Murray Edelman, Political Symbolism, and the Incoherence of Political Science


What is wrong with American political science? That there is something wrong is suggested by the titles of the most recent surveys of the discipline—The Tragedy of Political Science and Disenchanted Realists. The first book provides evidence from the political science community of "a nagging suspicion that the discipline is merely marking time."1 And the authors of the second book conclude: "Political science has not perished, but its major claims, purposes and justifications have."2

Originally American political scientists had hoped to put scientific rationality in the service of democratic politics. But this turned out to be an incoherent vision. By the standard of scientific rationality, the conduct of ordinary citizens appeared irrational. Consequently, political scientists had to doubt the reasonableness of democratic ideals. But most recently many political scientists have wondered whether the deeper problem concerns the very idea of scientific rationality. The scientific ideals of dispassionate objectivity and empirical verifiability may be unattainable. If that is so, then the con-

duct of social scientists may differ from that of ordinary citizens only because the irrationality of the scientists is more sophisticated.

I think these problems have to be kept in mind in order to make sense of the shifting patterns in Murray Edelman's work on political symbolism. In *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (originally published in 1964), he relied on a positivist conception of rationality in unmasking the irrationality of American democratic beliefs. In his later work, however, he began to question the assumptions of positivism; and he moved toward a radical relativism. Finally, in recent years, his epistemological nihilism has led him to a political nihilism, because he has expressed the hope that politics will eventually disappear to be replaced by a benign anarchy.

Edelman's confusion is instructive, because he manifests an incoherence that subverts much of the work of American political scientists. The source of this incoherence, I shall argue in this paper, is nominalism. Since the fourteenth century, it has been common in modern thought to assume that since universals do not exist except as fictional creations of the mind, the particular events of matter in motion constitute the only objective reality. Consequently, all symbolism falsifies reality. But if this is true, then both scientific knowledge and political order are illusory.

I shall suggest, therefore, a return to common-sense realism, which affirms the reality of universals, as the only way to restore the coherence of political science. Instead of denigrating the symbols of political life as irrational, we should examine them as the prescientific foundation of political science. To show how this point of view differs from Edelman's, I shall conclude by comparing his work with Aristotle’s rhetorical theory and *The Federalist*.

Political Symbolism

"Perhaps more than any other theorist," Elder and Cobb declare in their recent book, "Edelman has succeeded in showing the pervasive and profound importance of symbols in politics." 3 Doris Graber, in her earlier survey of this field of study, praises Edelman's work as "by far the best introduction to the use of verbal symbols by politicians to manipulate publics." 4 In fact, Edelman has been one

of the most influential political scientists of his generation; and his *Symbolic Uses of Politics* deserves to be considered one of the few classics of American political science.

His great contribution to the discipline has been his insistence that the study of political behavior must be largely the study of political speech. In that respect, he belongs to the tradition of rhetorical theory begun by Plato and Aristotle. Moreover, as suggested by Graber’s comment, he resembles Socrates in his desire to expose the sophistical deception practiced by many rhetoricians. But to detect falsehood one must have some standard of truth. And indeed Edelman offers us such a standard.

In *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, the standard is implicit in his distinction between referential symbols and condensation symbols.

Students of this subject have noticed a fundamental distinction among symbols that groups them into two quite separate types. Referential symbols are economical ways of referring to the objective elements in objects or situations: the elements identified in the same way by different people. Such symbols are useful because they help in logical thinking about the situation and in manipulating it. Industrial accident statistics and cost figures in cost plus contracts are referential political symbols, though they may also be condensation symbols. Condensation symbols evoke the emotions associated with the situation. They condense into one symbolic event, sign, or act patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, promises of future greatness: some one of these or all of them. (6)

He indicates that he has drawn this distinction from an essay by Edward Sapir. And he observes: “No example can ever be wholly free of either referential or of condensation symbols; but the distinction between the two types of behavior is fundamental in realistic political analysis.” (7)

We must wonder about this distinction if in fact the two kinds of symbols are never wholly distinct. We must also wonder about the kind of symbolic activity required for making this distinction. When linguists “noticed” this distinction, presumably they were thinking in symbols. Did they use referential symbols or condensation symbols? If they used referential symbols, does that mean that condensation symbols can be translated into referential symbols for the sake

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of linguistic study or "realistic political analysis"? The problem for Edelman is that his explanation of symbolism must account for itself as a symbolic activity. Later in this essay, I shall argue that he fails to do this, and thus his reasoning becomes self-contradictory.

But at this point Edelman's argument can be summarized using the passage quoted above and other passages in *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*. Referential symbols allow us to understand empirical reality objectively and to manipulate it for our benefit. Condensation symbols evoke an emotional and thus subjective reaction to a situation, and therefore we see the world not as it really is but as we imagine it to be. By applying this distinction to political symbolism, we can distinguish mythical politics from utilitarian politics. For most people politics is a mythical activity; for a few people it is a utilitarian activity. (1-5) For "mass publics" politics is a spectacle in which they ritualistically seek symbolic reassurance that they live in a meaningful world. But for the "elites," who participate directly in public affairs, politics is merely an instrument for manipulating the objective world to win certain tangible benefits-money and power. The elite few bargain among themselves about public policy in the selfish pursuit of concrete gains, while the naive many deceive themselves into believing that government promotes the common good. The utilitarian politics of the few is a rational calculation of material interests. The mythical politics of the many is an irrational evocation of abstract ideas. (9-11, 15-18, 29, 41-42, 97-98, 124-25, 180) Thus, like many other political scientists, Edelman rejects American democratic ideals as illusions. (191-94)

Much of Edelman's writing seems to assume a Hobbesian view of politics, which could be explained by the influence of Harold Lasswell. Human beings are not by nature political beings. Rather they are divided by their selfish appetites. They establish governments, therefore, only for the sake of securing peace. (Uses, 18-19) On the other hand, Edelman insists that "man is a political animal." (Uses, 1-2) Politics is not merely an instrument for satisfying individual wants, because what a man wants—indeed the essence of his being—is in part a product of political symbolism. (Uses, 19, 43) But this suggests that there is no sharp distinction between the instrumental or utilitarian politics of the elites and the expressive or mythical politics of the masses. "The expressive and symbolic functions of the polity are therefore central: not simply a blind for oligarchic rules, though they may sometimes be that, too." (Uses, 19-20) "Elites are just as likely as others to base their beliefs upon symbolic
governmental cues." (Action, 10) In these and other passages, Edelman uses the word "symbolic" in a narrow sense to denote condensation symbols rather than referential symbols. The implication, therefore, seems to be that all human beings—both the elites and the masses—rely on condensation symbols to determine their needs and wants. Only with such symbols can human beings define themselves through interaction with one another. (Uses, 124-25, 127, 142, 180-81; Action, 7, 70, 114, 144-45, 158, 171)

This, however, creates a paradox. Human beings cannot live without relying on mythical symbols that falsify the world. And yet if this is so, it is hard to see how anyone could know it. For in the very act of recognizing that falsification is a necessity for all human beings, someone would have to free himself from that necessity, which would show it was not a necessity after all. One cannot expose falsehood without some conception of truth. Edelman, however, sometimes tries to evade this point.

