
CONVERSATION 2

*The Necessity of Overcoming the Prejudice of Political Philosophy
as a Condition for Philanthropy*

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THE NECESSITY OF OVERCOMING THE PREJUDICE OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY AS A CONDITION FOR PHILANTHROPY

Steven D. Ealy

This paper addresses the question, “Why does the political solution to social problems appear to be the default position in contemporary America?” A complete answer to this question would take us to the heart of the dynamic of American society, and would involve considerations of historical development, contemporary politics, and political philosophy. An answer to this question is central to any effort to move away from government and toward independent voluntary action as a means of dealing with social and community problems. An alternative to the default move to government control is crucial if philanthropy is going to have an independent life of its own as opposed to simply being one more piece of equipment in the political toolbox.

A complete answer to the question at hand is not provided here; rather, I deal with one component of the problem. This paper approaches the subject not by examining contemporary attitudes or the immediate historical framework for the development of American philanthropy, but by examining how political philosophy frames our understanding of social life.

In the first section of this paper, I will examine a major premise underlying political philosophy identified by Leo Strauss: the notion that “the political association...is the most comprehensive or authoritative association” in society. I will offer a critique of this position based on the argument that “the political” exists in the modern world only by analogy, and that the use of the political analogy allows many assumptions, perhaps true of the ancient Greek *polis*, to be applied without serious thought to the modern state. In the second section, I argue that this question is of more than historical interest, as an examination of both conservative and liberal arguments will demonstrate.

The focus of that section will be the arguments made by conservative political commentator George Will in *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does* and those of William James in “The Moral Equivalent of War.” In the final section of this paper I will consider alternatives to the position of pre-eminence given to the state by all three of these writers.

Among other things, my discussion of Strauss and Will is intended to emphasize the underlying irony of much contemporary political action and debate. Many conservative political writers (including Will himself on occasion) point to “collectivistic liberalism” as the intellectual source for the growth of government. Neither Leo Strauss nor George Will is a part of the liberal establishment, yet their arguments provide a foundation for the development of government as expansive and intrusive as that supported by the left.

I

In an essay entitled “What is Political Philosophy?” Leo Strauss argues that political philosophy as a discipline is committed to an unwavering search for the truth, especially in regard to the question of the good society. But this total dedication to pursuing the truth appears to be challenged by Strauss himself when he contrasts political philosophy with what he identifies as “social philosophy.” Strauss writes, “Political philosophy rests on the premise that the political association—one’s country or one’s nation—is the most comprehensive or the most authoritative association...” (Strauss, 1959, 13).¹ This position presents a number of difficulties to the individual interested in discovering what the “good society” would look like.

A major difficulty with Strauss’s view is that his “premise” predetermines the answer to one of the most important questions that must be addressed in uncovering the good society—the question of where ultimate authority should reside. The prejudgment of political philosophy places this authority with or within the political system, but there are at least two alternative views contending against this position.

One view, which holds that there need be no central “comprehensive and authoritative” authority at all, can be further subdivided. The better-known half would be anarchism, which sees no need for social authority at all. Each man, independent and autonomous, should make his own decisions in isola-

tion, and society should leave it to the “invisible hand” to coordinate any spillover benefits or ills to other equally autonomous and independent individuals. But it is possible to oppose the notion of a single authority and still see that (empirically) some authority does seem to rule in most social situations and that (normatively) authority is not per se illegitimate. Authority thus may be free-floating, attached to different institutions at different times and under differing conditions, and variable. We can tentatively identify this view as “polycentricism,” which maintains that there are independent sources of authority and judgment that act informally but collectively in determining community standards of behavior and the focus of collective (but voluntary) action. A model for this view is represented by the work of Michael Polanyi on the nature of the scientific community (Polanyi, 1964, 15-17, 42-62).²

The other position contending with the Straussian supremacy of politics maintains that some institution or group other than the political is deserving of the privileged position in society. To complete the spectrum of possibilities, we simply need to note that there are other challengers for the title of “most comprehensive and authoritative” institution. Among these challengers would be religious institutions, business and economic concerns, and legal and market mechanisms. Strauss recognizes this challenge to his position—the “social philosophy” he contrasts political philosophy with “conceives of the political association as a part of a larger whole which it designates by the term ‘society’” (Strauss, 1959, 13).

