A Preface to American Political Theory

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Chapter 1

What Is American Political Theory?

The Status of the Discipline

American political theory, as a discipline, is waiting to be born. Its various pieces are floating free of each other in different academic departments and among several subfields within political science. What, one might ask, can those scholars who study political philosophy, voting behavior, legal history, philosophy, social history, legislative roll calls, public law, the history of ideas, economic theory, political sociology, and American literature have in common? One answer is that people from each of these intellectual pursuits have made and continue to make contributions to American political theory. The problem does not lie in the diversity of backgrounds but in an unsystematic focus, in the failure to ask what we are doing when we engage in the study of a subject called American political theory.

A kind of quiet modus vivendi has resulted from a common target of inquiry—the American founding. The importance of this event in human history and for the American experience has made the founding era a magnet for American academics of every description, and the common focus has served as an anchor. Yet the moment we seek the roots of this founding or ask how the founding relates to political thinking and activities that come later, conflicting assumptions and methodologies drive apart the various pieces that make up American political theory. Furthermore, this modus vivendi has led to the tendency to assume that nothing of consequence for American political theory came before the founding era and that nothing of much consequence happened afterward. The nineteenth century in America is generally ignored as a
wasteland of political theory, and political theory in the twentieth century, including current approaches, is usually seen as unconnected to the issues of the founding era.

The creation of a discipline called American political theory does not require that we break off from other approaches to the study of politics. Instead, I argue that the discipline of our enterprise must assume the ability systematically to learn, use, and sometimes merge the approaches of these various other viewpoints. This in turn requires that we think more carefully about what it is we are doing when we engage in American political theory, that we become more self-conscious about our aims, assumptions, and methods.

A discipline necessarily implies a certain level of intellectual rigor, a set of important and difficult questions that serve as the focus of inquiry, and a methodology appropriate to the study of these questions that is both effective and sophisticated. Such an activity requires that those scholars engaged in it should have undergone an intellectual formation, a disciplining of the mind, that prepared them. A discipline, in other words, is a joint enterprise engaged in by a number of people who have undergone a certain intellectual formation so that they understand the common questions defining the enterprise, have a comprehensive familiarity with the relevant literature and materials, and know how to use the methodologies appropriate for advancing that literature.

"Discipline" is not used here in the loose academic sense to identify heterogeneous conglomerates of scholars gathered in a specific university department, such as the "discipline" of political science. Political science is currently more of an academic profession composed of several disciplines linked by a modus vivendi. There is, for example, a discipline within the profession built around the close textual analysis of a well-defined canon of great books, which requires both the mastery of the contents of these works and the techniques of textual analysis with which to study them. Another discipline requires mastery of a literature based upon the empirical study of political phenomena as well as upon the statistical, inferential, and research-design techniques required to evaluate and extend such research. We can identify other disciplines within political science, such as those built around formal mathematics or around a foreign language, but the main point to be grasped here is that within the profession of political science
there are several disciplines, each requiring that the person practic­ing it be formed and developed in a certain way.

A "discipline" is defined by a specific, rigorous intellectual for­mation; a "profession" is a body of persons that has licensed or publicly certified that its members have attained a certain minimal level of proficiency in the delivery of a service. Presumably, since a profession is usually deemed to require some form of advanced training, one must successfully undergo a discipline in order to be licensed as a professional. Therefore a discipline refers to a process that is open in the sense that it never ends, either in its develop­ment or in its application, and anyone can decide to enter it, even amateurs; a profession refers to a status that is by definition closed—both in the sense that the status is closed to those who have not been licensed and in the sense that once the status is at­tained, no further development is required to retain the status.

The current idea of a professional contains two interesting am­biguities. First, we speak of someone who engages in a specific ac­tivity for a livelihood as a professional (a professional writer, for ex­ample), but at the same time the essence of a profession is that "though men enter it for the sake of a livelihood, the measure of their success is the service they perform not the gains which they amass."1 In other words, professionals do not "keep score" by the amount of money they make but by some professional standard, such as the number and quality of their publications, discoveries, patents, cures, or successful court cases and the recognition given these "scores" through various forms of nonmonetary awards and honors. A second ambiguity relates to the need for a professional to "profess" something as true—in the old days one professed a faith—and at the same time to follow inherent professional stand­ards of neutrality and universal applicability. Essentially a profes­sional professes a high level of standards in the delivery of a ser­vice, but he or she also professes that a certain discipline will be most likely to produce that high level of service. For this reason a profession requires a licensing system, both to ensure standards and to keep out those who have not undergone a proper discipline.

Every profession, although it licenses for a common, minimal discipline, still contains within itself a variety of disciplines that have developed above and beyond that common discipline. For ex-
ample, medicine requires a common American Medical Association license as a minimum before a person can be called "doctor," but the discipline of a surgeon is not the same as that of a pediatrician, a psychiatrist, or an ophthalmologist, each of which requires substantial training beyond medical school. Of course, each branch of medicine has its more advanced and specialized certification, but pediatrics is a specialty and medicine is the profession. In the same way political science is a profession that defines a minimum, common certification but that contains a number of specialties defined by a more advanced discipline. Unlike medical schools, however, where each specialty is organized in a separate department, political science combines its various disciplines in a single department.

On the one hand, the presence of several disciplines within a single university department tends to divide those scholars who are ultimately studying the same subject or set of phenomena. This diversity has required over the past century an almost continuous accommodation among disciplines within political science departments, an accommodation that has often been acrimonious since the wedge that divides the parties is much more than methodological diversity. On the other hand, the presence of several disciplines in the same department has had the beneficial effect of continuously reinforcing in everyone's mind those features that the various parties do share—a common interest in the study of politics and a common dedication to the highest level of disciplined inquiry. The competition and the mutual opposition have led proponents of each discipline to shore up and improve their respective positions, not to the point where the uneasy accommodation is based upon mutual agreement, but to the extent that each advocate at least recognizes that the others do impose a training, an orderly and difficult set of standards, upon themselves and their students, which constitutes disciplined political inquiry. They sometimes see in each other patterns of inquiry that are misguided and fruitless, but the accommodation tends to be based upon a quiet acknowledgment that the others do pursue a recognizable discipline of the mind.