One example of such evasion is his chapter in Political Language (57-75) on "The Political Language of the Helping Professions." This is a useful study of how professionals can use the language of medical science to justify their power over others. It is easy for us to accept the deprivation of individual freedom, Edelman argues, when it is called "therapy." But Edelman does not give us substantive criteria for deciding what can or cannot be properly classified as therapy. For example, does Edelman want us to conclude that the idea of "mental illness" is a myth? (17, 61-62) If he does, then he should support that conclusion with evidence and reasoning. But he does not do that. Consequently, he is open to the criticism made by William Connally: "By exposing all vocabularies and endorsing none, Edelman implicitly endorses the cynical view that all uses of language are thoroughly manipulative. But he cannot accept that thesis thoroughly, or else it would undermine the credibility of his own thesis."

Edelman must struggle with what Clifford Geertz has called "Mannheim's Paradox." If all thought is ideological, then how can the scientific study of ideology be free from ideological bias? In his first two books on political symbolism—The Symbolic Uses of

Politics and Politics as Symbolic Action—Edelman implicitly adopts a positivist strategy for escaping the paradox. This strategy rests on the claim that the scientific method provides the social scientist an objective standpoint from which he can study the ideology of social actors.

Positivist Objectivism

In *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Edelman's distinction between condensation symbols and referential symbols allows him to defend the objectivity of scientific language. The propagandist must use emotional language that has little if any reference to reality. But the analyst can use logical language that is empirically verifiable. (124) Insofar as he acts as "a cognitive and empirical manipulator of reality," a man can have reliable knowledge of the world. (97-98) He will use terms as "efficient tools, relatively free of the contagion of values." (119)

Since he acts as an objective observer, the social scientist must reject the viewpoint of the ordinary citizen. "The themes a society emphasizes and re-emphasizes about its government may not accurately describe its politics; but they do at least tell us what men want to believe about themselves and their state." (191) Some people have chosen to believe that their rulers were divine or divinely chosen. Others have believed that their rulers were naturally fitted to rule for the common good or for the good of some dominant class. And many people have believed that their government represented the general will of the people. But Edelman's social scientist must recognize the mythical character of such ideas.

In some metaphysical sense all these propositions may be true; but it is of more interest to the social scientist that they are often not demonstrable by scientific methods, that there are many exceptions to them, and that they continue to be believed in spite of the lack of evidence and of the demonstrable exceptions. Clearly, beliefs like these serve functions other than the description of a country's political institutions. They help hold men together and help maintain an orderly state. (191-92)

The social scientist, however, is not the only kind of person who can exercise scientific rationality in social life.
A great many people, particularly specialists, professionals, and managers in industry, develop a tie to their work that is relatively rational and efficient. Their effectiveness derives from their special ability to devise methods of accomplishing desired ends . . . Such rational and effective manipulation of resources is in part a function of the opportunity to work with the concrete environment and see the results of one's work. Nobody functions in this way in everything he does, and some people never do. (179-80)

Within the political arena, this same kind of utilitarian rationality is employed by people who use government to advance their concrete interests, people who wish to secure “tangible rather than symbolic benefits.” (150)

In *Politics as Symbolic Action*, Edelman gives more attention than in his earlier book to the limitations of “academic political science.” (vii, 1, 3-4, 116, 172-73, 176) But he still believes it possible to establish a rigorous political science upon verifiable observations of empirical reality. (5, 44, 52, 155, 178) And he continues to rely on the differences between condensation symbols and referential symbols. “The question always is whether people are responding to the special stylized world that is created and given meaning by a collectively held myth, or whether they are trying, as individuals, to observe and to verify their perceptions through free empirical inquiry.” (79)

Edelman commonly supports his political conclusions with claims about what “studies show,” what “the data indicate” or what “empirical findings” demonstrate. (84-95) He rarely uses the names of the authors. Thus, the impersonal, dispassionate, and abstract style of his language conveys the impression of objectivity. He lulls the critical faculties of his reader by invoking the authority of social science without considering how dubious the “findings” of social scientists can be.

Nevertheless, the careful reader of *Politics as Symbolic Action* can detect some doubts about the positivist rationality of political science. Edelman confesses, for example, that empirical methodology cannot handle the truly political questions of life. Empirical testing can be done by individuals who wish to calculate the most efficient means to unambiguous ends. But such technical rationality presupposes that the ends are clear, as in constructing a building or sending an astronaut to the moon. Political questions, however, are by definition questions about the ends of action. “It is precisely when collective enterprises become controversial, i.e.,
political that they grow heavily symbolic and begin to assume the forms of conflict that may escalate.” (177)

If political reality is constituted by symbolic meanings that cannot be reduced to sense impressions, then the study of politics cannot conform to positivist methodology. In fact, it is doubtful that there are any empirically verified theories of political symbolism. The "shared social objectives that become major political issues," Edelman indicates, "depend upon perceptions and beliefs that are not, and often cannot be, based upon empirical observation." (Action, 174) Consequently, Edelman has been forced to reject the positivist conception of political science. (Words, 9-11; Uses, 195) He has turned to phenomenology and other alternatives to positivism. (Words, 24-26; Uses, 208-9; "Language," 10, 14-18)

In 1984 Edelman wrote a new Afterword to The Symbolic Uses of Politics confessing his mistake in accepting Sapir's distinction between referential and condensation symbols.

