Introduction

Many political theorists remain untroubled about the nature of the subject. The important thing in political theory is to get on and do it. In this reading, it is a form of thought with a direct practical orientation, and always has been since the ancient Greeks. It is concerned with logical coherence, rigour in argument, empirical accuracy, moral seriousness and practical efficacy. However, political theory, as a subject of academic study, is in a peculiar situation at present. In the anglophone world it has gone through a number of subtle transformations in the twentieth century – tracked in part in Terence Ball's opening chapter. After a period of doldrums during the 1950s, it has grown in significance. Despite times of travail in universities, there is no shortage of interest in the subject, if this is measured in terms of demand for journals and books. However, what does the average student of politics think they are entering into when starting a course on political theory? Are there any clear expectations as to what is being engaged in? In the period from 1945 up to the 1970s, a course entitled 'political theory', 'political philosophy' or, more nebulously, 'political ideas', could have entailed any of the following: the history of political theory – a text-based course relating to the purported canon of theorists; analytical political theory, a concept-based course; or a refinement of the concepts course which focused on one hyper-concept or hyper-theorist. Justice and equality have been the most favoured hyper-concepts, John Rawls being the most favoured hyper-theorist since the 1970s. Further, such a course could concentrate on moral stances within political theory, usually focusing on utilitarian consequentialism and Kantianism, or teleological as against deontic theories, or theories of the right and good. Finally, it could be a hybrid of historical and conceptual concerns, under the rubric of political ideologies (although this has, oddly, grown in popularity only in the last

decade).[1] These formats have shaped the structure of political theory in many university environments.

This is not to say that there was no contention; there were even dire mutterings about 'death', and 'putrefaction' in some cases, of political theory. However, by and large, there was an approximate agreement, from the 1950s to the 1970s, on the structure of political theory. The dominant types were the history of political thought and forms of analytic conceptual theory. With the advent of Rawls's work, normative political theory began to form the dominant motif from the later 1970s up to the late 1980s. Despite the post-1945 dominance of a particular analytic style of philosophy, the last two decades have also seen a gradual influx of different modes of philosophical thinking, like hermeneutics and poststructuralism, often loosely grouped under the title 'Continental philosophy'. This volume is not intended as a joust between any of these components. Rather, it allows some of the different styles to address their concerns.

It is one of the themes of this introduction that there is now, in the 1990s, more hesitancy at the core of political theory, a hesitancy which has become more apparent in the last few years. Even the term 'political theory' is itself porous (see Rengger 1995: xiii). Words like 'theory', 'political', 'ideology' and 'philosophy' resonate with symbolic significance and diverse usage. Yet, each is sufficiently contested to generate overlaps and problems of identification. Is political theory different from philosophy? Is political philosophy the same as ideology? What is the relation of political and moral philosophy? Is political theory a subbranch of political science or synonymous with it? Alternatively, is political theory just an aspect of the history of ideas? Is it a hybrid subject, involving elements from other disciplines? There are now clearly overlaps between political theory, history, moral philosophy, psychology, international relations, law and economics. What is the precise relation of political theory to these areas? Does political theory benefit, for example, from the importation of economic theory? Do such disciplines enrich or impoverish it? I am not suggesting there are any definitive answers to these questions; rather, they indicate areas of concern. The claim that political theory has become more hesitant in the last few years does *not* imply that there was any golden age of consensus. Far from it: all that is being asserted is that, within anglophone political theory, there simply *was* more of a pragmatic consensus between 1945 and the 1970s. The surge of justice-based theories during the 1970s and 1980s could be said to have established another partial consensus, where theory had purportedly returned to its heartland of grand normative theory (although others have implied that it never left that heartland).

The hesitancy over political theory is related in complex ways to the

manner in which the substantive issues of politics are debated. The nature of theory and the conception of the task of the theorist establish complex theoretical webs within which the substantive issues of the discipline are caught. The restless diversity of theoretical preoccupations goes some way to explain what, at first glance, might appear as a disparate group of papers in this volume. No doubt some legal theorists, post-structuralists or international relations theorists might want a more fulsome commitment to their own intellectual niche. There might, in that sense, be an element of frustration that the contents are so apparently broad-ranging. This volume is distinctive in so far as it indirectly raises the question 'What is political theory?' via the diversity of approaches.