To a certain extent this recognition is manifested through the publication of scholarly books and articles. No matter how little regard one discipline might receive and despite some striking differ-
ences in opinion over the preferred publication pattern, three characteris-
tics together create the operational definition of a successful political scientist: (1) a systematic inquiry more or less guided by rigorous methodology, (2) the development from that inquiry of a sustained analysis and argument that proceeds according to recognizable canons of logic, and (3) success in passing a refereed evaluation by a group of one's peers to produce a publication in a respected forum. Put another way, the tendency in political science is to define a discipline as the combination of systematic inquiry, logical exposition, and successful "marketplace" (i.e., neutral) evaluation—with all three combining to discipline the work of an individual.

This publication-based modus vivendi among the various disciplines within political science has had some generally beneficial effects beyond reinforcing a recognition of shared interests and dedication. A primary benefit has been an advance in sophistication by almost all of the disciplines in the profession as a result of the stimulation produced by deep, mutual critiques. Another has been the tendency to continue the exposure of doctoral students in their formal training to several political science disciplines (except in those relatively rare and unfortunate instances where one discipline or another has "captured" a department), which has the result of internalizing the disciplinary tensions within individuals in a way that often produces a useful self-critique, quiet though it may be.

In the context of this divided yet accommodated profession called political science, American political theory has an unusual place that is presently anomalous but potentially important. American political theory is not yet a discipline since those who say they are engaged in the enterprise offer several competing versions, none of which is adequate as a discipline because each is partial—partial in the double sense of being incomplete in its definition of the project and of favoring or being biased toward one of the other relevant disciplines in political science. This partiality is a result of the history of political science in America.

Born as an American profession in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (although the systematic study of politics was born twenty-five hundred years ago in Greece), political science was at first heavily oriented toward the theoretical discussion
of American politics and political institutions. One could almost say that the field we currently tend to call American political theory was in the beginning the core of American academic discourse about politics. As the profession was gradually fragmented into specializations, pieces of the total enterprise pulled away from this core and developed distinct identities within the profession, often defined by their own methodologies as well as by more narrowly focused research. As a result, over the years American political theory has become almost a residual category, that which remains after everyone else has left.

The peculiar position of American political theory within political science can be illustrated in several ways. The American Political Science Association publishes a yearly membership directory that lists its approximately ten thousand members in a variety of ways, including by specialty. The association recognizes twenty-six fields of interest, but American political theory is not one of them. Still, virtually every political science department has someone teaching American political theory, sometimes more than one person, and American political theory is usually part of the standard introductory American government course. Yet the job listings almost never have ads recruiting scholars in American political theory. Instead, there is usually a sentence that lists American political theory as one of several possibilities for ancillary interest in addition to the area or specialty for which the person will be hired. As a result, those teaching American political theory tend to come to it through the back door and lack a common disciplinary base.

Once, at a conference attended by nineteen well-published scholars in American political theory, I asked the participants what subjects they had been originally hired to teach. The responses included: American political theory (two), history of political thought (two), public policy, political behavior, international relations, medieval political thought, methodology, constitutional law, voting behavior, the presidency and congress, urban politics, public administration, public law, statistics, modern political theory, state politics, and public choice. Although this sample was hardly random, the phenomenon of teachers of American political theory coming to the task from another part of the profession is familiar enough to those of us involved that the sample is recognizable as reasonably representative.
Nor is this necessarily an unhealthy phenomenon; there is much to be said for making American political theory the meeting place of the discipline. Furthermore, the nature of American political theory is such that as an enterprise it must draw upon and relate to many or most of the specializations that have withdrawn from it. Earlier reference was made to the critical potential of American political theory, and this potential lies in using its natural connectedness to the various disciplines within political science to aid the development of a comprehensive, coherent study of political phenomena that moves beyond the current minimally accommodating, mutually suspicious, haphazardly reinforcing divided activity.

One major purpose of this book is to offer a vision of a discipline called American political theory and its requirements from its practitioners in terms of common preparation. The book is in this sense a preface to a discipline, an invitation to an explicit, orderly discussion about what those of us who teach, think about, and write in American political theory are doing and should do. The intent, however, is not to erect fences within political science, to create an orthodoxy, or to develop criteria for licensing practitioners in American political theory. Rather, anyone who is interested in pursuing the study of American political theory, those scholars in another discipline (in the sense of a departmentalized profession such as history or philosophy), other academics elsewhere in political science, or anyone outside of the academy—whether they are students by matriculation, amateur interest, or cross-disciplinary research—all are invited to view this book as an aid to study, as an introduction to the topic, as a preface to a discipline struggling to be born.

What Is American Political Theory?

The first step in our analysis is to reach a provisional understanding of the three terms that define the enterprise—American, political, and theory. Each term has multiple usages and meanings that are confused and confounded, and therefore we must draw some important distinctions. My strategy here is to lay out the major alternative understandings of each term and then to suggest which
of these apply most appropriately to the pursuit of American political theory. The discussion is designed to be useful and evocative rather than to resolve the ambiguity and contradictions. If the discussion is successful, those readers who disagree with my position will know precisely where the disagreement lies.

The term "theory" has in various contexts been used interchangeably with a number of other terms such as "philosophy," "thought," "ideology," and "hypothesis." For example, in everyday, ordinary language we often use the term in reference to a single statement that is contingent or hypothetical in nature. The classical formulation "If A, then B" is frequently termed a theory. Certainly a hypothesis is a theoretical statement, but a theory worthy of the name comprises a number of logically linked statements, not just one proposition. Implicit in such usage is the assumption that a theory is something not yet proven or for which there is not yet strong evidence. Perhaps this assumption results from the appropriation of the term from the physical sciences, where any statement, even if supported by evidence, is still considered falsifiable and therefore contingent rather than demonstrably true. Yet even in science, where all statements are to some extent contingent, "theory" is usually used in reference to a logically linked set of propositions that has significant empirical support. That is, a theory is both far more complex than a hypothesis because it is composed of many statements and less contingent than a hypothesis because its propositions are former hypotheses that have been to a greater or lesser extent supported by systematically gathered evidence. For these two reasons it is improper to use "theory" as equivalent to "hypothesis"; one cannot speak sensibly of "American political hypotheses" as an enterprise.

