



Neo-Aristotelianism in Contemporary Political Studies: Breaking the Spell of Modernity and Postmodernity

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For the last several centuries, the concept of modernity has furnished political philosophy and political science with an orientation toward the world that accepted modern natural science as the model for inquiry, and freedom as the governing norm of political life. Postmodernists often present themselves as enemies of modernity but are, I argue, simply more sophisticated modernists — they reject the modern devotion to scientific enlightenment as the only path to truth, but they retain an unexamined commitment to freedom as the central political norm and to democracy as the only legitimate political community. The Neo-Aristotelian naturalism I propose is not a new paradigm, but a way of thinking about the modernist and postmodernist paradigms we have too often accepted as inevitable. It is critical rather than programmatic or doctrinal. What I am after here is a way of thinking about what we are doing that is open to critique and revision in a way that modernism and postmodernism are not.

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Very soon after the historian of physical science Thomas Kuhn introduced the term in the 1960's and 1970's, the idea of a "paradigm" quickly became recognized an essential feature of every well-organized and mature academic discipline (Kuhn 1970). Ever since that time, academic political science has been engaged in perpetual controversy over what, if any, paradigm we should adopt to achieve scholarly maturity on a par with the natural sciences, and with some of the other social sciences, notably Economics and

Cultural Anthropology. Kuhn's philosophical critics immediately pointed out the ambiguity of the term "paradigm" (Lakatos and Musgrave 1970), noting that it seemed refer not only to a method of inquiry, but to a set of well-respected historical examples as well as to a basic worldview or set of presuppositions about the object of inquiry that underlies and supports the work of any distinctive and well-organized community of scholars. Nonetheless, the idea that a unifying Kuhnian paradigm is a necessity for any respectable discipline took hold with astonishing rapidity, especially in the social sciences,¹⁾ and within these especially in Political Science, and it is not hard to see why. Over the past 35 years, the complaint has been raised over and over that not only is Political Science composed of so many different approaches and research traditions, but also that many of these approaches are themselves so unmethodical, so undisciplined, in comparison with those of other academic departments. As rational choice advocate Kenneth Shepsle put it in 1990: "Is there a core in contemporary political science? ... there are pockets of discipline within the profession. But for the most part, the discipline is undisciplined" (Monroe et al. 1990). More recently, the very same complaint is voiced by David Laitin, who argues that we must settle on a single idea of "disciplinary organization" (he proposes one such) that "puts constraints on the assumptions, the reasoning, and the empirical claims that are permissible" in Political Science or else risk "institutional incoherence" and loss of scientific or scholarly status (Laitin 2004, 11-40).²⁾ This sort of quasi-permanent paradigm anxiety seems to reflect not only concerns

1) Kuhn himself referred to the social sciences as "pre-paradigmatic" (Lakatos and Musgrave 1970, 244-245).

2) Laitin's approach is attacked in that volume, and he vigorously defends it against further anti-paradigm critiques in a recent issue of the journal *The Good Society* 15, No. 1 (2006). Two recent interesting works attacking the attachment to the project of establishing a coherent unifying paradigm of the sort Laitin proposes are Shapiro 2005, and Norton 2004. Both Shapiro and Norton resist what they see as a pernicious, unnecessarily restrictive drift toward disciplinarity as an end in itself. For Shapiro, a self-described pragmatist, the work of social science in general should be governed by an attempt to use whatever tools are handy to clarify and solve problems that emerge in contemporary society. For Norton, a postmodernist, the explanations proposed by any inquiry (whether it calls itself scientific or not) are simply stories or narratives, and the more the better.

about how Political Scientists should best pursue truth, but a deep worry about the very survival of Political Science within the academy.

