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# A Description And Elaboration Of Reality, Power, and Ethics: A Dialogue Concerning Approaches To Political Theory

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## Abstract

*A thin but important line needs to be drawn between a theory creating political reality and one describing political reality. This distinction is at the core of what continues to divide political theory: The question is whether political scientists should strive for theories that describe reality in the tradition of science, or should they attempt to develop theories that describe reality in terms of what ought to be changed or remain the same. Regardless of one's side on this "is" versus "ought" issue, there are common concerns beyond constructing reality that must be addressed: namely, power, ethics, organizations, and context. Clearly, one lives by means of theories; therefore, we hope that this article gives all participants involved in the "is/ought" dialogue a better understanding of what a theory is, how it can be used, how it can be abused, and its impact on political analysis.*

*"Sometimes science is nudged by pioneers from the field who put studies together in new ways and ask questions from an unexpected perspective."*

--Kathleen DesMaisons

**Introduction:**

*“We do not see things as they are; we see them as we are”*

--Naomi Remen

The question that still divides political theory is whether political scientists should strive for theories that describe reality in the tradition of science -- strive for “*is*” theories and accept their lack of perfection -- or should they attempt to develop “*ought*” theories that describe reality in terms of what *ought* to be changed or remain the same. But in this case, we admit that we are “separated from reality by a small space,” and most social scientists perform analyses with this in mind. In order to make this statement more stark, while at the same time more clearly setting the framework for analysis, let us highlight a statement by George Bernard Shaw:

*“Logic is interested in the reasons we give for things” [what is]*

*“Ethics is interested in the things we give for reasons” [what ought to be]*

In either case there are many people on both sides of the issue and in both there are potential problems.<sup>1</sup>

Using the concept of power, one can see some of the problems of *is* theories. The *is* (or reality) theorist tries to describe power in terms of how it comes into existence—the channels through which it comes, the people involved, and the procedures used—but s/he does not deal with whether it is right or wrong. For example, if s/he were examining the power of the American presidency, s/he would describe the tradition of the office, the war powers, the power of the president to initiate legislation, the types of methods by which various presidents used their power, and the kinds of people (advisers, cabinet officers) they chose to share power with them. In all of this, the *is* theorists would not attempt to discuss whether the president should have those powers or how some powers could be better used. This, according to the *ought* theorists, simply justified the power of the president and had the same effect as Hitler’s propaganda. This is not to say that the president is the same as Hitler, but rather some argue that by continually justifying the power of the president, *is* theorists inevitably helped lead the United States to excesses such as Watergate.

The *ought* theorist also has many problems. S/he does not believe in justifying power. Some argue this type of analysis involves the *ought* theorist in actual political influence. That is, by taking a strong stand on an issue and attempting to explain it from an advocate's point of view, s/he actually influences individuals. And if enough *ought* theorists take a stand together, they run the risk of creating an ideology. In other words, they no longer will be merely analyzing politics, but creating it. Karl Marx's analyses were excellent *ought* theories, but once they became used as a justification for power, they led to the excesses of Stalinist Russia. (Joseph Stalin was the head of the Soviet Union from the 1920s until 1953. During his rule, thousands were executed for opposing him and millions were jailed or exiled to Siberia. Most Marxist theorists agree that Stalin completely distorted Marx's intent.) In fairness to the *ought* theorists, they point out that Soviet Marxists such as Stalin claimed that they were using scientific socialism (or *is*) to govern their country.

If this appears to be a difficult dilemma, do not feel overwhelmed. What is important is to understand that pure *is* theories do not exist in political science. A pure *is* theory would be one in which there was a perfectly accurate description of reality. In political science, we can only deal with probabilistic statements about conditional events. To this end, the term "political science" is technically a misnomer. "Political hypothesis" is a better descriptor of what we conveniently but inaccurately label political science. Perhaps in our zeal to elevate the soft social science study of politics to the status of a logic-anchored empirical area both valid and reliable in its assertions, we oversell the field. Regardless, there is no reason for *is* theories to be preferable over *ought* theories. Why would you use one kind of theory as opposed to the other? Is there any middle ground?

### **A Critical Dialogue: *Is* Versus *Ought***

*"Dialogue doesn't just reshuffle the cards; it creates new cards."*

--Theodore Zeldin

Most individuals would probably like a definite "this is the right way" or "this is the wrong way" as far as theory is concerned. Unfortunately, we can do no more than provide rough outlines and some of the major tools that can be used in finding an answer. What follows are some criticisms of theories developed by both *is* and *ought* theorists, with the hope that we have provided enough information to deal with these in a