One can speak of "American political thought," however, and this is the phrase most commonly used in the titles of books that supposedly introduce the subject. Certainly theoretical thinking is the attempt to be thoughtful in the sense of seeking to be serious in purpose, careful in reasoning, and cautious in reaching conclusions; moreover, "thought" does refer to the process of conceiving ideas and of reflecting upon them or to the ideas that result from reasoning. But theory is not the same thing as thought. Thought encompasses the processes and results of spiritual meditation, imaginative and creative invention, stream-of-consciousness ran-
domness, conditioned cognitive responses, opinions based upon prejudice, and untested or untestable common-sense propositions. Theory, on the other hand, implies a careful, considered, logically structured explanation for an event or events that is susceptible to modification or rejection on the basis of further systematically presented information—either through empirical research (science) or through the rigorous explication of implications (philosophy).

An examination of the prominent textbooks with American political thought in the title shows that they typically contain either partial texts by a large number of people expressing a wide range of opinion or that they discuss a wide range of thinkers in some kind of historical context. In the case of edited collections, because the arguments are usually just a part of a person's position, a complete theory cannot be laid out. Not even the tenth essay of The Federalist constitutes a reasonably complete theory. Thus, political thoughts are presented that can encompass anything in the way of thought just outlined. In the case of the history of ideas, the tendency is to sacrifice the explication and discussion of theory and to replace it with summaries of the changes in dominant patterns of political thought. Such an approach also usually attempts to explain the factors that caused the changes in the patterns of thought shared by Americans at a given time.

A more careful examination of such books shows that they do not claim to present political theory but to represent or describe the ideas, principles, and opinions prevalent at a given time, among a given people, in a given place. In short, these books offer purportedly representative thoughts of certain groups or certain eras of American history or both. Such representations can be significant and are useful in a basic descriptive sense, but they do not constitute theory. The editors of such volumes, in the selection of their titles, tend to be very straightforward and honest about their goal, but the implications of such an introduction to American political theory are not helpful.

First, to use a book on political thought as an introduction to American political theory implies either that there is no difference between theory and thought or that there is no such thing as political theory. Second, such a presentation implies that the thoughts of all those writers in the book somehow have equal or equivalent theoretical status. Third, by implication theoretical importance is
reduced to or confounded with its impact on the popular thought of an era, thus suggesting that ideas in general are rooted in and relevant only to particular historical circumstances. Let us consider each implication briefly in turn.

If no difference exists between theory and thought, then on what grounds are we to urge our students to seek deeper levels of understanding and more rigorous logical explanations? If teachers using such books do not point out the superior reasoning in one piece compared with another, regardless of the position being defended, then we might just as well let students go home, utter anything they wish, and mail them a degree. If there is no theory, then not only can there be no philosophical discourse about politics, there can be no science of politics either.

Nor is it helpful to suggest to students that all political thoughts have equivalent theoretical status. It is one thing for teachers to be patient with students who in their attempts at learning utter the silly or the banal; it is another thing to hold up to these students as a model of political discourse an amorphous melange that mixes the good with the bad and the ugly. Theory is built around an exploration of deeper, more fundamental issues, and mixing theory with superficial political expostulations will understandably lead a student to conclude that the political correctness of a thought is more important than the reasoning that led to it.

The view that all thoughts on politics are equivalent in value is related to the confusion caused by confounding the importance of a theory with its impact on a given historical period. Any theory worthy of the name is a claim for some truth that transcends not only its historical era but also its culture and the intent of its discoverer. Good theory can be used by people of different ideologies, from different nations, and for opposing interests. For example, empirical theories about the impact of different electoral systems on party systems or the relative merits of congressional and parliamentary modes of organizing the legislature can be used by people on any continent in any year. Likewise, theories linking political institutions with preferred political outcomes can transcend the historical era and its place of origin. For an interesting example, one could compare John C. Calhoun’s theory of the concurrent majority from the 1840s with the theory of black power enunciated in the
1960s. A striking similarity exists between a theory devised in support of slavery in the American south and a much later theory devised to advance the control of African Americans over their destiny. The point here is not to claim that Stokely Carmichael got his idea for black power from Calhoun; rather, it is to argue that Calhoun's theory could be used by others of a completely different persuasion because this transcendence is vital to good theory. It is one thing to ask about the historical impact of an idea or a theory at a particular time at a particular place and an entirely different thing to ask for the meaning and implications of a theory that is not necessarily bounded by time, place, or interest.

Failure to distinguish the meaning of a theory from its immediate historical impact is partly responsible for the tendency—now common among historians and political scientists—to confuse theory with ideology. This confusion is based upon two premises: first, that all human ideas are conditioned by some aspect of the human environment, and second, that ideological thinking differs from nonideological thinking primarily by being more coherent in its logical structuring.

In its broad form the first premise holds that ideas do not have an independent existence but are reflections of processes and events in the material world. In its narrow form it holds that political theories are only ideas devised to protect, advance, and justify specific political interests at a particular time in history. For now it is sufficient to suggest that even if all political thinking is initially at the service of historical interests (a highly debatable presumption), political theory refers to political thinking that has a content and structure that allows it to be used by different, even opposing, interests at different points in history. If there is such a phenomenon, then political theory describes it, and a theory is distinguishable from an ideology—with the latter term reserved to describe the phenomenon of political thinking that is only in the service of a particular interest at a particular time.

