, there will be much that is common or the same in the experiences of many or all fifth-century Athenians, eighteenth-century Parisians, and twentieth-century Muscovites. The extent to which the non-investigative experience of a fifth-century Athenian, an eighteenth-century Parisian,

or a twentieth-century Muscovite is shared by others living at the same time and place, or the number of those sharing in such elements of experience, does not affect the character of that experience as common or non-investigative rather than special or investigative.

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With these distinctions before us, I can now make clear the difference between the way that common experience functions in ethics and the way that it functions in politics.

For the most part, the common-sense approach to the problems of ethics can rely on the *core of common experience*, the non-investigative experience that is the same for all men by virtue of their all having the same specific nature and living in the same world. This is not to say that the differences, between the common or non-investigative experience of a fifth-century Athenian and of a twentieth-century New Yorker have no effect on the details of the common-sense answer each would give to the question about how to make a good life for himself. Nevertheless, it remains the case that the common-sense answer as developed philosophically in fifth-century Greece and in twentieth-century America preserves the same general outlines, especially in its fundamental insights and its controlling wisdom. That is why it can be said that a common-sense ethics, based on common experience in both the positive and the negative sense of that term, is for the most part unaffected by historical changes or developments.

What I have just said is not true of the common-sense approach to politics precisely because, with regard to the problems of the good society, the common experience on which common sense must rely and to which philosophy must appeal is common *only in the negative sense*: it is the non-investigative experience of men living under certain social conditions at a given time and place, experience that may be shared by many who live in the same environment, but certainly not experience that will be universally

the same for all men—for the fifth-century Greek, the nineteenth-century American, and the twentieth-century Russian. [5]

Consequently, both the common-sense wisdom and the philosophical development of it that is attainable under one set of historic conditions will differ from the common-sense wisdom and the philosophical development of it that is attainable under a radically different set of historic conditions. At any given historic moment, the political wisdom that is available derives from the common or non-investigative experience of men living at the time in the social environment that is then a reality—a limited realization of the possible. The existing institutions at the time and the existing technology determine the content of that common experience and set certain limits to man's vision of the possible, relative to which political ideals can then be formulated.

In the course of history, with radical changes in social institutions and in technology, common experience changes and with it the vision of what is possible. Hence there can be advances in political thought and accretions of political wisdom, even though the power of common sense and of philosophical reflection to draw wisdom from common experience remains the same at all times. The increment of wisdom that is added with each advance in political thought is as much a development of common sense as was the deposit of wisdom to which it is added. The difference between the new wisdom and the old is not to be attributed to a more discerning or perceptive power of common sense or to a greater skill in philosophical analysis, but rather to a change in the common experience on which both must rely—a change that results from alterations in the external circumstances, both institutional and technological, which condition political experience and thought at that time.

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This difference between politics and ethics—the dependence of the one on historical developments and the independence of the other—can, perhaps, be illuminated by a parallel difference

between sciences that depend on elaborate instruments of observation, such as telescopes and microscopes, and sciences that employ the unaided senses in their observational procedures.

Thus, for example, the gross anatomy of the human body known to Hippocrates, Galen, and Vesalius is still largely correct in its general outlines, though additions and corrections in certain details have been made by later observers. In sharp contrast, our histological knowledge of cell structure originates with the invention of the microscope and improves radically with increases in its power of magnification and even more remarkably with the invention of the electron microscope. What is to be known about cell-structure was always in the domain of the knowable. It was only made known, not knowable, by the microscope; just as the motions and properties of the celestial bodies were what they now are, before we had telescopes to observe them. They were observable or knowable at the time when, lacking the instruments, we could not observe or know them. In such sciences as histology and astronomy, the increase and improvement in our scientific knowledge is a function of technological advances in our instruments of observation, but such increments of knowledge must always be viewed as an enlargement of that portion of the knowable that has become actually known.

I would like to suggest that the great historic developments in man's social life, both institutional and technological, function for political thought as the microscope and the telescope do for histology and astronomy. By altering man's common experience of the social environment, these historical developments enable him to enlarge the common-sense and philosophical wisdom that he can derive from such experience. They do so mainly by enlarging his vision of the possible. Things that were not thought feasible at an earlier time, or were not even thought about at all, become at a later time and under radically altered social conditions, aspects of the experienced reality of social life. Man's altered vision of what is politically possible in the light of what has been actually achieved gives rise to new increments of political wisdom in the formulation of the political ideal, involving possibilities still to be realized. In political philosophy, as in his-

tology and in astronomy, the improvement in our knowledge does not imply any enlargement of the knowable, but only an enlargement of that portion of the knowable which, at a given time, has become actually known. [6]

If at the dawn of history, one could have known enough of the nature of man—his natural needs and his natural rights—and could have imagined the institutional and technological inventions required for the realization of the social possibilities involved in satisfying all of man's natural needs and securing to all men all of their natural rights, it would have been possible to predict the great revolutions that have occurred in human affairs and that are still to occur. The great political changes that have occurred so far, including changes in social and economic arrangements, as well as changes in the institutions of government, are revolutionary improvements that should have occurred. While it cannot be asserted with confidence that what *should* happen always *will* happen, the course of political history so far does give us some reasonable basis for the prediction that the vision which we now have of the best society that is possible will be realized by radical changes or revolutions still to come.

The hypothesis that I proposed a moment ago is, of course, contrary to fact. At the dawn of history, we could not have imagined the institutional and technological inventions required for the fulfillment of man's natural needs and the protection of all his natural rights, even if we could have had an adequate understanding of human nature at that time. Historical developments, both institutional and technological, have given us an experience of emergent social realities in the light of which our vision of the possible has been altered and enlarged.

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The dependence of political thought on historical development, as I have tried to explain it, has obvious consequences for the formulation of political philosophy at a particular time. Through the experience that our present position in history affords us, our

vantage point for engaging in political philosophy is superior to that of our ancestors, just as the vantage point of political theorists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was superior to that of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero in the ancient world. [7]

Failure to understand and acknowledge this has led some of our predecessors to regard their formulations as final or good for all time, as if nothing more would be learned as a result of historical developments beyond their own day. Not only did most of the great political philosophers of the past fail to limit themselves to the level of universal principles, on which alone wisdom is attainable; they also failed to recognize the unavoidable limitation that history itself imposes on the best formulation which they could make of the wisdom then attainable. They could only see a little beyond the historic realities of their own time to possibilities then imaginable; they could not see the full range of possibilities, for it included those not imaginable or conceivable in their day because of the limited range of social realities then experienceable.

I hope that I have said enough to make clear that while I think that we, living in the twentieth century, are in a position to attain a richer and more mature political wisdom than our ancestors, we are far from standing at the end of time or history, and so the best formulations we can achieve are not the last or the complete word on the subject. Our knowledge of human nature, so far as it goes, will enable us to make highly probable, yet seldom certain, judgments about utopian schemes that lie beyond the pale of the practically possible in the sphere of our social arrangements and institutions. Our knowledge of historic developments so far, and our experience of the social realities that now exist, will enable us to project a number of possibilities still to be realized, but hardly *all* the possibilities that the future holds in store. A common-sense approach to politics that properly acknowledges these limitations will refrain from claiming completeness or adequacy for the political wisdom it is able to formulate; but such restraint should not prevent it from offering its formulations as the fullest wisdom that is now attainable.