My argument in this paper is that the solution to our dilemma resides neither in the adoption of a uniform paradigm, nor in the rejection of the value of Kuhnian paradigms as such. If we understand such paradigms as widely held, plausible, but nonetheless criticizable beliefs that inform inquiry in various disciplines or communities of learning and action, they seem to be advantageous in at least two ways — they make research and teaching much more efficient by allowing members of a discipline to avoid always having to start from scratch and invent their own approach to a field of study, and they make possible communication among those who share a paradigm. But such paradigms bring with them a certain disadvantage or cost: they tend to obstruct reflective inquiry into the basic principles of a discipline and thus make serious scholarship less philosophical and self-critical.³⁾ My goal here is not to propose a new paradigm for Political Science that will offer the benefits without the costs — I think that is impossible — but instead to outline a Neo-Aristotelian way of thinking about what we are doing as Political Scientists that can preserve the benefits of shared paradigms while avoiding the tendency of paradigm-talk to restrict self-critical reflection and make the discipline less philosophical and less open to a variety of ideas and approaches than it needs to be.

To begin with, I want to take notice of a fairly obvious truth. In spite of the continuing proliferation of subfields in the discipline, there are not an infinite number of paradigms in contemporary Political Science, but two major ones in direct competition with one another: a variable-centered political science that explicitly adopts the model of modern scientific predictive explanation as its paradigm, and an interpretive political science that rejects this scientific model and proceeds instead to examine the significance of

3) These advantages and disadvantages were recognized by two philosophical German practitioners of the human sciences at the end of the 19th century — by Nietzsche who was quite critical of the newly emerging disciplines, and by Max Weber, who understood the critique and thought there was no way to avoid the blinders imposed by joining a scholarly discipline but nevertheless argued for embracing “science as a vocation” in spite of it.

particular societies and polities on the model of reading a literary text in order to bring out its coherence and/or incoherence.⁴⁾ Both paradigms have extensive following among contemporary political scientists, and both have led to a number of important and illuminating studies. Clearly, each captures something of real importance about the character of modern political life. My quarrel is not with the body of work modern political science has produced, but with the narrow understanding of the basis for that work embodied in the self-consciousness of the two competing paradigms.

To characterize these two competing research traditions, I suggest replacing the term “paradigm” with a word from Aristotle’s Greek vocabulary, the term *endoxa*.⁵⁾ My reason for suggesting this is that unlike Kuhn’s “paradigm,” Aristotle’s term *endoxa* doesn’t describe a set of presuppositions that *must* be taken for granted if any authoritative inquiry is to go forward (no paradigm, no science — any practice of inquiry that lacks a strong widely and tacitly accepted paradigm is defective and “pre-scientific”), but a set of opinions about basic matters that are indeed useful and compelling and productive, but not to be taken as beyond question and critique. The Aristotelian approach here, as in other areas both theoretical and practical, is an attempt to escape two unsatisfactory but alluring extremes: the belief that inquiry works only when its presuppositions are safe from questioning, and the belief that inquiry proceeds best when it rejects presuppositions altogether.⁶⁾ Both of these “vices” of inquiry can be

4) The classic defense of this interpretive approach against the natural scientific model is Taylor 1971, reprinted in Rabinow and Sullivan 1987, 33-81. For an extensive argument that attempts to show that interpretive political science is best understood as informal preparation for scientific variable-centered analysis, see King, Keohane, and Verba 1994.

5) That is, answers that are prominent and widespread in the Greek culture he and his students share: “The *endoxa* are opinions about how things seem that are held by all or by the many or by the wise — that is, by all the wise, or by the many among them, or by the most notable (*gnôrimoi*) and endoxic (*endoxoi*, most famous) of them.” *Topics* 100b21ff. The fact that Aristotle identifies a belief as respected does not imply that he finds it respectable. His distance from the *endoxa*, like Plato’s, is signaled by the fact that each avoids using words like *gnôrimos* (notable) and *kalosk’agathos* (gentleman) as terms of genuine praise, referring instead the less familiar *spoudaios* (serious) and *epieikês* (equitable, decent).