A second difficulty presented by the Straussian perspective, although not as obvious as the first merely on the basis of this initial quotation, is the claim that the appropriate model for political action is the classical understanding of politics. That is, the political community is truly “most comprehensive,” and not only for external matters (defense and security) but also is the locus of the most important internal matters (education and morality) with which human beings must deal. To use the phrase made popular by pundit George Will, political philosophy (at least the Straussian variety) sees “statecraft as soulcraft.” Although American conservatives are often identified as proponents of “limited government,” most are proponents of governmental restraints in some areas and governmental activism and expansion in other areas. George Will is a leading spokesman for an activist brand of American conservatism. A current example of conservative expansionism would be the Bush administration’s establishment of an office to coordinate volunteerism in American society.

The implication of the Straussian view of politics for an understanding of the proper role of philanthropy is straightforward: if political institutions are both authoritative and concerned with all aspects of human life, all activity—even those actions normally deemed private or charitable—must be subsumed under political review and control. Thus from this perspective, even if the decision was made to allow “private” philanthropic activities to be carried out, they would do so under the guidelines of the comprehensive and determining political agenda. Although progressivism may have set the immediate institutional and historical setting for the development of American philanthropy, I would argue that a broader intellectual understanding of the status of the political order in human life, one akin to that described by Strauss, underlies the specific details of progressivism.

This understanding of politics, Strauss argues, grew naturally out of the Greek *polis*. Although modern mass industrial society no longer shares the important characteristics that made the *polis* distinct, we still live in the shadow of the *polis* intellectually. We live in its shadow, first, in that many of the terms still used in political and social discourse had their origins in classical Greek thought. We live in the shadow of the *polis*, second, in that the Greek *polis* is taken by many today to be the model of the healthy and well-functioning society.

One approach to these issues is offered in a closely reasoned essay by the political philosopher Eugene F. Miller, “What Does ‘Political’ Mean?” (Miller, 1980). After examining the various things to which the word *political* is applied, Miller concludes, “the meaning of ‘political’ is neither univocal nor empirical” (Miller, 1980, 57). This conclusion leads Miller to a consideration of Aristotle’s understanding of univocals and equivocals. Miller explains: “things named univocally have in common both the name and the definition answering to the name; things named equivocally have a name in common, but a different definition” (Miller, 1980, 57). Whereas Aristotle identifies a number of types of equivocals, Miller concerns himself with only two: the *pros hen* type of equivocal and the equivocal based on analogy.

The Greek term *pros hen* literally means “to one” (Miller, 1980, 59). Miller states, “things of this type have the same name because of a common reference or relation to some one thing,” and notes that Aristotle’s favorite examples of *pros hen* equivocals are “healthy” and “medical” (Miller, 1980, 60). If the word *political* is to be understood as a *pros hen* equivocal, it must have a “focal meaning”; that is, it must have “many senses pointing in many

ways to a central sense.”³ So, Miller asks, what is the primary experience to which the word *political* refers? He concludes, “The primary instance of something political, and thus the central or focal meaning of the term, is the political community, the *polis*. Other things are called political by reference to this primary instance” (Miller, 1980, 61).

This *pros hen* understanding allowed Aristotle and his contemporaries to use the term *political* by reference to the Greek *polis*, Miller continues, but this is not an adequate foundation for understanding the modern use of the term, for the *polis* no longer exists.⁴ Miller finally concludes that the modern usage of *political* can be salvaged through Aristotle’s understanding of analogy: “the state or nation bears an analogical likeness to the *polis*; and the term ‘political,’ when applied to both, is an equivocal by analogy” (Miller, 1980, 66-67).

For our immediate purposes, the crucial element in Miller’s argument is his discussion of the absence of the *polis* from the modern world. “The *polis* has been superseded by the modern ‘state’ or ‘nation’, and this type of association is something very different from the *polis*,” Miller argues, going so far as to suggest that “a persuasive case can be made that the two are fundamentally opposed” (Miller, 1980, 64).