I doubt that there are any referential symbols. Anything that serves as a symbol is bound to condense a range of ideas, feelings, and sentiments and to do so differently for different people. A symbol cannot refer to a nonexistent reality. (198)

His original examples of referential symbols were "industrial accident statistics and cost figures in cost plus contracts." (6) But presumably now he would say that such “quantitative abstractions” cannot refer to any concrete reality. (Uses, 117; Words, 104-8)

Although Edelman does not indicate it, even Sapir may have doubted that referential symbols could be clearly distinguished from condensation symbols. In the essay on which Edelman relies, Sapir says that social symbolsm and scientific symbolism are similar as means for rationalizing human behavior. "Scientists fight for their theories not because they believe them to be true but because they wish them to be so." (9)

Pursuing this line of thought, Edelman concludes that positivist objectivity is impossible. And as an alternative, he turns to what I shall call "interpretive relativism." To see the world is to interpret it. And interpreting it is less an act of discovery than it is an act of

8. See Graber, Verbal Behavior, 322-27. Moreover, it is questionable whether any field of political science has ever produced an empirically verified law of political behavior. See Ricci, Tragedy, 249-75.
creation. We must reject behaviorism and positivism because "the study of the construction of meaning must focus upon the interpretations of subjects more than the observations of objects." (Uses, 195)

By taking this stance, Edelman illuminates the defects in the positivist methodology that he took for granted in his early writing. But when his relativism becomes nihilistic, his work becomes both logically and politically incoherent.

Interpretive Relativism

Despite the pervasive positivism of The Symbolic Uses of Politics, even that book contains some ideas that anticipate Edelman's subsequent rejection of positivist objectivity. Edelman notices that even our simplest ideas about the world are abstractions, and all abstractions are fictions. (119) To make sense of things we must name them. But every name is a metaphor. It specifies some property which a class of objects has in common. It thereby calls attention away from other properties. The name "table" calls attention to a flat, raised surface suitable for eating or writing but ignores other properties of the wood and spaces comprising a table." (158) In some sense, therefore, "man creates his own world." (185) And consequently we cannot—especially in the study of politics—separate facts from theories. "Observation of politics is not simply an effort to learn what is happening but rather a process of making observations conform to assumptions." (186) Edelman does not elaborate these comments, however. And, therefore, they do not subvert the general tone of confidence in the objectively verifiable knowledge of the political scientist as transcending the mythical symbolism of the ordinary citizen.

He tries to maintain this confidence in his later writings. He insists that at least a few political actors and spectators can maintain a "commitment to reality testing" that allows them to see through the illusions of political symbolism. (Action, 44, 52, 177-78) Such people can try to remain tentative rather than dogmatic in their political beliefs. (Words, 20, 106, 144) They can reject "public language" in favor of "formal language" like mathematics that is logically precise and dispassionately objective. (Words, 105, 108) "To brush away the prevailing symbolism completely is probably impossible, but the effort is necessary and some success is obviously feasible." (Words, 155) Yet this is at best a faint hope considering how insistent Edelman is about the pervasiveness of symbolic illusion.
"Political language is political reality: there is no other so far as the meaning of events to actor and spectators is concerned." ("Language," 10) Therefore, "it is language about political events rather than the events themselves that everyone experiences." (Words, 142) Furthermore, we cannot rely on language as an accurate representation of reality. "Language does not mirror an objective ‘reality,’ but rather creates it by organizing meaningful perceptions abstracted from a complex, bewildering world." (Action, 66)

Strictly speaking, we cannot even distinguish between language that is literal and realistic and language that is metaphorical and mythical. All language depends on metaphor and myth, because in language we simplify the complex by viewing the unfamiliar through its likeness to the familiar. We must sort things out into fictional patterns of resemblances and differences. Otherwise, we could not bear the anxiety of confronting the world in its chaotic complexity. (Action, 65, 67, 83; Words, 24, 150) Edelman must therefore agree with Nietzsche in denying the "dogma of immaculate perception." (Words, 13) And he must agree with Wittgenstein in affirming that "there are no essences, only language games." ("Language," 10)

A clear example of how Edelman has changed his point of view is his handling of the problem of poverty. A fundamental theme in his early work is the exploitation of the poor and the weak by the rich and the powerful. Indeed, Edelman offers his theory of political symbolism as the only way to explain why the oppressed rarely become rebellious. The elites are free to pursue the "tangible benefits" of government-money, power, and status-so long as the masses are provided "symbolic reassurance" that government actually promotes the public good. The rational few use political symbolism to deceive the irrational many. (Uses, 1-19, 22-23, 35-36, 38-41, 56, 62, 127, 149-150, 170-71, 180-81; Action, 1, 7, 78-83, 142, 148-49, 170-71)

But in Political Language Edelman explains that since no political analysis is free of ideological bias, it is impossible to have objective knowledge of whether or not the poor are oppressed. He distinguishes two patterns of thought about poverty. According to one, the poor are responsible for their poverty and should be controlled. According to the other, the poor are victims of exploitation. Neither stock explanation has any necessary bearing on the "facts." Either may in some sense be valid . . . . There is always "evidence" of
a sort for either view; and because both explanations depend upon un-
provable premises about society and the individual, the observer's 
values and interests play the crucial part in the acceptance of one or the 
other view. (7)

We must choose between "contradictory myths." (44)

But of course all political thinking is mythical in that it depends 
on fictional images determined by the arbitrary values of the 
observer. Social science, therefore, cannot be "value-free." Edelman 
concedes that even his own political analysis reflects his subjective 
values. Like any political writer, he uses "evocative" language to 
promote his personal political preferences. (Words, 14-16, 120, 124)

Since each person looks at the political world from the point of 
view of his values and interests, all political arguments are ra-
tionalizations. Politics is so complex and so ambiguous that any per-
son can find evidence to support his preferred position on any issue. 
Therefore, when conflicting interests lead to fundamentally dif-
ferent interpretations of the evidence, there is no rational way to set-
tle the disagreement. And this is as true for the disputes of social 
scientists as it is for the disputes of politicians and citizens. (Action, 
3; Words, 30: "Language," 11, 14) "Reason and rationality in polit-
ical argument, like creativity, are constructions of the 
observer." (Uses, 210)

Edelman must therefore endorse the following claim by Kenneth 
Burke:

And however important to us is the tiny sliver of reality each of us has 
experienced first hand, this whole overall "picture" is but a construct 
of our symbolic systems. To meditate on this fact until one sees its full 
implications is much like peering over the edge of things into an 
ultimate abyss. And doubtless that's one reason why, though man is 
typically the symbol-using animal, he clings to a kind of naive verbal 
realism that refuses to realize the full extent of the role played by sym-
bolicity in his notions of reality. (Action, 2)

But now that he has rejected all claims to objective knowledge, 
how can Edelman escape Mannheim's Paradox? How can he avoid 
the incoherence of radical relativism? The incoherence is evident in 
Burke's remarks. Is it not "naive verbal realism" to speak of the 
"ultimate abyss" as a "fact"?

