

Purnadas Bandyopadhyay
Dept. of political science
Saltora Netaji Centenary College
State aided College Teacher
(M)- 9933459991

N O R M A T I V E A P P R O A C H

I N

P O L I T I C A L S C I E N C E

Normative Political Theory

Introduction

- ▶ Traditionally, the scientific study of politics has been associated with a value neutral approach to the subject.
- ▶ One seeks to uncover what is, not what ought to be, in the political realm.
- ▶ This is what distinguishes a “positive” science from opinionizing, social engineering, or political philosophy.
- ▶ If Political Science is to matter to policymakers or citizens, authors must be clear about how their subject ties into some broader telos that others might share.

Origin of Normative Political Theory

- ▶ It traces its roots to Ancient Greeks.
- ▶ Since Plato and Aristotle, questions about:
 - The best kind of life that can be lived,
 - The best political order that would promote that life.
- ▶ The search for ultimate, objective moral reference points, will help critical assessment of our existing political practices and institutions.
- ▶ The theory has undergone many changes and crises.
- ▶ the attack on it was so strong in the twentieth century that many thought that political philosophy was no longer viable.
- ▶ The biggest assault on normative political theory was mounted by logical positivists.

Feature of Normative Political Theory

The four main features of normative political theory are:

- **Action-guiding,**
 - **Idealizing,**
 - **Moral, and**
 - **Liberal.**
- ▶ These are the most important features in particular because they form the tacit background of assumptions.

Action-guiding

The point of setting out systematic accounts of political values is to guide action.

- ▶ The aim is to put us in a position not only to appreciate, as spectators, the goodness, rightness, beauty, or usefulness of actions and states of affairs,
- ▶ But also to engage our will as participants in the forms of life at stake.

Idealizing

- ▶ At its most ambitious, the project is meant to address anyone that can have an impact, however small, on political outcomes.
- ▶ If the political value is ‘justice’, then the political outcomes include the organization of policy, law, and administration, as well as broader societal norms.
- ▶ In some cases, the societal norms could be as encompassing and informal as the particular social ethos pervading a political community.
- ▶ The principles articulated in Normative Political Theory include:
 - ▶ (a) a citizen contemplating which party to vote for or whether to vote at all;
 - ▶ (b) a legislator contemplating how to vote on a bill;
 - ▶ (c) a judge deciding a hard case;

Moral

- ▶ The study of normative political theory is the study of political *morality, or the attempt* to understand the variety of ways in which we can wrong one another through various forms of:
 - political action,
 - the nature of our remedial obligations in rectifying wrongs for which we are responsible, and,
 - the analysis of the ways in which a society organized according to the correct moral-political principles should and would operate.
- ▶ Political values such as justice, of course, are not the whole of morality, but only one significant part of it.
- ▶ While non-moral values such as, for example, well-being or efficiency or prudence may enter into the justification of moral-political values, such as justice, they are never the conclusion of any particular bit of political theorizing.
- ▶ NPT also answers the question ‘What is the best life for me (or us) to lead?’
- ▶ It also tells us what moral constraints we should recognize in organizing our cooperation whatever the (non-moral) goals we have set ourselves.

Liberal

- ▶ The project aims to set out principles and values that are, in some sense, *liberal*.
- ▶ There is wide and persistent disagreement about what exactly liberalism is.
- ▶ But it seems uncontroversial to say that all those involved in the project are self-described liberals.

The relevance of NPT

- ▶ The presentations of Isaiah Berlin and Ernest Barker above indicate that NPT is very relevant to the study of political science.
 1. It prescribes the rules and norms that must guide the conduct of politics.
 2. It ensures certainty, clarity and rule of law instead of arbitrariness and rule of men.
 3. The call for strong institutions will be of limited utility if there are no laid down rules to govern the conduct of politicians and the entire citizenry.
 4. It promotes accountability and responsiveness in the sense actions and activities of leaders are assessed on the basis of the rules and regulations that govern their such actions. (what is the role of citizens here?)
 5. It is because of NPT that concepts like democracy, participation, rule of law, equality etc have triumphed and are hailed in political science discourse.
 6. Normative political theory enhances the performance of political science. These practitioners are able to comment effectively on policies and analyze the activities of government the arsenals provided by normative political theory.

Objections

Feasibility

- ▶ The first objection receives its clearest and most far-reaching form with regards to the project's contributions to the global justice debates
- ▶ Realists worry that the circumstances are not right for justice to be done at the global level.
- ▶ Indeed, because the circumstances are not right, the pursuit of justice—when it is pursued—is likely to lead to a kind of blindness to the *facts of global interaction*, most important of which is the absence of a sovereign.
- ▶ By seeking justice, the moralizing politician will produce its opposite.
- ▶ Those who defend the normative political theory project's involvement in the global justice debates have a respectable reply.
- ▶ They can claim that the realist *accepts that there is an ideal* worth defending, but only questions the circumstances in which it can be realized.

Objections (cont'd)

- ▶ Ideal Theory is Neither Necessary nor Sufficient
- ▶ 'Feasibility' turns out to be a weak basis from which to critique the project of normative political theory.
- ▶ What does it mean to 'approximate'? How can we tell which feasible institutional scheme is 'closest' to satisfying whatever set of principles one favours?

Objections (cont'd)

- ▶ Sen summarizes his own argument as follows (Sen calls ideal theory in the Rawlsian mold 'transcendental'):
A transcendental approach cannot, on its own, address questions about advancing justice and compare alternative proposals for having a more just society, short of proposing a radical jump to a perfectly just world.
- ▶ Indeed, the answers that a transcendental approach to justice gives—or can give—are quite distinct and distant from the type of concerns that engage people in discussions on justice and injustice in the world, for example, iniquities of hunger, illiteracy, torture, arbitrary incarceration, or medical exclusion as particular social features that need remedying.
- ▶ The focus of these engagements tends to be on the ways and means of advancing justice—or reducing injustice—in the world by remedying these inequities, rather than on looking only for the simultaneous fulfillment of the entire cluster of perfectly just societal arrangements demanded by a particular transcendental theory.

Reactions to the objections

- ▶ Advocates of NPT concede that moral propositions are not facts. But this does not harm to the theory. The theory can use both facts and evidence from descriptive social science.
- ▶ The theory makes use of logical relationship in much the same way as the natural science emphasize logic and critical thinking as critical tools.
- ▶ It is true that the theory has been criticized for only concentrating on “values” or what ought to be”, but facts can only make sense when they are used in the context of “what ought to be”.
- ▶ Before one can prescribe “what ought to be”, one must know “what is” or the facts on the ground.(in the study of institutions, one must look at their operations before one can prescribe what ought to be).
- ▶ In the same sense, a medical doctor is able to make sense of ones body temperature only because he knows what the normal body temperature of a human being is, otherwise the current body temperature makes no sense to him/her.

- *end* -

Thank you!

For your Attention

Any questions?