While some of the differences may appear to be superficial, such as size, the key difference between the *polis* and the state is intellectual. Miller underlines the importance of the different intellectual foundations of *polis* and state by arguing, “The modern vocabulary of politics originates in political theory that specifically opposes the sort of authoritative community that the *polis* represented. The *polis* was understood to aim at the good or happy life for man, and the education of its members in virtue was thought to be required by this aim” (Miller, 1980, 64). Modern society, on the other hand, “is the web or network of human relationships that arise from the striving of individuals to attain their private ends, and the ‘state’ is the agency that guarantees the means or conditions for this striving. Far from having a comprehensive authority over the life of man, the state has only the authority that is necessary to secure the rights of individuals and the safety of the whole society” (Miller, 1980, 64). Miller concludes this contrast by reiterating the Aristotelian position that the *polis* is the most authoritative community and arguing “it is doubtful if the state can be understood as a species of the genus community at all” (Miller, 1980, 65).

The burden of this paper is to deal with the twin prejudices on the part of political philosophy—that political institutions should be the most authoritative and that the political system has the “regime responsibility” for shaping the moral life of its citizens—and to show that these positions do not fit well with the nature of modern society. Miller’s discussion of the differences between the Greek *polis* (the experiential foundation for Greek political philosophy) and the modern state, is a first step in decoupling classical moral and political philosophy from the modern practice of politics, but it is not sufficient.

As Miller’s discussion of the meaning of the word *political* suggests, even when we are using that term to describe the modern, mass, democratic, religiously neutral state, the very words we use continue to carry some of the resonance of their earlier application and usage in the ancient, small, and religiously and morally committed communities of Greece. Thus there is a psychology built into the very political language we use that inclines us toward the position articulated by Strauss.

The difficulty in overcoming the “prejudices of political philosophy” can be underlined by noting that the conclusions I draw from Eugene Miller’s thoughtful analysis of the word *political* diverge radically from Miller’s own conclusion:

In order to speak intelligibly of political things and to understand them, we are compelled to seek some insight into the nature of the polis as a distinctive kind of human community and into the fundamental differences between the polis and other ways of associating to achieve common purposes. Since this insight is no longer available to us directly from experience, we must turn attentively to the classical writings in political philosophy, whose theme is the polis and its right ordering (Miller, 1980, 72).

From my perspective, a large part of our problem in limiting government to its proper role in social life stems from the political philosophy smuggled into our thinking by the use of an analogical language that keeps pointing us back to ancient Athens and its expansive political institutions. That difficulty will only be intensified if we turn for an understanding and clarification of contemporary political concerns to the very writers whose views have distorted the nature of modern social and political life.

II

Thus far my discussion may perhaps be construed to suggest that these are arcane issues of interest only to a few specialists in ancient Greek thought, but in the remainder of this paper I address the more immediate political relevance of the preceding argument. In 1981, George Will, today known as a conservative newspaper columnist and political commentator on television, delivered the Godkin Lectures at Harvard University, which were published under the title *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does* (Will, 1983). Will's book can be seen as an extended essay on the conservative understanding of political life, and indeed Will writes in the preface, "My aim is to recast conservatism in a form compatible with the broad popular imperatives of the day" (Will, 1983, 12).

Will begins by referring to an opinion written by Justice Felix Frankfurter. In *West Virginia v. Barnette* Frankfurter wrote, "Law is concerned with external behavior, and not with the inner life of man." While claiming that he does not understand what Frankfurter meant, Will claims to be sure that what Frankfurter said was untrue. He then states forthrightly, "the purpose of this book is to say why that proposition is wrong" (Will, 1983, 20). Let us turn to an examination of the argument Will builds against Frankfurter. It will be obvious, as this discussion proceeds, that Will parallels closely the views of classical political philosophy discussed in the first section of this paper.