This volume of essays can thus be used by readers on a number of levels. First, if the student of political theory is seeking an up-to-date summary discussion, in a manageable compass, of issues like rational choice theory (Geoffrey Brennan), utilitarian political theory (Robert Goodin), republican theory (Philip Pettit), international relations theory (David Boucher), and the like, then there are chapters which address these questions quite directly. In this sense, the essays function on a basic, informative level for both students and scholars of political theory. Second, they can also be read in a more collective sense, to raise questions about the present status, character, role and future of political theory as a discipline. The plan of this introduction is *not* to follow the arguments of the various chapters, but rather to examine certain broad themes in contemporary political theory.[2]

'Politics' and 'Theory'

The compound term 'political theory' is a comparatively late development – certainly in the manner that we now employ it. In the nineteenth century, the word 'theory' often had pejorative connotations, being equivalent to speculation, conjecture or untested fact. The ancient association of theory with philosophy[3] has meant, though, that theory has been tied, and still is, to the changing fortunes and nature of claims to knowledge and philosophical thought – whether the style of philosophy be idealist, phenomenological, existential, hermeneutic, poststructuralist, Marxist or analytic. Thus, political theory has tended to mirror the fragmented character of philosophical thought.

One overt facet of political theory is that it inhabits both an abstracted philosophical realm and the more immediately practical domain of politics. There is an implicit tension between these realms. As Michael Sandel comments, 'philosophy may indulge our moral aspirations, but politics deals in recalcitrant facts' (1996: xi). However, there is an assumption, in some forms of political theory, that it must, in some way,

address itself consistently to the practice of politics, that is, institutions, policies and processes. Political institutions and policies, in this reading, would be the embodiment of ideas: literally, living theory. This is certainly one important way in which the canon of political theorists and classic texts has been viewed. However, there are profound ambiguities on this issue. One problem is the hard distinction which has often been driven through theory and practice in some Western philosophy. Another is the epistemological problem of what theory is doing. Is it representing, explaining, interpreting, justifying or creating politics?

The distinction between theory and practice has a long history in European thought. Aristotle, Kant, Hegel and Marx all distinguished the spheres of theoretical and practical reason (see Lobkowitz 1967). Aspects of the distinction reappear in various forms of twentieth-century political philosophy. Thus, for Michael Oakeshott (1933), practice is distinct from philosophy. There is no way, categorially, that philosophy could involve itself in political practice without ceasing to be philosophy.[4] Political activity, for Oakeshott, is not something which arises from worked-out, rational belief. Rather, it is rooted in an existing tradition of behaviour. A tradition, for Oakeshott, is a 'multi-voiced' entity which does not constitute a creed, set of maxims, rules or propositions. Practical knowledge is assimilated in the 'doing' within a tradition (see Oakeshott 1991). The rationalist in politics selects and abstracts to make a self-consistent creed. A body of maxims, rules and precise concepts is then seen to encapsulate reality. Yet it is the day-to-day practical decisions which change the world, not the conclusions of theories. The theorist should not therefore try to see any link between 'political theory' and 'practice'. Politics can be discussed historically or philosophically. Such discussion would involve the interpretation of explanatory languages. Given that such languages are either philosophical or historical, they cannot, for Oakeshott, provide rational principles on how to act in the political world. In this sense, political theory paints its grey on grey. A cognate distinction appeared in Leo Strauss's writings. He argued that political philosophy needed to recover a realm of transcendental truths and move away from both the messy, self-interested domain of political science, policy and ideology, as well as the dangerous reefs of relativism, nihilism and historicism (Strauss 1959). In one sense, this demand for a transcendental ahistorical realm of political philosophy is not without some modern adherents, not just in the writings of a Straussian like Allan Bloom, but also in the initial writings of John Rawls, Robert Nozick and Ronald Dworkin.[5] There is a difference, however, between Nozick, Dworkin, the early Rawls and Oakeshott on this question: the first three theorists would like their abstract theories to have an impact on day-to-day politics and policy-making, even if at one or two removes. Oakeshott, though, makes a virtue

of distance from practice, a theme which is echoed, in a different philosophical format, in T. D. Weldon's work and Wittgenstein's later writings.

The obverse of Oakeshott's position is where political theory links closely with practice. In much contemporary political philosophy, rigour in argument, consistency with formally stated normative principles and clear lines of rational inference to practice take definite priority. A consistent political theory will lead to good politics and policy. On one level, there is indeed something rather obvious about the relation of theory to political practice. As Fred Dallmayr notes, 'To the extent that it seeks to render political life intelligible, political theory has to remain attentive to the concrete sufferings and predicaments of people' (1978: 2). Theories do not therefore arise *in vacuo*.[6] Rather they originate in practice, provide maps of the political realm, and offer us normative guidance on where to proceed.

