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Class Presentation: "Why Is It Important to Develop a Political Philosophy"

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• Good morning. I was delighted to receive this invitation from Prof. Englehardt and have been looking forward to being here today. The assigned topic, "Why is it important to develop a political philosophy," is one that has had me mulling for a few days now. It has forced me to examine my own political philosophy in some detail and recall how it was developed and how it has served me in personal, civic and professional matters. That kind of contemplation is, I suspect, at the heart of what this class is all about.

Aristotle was right, "Man is by nature a political animal." This class simply points out how important it is to think long and hard about your politics--the beliefs that go into your politics and the outcomes of the political decisions you make.

• Why is it important to be conscious of your political philosophy?

1) First, it's because your political philosophy is really the intersection between who you are and how you interact with the society you live in. In so many practical ways, it is how you put your core personal beliefs, values and morality into action--how you believe society should be fundamentally organized.

2) Second, your political philosophy, once you begin to express it, announces your alignment with others who share your values and view the world and its needs in ways similar to yours. Conversely it can put you at odds with those whose values and views differ from those you've developed.

3) And finally, it serves as a base around which you can check your own intellectual and moral honesty. It's the gut check that reminds you that what is
sometimes expedient or personally beneficial in the short term does not really meet the bar you've set for yourself or fulfill the vision you have for how a just and moral society operates. Having carefully thought through your own values gives you an appreciation of the complexities that go into making political and philosophical judgments.

**Personal values**

- Let's start with those personal values. They change somewhat over time and as experience dictates, but they really are the core of the person you are. My ingrained beliefs dictate how I think the world should be organized. How I perceive these values--freedom, fairness, justice, equity and equality, community and faith--are what I bring to the table when we talk about the important issues of the day.

How can you arrive at a position on taxation without examining how you feel about fairness and equity? Where do your beliefs about freedom fit into your views about censorship? How can I commit to a position on any of the issues of the day without looking at them through that value lens that is my own personal belief system?

- War and peace, the death penalty, abortion, gun control, private property rights, affirmative action, immigration, health care, censorship, sustainability--they all require examination on that personal-values balance sheet.

**Aligning with like thinkers**

- When it comes to aligning myself with others who think like me, again there's a careful balancing act involved. When I align myself with other “like thinkers” I'm basically helping to empower that political party or philosophy with my support. There are no perfect matches, however, and how my personal values play out in a group setting can be a source of frustration.
I might find a group and stated philosophy that matches my personal philosophy on the topics of taxation and fairness, but find that group egregiously violates values that I hold even more important--civility and a sense of community, for instance. Then I have to decide which value is most important to me. Where will I have to compromise?

From a practical standpoint, this is a great year to witness the struggles and personal balancing that rising political movements and old, out-of-the-mainstream philosophies demand. How many people who say they believe in smaller, less intrusive government, for instance, will be willing to put their personal resources and commitment on the line to respond to a natural disaster and preserve their belief in a just and fair society?

There are always elements in our societal structures who try to take advantage of turmoil and promote underlying value systems that are not beneficial for everyone. But I think ultimately good thoughtful people will navigate those challenges and we will emerge with a new "ism" that will make us a better society.

**Setting a personal bar**

Defining your political philosophy can serve as a benchmark against how you measure your own actions and those of others. I witnessed at a young age what happens when people mix values--when seemingly good people extend a personal bias that has not been clearly analyzed into the political process.

*(Tell the story about the JFK election and teachers you respected who allowed religious bias to supplant what were probably sound political philosophies.)*

I knew those people. They weren't bad people, and suspect today, they would be embarrassed by their statements and actions at that time. They may have fallen prey
to group pressures and they may have neglected to think carefully about personal values as a foundation for political organization. Or maybe their personal values truly were lacking.

I applaud the foundation premise of this class, and hope it has a lasting impact on you. I hope it encourages you to continually examine your beliefs, your actions and the causes and organizations you support. Think about your values, act on them and be ready to shift allegiance rather than compromise what is most important to you.

I've saved the last portion of my time with you for questions and comments, so please feel free to ask about or challenge my comments.