What does Will understand the place of politics and the role of government to be? There is, scattered throughout *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, mention of at least five separate (but overlapping and self-reinforcing) functions for the political system. First, and upon which all of the other functions build, is politics' responsibility for the "the steady emancipation of the individual through the education of his passions" (Will, 1983, 27). Will raises a couple of cautions along the way—he says that this is a purpose that politics shares with religion, and one that requires prudence—but ultimately he accepts as legitimate the classical view that political institutions have primary responsibility for moral education.

There is a two-fold argument at the heart of classical political thought that Will also appears to accept: (1) there are natural standards for human conduct—that is, there is a natural standard of excellence; and (2) government's agents are the teachers and enforcers of those natural standards. This

discussion recurs when Will talks of “law as tutor” (Will, 1983, 77). Perhaps the strongest statement Will makes in this regard is his claim that “The abandonment of soulcraft was an abandonment of a pursuit of excellence,” (Will, 1983, 43) suggesting that there could be no such pursuit outside of politically controlled channels.

The second function to be performed by the political system grows out of the first: the “creation of social cohesion which proceeds from shared adherence to a public philosophy and shared emulation of exemplary behavior and values.” Such cohesion is not the result of “spontaneous combustion,” Will notes in an oblique critique of the liberal concept of spontaneous order, but instead is a product of actions by the state, or “by statecraft that is soulcraft” (Will, 1983, 55).

A third function of government, according to Will, is to provide the foundations for the production of wealth: “Government produces the infrastructure of society—legal, physical, educational, from highways through skills—that is a precondition for the production of wealth” (Will, 1983, 125). Will argues that conservatives need to adopt “an affirmative doctrine of the welfare state,” (Will, 1983, 126) a political arrangement that he argues may be necessary for the full development of human capital. Will extends this creative power of government to include the establishment of economic structures and mechanisms: “a ‘free-market’ economic system is a system; it is a public product, a creation of government” (Will, 1983, 125). Even more sweeping is Will’s conclusion that “any important structure of freedom is a structure, a complicated institutional and cultural context that government must nurture and sustain” (Will, 1983, 123). Will seems incapable of considering the possibility of human creativity apart from governmental encouragement and management.

In a variation on an earlier point, but one important enough to list separately as a fourth function, Will asserts that “the aim of politics...is a warm citizenship, approximating friendship, based on a sense of shared values and a shared fate” (Will, 1983, 142). This “social warmth,” or community, “depends, to some extent, on policies which generate the feeling that we are and ought to be in some corporate enterprise that stands for something” (Will, 1983, 143). Note that Will is unclear on how crucial public policy is for promoting “warm citizenship,” as well as on exactly what public concerns it is that these policies should be addressing. Will maintains that, because state

action has alleviated most of the physical distress we once confronted, we now have “societies in which the most important problems are of the spirit” (Will, 1983, 143). Man has other needs that cannot be reduced to physical or material needs—metaphysical, spiritual, moral, and emotional—and which society cannot afford to ignore. The implication appears to be that state action must now be directed toward the amelioration of man’s spiritual, moral, emotional, and metaphysical distress.

Fifth, he says, “an aim of prudent statecraft is to limit the state by delegating many of its chores to intermediary institutions” (Will, 1983, 145). At this point Will acknowledges the potential dangers of government, and the passage is therefore worth quoting at length:

Government can become, to a dangerous degree, an interest group, as self-interested as any other, and more abusive than most. But government can apply to itself a kind of antitrust policy. With all its dimensions, from law through rhetoric, government can encourage strength in private institutions just as surely as totalitarian regimes work to enfeeble such institutions (Will, 1983, 145).

The key point to note in Will’s discussion is the presumption that the right to act resides with the government. While government may choose to delegate some of its “chores” to private institutions, those chores are always the responsibility of government first. Although Will acknowledges the existence of “private institutions” that may be used to achieve governmental objectives, he does not speak of “independent institutions.” There seems to be no real sense of the importance of “countervailing power” or alternative, freestanding, private centers of authority that could pursue alternative goals or intervene in the policy process.

Will concludes *Statecraft as Soulcraft* with a paean to politics that is so breathtaking in its sweep and implications that I will quote it without any additional comment:

Politics involves an endless agenda of arduous choices; it can be thrilling and noble. Certainly a sense of the complexity and majesty of politics is indispensable to the care of our time (Will, 1986, 165).