The self-referential inconsistency of Edelman's argument becomes 
clear on one page of his paper on "Political Language and Political 
Reality," which was his contribution to the Harold Lasswell Sym-
posium at the 1984 convention of the American Political Science Association. In denigrating political speech, he writes: "What is accepted as a 'good reason' tells us nothing about the cogency of its argument but is a sensitive index to the problems, aspirations, and social situation of its audience." (14) But a few paragraphs later, he writes:

To examine the stylized utterances of public officials, interest group spokespersons, and concerned citizens as they interact respecting a topic of common concern is to be impressed with the cogency of Michel Foucault's insight that there is an important sense in which language constructs the people who use it, a view manifestly in contrast with the commonsensical assumption that people construct the language they use. (14)

If we cannot judge the cogency of arguments, then why should we be "impressed with the cogency of Michel Foucault's insight"? Should we say that a few people-like Foucault and Edelman-occupy a privileged position so that they can speak with cogency about the lack of cogency in everyone else's speech?

If Edelman is right, then his reliance on Foucault's "insight" has nothing to do with cogent reasoning "but is a sensitive index to the problems, aspirations, and social situation" of his audience. We could say that the political scientists in his audience have lost confidence in positivist epistemology and are therefore desperately looking for an alternative. We could also observe that political scientists like to keep up with the latest intellectual fashions from France, and Foucault happens to be in vogue. Being aware of this, Edelman surely knew that citing Foucault would enhance his professional status while giving his colleagues "symbolic reassurance" about the intellectual respectability of political science without positivism. And since his argument was reassuring to his audience, Edelman knew that they would rationalize their acceptance of it because they wanted to be convinced.

Again, if we apply to Edelman's political speech the same cynical scrutiny that he applies to the speech of others, then we must notice how he manipulates words. For example, in his paper for the Lasswell Symposium, he writes: "The reasons people offer for their political actions and preferences are also rationalizations, as Freud recognized; there is no way for a speaker or audience to distinguish between the two." (13) His use of the word "recognized" hides the contradiction in that sentence. "Recognition" suggests clear percep-
tion or knowledge of something. But if all reasoning is rationalization, then genuine knowledge is impossible. How could Freud recognize that all recognition is illusory?

Edelman relies heavily on the words "recognize" and "recognition." He uses the words whenever he wants to assert something as simply true without having to make an argument to support it. (Uses, 5, 21, 120, 150, 176, 196, 204, 207, 212-13; Action, 3, 29, 32, 54, 79, 84, 114, 167, 179, 181; Words, 30, 66, 106, 127, 134, 142, 144, 146, 150, 153-54; "Language," 12-13, 18-19) With most authors, it would be trivial to object to such word usage. But in Edelman's case, it is instructive to see how difficult it is for him to avoid words that implicitly contradict his assertion of interpretive relativism.

In his 1984 Afterword to The Symbolic Uses of Politics, Edelman rejects his earlier distinction between political symbolism and political reality. He denies that there is "an objective political 'reality' from which symbols can divert attention." He must therefore disagree with the logical positivists who "equate the phenomena produced by professional scientific procedures with reality." (200) But then, a few paragraphs later, he explains:

The challenge is to suspend inculcated belief in a state that ultimately, if imperfectly, reflects the wishes of the people and look with a naive eye at the ways in which publicized governmental processes, people's actions, and value allocations mesh with one another. (201)

Having warned his readers that they can look at the political world only through symbolic constructions that have no reference to any objective reality, Edelman now urges his readers to "look with a naive eye." He cannot have it both ways.

Edelman also contradicts himself whenever he tries to illustrate his general claim that all political reasoning is rationalization. He cannot identify an argument as a rationalization without assuming that he knows the truth of the matter. Here is an example from his Lasswell Symposium paper:

Military interventions in the third world that bolster corrupt oligarchies and stifle peasant demands, for example, have been rationalized for many years on the ground that they support democracy by preventing a communist takeover engineered in Moscow or Havana. (11)

Edelman assumes that such interventions have not in fact promoted democratic ends. It seems so obvious to him that he sees no need to
offer evidence. Is he appealing to the ideological bias in his audience of political scientists?

Edelman's assessments of political symbolism depend upon his acceptance of a certain conception of justice. Thus, again, he cannot adhere consistently to his claim that all views of justice are mythical. Consider the concluding sentences of his last two books. The complexity of government "should not obscure recognition that the most efficacious, certain, and lasting response to popular unrest lies in substantial improvement in the conditions of the deprived so as to remove the reasons for their sense of deprivation." *(Action, 181)*

"Every case of these pathologies is added proof that economic and social institutions need to be adjusted to the needs of human beings." *(Words, 155)* On the one hand, Edelman asserts that the debate over whether the poor are unfairly deprived arises from "contradictory myths." *(Words, 44)* On the other hand, Edelman clearly regards deprivation as a fact not a myth.

What would Edelman have us do to insure that our political arrangements would be "adjusted to the needs of human beings"? Edelman's response is politically incoherent, because he seems to say that the perfection of politics would require the abolition of politics. Since political symbolism is essential to any political community, Edelman's denigration of symbolism becomes a denigration of politics. In opposing all symbolism as irrational, he becomes an anarchist.

Symbolism and Anarchism

In his Lasswell Symposium paper, Edelman maintains that governments have never solved any major problems. He even denies that examples such as the abolition of slavery and the establishment of universal education disprove his assertion.