traced to the broader phenomenon of modernism, as it originates in the philosophical debates in Europe in the 17th century. More must be said about this, but my general claim is that in order to understand the intellectual power of and the opposition between the variable-centered and the interpretive paradigms, it is necessary to see them as flowing from two different forms of philosophical modernism. These two modernisms — the mechanistic materialism proposed by Hobbes and others in the 17th century, and the culturalist response to that modernism that begins with Rousseau's 18th century reaction against 17th century materialism — form the necessary background for assessing both the strengths and the limitations of contemporary political science. My argument will be that both of these philosophical modernisms and the post-modernism that succeeds them at the end of the 19th century are defective in that each claims to know more than it can possibly know. By claiming that it and it alone can serve as the theoretical background for empirical inquiry in the human sciences, each serves to defeat the possibility of philosophically informed inquiry in political science, and thus gives us to reason to think about Neo-Aristotelian alternatives .

In what follows, I provide a quick narrative of how we arrived at our current situation by looking at four different ways of understanding the world and the place of human and political life in that world. I begin with the medieval European Biblical worldview against which modernism and the Enlightenment arose, and follow with the two modernisms and finally with postmodernism. My contention is that each chapter in the story involves a claim to exclusive and complete possession of the truth about the whole, claims that have force but cannot be established with certainty. My conclusion is that these perspectives all involve partial truths that can best be organized and

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- 6) John Searle, in his *Mind, Language and Society: Philosophy in the Real World*, uses the computer metaphor of “default positions” to refer to “the views that we hold prereflectively so that any departure from them requires a conscious effort and a convincing argument” (Searle 1988, 9). I think Searle's default position metaphor clarifies our relationship to our basic presuppositions much more accurately than Kuhn's “paradigm” or, for that matter, Nietzsche's “horizon” does. Such presuppositions are usually accepted tacitly, but with effort they are accessible to us for reflection and even revision.

understood from a more inclusive and less dogmatic Neo-Aristotelian picture of the world political science seeks to understand.⁷⁾

1) The Bible presents the cosmos as the creation of God. The fundamental unity of all nature is more pronounced than it is for Aristotle, whose primary concern is with the manyness of beings and with the character of the *internal* beginning or source (*archê*) that distinguishes each from the rest. Aristotle's "primary instance of being", the unmoved mover, is a model for all the rest, but not their master or creator. On the Biblical understanding, created, sensible nature has a definite duration in time, dependent upon its supersensible creator, and calls for interpretation as a whole in this way. Beings are not self-moving, but owe their existence to God. We are radically different from the rest of nature in that we are capable of free will, and hence of resistance to God and the divine will. For Aristotle, voluntary motion is an attribute of *all* living beings, not humans alone. The central practical questions for human beings, according to the Biblical model, involve our relations to the creator on the one hand and the rest of creation on the other. Since most of the Islamic, Jewish, and Christian writers in this ontological tradition had to face the question of its compatibility with an Aristotelian or Platonic model, they had continuously to confront the possibility of conflict between philosophical and theological truths, between revelation and reason. In terms of an Aristotelian distinction between inquiry into necessity and inquiry into meaning, the creation model represents the triumph of meaning over necessity.

2) The modern scientific model of the whole as a coherent all-inclusive machine, a world of matter in law-governed motion without purpose. Originating in the 17th century, this has been the dominant view within natural science since that time. It represents the exclusion of inquiries into meaning from scientific discourse, or rational discourse generally, in favor of inquiries into necessity. Questions about meaning and

7) I say "Neo-Aristotelian" rather than simply "Aristotelian" not because of any particular disagreement with Aristotle's ontology or metaphysics (though no one could now accept it in every respect), but because the position I outline here is a response to post-Aristotelian perspectives that Aristotle himself could not have contemplated. My belief is that I am extending Aristotle's basic ideas, not bringing him "up to date."

value are not referable to nature, and any attempt to do so is condemned as superstition, the inappropriate intrusion of religion into matters of scientific inquiry. Aristotle is consistently identified as one of the champions of superstition (by Hobbes especially), and his teleology is one of the prime obstacles to valid scientific inquiry, which must always be concerned with discovering the necessary laws that govern the motion of matter, something that is now identified with nature as such.