I have presented, in rough outline form, Will’s case against Felix Frankfurter and his argument for why law should be concerned with “the inner life of man.” As Will explains it, this concern with the inner life provides the foundation for government—the state—to attend to the most inti-

mate of human relationships and to manipulate the economic system⁵ in order to alleviate man's physical and metaphysical distress. The checks on the use of this political power appear to be internal to government itself—self-application of an “antitrust policy,” as Will puts it. The presumption throughout this book is that the most important human concerns—the care for excellence, the creative energies of society, and the moral and spiritual vision of a people—are all somehow embodied in and controlled by the political structures of society. Intermediary institutions, the private sector, a relatively free market mechanism, voluntary associations—all of these appear to be of secondary importance, useful at times because government may choose to delegate a few chores to them.

Near the end of *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, Will quotes William James as follows: “Civilization is always in need of being saved. The nation blest above all nations is she in whom the civic genius of the people does the saving day by day . . .” (Will, 1983, 161). I believe that there is a deeper connection between Will's conservative activism and James's progressivism than is generally assumed, and therefore conclude this section with a brief discussion of James's very important essay “The Moral Equivalent of War” (James, 1987). This is a rich essay, deserving of more attention than I will give it here.⁶ This brief discussion of James is designed to do two things: to point back toward progressivism as an important foundation for the political and social development of America during the twentieth century, and to show an underlying connection between American liberalism and American conservatism (at least the “conservatism” represented by Will).

The issue James confronts is this: How can the martial virtues, which are both essential to the development of civilization and at the same time a threat to civilization, be maintained and made safe as the world becomes more pacific? James writes,

A permanently successful peace-economy cannot be a simple pleasure-economy. In the more or less socialist future towards which mankind seems drifting we must still subject ourselves collectively to those severities which answer to our real position upon this only partly hospitable globe. We must make new energies and hardihoods continue the manliness to which the military mind so faithfully clings. Martial virtues must be the enduring cement; intrepidity, contempt of softness, surrender of private interest, obedience to command, must still remain the rock upon

which states are built (James, 1987, 1289-90).⁷

James's solution to the problem he sets forth is, first, to recognize that the martial virtues are "absolute and permanent human goods" (James, 1987, 1290). Patriotism and military ambition are but variations on man's "general competitive passion." The second step is to transfer these virtues and emotional energies toward some non-militaristic goal. He suggests, for example, "instead of military conscription a conscription of the whole youthful population to form for a certain number of years a part of the army enlisted against *Nature*." (James, 1987, 1291). James envisions armies of American youths working in coal mines, on freight trains, on fishing ships, and in other settings, being disciplined and trained in the way the military forces discipline and train recruits, but toward peaceful and socially productive ends.

But for this vision to come to fruition, James notes, we must approach social problems as the "moral equivalent of war," for without the passions released by war, we will not have the energy or focus to address these challenging but more mundane problems. James writes, "I have no serious doubt that the ordinary prides and shames of social man, once developed to a certain intensity, are capable of organizing such a moral equivalent as I have sketched, or some other just as effective for preserving manliness of type. It is but a question of time, of skillful propagandism, and of opinion-making men seizing historic opportunities" (James, 1987, 1292).

James believes that the martial spirit can be bred and maintained without war, because examples of "strenuous honor and disinterestedness" can be found everywhere. "Priests and medical men are in a fashion educated to it, and we should all feel some degree of it imperative if we were conscious of our work as an obligatory service to the state" (James, 1987, 1292). James continues,

We should be *owned*, as soldiers are by the army, and our pride would rise accordingly. We could be poor, then, without humiliation, as army officers now are. The only thing needed henceforward is to inflame the civic temper as past history has inflamed the military temper (James, 1987, 1292).

The historical point that should be made is that twentieth century America, in an amazing way, carried out the strategy James outlined in 1910. Think of the various New Deal programs which mobilized hundreds of thousands of Americans toward building or rebuilding the country's infrastructure, the development of the Peace Corps and Vista, the War on Poverty, the War on Illiteracy, the War on Drugs—all of these as a part of the great progressive

effort to channel human energies into the “moral equivalents of war.”