There are, though, what might be termed *inclusive* and *exclusive* readings of the theory–practice link. The latter brings pristine theory *to* politics, the former finds or retrieves theory *from* political practice. The exclusive reading, which pervades a great deal of literature, maintains that a good political theory can be applied to, and can modify and improve, political practice. This usually implies a more technical solution to political practice. The exclusive reading has a number of subtle variations. Two distinct forms of exclusive theory exist in current literature. On the first account, theory is formulated, *sub specie aeternitatis*, as a body of systematic ideas and values which can be applied to politics. This was certainly characteristic of the *early* Rawlsian enterprise (Rawls 1971). It is also characteristic of rational choice theory, much late twentieth-century utilitarian theory and contractarian thought.[7] For some theorists it has led to the demand for closer linkage between political theory and empiricism, political science and policy-making: in sum, *applied* political theory.[8] The second account of exclusive theory has developed from the most recent developments in liberal theory. In Rawls's current work (Rawls 1993), theory is not formulated externally, like David Gauthier's contractualism (Gauthier 1986), and applied to the world. It is deliberately more non-univeralist and non-transcendental in intent. It is drawn *from* and addressed *to* a particular public culture and public reason. Theory – despite being free-standing – is seen to draw its sustenance and validity from the ordinary 'considered convictions' of the mass of the citizenry of particular political cultures. For some, this move in Rawls gives up everything that is worthwhile in his political theory (Barry 1995: xi, 3, 5). Rawls is thus often seen as partially capitulating to his communitarian critics (Hampton 1989: 792ff.) or drifting towards a partial Hegelianism. For others, correctly understood, Rawls has made a definite advance in political theory (Larmore 1990: 356–7).

In the inclusive account, however, theory is seen as neither an instrumental adaptation of politics or policy, nor an adjustment to an external reality; rather, it has a constitutive and interpretive role to play in politics. There are, thus, no brute facts which are not permeated with interpretive assumptions and beliefs. The practices and institutions which result from this find their sense (or nonsense) in such beliefs. Forms of communitarianism, multicultural theory, feminism and some recent liberal nationalist theory have developed this mode of analysis. Such theory moves, in some cases, with great ease into a hermeneutic perspective – Charles Taylor is the prime example. For modern communitarians, it is a core thesis that the self is embedded in the community. In Michael Sandel's phraseology, there are no 'unencumbered selves' standing outside a community frame. Thus, for Sandel, we cannot adopt the stance of Rawls's original position, because it makes the unwarranted metaphysical assumption of the unencumbered self (see Sandel 1982: 175). If we cannot accept this unanchored, insubstantial Rawlsian self, then it follows that we have no grounds for accepting the two principles of justice. Thus, in the Sandelian view, Rawls presupposes an implausible account of the moral subject, which is the logical prerequisite for the impartiality of justice. Life in the polis and citizenship precede any sense we might have of our unique human individuality. This argument is also echoed in Alasdair MacIntyre's narrative conception of the self, a self which is constituted, in part, from the history and telos of the community (MacIntyre 1981). Similarly, for Michael Walzer, we read off existing traditions of discourse. We do not need external theoretical foundations for a practical life; rather, we draw upon the interpretations of a tradition or form of life. We cannot totally step back to assess communities, morality or justice with a view from nowhere, although we can criticize them from within using internal standards of rationality (Walzer 1987: 6–7). From one perspective, communitarianism should have no link with normative theory at all. It works at an interpretive level, citing the philosophical conditions for the use of concepts like the self and human rationality (see Taylor in Rosenblum 1989: 159). It thus might be considered a category mistake to see it *recommending* a particular substantive view of society.[9] Political theory rather provides an articulate rendering and interpretation of the unarticulated beliefs of a community (see, for example, MacIntyre in Miller and Seidentrop 1983).

Turning briefly to the concept of politics: the term developed from a unique vocabulary in Greek thought concerned with the city-state – *polis*. This vocabulary was, in a sense, rediscovered in the thirteenth century with William of Moerbecke's translation of Aristotle's *Politics*; it was used by Aquinas and later Aristotelianism until the fifteenth century, when it became more closely associated with a republican form of government

(see Rubinstein 1987: 42ff.). Theoretical political knowledge was often seen to be *intertwined* with political practice. To use a contemporary vocabulary, the thickly textured consensual goods of the ancient polis or republic could be 'read off' from the institutions.