These examples do not demonstrate that major problems have been solved, but rather that the terms in which they are named have been transformed. In these cases formal governmental action changed the legal terms applied to the problems, abolishing slavery and requiring attendance at school; but the deprivations, inequalities, and moral questions that made them issues in the first place have remained as major items on the political agenda, with no resolution in sight. *(18-19)*

But to deny the substantive difference between slave labor and wage labor is implausible. Not even Marx believed that.
Edelman seems to concede, however, in the next paragraph, that the abolition of slavery was an improvement. Yet he insists that this did not manifest genuine progress because it actually benefitted the capitalists. "The industrial revolution and the growth of capitalist industry in America in the first half of the nineteenth century made wage labor more economical than slave labor." (19) Edelman's reasoning is vague. Does he mean to say that since the root of all political problems is inequality of power, no political improvement counts as a solution to any problem so long as inequality persists? Is he suggesting that there never has been or will be any genuine progress until we establish a socialist utopia--"a society without capitalism or governmental or corporate or military hierarchies"? (13) If that is what he means, then again Marx would not agree with him. For in the first part of the Communist Manifesto, Marx praised the bourgeois revolution as an advance beyond feudalism, an advance that would make the socialist revolution possible.

Surprisingly, Edelman's reasoning resembles that of George Fitzhugh, the antebellum apologist for slavery. Fitzhugh found that "the works of the socialists contain the true defense of slavery," because they show that "capital exercises a more perfect compulsion over free laborers than human masters over slaves." Fitzhugh would also agree with Edelman's claim that all government depends upon oppressive force. He would disagree, however, with Edelman's suggestion that anarchy is a reasonable alternative.

According to Edelman, the most fundamental human need is for self-realization. (Action, 7, 56, 59-60, 74, 158, 162, 177-81; Words, 27, 64-65, 71, 82-83, 86-90, 127-33, 142-43, 150-55) But all governments secure social, economic, and political structures that prevent people from fulfilling themselves. Governments can at best produce "marginal change" that falls short of "basic or radical change in existing inequalities in wealth and power." (Words, 124-25) Sometimes governments help people, especially in handling purely technical or scientific problems. "More often, politics creates a way of living with social problems by defining them as inevitable or as equitable." (Words, 141) "Deprivation is universal." Even the rich and the powerful are blinded by their social roles so that they remain oblivious to the real impoverishment of their everyday lives. (Action, 56) They are impoverished because they cannot actualize their intellectual and social potentialities.

Although role taking usually distorts reality, because we see people as simple objects rather than as complex human beings, Edelman hopes that sometimes we can exercise "empathetic mutual role taking which enlarges understanding of the range of viable potentialities." (Actions, 59) But generally Edelman doubts that we can ever be fully free so long as we live within the symbolic construction of reality imposed by society.

W. Lance Bennett, a political scientist deeply influenced by Edelman’s work, suggests that Edelman begs the question of how political order would be possible without symbolism. Our aim, Bennett argues, should be to sustain the symbols of government in ways that would minimize their abuses. Bennett is caught in a dilemma, however. He believes political order requires "sacred political symbols, rules, and rituals." But he also believes Edelman is right about such symbolism being a fictional creation. Bennett must therefore defend political symbols as merely necessary illusions. Yet this subverts his recommendation of "principled public understandings" achieved through rational public debates.

If political symbolism is—as Edelman insists—"a cage that inhibits both mind and political action," then the only reasonable course of action is to destroy the cage. (Uses, 211) But if political symbolism is the precondition for political order, then to destroy the cage is to destroy politics. Political order is possible only so long as individuals are adjusted to their social roles through the symbolic construction of reality, which "rationalizes the most repressive stultification of the human spirit." "To establish adjustment, rather than fulfillment, as the highest good is to assure a life for everyone that fails to achieve its potentialities." (Words, 153)

The individual person exists, and his or her well-being is the point of existence. "Society," "the national interest," and similar terms do not refer to anything that exists . . . . But because everyone is socialized to respond positively to "society," "the national interest," and similar condensation symbols, these terms help engender mass acquiescence in material sacrifices, constricted roles, political weakness, existing power hierarchies, and unfulfilled lives. (Words, 153-54)

The anarchistic ramifications of this passage are clear. Compare, for

example, a similar passage in Mikhail Bakunin's *God and the State*: "Until now all human history has been only a perpetual and bloody immolation of millions of poor human beings in honor of some pitiless abstraction-God, country, power of State, national honor, historical rights, judicial rights, political liberty, public welfare.

Edelman's anarchism may reflect the influence of Harold Lasswell's vision of a "free man's commonwealth." Lasswell observes:

The long-run aim of societies aspiring toward human freedom is to get rid of power and to bring into existence a free man's commonwealth in which coercion is neither threatened, applied nor desired. This is the thread of anarchist idealism that appears in all uncompromising applications of the key conception of human dignity. When Engels wrote of the "withering away of the state" he was voicing the hope, though not necessarily the certainty, of the radical democrat."

Moreover, Edelman's expressive individualism resembles Lasswell's concern for the "open ego." Both Edelman and Lasswell denigrate political symbolism because it hinders individual spontaneity. Both yearn for the disappearance of political rule as the precondition for human emancipation. In short, both abhor politics.

Edelman expresses his depreciation of politics in his praise of the arts for allowing an individual "creativity" that is impossible in politics. ("Language," 15) Indeed, Edelman shares with many modern artists a desire to escape the public world in the pursuit of an intense privatization of experience. Like the modern artist, he attacks the common-sense constraints of public language because they inhibit individual sensitivity.

Edelman's contempt for politics also gives him some common ground with libertarian theorists like Milton Friedman and Robert

Nozick. Like Edelman, Nozick denies the existence of any "social entity" or "social good." "There are only individual people," Nozick says, "different individual people with their own individual lives." Government is justified therefore only insofar as it serves individual freedom. It is unjustified whenever it forces any individual to sacrifice for the good of others. Nozick maintains, for example, that taxation and the military draft are forms of slavery." Edelman would seem to agree:

The revenue service deprives people of money, almost always involuntarily; the military draft imposes involuntary servitude; thousands of other agents of the state deprive people of forms of freedom. Usually the rationale for such restraints is an ambiguous abstraction: national security, the public welfare, law and order. We do not experience or name these ambiguous and abstract objectives as any different from goals that consist of concrete benefits, such as traffic control and disease control. (Words, 65)

Edelman also agrees with Milton Friedman in warning against abstract political ideals as tools of deception that threaten individual freedom. For example, they both condemn John Kennedy's famous remark in his inaugural address-"Ask not what your country can do for you-ask what you can do for your country." Since they believe the "country" does not exist-except as a collection of individuals-they consider it both absurd and dangerous for a leader to tell people that they should sacrifice themselves for their country.