The political point that I want to make is that there is a connection between James’s view that we should see “our work as an obligatory service to the state” and Will’s view that “An aim of prudent statecraft is to limit the state by delegating many of its chores to intermediary institutions.” In both views the center of power, the creative center, is the state, and the citizenry are properly seen as secondary to, and subjects of, the state. When George Will can write, “My purpose here is only to sample the range of possible uses of assertive government to achieve conservative goals,” (Will, 1983, 130) is his world of conservatism really far removed from the liberal or progressive world of William James?

The question to be raised concerning the place of philanthropy in social life, based on either James’s or Will’s understanding of politics, is simple: is there any place in their society for an independent and vital philanthropic enterprise? The answer in both cases, I believe, is clearly negative. At best, philanthropy might achieve the status of an intermediary institution to which government might delegate a chore or two, but certainly not the status of independent institutions from which alternative visions of the good life could flow and which could legitimately participate in the public life of the community as a proponent of those views. Hence, in the concluding section of this paper I will briefly point to alternative ways of thinking about the relationship between politics and private life that hold out the possibility of a more robust philanthropy.

III

I began with a discussion of Leo Strauss’s claim that “the political association...is the most comprehensive or authoritative association in society.” I will conclude with a brief discussion of Michael Polanyi and Michael Oakeshott, two twentieth century thinkers who offer alternatives to the political vision of Strauss and Will, and whose views are more compatible with the development of an independent philanthropy.⁸

Michael Polanyi was a successful research chemist whose professional work led him to consider the broader implications of science as an institution; first, to an examination of the nature of the scientific enterprise and questions of scientific governance, and then, to a consideration of the institutional

arrangements appropriate for complex societies. In 1948, Polanyi delivered a brief radio address under the title “Planned Science,” (Polanyi, 1998, 106-111) in which he described the scientific enterprise and explained why true science is resistant to central planning. In this address, Polanyi searches for a metaphor to describe the scientific enterprise, and he rejects the image of men building a house, with the blueprints as the plan. Science is systematic, he says, but “the nature of scientific systems is more akin to the ordered arrangement of living cells which constitute a polycellular organism” (Polanyi, 1998, 109). Scientists cooperate by adjusting their research to the findings and research of other scientists working in the same field as they pursue their own work, just as in embryonic development healthy cells adjust their growth to that of the surrounding cells.

But this image too proves inadequate. “The actual situation...may perhaps be better captured by using Milton’s simile, which likens truth to a shattered statue, with fragments lying widely scattered and hidden in many places. Each scientist on his own initiative pursues independently the task of finding one fragment of the statue and fitting it to those collected by others” (Polanyi, 1998). But Polanyi finds even this to be inadequate, for whereas it will be obvious when the statue is incomplete (setting aside certain contemporary works of art), science always appears to be a complete whole.⁹ Polanyi therefore modifies Milton’s image by stipulating that the shattered statue always appears to be complete even as new pieces are being added and that its meaning is modified—to the surprise of those watching—with each addition. Polanyi notes that this is crucial in understanding why central planning in science cannot work:

No committee of scientists, however distinguished, could forecast the further progress of science except for the routine extension of the existing system. No important scientific advance could ever be foretold by such a committee. The problems allocated by it would therefore be of no real scientific value. They would either be devoid of originality, or if, throwing prudence to the winds, the committee once ventured on some really novel proposals, their suggestions would invariably prove impractical. For the points at which the existing system of science can be effectively amended reveal themselves only to the individual investigator. And even he can discover only through a life-long concentration on one particular aspect of science a small number of practicable and really worth-while problems (Polanyi, 1998, 110).