Politics, in the above sense, largely focused on the state and cognate terms like government, legislatures or public policy. The modern polis (state), and its unity of purpose, became the point of convergence for many modern political theories until comparatively recently. As Will Kymlicka notes, 'most Western political theorists have operated with an idealized model of the polis in which fellow citizens share a common descent, language and culture' (1995: 2; Vincent 1987: 4ff.). The state, despite its profound conceptual ambiguity, forms an unproblematic, consensual backdrop for such theorizing. The current claimants for this approach, with often much thinner notions of consensual goods, incorporate a conception of politics premised on, for example, shared notions of equality, rationality, impartiality and justice. In Rawls's most recent work (1993), for example, justice is seen as offering neither a *modus vivendi* thesis premised on rational choice, nor a comprehensive, morally based outlook. For Rawls, practical reason achieves an overlapping consensus through the embeddedness of liberal values, like freedom and equality, within the institutions of liberal democratic societies. Politics, in this reading – given that we are dealing with justice which is political, not metaphysical – is a description of a situated public reason or shared consensus which resolves matters impartially. This bears little or no relation to a politics of power, class, gender, colonial or elite manipulation, which is the more immediate intuition about politics within other areas of political theory. It also bears little relation to the more diffuse and contested vision of politics that has arisen in recent years.[10]

One major problem for contemporary political theory is that the dominant liberal notion of the 'political' as a site of consensual, if minimal, public norms and institutions (whether viewed from a universalist or partial communitarian standpoint) is now deeply contested from a range of theoretical perspectives. Feminist theorists have challenged this more orthodox concept of the political as embodying patriarchal power (Pateman 1988; Okin 1992). It is a cardinal point of feminist political theory that politics is a much broader phenomenon than can be encompassed in the state, government or centralized demands for distributive justice. For poststructural (and indeed many feminist) writers like Michel Foucault or Judith Butler, the language of public reason is not viewed as a transparent conveyor of meaning. Political theory cannot stand back from social conflict. It is the medium of expression and experience of such conflict. In other words, political theory is enmeshed itself in complex relations of power. Foucault, amongst others, therefore

suggests genealogical explanation, which examines how certain 'regimes of truth' concerning politics – including forms of political theory – come about (see Foucault 1980). The notion of the individual, rational, choosing subject is itself seen as the *product* of a regime of truth, which itself needs genealogical explanation. Similarly, ideas of justice, rights or freedom, do not stand above power relations or politics, they are part of power relations. For Foucault, knowledge, of all forms, is neither external to the world nor a way out of the world. Knowledge is intimately bound to power and politics.

Twentieth-century Marxism has also impacted strongly on the idea of politics. The primary schools of Marxism have been the critical 'humanistic' theory of the Frankfurt school, the anti-humanist structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser, and analytical and rational choice Marxism. Structuralist Marxism was of fairly short duration – from the late 1960s to the early 1970s – and had the least impact on anglophone political theory. If anything, it is now interesting only in relation to the more general concerns of structuralism as an intellectual movement. The more recent ideas of analytical and rational choice Marxism have utilized the resources of analytic philosophy, methodological individualism and rational choice to construct their idiosyncratic positions (see Elster 1985; Roemer 1986; Carver and Thomas 1995), downplaying the more historical aspects of traditional Marxism. Out of all of these, Critical Theory has had the most significant impact. Its most prestigious exponent – although some would deny that he is now so clearly identified with the aims of Critical Theory – is Habermas. The broad aims of Critical Theory have been concerned with a historically based critique of reason and the critical exposure of ideologies for the purposes of political and moral emancipation (see Jay 1973; Held 1980). Politics, like reason, is seen as a contingent historical idea. Habermas's work has been the most systematic, optimistic and developed project of Critical Theory to date, culminating in the last few decades with his attempt to construct a general theory of communicative rationality. Habermas endorses a more critical dialectical-hermeneutic approach to politics. He envisages the 'political' as tied to a search for a rational public consensus, through an ideal speech situation of unconstrained deliberative rationality (1984; 1987). Minimally, in all these spheres of Marxist thought (with the possible exception of Habermas whose ideas are more complex and nuanced), politics is seen as a sphere of historical contingency and conflict. More recent discourse analysis blends Foucaultian poststructuralism, deconstruction theory and late Marxist thought.[11] It identifies the political with discursive struggles to fix, hegemonically, the meaning or configuration of key terms in political discourse for the sake of power (see Laclau 1990; Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Further, the nation-state form – which has been so intimately connected to one sense of politics in Western thought – has also been subject to intense challenges in the last few decades from both globalism and localism.[12] The recent restless debates over communitarianism, nationalism, multiculturalism, difference theory, interculturalism and post-colonialism, have raised further searching questions over the precise location and character of politics, often outside the boundaries of the state.[13] Finally, there are growing numbers of theorists who argue that much modern political theory has actually displaced politics. Thus, Bonnie Honig comments that many modern political theorists are 'hostile to the disruption of politics', confining it to the 'juridical, administrative, or regulative tasks of stabilizing moral and political subjects' (1993: 2; also Barber 1988). This latter view sees many political theorists as unwilling to come to grips with the conflictual, messy and agonistic character of politics. Alternatively, theorists are seen as engaging in an 'effete' self-justifying activity which is distant from the 'hurly-burly' of the political world (see Gunnell 1986).[14]