meaningful way. The *ought* theorists are important in understanding major political science problems. They reveal an ethical dimension to politics—what is right and what is wrong. They argue that the average person in contemporary society is being taken advantage of, is exploited, and is unhappy. Their values center around making people happy in society. All ethical (*ought*) theorists emphasize some value, usually the happiness of the society or the individual. Generally, these individuals would argue that the *is* theorists simply glorify the status quo. By trying to predict events with empirical (numerical) data, the *is* theorist cannot “see” beyond the existing society. This is not necessarily an ideological critique. It is waged by the left, the right, and the center. Rather, it is a critique of the ability to understand politics from a perspective that emphasizes measurable data. In the emphasis on measurement, it is argued that the human component is lost. Through the use of numbers, we are an additional step away from the political even being described. For example, if we observe an election, we must first translate it into words, concepts, or ideas—in short, language. Sometimes we must use mathematical symbols. This is much like translating Persian into Hebrew and then into English. A lot is lost in the first translation, but in the second, the entire original meaning can be (unintentionally) twisted. It is not totally descriptive when someone has an “*is* study.” The *is* theorist would argue that this is as precise as our present social scientific knowledge will allow us to be. The *ought* theorist argues “no,” contending that no theory can ever be an *is* theory. From the perspective of the *ought* theorist, this is all the *is* theorist can possibly do. Simply put, an *is* theorist is actually an *ought* theorist hiding behind science and statistics. The *ought* theorist argues that the *is* theorist’s biggest problem is his dishonesty.

From this perspective, the *ought* theorist argues that the use of power as an empirical concept usually justifies that power. In fact, some *ought* theorists go so far as to condemn these theories because they are used to justify actions and convince people that their government is good. For example, suppose an empirical theorist were to describe the relationship between “the presidency” and other government officials: “the president” uses his power only in cases of emergency and is usually elected by over 90 percent of the vote. Most people would think this an ideal democracy. Paradoxically, it was a more accurate description of the president of the Supreme Soviet in Russia, who had no real power. For this reason, *ought* theorists consider empirical descriptions of power to be alienating (alienation refers to the separation of individuals from their true potential).

By convincing people that the president is elected by a majority and is not overly powerful, we may be giving them an inaccurate picture of the political environment.

In the same way, empirical descriptions of influence are viewed critically. Where does influence begin and can one observe all of it? If we are to accurately describe influence, we must be able to account for a total picture. Cialdini approaches the topic by writing about it as a quasi-war, suggesting that topics such as reciprocation, commitment and consistency, social proof, liking, authority and scarcity are elements of the “influence armamentarium.”<sup>2</sup> Even some of the best descriptions of the political system have flaws on this point. We might want to describe all inputs to a congressional decision on foreign policy, but wanting to, unfortunately, does not mean that we can. If passage of a foreign aid bill depends on even one key member of Congress, how can we accurately describe the inputs to him? Can one thousand letters from his constituents “balance” an argument he had with his wife about who does the dishes? The argument might have made him so mad at the world that he will vote “no” on anything! It might be argued that we are only interested in political inputs, but isn’t this argument with his wife “political”?

To quickly summarize the *ought* point of view, there are no *is* theories because we do not always know what *is* is (how Clintonesque ...), or whether we are describing all that we should. *Is* theories are simply *ought* theories—usually status quo *ought* theories which hide behind science and methodology.

The empirical theorist does have answers to these charges. S/he also has countercharges to make. They center around one argument: an empirical theorist makes no pretense to be perfectly describing reality. Rather, s/he is simply trying to obtain as close an approximation of reality as possible. Indeed, there are errors made, but by making them the empiricist refines methods and concepts to avoid making the same mistakes again. As we strive, our research improves, and although we will never be perfect, we can better understand the political system.

The *ought* theorist seldom worries about what is. However, when concern arises, he describes those things that justify his ideas. He does not offer “clean,” concrete concepts or definitions because he refuses to distinguish fact from value. The empirical theorist is not perfect in this

area, but at least he makes the attempt. Within this context, political science is truly a science, because it is concerned with distinguishing the important and measurable from the peripheral and nakedly opinionated issues in studying a political event. As *is* theorists, we make it easier to understand and grasp political events by giving to the discipline the concepts and data that can be tested and repeated by other political scientists.

The argument made by *ought* theorists on values is not that crucial because the empirical theorist does not deny that values exist. Rather, the *is* theorist argues that by organizing the facts and separating them from values, we can better understand the values. It is not denied that all theory includes some value preference; what must be done is to develop theories and methods to reduce the bias of those values. Basically, *is* theorists say the critique of *ought* theory is founded on his misperception of the goals and methods of empirical social scientists.

The *ought* theorist leads to different perspectives as to how the political system ought to function, but seldom tells any of what is really happening, giving us little or nothing to use. To be sure, there are a basic idealism and fervor which individuals might prefer, but the rigor and substance of empirical theory are much more beneficial: it gives us the chance to understand the basic political and social indicators affecting politics.