In a number of studies Polanyi continues his critique of central planning in science and his understanding of the “self government of science.” The scientific enterprise, he finds, involves what Polanyi calls “general authority,” characterized by rules of art and individual freedom to pursue research, “governed” by a loose set of institutions that publicize and evaluate scientific activity and maintain professional standards (Polanyi, 1957, 57-60, *passim*). He then extends his analysis to consider the cognitive limitations on central planning in complex organizations and societies—some of this work paralleling that of Hayek.¹⁰ Although Polanyi uses the term “polycentric” in a technical sense in his papers, I think it can be helpful to think of that term as applicable to an understanding of society which sees multiple sources and locations of social power, none of which are “comprehensive and authoritative” in a final sense—just as there is no “final authority” in science (except in a very temporary and localized way).

A fruitful avenue for future research would be to relate Polanyi’s discussion of the self-government of science to a consideration of civil society. The concept of civil society, so popular right now, can be particularly important only to the extent that it is developed with an understanding that community and intermediary institutions are actually independent, control their own affairs, and have the resources and power to influence the direction(s) of social change (as opposed to being merely “delegates” of governmental chores).

Michael Oakeshott also is a fruitful source of ideas worthy of further exploration and application in relation to the nature of politics and the foundations of philanthropy. I will discuss briefly two of Oakeshott’s concerns that are important for the issues raised in this paper. In his brief essay “The Claims of Politics,” Oakeshott provides an understanding of the relation between political institutions and the broader society that is quite different from that of Strauss and Will. Politics, Oakeshott argues, rather than being the central activity of the community, “is a highly specialized and abstracted form of communal activity”; rather than being the heart and soul of the community, “it is conducted on the surface of the life of a society and except on rare occasions makes remarkably small impression below that surface” (Oakeshott, 1993, 93).

What, then, is the function of the political system in the life of society? It is “primarily for the protection and occasional modification of a recognized legal and social order.” But political institutions are not the creators of, or creative forces within, that social order: “its end and meaning lie beyond itself

in the social whole to which it belongs, a social whole already determined by law and custom and tradition, none of which is the creation of political activity. . . . A political system presupposes a civilization; it has a function to perform in regard to that civilization, but it is a function mainly of protection and to a minor degree of merely mechanical interpretation and expression” (Oakeshott, 1993, 93).¹¹

Oakeshott underlines the limited scope of the political system in the total life of civilization with his comment on two of the most important and well-known documents in English history: “Political activity may have given us Magna Carta and the Bill of Rights, but it did not give us the contents of these documents, which came from a stratum of social thought far too deep to be influenced by the actions of politicians” (Oakeshott, 1993, 93).

Oakeshott’s understanding of politics and society moves the “creative center” outside of government and into the society at large—the notion of a “creative center” in fact runs counter to the thrust of Oakeshott’s understanding of society. There are many sources of creativity and renewal in a society, some running in parallel lines and some running at crosscurrents. This is why Oakeshott maintains, “Each [modern European state] was the outcome of human choices, but none was the product of a design” (Oakeshott, 1975, 185). This same comment could be applied to almost all other human institutions—including those that appear clearly to be the result of a single design.

This leads to a second important notion developed by Oakeshott: the distinction between the “civil association” and the “purposive (or enterprise) association.”¹² The civil association is responsible for establishing “noninstrumental rules of conduct”—the law (Oakeshott, 1991, 454). Law is to be “non-instrumental” in the sense that it establishes “the rules of the game” but does not aim at any substantive goals to be achieved. “Enterprise associations,” in contrast, are characterized by a commitment to a substantive agenda for action. The law, Oakeshott argues, should be a neutral framework that sets minimal requirements that allow individuals to pursue their own substantive ends, either individually or collectively (through enterprise associations). Whereas there can be only one “civil association” in a community (although it can be divided into different units or branches), there can be multiple enterprise associations (with overlapping memberships) pursuing and promoting various causes and differing visions of the good society. Philanthropic institutions would clearly fall into the category of enterprise associations, and would

have the freedom to pursue their goals, as do other such associations (voluntary civic groups, churches, business enterprises, etc.). Of course, one of the major issues confronting modern society is the possible capture of the institutions of civil association by enterprise associations, and the subsequent effort to convert noninstrumental law into substantive laws.