In summary, politics moves across a spectrum of ideas, sometimes intersecting with, sometimes veering away from, systematic theory. Politics, in this sense, is not simply an object to be explained, but is, rather, the site of a multiplicity of contesting theories, languages and vocabularies. Theory, in this format, is no longer so unambiguously linked to practice. We are often in a double-bind here. In a pre-modern sense we still expect to see political theory intimately linked with a consensual practice. Yet, in a (post)modernist frame, theories often contest and skate over the surface of politics.

Political Theory: History and Tradition

There is a deep-rooted assumption within political theory that the study of the canon of classic texts is *the* defining aspect of the discipline of politics. The development of the academic discipline of politics in the nineteenth century began, in fact, with the historically based study of such texts. In this sense, the history of political thought became an established part of the discipline into the twentieth century. However, not all of those with interests in political theory in the late twentieth century have been so struck with its importance. For some, focusing on the history of political theory is in fact debilitating. As one critic notes, 'the study of the history of political thought should not be the core of the discipline of political theory . . . by treating it as the foundation of our study we have corrupted it and incapacitated ourselves as creative thinkers' (Spence 1980: 699; see also Freeman and Robertson 1980: 3). Spence compares the classic texts to Rorschach's inkblots 'on which

contemporary political theorists can project their aspirations and values' (1980: 705). For recent theorists, like John Dunn, this mistrust of history – which he sees more broadly within the recent Anglo-American tradition, particularly in the hegemony of liberal contractarian thought – is a matter of irritation (Dunn 1995: 13).[15] However, it is worth noting something of the genealogy of the relation of political theory and history before jumping to any conclusion on this issue.

History, like politics, is comparatively recent as an independent *academic* discipline, though we commonly trace its ancestry to remote antiquity. In fact, in the anglophone world, both history and the history of political theory, as self-conscious academic disciplines, are the product of the nineteenth century (see Boucher 1989; Condren 1985).[16] However, the history of political theory has served different roles in its comparatively short academic history since the nineteenth century, many of them, directly or indirectly, tied to politics. Some of these roles bear upon the function of history itself as a discipline. From its first inception, the history of political theory was viewed as part of the education of the citizen, teaching virtue through the great classic books and providing sustenance for character development. It was also, by the later nineteenth century, perceived to be an important aspect of the training in civic awareness and national consciousness. Universities had in mind particular professional citizens (civil servants), enabling them to see the 'development' of ideas which led to their own society. The history of political theory embodied the morally uplifting story of the nation. Thus 'historians believed that in their teaching and writing they were continuing a tradition which, by cultivating character and mental abilities, led to a discovery of truth proven by historical events' (Soffer 1994: 5). This process also functioned in the institutional interests of universities. Progressively, over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, universities 'successfully transformed a set of values encoded in the concept of "liberal education" into a licensing system for a national elite' (Soffer 1994: 5), a process which has continued into the twentieth century. In Britain, it was thus overtly nationalist and institutional concerns which impinged upon the construction of both the disciplines of history and the history of political theory. The same process was echoed in the creation of history in both North American and European universities.[17]

Further, the history of political theory, from a more directly academic perspective, was seen to embody the fundamental and perennial *ideas* of political science from the ancient Greeks to the present. This was one predominant sense of 'political science' in the early part of the twentieth century (and has not lost support to the present). The first modern usage of the term 'political science' dates back to thinkers like