Although Nozick and Friedman are not anarchists, they do accept Edelman's anarchistic premise that "the individual person exists, and his or her well-being is the point of existence." (Words, 153) But is it not true that human beings are social creatures whose development must be nurtured by society? If that is so, then the welfare of the individual is intertwined with the welfare of society. Even Nozick concedes "that we partially are `social products' in that we benefit from current patterns and forms created by multitudinous actions of a long string of long-forgotten people, forms which include institutions, ways of doing things, and language." He insists that this "does not create in us a general floating debt which the cur-

rent society can collect and use as it will. But if we are in fact "social products," how can we deny any "floating debt" to the society that produced us?

Edelman's position is ambiguous. On the one hand, he affirms a radical individualism that denies the claims of society. On the other hand, he says that individuals exist only as products of social interaction. George Herbert Mead's "symbolic interactionism" is a pervasive element of Edelman's teaching. And he uses Mead's work to show "that only by taking full account of the ways in which social situations help make individuals what they are can we appreciate and encourage people's potentialities; only in society and in response to its constraints and repressions do human beings express themselves." (Uses, 198) However, in saying that individuals exist "only in society," does not Edelman violate his own teaching that "society" is merely a fictional symbol that refers to nothing real?

Although Edelman has rejected the distinction between condensation and referential symbols, his anarchistic individualism depends upon it. He denigrates "society," "the country," "the national interest" and similar terms as "condensation symbols." And yet he speaks easily about "the human spirit," "individuality," "the individual person," and "human potentialities" as though these were concrete, clear terms subject to empirical verification. (Words, 152-55) But how can we talk about "human beings" or "individual persons" without appealing implicitly to some abstract concept of "humanity" or "personhood"? We cannot affirm the reality of particular human beings unless we also affirm the reality of universal ideas.

Most political scientists, however, have tried to deny the existence of universals. Positivists deny their existence because they cannot be objectively verified through sense experience. And most of the critics of positivism deny their existence except as interpretive fictions. But insofar as political reality is largely a symbolic reality, which depends upon the reality of universals, we cannot have a coherent understanding of politics unless we account for the existence of universals. We must therefore reconsider the nominalistic assumptions of modern political science.

18. Anarchy, 95.
Realism, Nominalism, and Common Sense

The intellectual ancestry of Edelman's work—and of the work done by many political scientists—begins with Thomas Hobbes and Francis Bacon. A fundamental principle for both was the nominalist assumption that since universal concepts do not exist outside the mind, they exist as mere names with no objective reality.

In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes explains:

> Of names, some are *proper*, and singular to one only thing, as *Peter, John, this man, this tree*; and some are *common* to many things, *man, horse, tree*; every of which, though but one name, is nevertheless the name of divers particular things; in respect of all which together, it is called an *universal*; there being nothing in the world universal but names; for the things named are every one of them individual and singular.

From this he infers that "true and false are attributes of speech, not of things." 19

Similarly, Bacon, in *The New Organon*, assumes that "in nature nothing really exists besides individual bodies, performing pure individual acts according to a fixed law." He therefore warns us:

> The human understanding is of its own nature prone to abstractions and gives a substance and reality to things which are fleeting. But to resolve nature into abstractions is less to our purpose than to dissect her into parts; as did the school of Democritus, which went further into nature than the rest. Matter rather than forms should be the object of our attention, its configurations and changes of configuration and simple action, and law of action or motion; for forms are figments of the human mind, unless you will call those laws of action forms. 20

Both men warn against the illusions that arise when people are captivated by mental abstractions. Hobbes ridicules the Scholastic notion of "separated essences." And Bacon unmasks the "Idols" of the mind. 21 When Edelman condemns political symbolism for

obscuring people's view of the empirical reality of politics, he con-
tinues the tradition of Hobbes and Bacon.

Although the nominalist doctrine of that tradition is at least par-
tially true, it creates insuperable difficulties for the political scien-
tists who adopt it. The strength of the nominalist position is the recog-
nition that whatever exists in the physical world is material and
individual. It is a mistake, however, to infer from this that the
universal ideas in the mind cannot have any foundation in the
nature of things outside the mind. The nominalist account of
political knowledge is incoherent, because its account of knowledge
in general is incoherent.

As a matter of common-sense experience, we do in fact have some
limited understanding of our world and of our fellow human beings.
This is made possible by the fact that reality exhibits recurrence with
variation. The recurrence makes our knowledge possible: we can
understand events only insofar as they fall into regular patterns. But
the variation makes our knowledge limited: we can never fully
understand events insofar as every event is unique in being unlike
any other event. For example, to identify an apple, we must sort
things out according to their similarities and differences. We must
see what makes apples different from oranges although they are
similar in comparison with rocks. But no two apples are ever com-
pletely alike, and consequently the individual reality of any par-
ticular apple escapes our schemes of classification. We cannot truly
know something in its concreteness and singularity. We can think or
talk about something only if we can classify it according to some set
of catagories. The nominalists are wrong, however, to conclude
from this that our abstract ideas have no objective reference to the
world.

The nominalist cannot explain the fact of shared understanding.
We talk to one another, which assumes that we live in a common
world. If each person's concepts were purely subjective, no one
could talk or listen to anyone else. And if the physical world failed to

22. On the defects of nominalism, see Richard M. Weaver, Ideas Have Consequences
(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948); Charles S. Peirce, Selected Writings, ed.
Philip P. Wiener (New York: Dover Publications, 1958), 73-88; and Roberto
Mangabeira Unger, Knowledge and Politics (New York: The Free Press, 1975). For re-
cent statements of the nominalist position, see Willard Van Orman Quine, From a
Logical Point of View, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 1-19, and Nelson
conform at all to our concepts, then we would have no use for such concepts.

The nominalist cannot explain the existence of a political community. If only individuals exist, then any community is a fiction. Edelman's anarchism is a logical conclusion from his nominalism. But his adherence to the idea of the dignity of human beings is inconsistent with nominalism, which must reject the idea of any natural essence that unites human beings and separates them from other entities. A nominalist cannot therefore assume that in the absence of government people would create a spontaneous order founded on shared interests.