The discussion in this final section of this paper has attempted to show that there do exist important alternatives to the classical model of politics espoused by many on both the right and left, alternatives that have a social depth that many economic models of social action seem to lack. All of the issues dealt with in this paper, however, are preliminary to the task of re-envisioning American philanthropy. Thus the purpose of this paper has been limited to trying to clear away one of the important intellectual roadblocks to the fostering of an independent and robust philanthropic enterprise. Overcoming the common prejudice of political philosophy that holds government to be the most authoritative and creative actor in our social life is a necessary condition for a renewed philanthropy, but in itself it is not a sufficient condition for such renewal.

NOTES

- ¹ In saying this Strauss is restating the view articulated by Aristotle in *The Politics* 1252a.
- ² Polanyi uses the concept of “polycentricity” throughout the essays in *The Logic of Liberty: Reflections and Rejoinders* (1998) to describe the complexity of some types of problems and the way in which the various components of a problem interface. I am using the term to suggest the notion of multiple *loci* of power within a system, sources that are not reducible to a common source.
- ³ G. E. L. Owen, “Logic and Metaphysics in Some Earlier Works of Aristotle,” in *Aristotle and Plato in the Mid-Fourth Century*, eds. Owen and During (Gotebog, 1960), p. 189, as quoted in Miller, 1980, p. 61.
- ⁴ “This principle is not sufficient to account for the meaning of the term as we use it today. The reason for its insufficiency is this: the primary instance by reference to which political things originally were named has disappeared as an object of everyday experience. ‘Healthy’ continues to be a *pros hen* equivocal, because health of the body is something that is as accessible to our experience as it was to that of the ancients. Yet the *polis*, which is the primary instance of

something ‘political,’ has disappeared from view.” (Miller, 1980, p. 63)

- ⁵ See Will, 1983, pp.124-125 on the subordination of economics to politics and morality.
- ⁶ See, for example, the very perceptive comments on the changing nature of war that forecast the development of the garrison state: “Every up-to-date dictionary should say that ‘peace’ and ‘war’ mean the same thing, now *in posse*, now *in actu*. It may even reasonably be said that the intensely sharp competitive *preparation* for war by the nations is *the real war*, permanent, unceasing; and that the battles are only a sort of public verification of the mastery gained during the ‘peace’-interval.” James, 1989, pp. 1283-84. Emphasis in original. This essay was published in February 1910, long before George Orwell made the same point so dramatically in his novel *1984*.
- ⁷ James, 1989, pp. 1289-90. This passage continues: “—unless, indeed, we wish for dangerous reactions against commonwealths fit only for contempt, and liable to invite attack whenever a center of crystallization for military-minded enterprise gets formed anywhere in their neighborhood.”
- ⁸ This is not to claim that there are not important differences—especially philosophical differences—between the two. (Mitchell, 2001) I have argued throughout this paper that the growth of the state, and the intellectual foundations for such growth, can be found on the right as well as the left. By the same token, some on the left are concerned with limiting the sphere of political action and protecting a sphere for private and civic action free from political control. For a recent example, consider William A. Galston: “There are multiple, independent, sometimes competing sources of authority over our lives, and political authority is not dominant for all purposes under all circumstances. Liberalism accepts the importance of political institutions but refuses to regard them as architectonic.” (Galston, 2002, p. 4)
- ⁹ Consider in this connection Thomas Kuhn’s discussion of “normal science.”
- ¹⁰ “The Span of Central Direction,” “Profits and Polycentrism,” and “Manageability of Social Tasks,” in Polanyi, 1998.
- ¹¹ Consider the parallel argument made by Roger A. Lohmann: “If we look at public programs subsidizing the creation and continued operation of various nonprofit corporations, we will probably conclude that the state creates the commons. It is probably sounder, on the whole, to step back and view the state as arising out of the commons than to see the state as engendering the commons. Certainly, this view point is more accurate in the long-term histo-

ry of civilizations.” (Lohmann, 1992, pp. 183-84)

- ¹² For a thoughtful discussion of the importance of enterprise associations for Oakeshott, and the dangers of confusing enterprise and civil associations, see Boyd, 2002.

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