3) The Kantian model of the whole as essentially dual, composed of two radically different kinds of being: the mechanical nature of modern science, plus a separate supersensible realm or system of free and rational determinations. Unlike the creation model, the supersensible realm of freedom here emerges spontaneously from and stands in opposition to the natural machine. No miracle is required to produce and sustain the realm of freedom. All that is required is a powerful will to resist our natural inclinations and act according to our duty as rational beings. In a sense, Kant is saying to mechanists like Hobbes and Locke that they didn't go far enough in removing meaning from nature, since they still hang on to the notion that nature may teach us a law we can use to govern ourselves well, even if it contains no hint of a highest good. Kant's thesis of the separation of rational freedom and nature is itself modified, and the antitheses eventually reconciled in the historicism of Hegel and Marx, according to whom human history is the unintentional but inevitably progressive overcoming of natural resistance by human freedom and reason. This dualist tradition as a whole might be described as humanist: it offers the possibility of integrating necessity and meaning within human activity, without any reference needed to a creator god. Aristotle's naturalism is doubly excluded by this perspective: his teleology prevents him from understanding natural necessity, and his failure to see that rationality requires freedom from nature blinds him to the profundity of human creativity.⁸⁾

8) Some contemporary defenders of philosophical modernism argue that modernity as a set of historical transformations is so different from what preceded it that no earlier mode of thought is adequate to understanding our lives as modern people. One of the strongest proponents of this view is Charles Taylor. He sets out his case for the uniqueness of modernity most clearly in Taylor 2004. I find more persuasive an argument made by Bernard Yack that theoretical modernism so exaggerates

4) The postmodern position articulated most influentially by Nietzsche, according to which the whole is only a “whole” in quotation marks, simply a fiction or a myth or a “social construction” that owes its persistence not to its truth but to the interests it serves. As Kant claims to go beyond Hobbes and Hume, and Hegel and Marx beyond Kant, so Nietzsche claims to push the modern project beyond humanism altogether — to undo what Kant called his “Copernican revolution,” his placement of human being (rather than nature or the gods) at the center of philosophic inquiry. The central insight of postmodernism is negative: the rejection of the idea that there is, in Iris Murdoch’s words, some “unconditional element in the structure of reason and reality.”⁹⁾ Postmodernism thus presents itself not as one among several possible answers to the question of the character of the whole, but as a thoroughgoing rejection of the philosophical tradition organized around that question. For Nietzsche, the human attempt to impose meaning on meaningless nature¹⁰⁾ is inevitable but never final.

and “fetishizes” its own distinctiveness and unity that it is unable to understand adequately a number of very important features of modern politics, nationalism and liberal constitutionalism among them. See Yack 1997. See also Yack’s review of *Modern Social Imaginaries* in *Ethics*.

- 9) This phrase is Iris Murdoch’s, *Metaphysics As A Guide To Morals* (Murdoch 1993, 432). In this work, as in her *Sovereignty of Good*, Murdoch argues that morality needs metaphysical guidance; that the substance of metaphysics is not a rule or principle, but an image of our experience of perfection (one that announces that it is an image); and that the function of this image is not to supply a foundation for morals or to issue answers to moral and political problems, but to provide an orienting light in terms of which virtues and choices make sense: “The Form of the Good, herein like Kant’s call of duty, may be seen as enlightening particular scenes and setting the specialised moral virtues and insights into their required particular patterns. This is how the phenomena are saved and the particulars redeemed, in this *light*. Plato’s Good resembles Kant’s Reason, but is a better image, since, by contrast, reason too, if we are to keep any force in the concept, is a specialised instrument. The sovereign Good is not an empty receptacle into which the arbitrary will places objects of its choice. It is something which we all experience as a creative force. This is metaphysics, which sets up a picture which it then offers as an appeal to us all to see if we cannot find just this in our deepest experience. The word ‘deep,’ or some such metaphor, will come in here as part of the essence of the appeal. In this respect metaphysical and religious pictures resemble each other” (Murdoch 1993, 507, italics in text).