The question with which we began this analysis was “How can I always be right?” That is, “How can I always choose the right theory?” The problem is that there are no absolute rights and wrongs in this area. The authors of this article are evenly divided as advocates of *is* and *ought* theories. Although we might not agree with each other, we certainly appreciate and understand the problems confronting our individual work. For you, the reader, it is not as important to choose the right theory as it is to understand the benefits and liabilities, the advantages and disadvantages, of both types of theories. As you become more politically and socially involved, you will find that you will develop a taste, or style, of your own as you discover which theories appeal to you—either because of the way they work or what they describe. In terms of the types of theories for you to use, we cannot give you a preference.

### **Ethical Considerations**

*“If you give no power to the fog to obscure the light, it has none.”*

-- from the magazine

### On Course

Regardless of one’s side on this issue, there is a common concern: ethics. The *ought* theorist openly courts ethical considerations. The *is* theorist, though s/he attempts to steer away from ethical questions, is ultimately concerned with them. The empirical theorists do not argue that ethical questions are not important—rather that they cannot measure them.

Some people feel that the behavioral tradition, to which most empirical theorists adhere, emphasizes the elimination of ethical concerns. And some behaviorists believe this is possible. From the perspective of the authors, this quest seems impossible, and they would advise individuals to strenuously question anyone who claims to be doing it.<sup>3</sup> When we deal with theory, we are dealing with a specific perspective, and no matter how close it comes to “fact,” it never is. Rather, a theory is a “generator” of understanding; that is, it allows one to gain a unique view of the political system through which s/he can question and learn. Anyone who claims to have eliminated values has also taken the human factor out of politics. This results in clear formulas, but it is no help in understanding politics. All entities are in a state of mutual simultaneous shaping, so that it is impossible to distinguish causes from effects ... just as it is impossible to make inquiry value-free.<sup>4</sup>

It is important to return to some of the initial problems that were broached in the beginning of this article. Specially, what do theories do? It has been argued that theories can be used as templates, but in a sense they are even more than this. They tell us how the world is organized. To be more specific, they not only tell us how the political world is organized, but how the entire world is organized. In other words, a political theory not only organizes political phenomena, but either implicitly or explicitly gives us a view on all social relationships. In our concern with giving the most lucid perspective on the political world, we should not forget this. Every time we talk of political corruption, we are also talking of the social, psychological, and economic structures which political corruption entails. This can cause problems, because if we view the political system as the

only important area, we will probably leave out significant pieces of information needed to explain it.

A classic example of this is psychologist B. F. Skinner's writing, especially his book *WALDEN II*. Skinner argues that we can understand all men in terms of a stimulus-response theory; that is, all human action is simply a stimulus for others or a response to them. Skinner argues that governing human reactions through expected responses will bring about the ideal society. In a sense, the dangers of this were exemplified in the classic film *A Clock-Work Orange*. An even more subtle experience happened to a colleague of ours and his spouse. They have a cocker spaniel pup named Brandy. The wife had given her a bone and when she tried to take it away, Brandy growled. Knowing that cocker spaniels have a penchant for possessiveness, the wife, being the disciplinarian in the family, gave Brandy several firm smacks. The bone was given to the dog again and, after the wife tried to retrieve it, she growled once more. Brandy got still another swat. This time she learned her lesson. However, it was not to stop growling. Whenever she was given the bone after the smacking incident, she was deathly afraid of it and refused to touch it. The problem is to eliminate other interpretations of stimuli—something neither psychologists nor political scientists have discovered how to do.

Theories will be used in all of the social science literature you read. They might be hidden, but they are there nonetheless. You must be sensitive to these theories and make sure that they make sense. There usually is no problem if you agree with the theoretical perspective and it is intellectually satisfying to you. But what happens if you think it is wrong? The difficulty lies in discovering why it is wrong. As one gains a more sophisticated understanding of the social sciences, this process will become easier. Criteria must be developed. They do not have to be complicated. An initial element to test is whether or not the theory seems to describe something that is real. One must take great care in doing this. Texts such as *The Reality Illusion*<sup>5</sup> and *The Unreality Industry*<sup>6</sup> are replete with examples that are useful to understanding the nuances of discerning what is real. Second, can there be other explanations? Is it the simplest way to describe the problem? If it is, should the simplest way be used?

When using a theory, accuracy, simplicity, and clarity are not the only factors affecting your decision. In a real sense it is a question of aesthetics—or taste. Just as Ford and Chevy owners can argue about the



various merits of their cars, there is no real, objective “proof” to resolve their differences. One might prefer the dashboard logistics of the Chevy, while the other might prefer the fuel economy of the Ford. For both individuals, it is a matter of preference with no independent criteria available. If we considered the Ford owner as a political scientist, we would realize that his/her values slip into his/her choice; that is, there is really a “politics” of political science. If an individual is conservative or liberal or radical, there is no way to prevent one’s biases from becoming apparent. What is questionable, however, is whether these biases should be prevented from slipping through. As long as they are explicit, we can use our own taste to determine whether we want to buy a Chevy or a Ford.