This notion of particularity, of course, is the minimal basis for distinction. One might want to argue for a more definite distinction on the grounds that even though much or most political thinking is in the service of particular historical interests, some of this thinking may be of such a content and a structure that it can be used in a variety of historical settings by people with a variety of
interests. Furthermore, it is perfectly possible that some political thinking can be devised that neither originates from narrow political interests nor is used directly in support of specific political interests. Put another way, political theory of some types may be so inherently opposed to supporting specific interests that it cannot be used for historically conditioned purposes. For now we will simply leave open this possibility, if for no other reason than that its status is one of the fundamental problems addressed by American political theory.

The second premise underlying the confusion between theory and ideology is descriptively correct but is often the basis for a faulty deduction. Ideologies do in fact have a logical structure that is similar to and often indistinguishable from that of theory. Political scientists speak of ideologies as being belief systems whose propositions are constrained or linked by an often elaborate logic. For example, in the study of voting behavior those voters who can give an explanation for their vote in terms of a set of propositions that are structured by a coherent, recognizable logic are termed "ideological voters." These ideologies are recognizable to most students as "isms," such as liberalism, conservatism, communism, and so forth. Since these ideologies have internal structures the same as or similar to theories and since these ideologies usually can be attributed in origin to some well-known political theorist such as John Locke, Edmund Burke, or Karl Marx, the straightforward deduction emerges that ideologies are theories, and thus theories must be ideologies.

Undoubtedly theories can be used as ideologies, but are theories automatically ideologies? The confusion results from comparing the internal structures of theories and ideologies instead of considering the purpose and the psychological status of each. Another line of study has determined that one key attribute of an ideology is the tendency of its holder to use it for psychological protection. That is, ideologies are elaborate rationalizations that help protect the individual's ego by helping that person deal with a complicated, changing world, by assisting in the creation and maintenance of a self-image, and by aiding in the processing of new, unfamiliar information. In short, ideologies are simply a more elaborate form of rationalization arising not from the need to protect one's objective interests but from psychological needs not
necessarily tied to one's objective interests. Ideologies, from this point of view, arise from irrational needs.

This contrasting view of ideology serves to drive another wedge between ideology and theory. On the one hand, ideology is seen as the rational inclination to protect one's material interests; on the other hand, ideologies are viewed as serving one's irrational psychological needs, even at the expense of material interests. In this second view ideologies are used to filter out information that conflicts with the already existing view of the world, the self, and the place of the self in the world. Once formed, ideologies are resistant to change since the ego is so heavily invested in the existing belief system. This strong tendency for ideology to be resistant to factual information or to reasoned argument or to both really defines the phenomenon. Political theory provides a logical explanation for political events and processes that is by definition susceptible to change or to rejection on the basis of facts or arguments or both; ideology is a theory or theory-like belief system (that is, a structured argument) that is used for psychological protection such that it is resistant to alteration by facts or by reasoned argument.

Political theories may be used as ideologies, but they are not automatically ideologies. Part of the problem for theory that arises from the behavioral literature of political science results from the quite proper conclusion by behaviorists that since natural science proceeds on the basis of observables and since we can observe behavior but not motives, we cannot attribute a motive to an individual with any degree of scientific certainty. Thus we cannot behaviorally distinguish a structured argument that is being used to justify a material interest from one being used to defend the ego or distinguish either of these from one being used to seek truth. A problem arises from using the term ideology to describe voters with apparent theories: It simultaneously attributes them with two contradictory views of ideology, rational interest-seeking versus irrational ego protection, but leaves no room for truth-seeking. Unless the possibility of truth-seeking, and thus of theory, is allowed, however, one must attribute the same ideological purpose to behavioral research, in which case the work of empirical political science must either be viewed as in the service of some material interest of the behaviorists or else be seen as serving to satisfy some irrational need of the researcher.
The relationship of theory to ideology is thus such that a theory can be used as an ideology, but theory and ideology are not the same since theory is in some sense always truth-seeking, something that by definition ideology cannot be (although an ideology could be correct or true by accident). A final, important distinction remains to be made between theory and philosophy, a distinction that raises some serious questions for American political theory as a discipline.

It is a matter of more than passing interest that one never reads or hears of American political philosophy. The phrase seems somehow pretentious or inappropriate, but the unwillingness to use it has serious implications. It is standard in the political science literature to look upon the activities of political philosophers as being essentially normative; their concern is with moral, ethical, or value judgments. This view distinguishes political philosophy from the empirical tasks of describing and explaining political phenomena, termed political science. Since the most prominent American political theorists include men like James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams—who were directly involved in some aspect of our nation's founding—any refusal to call them political philosophers implies that the founding of our political system did not involve normative considerations, that our political system was not designed to be "good," and also that no one since then has been concerned with the manner and extent to which our political system might be considered good. Obviously this is not true. Thus to the extent that American political thought has included concern for matters like virtue, the goodness or badness of public policy, and the justice or worth of our national political institutions and processes, American political theory is open to the possibility of concerning itself with political philosophy.

Some scholars would argue that although they are willing to include normative concerns under the term American political theory, the absence in American political thinking of architectonic political philosophies of the kind associated with Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Marx, or Mill justifies our not using American political philosophy as the description of our enterprise. This softened position is open to two criticisms, however. First, Plato, Aristotle, and other recognized philosophers did not argue that the creation of large, complicated theories was needed before the term "philoso-
"phy" could be applied to the effort. Instead, philosophy has always been viewed as a process of seeking the truth, not as the production of grandiose texts. Second, this position begs one of the critical questions that American political theory must consider—the extent to which American politics has been guided by normative concerns, the extent to which it should be so governed, and by what values. In sum, even if there are no identifiable individuals in American history with the philosophical stature of a Plato or an Aristotle, the possibility still obtains that this book should more properly be entitled A Preface to American Political Philosophy.

Political philosophy properly understood is not opposed to the empirical study of politics; instead, political philosophy includes political science. This can be illustrated by considering the various questions that a student of politics might ask. First, one might ask for a description of how current political institutions and processes work; a response would involve a descriptive task that falls under empirical political science. One could then ask how change in political institutions occurs, including how and why our current ones came into being. These are also empirical questions, but they require an explanatory rather than a descriptive response.