- 10) Even “necessity” is simply a meaning imposed by humans upon “nature.” Nietzsche, *BGE*, Part 1.

Aristotle is to be rejected both for thinking that there is meaning in nature, and for thinking that there is permanent or even stable meaning anywhere. Later postmodernists, like Heidegger, criticize Nietzsche for not going far enough in overcoming this philosophical delusion. And not surprisingly, recent writers deeply influenced by Heidegger attempt to “go beyond” him in the same emancipatory direction. The end of this trail of “supersession” (the post-Hegelian way of saying “absorbing and going beyond”) seems to be not a new metaphysic, but an embrace of disciplinarity, which reminds us that philosophy is only one scholarly specialty among many in the contemporary research university. So long as it is successful in maintaining its departmental status within the university, no more justification is needed than in the case of any other such specialty.¹¹⁾

These four “waves”¹²⁾ of Western philosophic reflection have swamped Aristotle’s metaphysics beneath a formidable tide of disparate rejections. And yet we must reconsider his metaphysics if we are to think about his conception of political science, since idea of politics makes little sense without the teleological background in which Aristotle places it. In particular we have to consider Aristotle’s idea that nature (and not humanity or the supernatural) is the primary site of both necessity and meaning. We

11) Nietzsche already recognized and deplored this trend in the German universities of the 1870’s. See *Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life and On the Future of Our Educational Institutions: Homer and Classical Philology*. But very much the same triumph of disciplinarity as needing no further justification is celebrated by a genuinely postmodern social scientist, Max Weber, in “Science as a Vocation.” Nietzsche and Weber deplore and praise the triumph of disciplinarity in precisely the same moral terms: for Nietzsche, it is a sign of great weakness and a perversion of the modern “historical sense,” for Weber of great strength — for each, as for Kant, strength of will or character is the highest virtue.

12) The reader will note that this periodization of post-ancient Western political philosophy into a medieval followed by three modern “waves” is taken largely from Leo Strauss’s essay, “What Is Political Philosophy” (Strauss 1959, 9-55). I differ from Strauss, however, in thinking that ancient political philosophy is not an especially unified point of view. The position I defend in this essay is Aristotelian, and I would say Platonic as well, but beyond that I do not think any other major ancient thinker would endorse it. Thus I am not advocating the blanket superiority of the “ancients” to the “moderns.”

cannot expect clear evidence of the superior plausibility of Aristotle's metaphysical understanding to the four others sketched above, but we can surely begin with the currently reputable (or "endoxic") opinion that each of the other responses to the question of metaphysics has considerable difficulties of its own. At least in that respect, the intellectual climate (or, in Aristotle's terms, the endoxa) for reconsidering Aristotle is probably better now than it has been for many centuries, precisely because of its contentiousness. This is disciplinarity's saving grace.

Modern readers of Aristotle must at some point consider whether such a position is hopelessly naïve, or whether we can profit by setting aside the objectivity question in its post-Kuhnian form. I think we would do well to set it aside, because it results in dogma rather than philosophy, but there is no quick demonstration of this. One way of defending the reasonableness of Aristotle's apparent naïveté is to say that our objectivity problem reflects a deep but corrigible confusion in modern philosophy itself stretching back to Hume and Kant, and that our anxiety about objectivity is a bad mental habit we need to break. This is John McDowell's argument in *Man and World* (McDowell 1996). McDowell's thesis is that the objectivity question is a characteristically modern anxiety that calls for exorcism rather than an answer. This anxiety results from the apparent impossibility of reconciling two firmly held modern beliefs: that nature is a system of necessity as modern natural science presupposes, and that our thought is free. Kant poses the problem this way: "Philosophy must therefore assume that no true contradiction will be found between freedom and natural necessity in the very same human actions, for it cannot give up the concept of nature any more than that of freedom" (*GMM*, 60). Kant's solution is to separate human rationality and freedom from nature, by claiming that there must be essentially two distinct realms of being or reality, a realm of freedom and a realm of necessity. A more plausible way of vaulting through the horns of Kant's dilemma, McDowell argues, is to think of nature and especially human nature in an Aristotelian way, as potentiality for a particular realization rather than as necessitated motion.