This does not justify using any and all theories. A thin but important line can be drawn between a theory “creating” political reality and one “describing” political reality. This has nothing to do with any distinction between *is* and *ought* theorists. Rather, creating political reality through theory avoids the question of what “real” is. Situations, concepts, and things can be created which have no relation to reality, or which reconstruct reality in totally ideological terms. For example, the Nazis used dozens of scientific and social science theories to justify their actions. Theory involved not only an aesthetic choice, but a moral one. Theories can be used for wrongdoing. Therefore, an essential criterion for evaluating a theory is whether or not it upsets one’s moral sensitivity. That is, a political psychologist could develop an intelligence test for voting that would guarantee that only those who understood politics could vote. This test could be firmly seated in logical proofs. Yet if it violates our concept of democracy, this violation would be an excellent ground for rebuffing the test, and discounting the theory.

### Conclusion

*“Thinking without action is futile; but action without thinking is fatal.”*  
--James Colvard

The use of a theory can be neither totally scientific nor value-oriented; it must exist comfortably between the two. This raises the specter of the application of the Hegelian dialectic with respect to *is* and *ought* theory. If *is* represents the “thesis” while *ought* represents the “antithesis,” how would we represent the “synthesis” of these concepts? What new theory can be developed to blend *is* and *ought*? While beyond the scope of

this article, such an investigation would be interesting work which would launch healthy debate and dialogue among the *is* and *ought* theorists as well as with the new theorists. The writings of Lincoln & Guba as reflected in their book Naturalistic Inquiry are a point of initiation for such work. They summarize the debate well when they write that the conceptualizations inquirers produce about the ways in which they do inquiry represent ‘reconstructed logics.’ At best, reconstructed logics are afterthoughts – rationalizations – that describe what the inquirer believes was done; most often they do not adequately describe what was actually done. ... When reconstructed logics are allowed to become orthodoxies, inquirers are reduced to becoming true believers – a posture hardly consonant with the open and stated position of seeking truth where it leads. They go on to state that while it is dubious that the “perfect” approach (even the synthetic one ...) will ever emerge, humility in asserting that a ‘new and truer path to knowledge’ has been found will be wise.<sup>7</sup>

Many of us have difficulty with theories because of their abstractness. A useful way to deal with them is to supplement their major concepts or ideas with examples from everyday life. In beginning this article, we intimated that one lives by means of theories. It is hoped that the previous pages have given you a better knowledge of what a theory is and how it can be used. If you are really interested in understanding an individual theorist or theory, go directly to the primary source. One generally finds that an interpretation of a theory is second in quality to the theory itself. And remember—theories describe interdependent relationships that, in most cases, can be used to analyze political phenomena in various areas. And remember, more specifically, that *organization* is simply another word for interdependencies. Further, organizations, including political, healthcare, and business organizations, do not by their nature have a right to exist. They have only a responsibility and opportunity to serve. That is, even though political science deals with methods, international relations, comparative politics, and government institutions, they all need and use theories to accomplish their tasks and justify their existence.

*“If we knew it all, it would not be creation, but simply dictation.”*

--Gertrude Stein

**Notes**

1. This article is extrapolated from the senior author's co-authored book: Ronald J. Stupak, Stuart C. Gilman, Craig E. Hartzer, Michael J. Keller, Jeffrey P. Kraus, and Stephen H. Wainscott, Understanding Political Science: The Arena of Power. Port Washington, New York: Alfred Publishing Co. Inc., 1977. The book was written by Stupak and some of his excellent graduate students at Miami University. This article owes more than can be acknowledged in a citation to the efforts of Stuart C. Gilman who did most of the work during the collaboration on Chapter 2 of the book -- "Political Theory." He is one of the "fathers" of this article; and yet, we take full responsibility for the edits, changes, and reformatting of the current effort with special thanks to Dr. Gilman, who always has performed and shared far beyond the normal call of duty.
2. Robert Cialdini. Influence: The New Psychology of Modern Persuasion. New York: Quill Publishing, 1984.
3. Stupak, Ronald. American Foreign Policy: Assumptions, Processes, and Projections. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976, p. 73-82.
4. Lincoln, Yvonna, and Egon Guba. Naturalistic Inquiry. Newbury Park, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1985, p. 37.
5. Strauch, Ralph. The Reality Illusion: How You Make the World You Experience. Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press, 1989.
6. Mitroff, Ian and Warren Bennis. The Unreality Industry: The Deliberate Manufacturing of Falsehood and What it Does to Our Lives. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.
7. Lincoln, Yvonna, and Egon Guba. Naturalistic Inquiry. Newbury Park, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1985, p. 330, 331.

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