Furthermore, the nominalist cannot explain the possibility of genuine knowledge—including his own. He finds himself caught in what can be called "the antinomy of theory and fact." On the one hand, he wants to judge the truth of theories by whether they conform to the raw facts of experience. On the other hand, he wants to say that what we recognize as facts depends upon our theories. The positivists emphasize the first point of view. The critics of positivism emphasize the second. But since both groups accept nominalism they cannot escape the antinomy. The persistence of the problem is evident in the debate provoked by Thomas Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.

Edelman assumed the positivist position in his early writings. He believed that political language was objectively verifiable if it was grounded in the concrete facts of political life. But in his later writings, he recognized that even the simplest sense impression presumes some categorizing activity of the mind. Therefore, he had to reject positivism as founded on the naïve belief in "immaculate perception." He was then left, however, with no objective standard of verification. He could not even assert the truth of his relativism without denying its truth in the very act of asserting it. This is the fundamental incoherence of nominalism. Edelman has never openly acknowledged this problem. (But see *Words*, 15-16.) Nominalists are rarely as candid as Nelson Goodman: "My outline of the facts concerning the fabrication of the facts is of course itself a fabrication."  

We must wonder whether there is any coherent alternative to nominalism as the ground of political science. The Kantian idealist is surely right in arguing that knowledge cannot arise from the merely passive reception of sense impressions. But when the Kantian claims that concepts are mental constructs with no foundation in the unknowable reality of things in themselves, he confronts the same difficulties created by the nominalist. The Kantian separation of knowing from what is known gives us no escape from the antinomy of theory and fact. Furthermore, Kantianism is as self-contradictory as relativism: the Kantian claims to know that he cannot know reality as it is in itself.

Another possible alternative is extreme realism. According to this position, universal concepts exist somehow outside the mind as subsistent entities in which individual entities participate. But it is easy for nominalists to ridicule the absurdity of immaterial universals floating in some ethereal realm above the world of matter and mind. The nominalist assumes that any attempt to recognize the objective foundation of abstract symbols would require this kind of naive realism.

But I think the most reasonable alternative to nominalism is the common-sense realism of Aristotle and Aquinas. This form of realism is commonsensical in two respects. First, it is the conception of knowledge that almost all of us assume in our everyday life. Second, it begins with our common experience as the foundation of all knowledge.

The common sense realist accepts the nominalist premise that only individuals exist as subsistent things. There is no realm of reality in which universal ideas exist independently of matter and mind. But although universals are not subsistent things, they do exist in individual things. Through abstraction the mind separates universals as forms from their material existence in individual things. As abstract forms universals exist only in the mind, but they have an objective foundation as the formal aspects of individual things. Human nature, for example, exists concretely only in individual men; yet the mind can abstract human nature in its universality as the formal essence shared by individual human beings. Formal patterns of this sort link mind and matter. We can therefore judge the objective reality of symbols by how well they correspond to these patterns.

26. See, for example, Aristotle, *De Anima*, 427a17-432a15; and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Questions 85-86.
Furthermore, we need not accept the Cartesian assumption that since there is a wide gulf between mind and matter, the link between the two is mysterious. Human beings are natural beings; they are therefore at home in the natural world. If the human mind has evolved as an adaptation to external reality, then the mind has a natural potentiality for grasping nature. Moreover, human beings have evolved with a natural potentiality for acquiring language as a symbolic tool for conceptualizing the natural order of things; and because they are by nature the only animals with a capacity for symbolic speech, human beings are also by nature the only truly political animals. Human beings are naturally more political than gregarious animals because human community rests upon a symbolic union in discourse and thought.  

Of course the human symbolic grasp of reality is fallible, and therefore the philosopher or scientist must criticize and refine the prevailing symbolism of his society. But ultimately the common-sense experience of human beings as formulated in ordinary language must provide the prescientific foundation of all sciences. This is probably true even for the most esoteric realms of scientific research. For example, Werner Heisenberg observes: "the concepts of natural language, vaguely defined as they are, seem to be more stable in the expansion of knowledge than the precise terms of scientific language, derived as an idealization from only limited groups of phenomena." This is so because on the one hand, "the concepts of natural language are formed by the immediate connection with reality"; while on the other hand, scientific concepts require idealization and precise definition through which "the immediate connection with reality is lost." Heisenberg concludes: "We know that any understanding must be based finally upon the natural language because it is only here that we can be certain to touch reality, and hence we must be skeptical about any skepticism with regard to this natural language and its essential concepts."  

If this is true for the natural sciences, it is even more clearly true for political science. The political scientist should not denigrate the symbols of society as though they were mere illusions. Instead, he

should proceed by a critical clarification of these social symbols to develop the theoretically adequate symbols required for political science.  

What I am suggesting is the need to revive Aristotelian political science. Edelman and many other political scientists have accepted the modern identification of rationality with a technical method founded *on* empirical verification and formal logic. But if this is the standard for rationality, then political speech must be irrational. Moreover, by this standard, even the practice of science seems irrational to the extent that scientists must make personal judgments that go beyond rule-governed validation through experimentation and logic.  

When political scientists like Edelman discover that neither politics nor science satisfies the criteria of technical rationality, they must become radical skeptics who deny that human thought and action can ever be truly rational. But perhaps the real problem is their unduly narrow conception of rationality. If we turn to Aristotle, *we* find a broader view of scientific and political rationality.

**Aristotle, Publius, and Edelman**

Among many contemporary students of philosophy and the social sciences, there is renewed interest in Aristotle's works-particularly the *Ethics*, the *Politics*, the *Topics*, and the *Rhetoric*. Although there are differing assessments of Aristotle's potential contribution to modern problems, there is general agreement on one point: as an alternative to the modern preoccupation with technical rationality, we should consider Aristotle's account of practical rationality as founded on prudential judgment and persuasive argumentation.

30. This is Kuhn's argument. See also Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle distinguishes rhetorical argument from both scientific demonstration and sophistical manipulation. Although it is less exact and less certain than demonstrative reasoning, rhetorical persuasion is truly rational in a way that sophistical deception is not. Rhetoric is like dialectic in that it draws its premises from common opinions, which reflect some common-sense awareness of reality. Because of the complexity and contingency of rhetoric's subject matter—the practical affairs of human beings—rhetorical argument cannot attain the rigor of apodictic proof. Rhetoric is probable reasoning. Therefore a rhetorical argument is always controversial. It can always be doubted. Nevertheless, by weighing the evidence and the reasons offered, we can judge a rhetorical argument as more or less plausible.