Humans engage in science primarily because they prefer to understand their situation rather than to remain ignorant. Furthermore, humans developed language, culture, social systems, and institutions for making collective decisions. Language allowed the creation of culture through which to pass knowledge from generation to generation. Culture, over time, permitted the creation of large, stable societies, which required institutions to maintain and to give them direction. This in turn required making choices, and politics was developed to replace choice imposed by force and violence with choice based upon persuasion.

The art of persuasion is known as rhetoric; political rhetoric aims at winning the arguments about which direction a society should take. In classical Greece rhetoric spawned a competitor that sought not merely to win the argument but to provide an understanding of which direction society should take. Political philosophy was based upon the search for the good political system. Rhetoric was intended to teach individuals how to be persuasive in support of their narrow interests, but political philosophy was intended to teach them how to be persuasive in support of broader,
shared human ends. Indeed, the belief that all humans had vital ends that they shared was the ground from which political philosophy arose.

Political philosophy required that a distinction be made between people's real needs and what they thought they wanted without proper reflection. It also required that we understand the nature of politics, its institutions and processes, and the range of possibilities open to humans on an imperfect earth. Aristotle organized political questions in a way that can be illustrated by a continuum representing an infinite number of possible-states-of-affairs merging into one another and arranged by their relative closeness to an ideal.

Aristotle argues that first one must have a standard by which to evaluate the present, and it seems reasonable to use the best standard, the ideal. The first task, then, is to analyze the implication of the ideal and to determine why the ideal is worth pursuing. The former is an analytical undertaking; the latter is a normative one. The ideal defines the end of the continuum, but the nature of the human situation is such that it is not possible to have the ideal in the real world as opposed to the world of ideas. The question, then, is to ask how closely the ideal can be approached in the real world (represented by point A). The answer involves a prudential calculation based upon the best empirical information available and a clear understanding of the goals and ideals relevant to the decision. For example, if our ideal is justice, to approach it too closely might entail serious compromise with respect to the ideals of equality or stability. That is, since no one ideal, and thus no one continuum, can encompass all that is of value to humans, a highly developed sense of the normative must be brought to bear on the available information in order to answer this question.

Point B represents our place on the continuum at the moment. This determination must be made empirically, but note that without a normative context, the continuum to define the situation, this empirical question cannot be sensibly answered. Point C represents the point where we wish to go next, in part because it is closer to the ideal and in part because we wish to test what hap-
pens when we move closer to the ideal. Empirical political science has as one of its aims the ability to tell us how to adjust institutions in order to move from B to C, but the reasons that we might want to do so belong more properly in the realm that some call critical theory, which is a manifestation of normative theory.\footnote{10}

Thus, in Aristotle's conceptualization, empirical political science is a part of the total analysis encompassed by political philosophy, rather than being in opposition to it. Political theory cannot be isolated from political philosophy, since its three forms—empirical theory, analytic theory, and normative theory—are each subparts of the general philosophical program. Political philosophy can be called the enterprise that encompasses, indeed requires, all three forms of theory. Political theory can thus be used as a linguistic alternative to political philosophy, even though the latter is a whole and the former implies parts of the same whole.

The word "theory" in the book's title is intended not only to signal the possibility of there being an American political philosophy or philosophies but also to imply that the enterprise includes all three forms of theoretical discourse.

What Is American Political Theory?

American political theory as a discipline should be defined by the systematic, cumulative activities of scholars engaged in the common enterprise of studying American politics theoretically. Yet even this seemingly tautological description hides a serious ambiguity that prevents American political theory from becoming a true discipline. The ambiguity results from the widely noted lack of a definition for politics to use as a focus for the common enterprise.\footnote{11}

There has been a varied response to this lack of a common definition. Some scholars turn it into a virtue by arguing that any attempt to define politics is a waste of time and energy at best and is probably dangerous because it prematurely limits the scope of study.\footnote{12} Most scholars working in political science or American political theory probably accept this position or its variant, that because of continued definitional diversity the best we can do is to define political science as the field that political scientists study,
and thus politics is whatever those who study it say it is.\textsuperscript{13} Still, despite the general belief that a definition is dangerous or unnecessary, most scholars writing theoretically about politics feel compelled to associate themselves with some definition, perhaps in uneasy agreement with E.E. Schattschneider's caution that

there is something strange about the feeling of scholars that a definition [of politics] is not necessary. Inevitably there is a lack of focus in the discipline because it is difficult to see things that are undefined. People who cannot define the object of their studies do not know what they are looking for, and if they do not know what they are looking for, how can they tell when they have found it?

Schattschneider then compares political science without a definition of politics to "a mountain of data surrounding a vacuum."\textsuperscript{14}

Schattschneider is probably correct in his intuition that a definition is needed but too demanding in his expectations for that definition. Certainly any definition should permit us in general to distinguish the political from the nonpolitical, but it is not clear that the definition needs to be so precise that it allows no room for argument. Indeed, more explicit argument about the nature of politics should be allowed by any definition since such arguments are the essence of politics. With this in mind, we shall briefly examine a number of prominent definitions, develop a characterization of politics from them that quietly informs contemporary political science, and then show how American political theory has an implicit operational definition of politics that is both consistent with this characterization and less problematic in its provisions for distinguishing the political from the nonpolitical.

Let us begin by considering a number of characterizations that have been advanced by prominent students of politics.\textsuperscript{15} The first is representative of a more traditional approach to the study of American politics that predominated before the mid-1950s. "The central point of attention in American political science . . . is that part of the affairs of the state which centers in government, and that kind or part of government which speaks through law" (Charles S. Hyneman).\textsuperscript{16} Hyneman's characterization emphasizes the importance of laws and institutions to politics, although his
first four words allow for much more to be included on the periphery of attention. Still, critics of such a view argue for a definition that allows more prominent inclusion of processes that are less formally, less directly part of governmental institutions. Initially such critics were especially interested in adding political parties, interest groups, and bureaucratic decision making to the central framework of American political theory; a decision-making approach seemed most useful toward this end.