Can Thomas Kuhn be cited as a witness for the postmodern claim that Aristotle's assumption of the possibility of an objective account of the world is mistaken?

Misreadings of Kuhn abound, and his text is imprecise enough to accommodate many of them. But Kuhn himself never says that science is not an attempt to make sense of independently existing nature, so that it is simply a matter of social control over the standards of truth operating at a particular time — power masquerading as truth-seeking inquiry which calls for genealogical unmasking and political overthrow nor that all inquiry should be organized into clear and discernible disciplines, on the model of physics and economics. Kuhn's appreciation and critique of the traditional understanding of science neither endorses modern science nor exposes it as ideological. His position is less dramatic and more compelling, epitomized in the following: "There are losses as well as gains in scientific revolutions, and scientists tend to be particularly blind to the former" (Kuhn 1970, 167). Note that his main interest was in showing that it is important to read non-modern scientific work from the inside, as it were, trying to understand it as the authors did, rather than as a step on the way toward truth. It is notable that Kuhn's first sense of this came when he realized that Aristotle's discussion of motion and matter in the *Physics* was not, as he at first thought it was, "full of egregious errors, both of logic and of observation." By understanding that what Aristotle meant by the terms matter and motion was very different from what Galileo, Newton, and their successors meant by them, he achieved the central historicizing insight of his book about scientific revolutions: "My jaw dropped, for all at once Aristotle seemed a very good physicist indeed, but of a sort I'd never dreamed possible. . . . Statements that had previously seemed egregious mistakes, now seemed at worst near misses within a powerful and generally successful tradition" (Kuhn 2000, 16-17).

Along with this preoccupation (verging on obsession) with the problem of certainty, modern social science is concerned to excess with the problem of precision. According to the standard paradigm of modern natural science and of the social sciences that wish to approximate it, no proposition can be held meaningful (either true or false) unless it spells out how its claim can be measured with precision. This privileges mathematical formulations over verbal ones, since the latter inevitably involve ambiguity and imprecision. The difficulty with this theoretical commitment is that it implies, as the Neo-Aristotelian economist Amartya Sen puts it, that social science will be more

concerned with precision than with accuracy.¹³⁾ It rules out the possibility that there are some things in the world — for example human virtues and human flourishing — that are knowable and expressible, but only in terms that recognize and signify the imprecision of our knowledge of these things. Denying this runs against Aristotle’s much quoted but usually misunderstood claim in the *NE* that there are certain matters that must be spoken of imprecisely, including the subject matter of social science, the specifically human goods and how they are best achieved.¹⁴⁾

Sen’s Aristotelian eudaimonism has two key aspects. The first is his claim that a good life cannot be reduced to a single good condition or precondition (such as utility or wealth) that includes all other goods — Sen refers to this as the “constitutive plurality” of human capabilities and functionings. This means that the variety of human functionings is such that they cannot be expressed by a single metric or ranking, so that there will always be cases in which various goods are at odds with one another. The second is his argument that given constitutive plurality, policy analysis cannot be as precise as mathematics without distorting its subject matter — without either neglecting the problem of human flourishing or denying the essential plurality of the goods that constitute flourishing activity for us. Mainstream economics cannot well answer questions about well-being because it tries to answer them too precisely. By concluding that quantitative models are always better representations of reality than ambiguous words, economists and others foreclose the possibility of thinking about just what we want our numbers and models to mean and to do. It is sadly true that most economists see what Sen is doing as something called philosophy, and thus of no interest to them.¹⁵⁾

13) Sen is perhaps the most clearly Neo-Aristotelian of empirical social scientists. His very Aristotelian approach to the problem of political development is set out in Sen 1999. Others who should be mentioned in this connection are the political scientist James Scott (*Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes To Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*) and the urbanist Bent Flyvbjerg (*Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again*).