Aristotle concedes, however, that rhetorical practice can be corrupted by the demands of poor audiences. Some listeners are more concerned with the style of what is said than its substance. They want to be diverted with pleasing imagery. Obviously much of what Edelman says about "symbolic rhetoric" would apply to this kind of rhetorical situation. In fact, when Aristotle considers rhetorical style and arrangement in Book Three of the *Rhetoric*, he covers most of the topics developed by Edelman. But this is only a small part of Aristotle's work. And unlike Edelman, Aristotle shows how even techniques of style-like metaphor—can become tools of rational argument.

There is another critical difference between Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Edelman's works. Aristotle looks at the low from the perspective of the high, but Edelman looks at the high from the perspective of the low. Aristotle studies all the tricks of ignoble rhetoric. Indeed, many of his readers have been shocked by his careful explanations of how one can deceive audiences. But he considers this from the point of view of what the noble rhetorician must know to be well-armed for every occasion. In contrast to this stance, Edelman's fascination with the deceptiveness of political language leads him to assume that all rhetoric is mere sophistry. Occasionally, he refers to the rhetoric of great statesmen like Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill; but he never looks at how such men can use rhetoric to develop reasonable arguments.  

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33. Citing Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Doris Graber speaks of "the rhetoric of the statesman" as founded on "reasoned arguments"; and she distinguishes this type of rhetoric from
The Federalist is a particularly instructive example of the kind of Aristotelian rhetoric that Edelman overlooks. Publius—the pseudonym used by Jay, Madison, and Hamilton—recognizes the deceptiveness of political speech. The obscure complexity of political life and limitations of the human mind make it difficult for human beings to develop correct ideas about politics. Furthermore, their expression of their ideas is distorted by language.

No language is so copious as to supply words and phrases for every complex idea, or so correct as not to include many equivocally denoting different ideas . . . . When the Almighty himself condescends to address mankind in their own language, his meaning, luminous as it must be, is rendered dim and doubtful by the cloudy medium through which it is communicated.

Moreover, Publius also acknowledges that people's political opinions are distorted by their selfish passions and interests. Political arguments are often merely rationalizations. Edelman would conclude from this that political speech must be irrational. But Publius provides in The Federalist an example of rhetoric as rational argumentation.

Aristotle explains rhetorical logic as composed of deductive reasoning through enthymemes and inductive reasoning though examples, and this holds true for The Federalist. Publius draws his arguments either from "reason" or from "experience." Arguing from "reason" requires reflecting on the internal logic of the thing in question; arguing from "experience" requires surveying the pertinent historical facts. With respect to some questions, theoretical reasoning is too abstract to be a reliable guide; and the lessons of experience are more dependable. But in other cases, past experience is insufficient; and the dictates of pure reason are decisive. Publius believes the most persuasive arguments are those that show experience confirming the conclusions deduced from theory. Hence it is common in The Federalist for an appeal to "reason" to be fol-

"the rhetoric of the rabble-rouser" and "the rhetoric of the charismatic leader." But she devotes all of her attention to these latter two types. Verbal Behavior, 181-89.
35. Ibid., No. 1: 3-6; No. 10: 54-56; No. 31: 189; No. 49: 328-31.
ollowed immediately with an appeal to "facts," so that Publius can claim, "examples support the reasoning which we have employed."  

Publius cannot rely exclusively on deductive proof because in most cases he must depend at some point on probable reasoning grounded on experience. Reasoning from experience lacks absolute certainty, but it does provide the knowledge that comes from a "rational calculation of probabilities."  

Despite the inherent complexity and contingency of political life, "the natural and experienced course of human affairs" is intelligible.  

*The Federalist* is a model of rhetorical rationality. Of course everyday political debate rarely attains the same level of rationality, but *The Federalist* shows what is possible. It shows that political argument can be more or less reasonable even though it falls short of scientific demonstration. The practice of political discussion requires that we give good reasons for our positions, and we can weigh the plausibility of those reasons.

But Edelman scorns this view of the rationality of political language.

A popular school of thought holds that encouragement to give "good reasons" for political preferences assures at least a modicum of "rationality" in political choice. The lesson of history is clear, unfortunately, that good reasons have been offered for every course of political action ever undertaken, that they have indeed often won wide public support, but that the consequences have all too often been experienced as disastrous, immoral, or the fruit of inexcusable stupidity. "Good reasons," like all political language, can be strategically effective, but they cannot assure a rational choice if, indeed, that term itself has any meaning other than a strategic or rationalizing one. How good a reason is depends upon its premise; the premise is crucial, but in politics it is typically controversial and not susceptible of verification, as already noted. ("Language," 13)

But how reasonable is Edelman's premise? He implicitly assumes that the only truly rational knowledge is that which rests on premises that are free of controversy and subject to "verification." If we accept this premise, then obviously political argumentation can-

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36. Ibid., No. 57: 374-75; No. 63: 413-14. See also ibid., No. 37: 230-31; No. 43: 284; No. 48: 321; No. 66: 431; No. 70: 457; No. 76: 495; No. 81: 523-24.
37. Ibid., No. 60: 389; No. 68: 444.
38. Ibid., No. 6: 27; No. 8: 44; No. 25: 157-58; No. 34: 204-05; No. 79: 512.
not be rational. But if we pushed this premise very far, as Edelman seems inclined to do, then no human knowledge could be rational. For example, we would have to classify Edelman's reliance on a "lesson of history" as irrational, because interpretations of history are typically controversial and difficult to verify absolutely.

Here again we see the incoherence of Edelman's political science. But we have noticed that another tradition of political science, which includes Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *The Federalist*, offers a coherent account of political rationality. It's a tradition that allows the political scientist to make sense of the common political experience of human beings. This has enabled some members of that tradition to offer sound political advice to their fellow citizens. Others in that tradition have not contributed directly to political practice, but even they have been respectful of ordinary political life as a sometimes noble and always engaging object of thought. If a formula is necessary, I would say this is the tradition of political science as political wisdom.

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