"Politics or the political includes the events that happen around the decision-making centers of government" (Alfred de Grazia). De Grazia's characterization retains the link between politics and governmental institutions but opens up the political to include events that might affect governmental decision making. Economic and social processes that impinge on decision making thus become fair game, or fairer game since it is not clear that Hyne-

man's definition excludes such considerations beyond denying their centrality for study. A decision-making approach has a number of other virtues, not the least of which is its more explicit introduction of the study of conflict and cooperation into political analysis. In sum, a decision-making definition of politics is broader and more inclusive than a definition that emphasizes governmental institutions and introduces more explicitly the notions of social process, conflict, and cooperation into the study of politics.

For a long while, however, some scholars had been concerned that a definition that limited politics to the governmental was unduly narrow for political scientists who wanted to study a broader range of phenomena. For example, it was argued, political scientists might encounter tribal societies that lacked formal governmental institutions, but they should be free to study such societies. In retrospect this example offered a strange basis upon which to argue for a definition of politics that denied the centrality of governmental institutions for politics. By the time political science became a profession in the twentieth century the number of people living in a tribal condition was extremely small and rapidly disappearing. Political scientists tend to have cognate fields of study toward which their research opens, whether it be history, sociology, philosophy, psychology, or anthropology, and sometimes political scientists will find a need to enter this cognate field completely in their research. Why could not those studying tribal societies admit
that they were in effect anthropologists studying prepolitical phenomena? Their insistence upon a definition of politics that included a form of social organization that once had been profoundly important and interesting but that now had become largely ephemeral did not advance the study of tribal forms very much; instead it led to a view of politics that could no longer be used to distinguish the political from the nonpolitical. Whatever the extent to which the anthropological view rested upon the study of tribal society, the virtual disappearance of pure tribal organization into settings conditioned by governmental institutions has rendered this anthropological need for a noninstitutional definition of politics, indeed the entire approach, moribund.

A more lasting and coherent position in favor of a broad definition of politics views human behavior as constituting a seamless web that can be analyzed in all its parts, using relatively few concepts. Since political scientists are greatly interested in power, some have argued that power is the essence of the political.

"The political process is the shaping, distribution, and exercise of power. . . . Political science is concerned with power in general" (Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan). Lasswell and Kaplan's definition is intuitively appealing, and it really is difficult to think of a political decision, process, or situation that does not involve power. Yet it is possible to think of many situations involving power that are not political. Throwing a shot-put involves power, but if throwing the put is also political then we have lost all ability to distinguish the political from the nonpolitical, and we no longer have a useful, functioning definition. The example, some readers will say, is unfair since it confuses physical power with political power, but Lasswell and Kaplan's definition does not make such a distinction. Nor does their definition distinguish between being robbed at gunpoint and serving on a jury or between the use of military force and the Supreme Court's applying the U.S. Bill of Rights against the states. All are included as political phenomena so that it is now perfectly sensible to speak of the "politics of the family." Some political scientists may be happy with a definition that supports acts of professional imperialism whenever it strikes our fancy, but the word "politics" is inherited from Greek origins that made such distinctions precisely because politics was the replacement of force with persuasion and because politics involved
the marriage or blending of justice with power. The definition of politics as simply power, then, is analytically useless since it cannot distinguish the political from the nonpolitical, linguistically barbarous since it empties an old term of its normal meaning, and empirically problematic since we are unable to apply the term without solving the analytic and linguistic problems.

Perhaps for these reasons, except for a general agreement that politics always includes power, today relatively few political scientists equate politics with power. William Bluhm's definition of politics is interesting since it includes power as part of a broader decision-making approach: "Reduced to its universal elements, then, politics is a social process characterized by activity involving rivalry and cooperation in the exercise of power, and culminating in the making of decisions for a group."\(^{19}\)

Although Lasswell and Kaplan's definition is not used much anymore, David Easton's definition is widely accepted and used by political scientists: "Political life consists of those actions related to the authoritative allocation of values for a society."\(^{20}\) The term "values" refers to anything upon which humans place a value, whether material, spiritual, or symbolic, and thus the definition looks at first like an inclusive one; however, the key operative word would appear to be "authoritative." If power refers to the ability of A to get B to do something B would otherwise not do, authority refers to the exercise of power by A that is viewed by B as legitimate.\(^{21}\) Thus, a robber does not legitimately take my money, but under properly political conditions the tax man legitimately does so. It is difficult to see how authority can exist apart from governmental institutions if one is allocating values in such a way that the allocation is viewed as legitimate by an entire society, and thus Easton's definition does not really differ much from Hyneman's in its breadth or in its implications.

In any case, the easy affinity between Hyneman's and Easton's definitions is illustrated in other definitions generated by political scientists in an attempt to understand the object of their study. Alan C. Isaak offers a good example: "Politics has something to do with the use of power to reconcile conflicts over the distribution of goods and values. Typically, this is done through the institutions of government."\(^{22}\) Note that most of the language from the decision-making approach is also present in Isaak's definition, al-
though the use of "distribution" here, just as the use of "allocation" in Easton's definition, has some troubling implications. Primarily, the implication is that politics somehow works from the top down, going from the authorities to those below them; in contrast, a pure decision-making language implies that a group of people in a horizontal relationship can reach a collective decision on their own without reference to a hierarchy. Also, many decisions, such as electing people to office, amending a constitution, and deciding whether a person is guilty of a crime, are made by an electorate or a jury and are not distributions or allocations of values as much as they are the defining of, the exercising of, and the imposing of values from below. Since much of politics in America depends upon these "values from below," a definition of politics useful for American political theory might be better served by decision-making language.

Also missing from these definitions are the two notions that politics is at minimum the substitution of persuasion for force and that in its complete sense politics is the process of seeking the good life, or *eudaemonia*. Theorists such as Christian Bay update this second notion of Aristotle's by arguing that politics involves the building of a just community based upon fundamental human needs that are both material and spiritual.