14) “Every account (logos) concerning how we must act has to be stated in outline and not with precision, just as we said at the start that we should demand accounts (*logoi*) that are appropriate to the subject matter, and matters concerning actions and what is in our interest have nothing fixed about them, just like matters of health” (*Nic Eth* 2, 1104a1-5).

In the end, the problem with both interpretive and variable-centered social science taken as hegemonic and exclusive paradigms is that in their unmodified and imperialist form they are bad science — they rely on models of the world that distort too much about human action and that conceal their own distortion. Interpretive science presupposes that the world is divided into cultures, which it becomes the job of the scientist to discover and articulate. Variable- or “data”-centered social science depends on the notion that emergent phenomena can be explained by the same hypothesis-testing procedures successfully used by physicists. This is not to say that there is any approach that serves up direct access to human affairs on a silver platter; any approach is theory-laden, making initial presuppositions about the character of what we study. The problem with the interpretivist’s “culture” is that it severs the human from the natural;¹⁶⁾ the problem with the behavioralist’s “data” is the opposite: it conflates simple and emergent phenomena. What is required is a less distorting and less self-concealing view of the world. I think something like that is implicit in the approach toward nature and action to be found in Aristotle; but my more general point is that we will better employ whatever models or paradigms we use in political analysis if we are aware of the theoretical

15) Nussbaum comments on this difficulty in reference to the conferences she and Sen ran from 1987 to 1993 for the World Institute of Development Economics Research (WIDER): “Given the public dominance of economics, any profession that cannot get itself taken seriously by it will have tough going. But economics is extremely self-satisfied, and its tendency to repudiate nonformal and foundational work as irrelevant to its concerns poses a major problem” (Nussbaum 1998, 778).

16) On the trouble with the exaggerated emphasis on the term culture, the literary critic Lewis Menand says this: “At a time when it has become common to say that changing our world begins with changing our culture, and when many people are eager to tell other people what sort of culture is right for them and what sort is wrong for them, it might be suggested that the real source of human change lies not in the culture or in the theoretical descriptions we propose for it, but in the mysteries of personality, which are a scandal to theory. I don’t think I know what culture is. It has become a term like the term “ether” in nineteenth-century science; it is the necessary medium for explaining why everything else does what it does. But whatever culture is, I do not think it is synonymous with human agency” (Dickstein 1998, 368-369). I suggest that the reason for the immense popularity of “culture” is that it gives us a sense of power over the world of ideas and practices, similar to the sense of power produced by Hobbesian reduction of action to response.

alternatives, if we participate in the conversation that is the history of political philosophy. It is a bitter irony that Thomas Kuhn, who intended his study of scientific revolutions as a way of making scientists more self-conscious about what they were doing, has been the man in whose name advocates for restricting self-consciousness to clear allegiance to a paradigm have waged a largely successful battle against philosophical self-consciousness. This was not Kuhn's intent, but it has been a major consequence of his work, especially in the social sciences, hungry for the power that seems to come in academia and in society generally from acting like a real science.

The Neo-Aristotelian approach to political reality rejects the explicitly modernist Weberian idea that politics or the state is defined as “a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory.”¹⁷⁾ From an Aristotelian point of view, this is a necessary but by no means sufficient or constitutive characterization of a political community. “Legitimacy” for Weber means that the citizens or subjects of a state freely consent to the exercise of state power to enforce its commands; the power of the state must be supported by the consent of the governed to count as political rule. For Aristotle, such a community should instead be thought of as a kind of giant household, or, if the consent of the ruled is obtained by deceit, as a kind of despotism or tyranny. For politics to exist, three additional elements must also be present. The first is that binding community decisions must be made with an awareness of shared *nomoi*, laws or customs, written or unwritten, that have two features: the *nomoi* must have authority independent of the decision of any individual or group, and the *nomoi* must be seen as criticizable and revisable, rather than absolute and unchangeable. As in many Aristotelian formulations, the idea is to avoid two undesirable extremes: treating laws as mere exercises in power, and treating the laws as eternal commands. The idea is that genuine political life cannot exist if the *endoxa* or the culture of a political community is dominated by either relativism or absolutism. The second element beyond consent required for politics is that the laws must aim at the promotion of some plausible conception of human flourishing

17) “Politics as a Vocation,” in Gerth and Mills 1958, 78.

(*eudaimonia*). If the *nomoi* of a society function only to protect individual rights or to secure internal and external peace and material prosperity, the community still falls short of a fully political existence. The third and final element that makes up a political community is citizen participation in ruling as well as being ruled. This can be satisfied in a variety of ways. In his discussion of “polity,” the best practicable regime, in Books 4-6 of the *Politics*, Aristotle argues that it is not necessary for the bulk of the citizens to hold high legislative or executive office so long as all exercise the right to act as judges or jurors in trials, to participate in electing officials, and to serve on boards that audit and scrutinize the performance of these elected officials once they have left office.

The work of social science is to illuminate that universal or natural set of problems and questions about the relationship between political and other forms of social life on the one hand, and human flourishing on the other, whether by predictive variable-centered studies that abstract from the ways in which political actors understand themselves, by more discursive and closer to practice historical-interpretive studies, by combining these approaches, or by some other way entirely. The problem with the two modernisms is that they restrict inquiry arbitrarily to one approach or another; the problem with postmodernism is that it fails to take the problem of objectivity seriously enough, and so too quickly throws the baby out with the bathwater.

Aristotle has an apt phrase for what I suggest doing here. In one of his two books of political science (he calls what he is doing *politikê*) he refers to the need for “saving the appearances,” by which he means saving the prevailing *endoxa* as much as possible. This is done not by accepting or rejecting them simply, but by using these existing approaches, pointing out their deficiencies and perplexities, and proposing a more universal framework within which they may be better understood and employed.¹⁸⁾

18) *Nicomachean Ethics* 7.1, 1145b 2-7: “One must here, as in other cases, when one has set out the appearances and gone through their perplexities, bring to light in that way all the reputable opinions (*endoxa*) about these experiences, and if not all of them at least the most authoritative ones. For if the difficulties are unraveled and something is left of the *endoxa*, it will have been made evident in an adequate way.” This is my revision of the translation by Joe Sacks, *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics* (Sacks 2002).

Aristotle's advice here seems especially appropriate for political theorists within the modern day discipline of Political Science. Political Science is unique among the contemporary social sciences in that, for a variety of hard to sort out motives, it has retained political theory or philosophy as an active sub-field, even though it has no direct connection to empirical work of either the variable centered or interpretive kind. The work of academic political philosophy today, as I understand it, is to draw attention to the connection between empirical science and contemporary political life on the one hand, and, on the other, the relatively permanent and universal questions that come to light in the conversations we political theorists create among the texts that constitute the traditions (plural) of political philosophy. Our particular job is to keep those conversations alive and by doing so to clarify and inspire both political action and political science.¹⁹⁾

Such an approach might even give rise to a new post-paradigmatic idea of disciplinary rigor, one that looks like this: a truly rigorous social science recognizes that any choices we make about the character of political reality should be informed by an awareness of the background debate over that question, not only in works of social science proper but in the philosophical arguments that underlie the social scientific explorations of events and institutions in the light of partly overlapping and partly clashing views about what politics is and is for. To paraphrase the greatest European philosopher²⁰⁾ of the "second wave" of modernity for my own Neo-Aristotelian purposes: Philosophy without social science is, from the perspective of action at least,

19) David Mayhew, a prominent and philosophically well informed student of American politics, argues for a role much like this one in his incisive and valuable essay "Political Science and Political Philosophy: Ontological Not Normative" (Mayhew 2000, 192-193). Mayhew argues against the positivist view that political philosophy deals with "norms" or ideals rather than political realities. Instead, he argues, the contribution of political philosophy to empirical social science is to keep alive a set of fundamental alternatives about the meaning and significance of political reality, alternatives set out in different ways by philosophers who attempt to speak of politics universally and objectively.

20) Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, B75: "Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind."

empty; from the same perspective, social science without philosophy is blind.

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