One can see in Isaak the straining toward a definition that on the one hand includes everything that needs to be included and on the other excludes what needs to be excluded. Politics has "something to do" with power and conflict, and "typically" governmental institutions are involved. That most recent definitions of politics contain such strained construction does not reflect the lack of consensus among political scientists about the constitution of politics; rather, it reflects the difficulty of precisely defining anything so amorphous. Nor does the difficulty suggest that we should do without a definition, since, for example, research on American politics does not require a definition that can cover tribal society. Indeed, any useful definition in the American context will describe politics as we practice it.

David W. Minar correctly notes that the American political system is above all constitutional, which explains why so many books on American political theory contain "constitution" in their titles and why American political theory seems naturally to gravitate to-
ward an analysis that includes discussion of the founding era. Though Minar’s definition is not entirely felicitous, it points us in an interesting direction: “By politics we mean a process for the seeking of authoritative solutions to social problems, by constitution, a generalized guide to this process.”

The cramped prose reflects an attempt to include the basics of Easton’s definition, a sign of its hold on mainstream political science. Yet if we consider Easton’s phrase “authoritative allocation of value” and ask what aspect of American politics makes anything authoritative, the answer has to be popular consent as embodied in a constitution.

American political theory has always worked implicitly from an operational definition of politics based on constitutionalism; that is, politics consists of processes conditioned by a written constitution. In other words, in order for something to be considered political, it must be brought under the description of the constitution. Obviously this means that institutions described in the constitution are political, but so are processes that are related to the operation of those institutions. Thus, political parties are political because they operate in the context of elections, and elections are constitutionally conditioned. Without the constitution, there would be no elections and thus no parties. Interest groups operate in the context of elections or of the branches of government created by the constitution. Bureaucratic processes are political if the bureaucracy belongs to an executive branch created by a constitution and charged with the task of carrying out legislation passed by another constitutional creation—the legislature.

Our federal structure creates national, state, and local constitutions so that we have politics in all of these arenas. Until and unless an issue is brought under the constitutional umbrella, until it is brought into the public realm, it remains in the private or nonpolitical realm. Congress can appropriate an issue to the public, constitutional realm by passing legislation affecting that activity, or it can move the issue back into the private sphere. In the same way the Supreme Court can interpret the Constitution so as to include or remove an issue from the political realm. Much constitutional controversy, including matters of rights, occurs in debate over whether issues should be defined as political rather than as private.
The use of constitutionalism to define politics in America is also an efficient and effective way of including issues that most political scientists wish to include as political phenomena while at the same time denoting the nonpolitical with reasonable clarity. In another context I laid out the purposes for which Americans write constitutions; in this context these purposes serve to define the core of the political for American political theory. Any American constitution worthy of the name will

1. Define a way of life—the values, major principles, and definition of justice toward which a people aim
2. Create and/or define the people of the community so directed
3. Define the political institutions, the process of collective decision making, to be instrumental in achieving the way of life—in other words, define a form of government
4. Define the regime, the public, and citizenship
5. Establish the basis for the authority of the regime
6. Distribute political power
7. Structure conflict so it can be managed
8. Limit governmental power.

Here we have a summary of the meaning of politics. Matters that most political scientists want to include are here included—if not explicitly, then by direct implication. Any behavior relevant to the definition of politics contained in a constitution is political behavior. Questions of philosophy or of theory relevant to this definition of politics are part of political philosophy or political theory. State and urban politics, intergovernmental relations, presidential and legislative studies, parties and pressure groups, elections and public opinion, constitutional law and judicial process, public policy and public administration—everything now considered part of the study of American politics is included. The definition is also flexible because constitutions can be amended or replaced to include new institutions, include different values, redistribute political power, or alter the understanding of citizenship so that, for example, matters of race, gender, ethnicity, morals, or economics that were not before considered part of politics become political and thus part of the material that political scientists study.
Ultimately, the empirical study of politics boils down to the search for patterns or regularities in human behavior. We conduct such a search because we wish to understand the grounding for such behavior but also because we hope to use our understanding of these patterns and regularities for prediction. In political science prediction proceeds at several levels. At the most superficial level we wish to predict the outcome of specific historical events, such as elections, legislative roll calls, or judicial decisions, to name just a few examples. As social scientists we have deeper, more important goals, however—predicting across several events to define the probable consequences of a policy and predicting across an even wider range of events to define the probable operation and consequences of institutions and political processes. This last level is that of constitutionalism and constitutional design.

As we move from more specific to more general problems of prediction, a sound political science is likely to be more helpful because it is not necessary that prediction go beyond the most general, statistical level, which means that a fruitful empirical political science can be of much greater assistance for those interested in constitutional design than for those interested in winning a given election.

The link between the empirical study of politics and constitutional design has three interesting potential consequences. First, the relative importance of an empirical study can be gauged by the possibility that it can contribute to our understanding of policy or of institutional outcomes, which may help winnow the wheat from the chaff in our major journals. The more a particular study helps us understand and predict policy and institutional consequences, the more useful it is for constitutionalism.26

Second, such a link argues for more attention to the integrative study of empirical research already completed. There is a myriad of research that remains largely unconnected with respect to major theoretical implications. The time may have come to give more weight and journal space to studies that “clean up” the literature, with a view to developing useful generalizations rather than new findings; this will in turn suggest key areas for further empirical research.27 Such analysis is likely to be improved by using a constitutional approach.

Third, to the extent that constitutional design requires that we
make choices about the ends or consequences that are worth pur­suing, we can put empirical research in the context of normative concerns without either denigrating or warping the empirical enter­prise itself. In short, the use of constitutionalism to define the political has deeply integrative functions.

One peculiar strength of using constitutionalism to define the political is that instead of imposing an analytic scheme upon em­pirical data, constitutionalism works from an empirical base. That is, no one has sat down and abstracted a definition to which the real world must then conform. Rather, constitutions are historical facts that rest upon and encode generations of behavior. Although the basics of constitutionalism are now well understood, actual constitutions will vary in content from place to place and from time to time. Thus, the composition of the political is always changing at the margin as constitutional political systems operate. Business corporations come to be, for a time, protected by the due process clause, and then the protection is withdrawn. Constitutionalism has not changed, but the constitution has, and political controversy over such issues becomes the very definition of politics.

What Is American Political Theory?

If our intent is to elaborate a discipline that addresses a peculiarly American approach to the theoretical study of politics, it quickly becomes apparent why the birth will be a struggle. American political theory is not just the theoretical study of American politics but is also the study of American theory with its distinctive premises, questions, and methods. This is an important distinction because one premise underlying the argument here is that American political theory is not the simple application of European political theory to the study of American phenomena. Rather, there is a recogniz­able American political theory, or set of theories, with which Euro­pean thought overlaps but does not determine. American political theory has a basis that is to a significant degree independent of Eu­ropean antecedents, and this independent base, among other rea­sons, to a large extent explains why Americans have attempted to develop a functioning science of politics while the Europeans have not.
The hypothesis of American particularism is not currently popular among historians, and it certainly smacks of an ethnocentrism that provokes phobic reactions among most intellectuals these days; but in the long run we diminish neither ourselves nor others by attempting to understand what we have done and are doing as Americans. Indeed, understanding ourselves is as important for understanding others as understanding others is for understanding ourselves. The danger of developing a self-satisfied smugness is not the major source of difficulty inherent in the thesis of American particularism, however. Rather, we must avoid the twin but opposite dangers of seeing no significance of American political theory for politics elsewhere or of failing to note the limits of applying American political theory to other peoples in different circumstances. In short, American particularism results in historically original and important contributions by American political theory, but those contributions have limited although definite application elsewhere.

American political theory is not simply political theory written by Americans. For example, one of the most interesting theoretical treatments of American politics was written by a Frenchman—Alexis de Tocqueville's two-volume work *Democracy in America*. Few texts of this type in American political theory are written by Americans or non-Americans; indeed, one might argue that there are no great texts in American political theory equivalent in sweep and depth to the works of Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Montesquieu, Hume, Rousseau, Marx, or Mill. There are, instead, many small texts written by many hands, and a good number of the most important are the products of committees. Moreover, a major portion of American political theory is contained in public documents that speak institutionally rather than philosophically. In the classification of intellectual endeavors, American political theory is a distinct genus within the phylum of political philosophy. Perhaps it would be better to term it a genre, since the kinds of texts that define American political theory differ as a genre from the other texts used in political theory in general.

American political theory can also be viewed as our discourse over a set of institutions and processes that are historically distinctive and important. To this day the British, from whom we split off, do not understand the institution of federalism that we developed
as a functioning institution and gave to the world. Americans also invented the institutionalized separation of powers and the mechanistic system of checks and balances. Americans invented the written constitution, modern bills of rights, and declarations of independence. The presidential system, nonparliamentary legislatures, an independent judiciary, popular sovereignty, universal suffrage, mass political parties, organized interest groups, and the constitutional amendment process are just a few more examples of institutions and processes that define American politics, and the discourse about such processes could be seen as defining American political theory.

The American genus might also be defined by a set of values, questions, and issues that underlies, informs, and directs discussion in the texts surrounding our distinctive political institutions and processes. Or it might be defined as an approach to political discourse, an instinctive American preference for reliance upon experience, a pragmatic preference for that which solves problems over that which is merely logical, and an inclination to empiricism coupled with a sense of mastery over our collective destiny that makes political science a natural and persistent goal for American political theory.

Whether defined as a set of texts, a set of institutions, a set of values and issues, or as a distinctive approach to political discourse, American political theory has at its center a tradition of constitutionalism; and this core is both a strength and a weakness. It is a strength, in part, because we are clearer about the limits of political discourse and the nature of politics. It is a weakness because its diffuse, multifaceted character and the large number of texts by which it is carried make it impossible to readily insert American political theory into the broader enterprise of political thought of the world at large. We are partially insulated, some would say distanced, from the rest of the world by our particularism; and at the same time passing this diffuse, demanding tradition on to our children grows more and more difficult.

This preface to a discipline is intended to help ease these problems, to make our tradition of political discourse more accessible to ourselves and to others. The various lists, especially those of texts, are intended to introduce American political theory rather than to close off discussion about material that should be included. Above
all, unlike other books that serve as introductions to American political theory, this one is more properly a preface since it discusses a subject that is often improperly taken for granted but that must be consciously brought to the fore if we are to make headway in defining and passing on a discipline of American political theory.

That discipline can now be provisionally defined as the normative, analytic, and empirical study of American texts, institutions, processes, issues, and values derived from and defined by its constitutional tradition. American political theory thus embraces the various types of theory, a variety of phenomena for study, and several quite different methodologies. The mental discipline includes not only becoming competent in these different areas but also the willingness and ability to refuse any temptation to disregard relevant work because it uses a different methodology or focuses upon a different type of data. Ultimately American political theory must strive to be integrative, and perhaps part of the mental discipline it requires is the willingness and ability to take abuse from the several quarters where it intrudes.

The interlocking network of American national and state constitutions as it evolves over time defines the boundary of American political theory. As a result these constitutions serve as the place where we must begin. The study of elections, parties, the presidency, legislatures, public opinion, and so on are part of American political science precisely because our constitutions create a political system that includes, requires, or allows them. Constitutions serve the double purpose of embodying and codifying what we have learned from past behavioral regularities in political behavior, and at the same time the summary of preferred or expected behavior contained in these constitutions helps structure and explain future political behavior. Thus, American political theory must start with the texts of American constitutional documents and the explanatory texts written around these documents, of which *The Federalist* is a prime example.

Certain problems are inherent in the study of American political texts, however, some resulting from the nature of texts in general and others from the nature of American political texts in particular. The next step in exploring a preface to American political theory, therefore, involves a discussion of textual analysis.