Political Theory Vs Scientific Theory Essay, Research Paper

Political Theory versus Scientific Theory

Theory is ubiquitous. Everyone is a theorist. A theory is generally stated to be an idea or belief one has formulated that is to be tested by others. Theory abstracts and generalizes from specific circumstances, and enhances the accessibility of experience. They are often more general and abstract then the facts they attempt to explain, therefore, alluding to more than just facts. Theories are functions of indirection, whereas facts are a matter of direct transcription of their contents. Despite the differences between fact and theory, they go hand in hand. This is most evident when comparing political and scientific theories.

Political theory might be said to be governed by time, patience and curiosity. It has its preservative function which is partly reflected in the amount of labor, perhaps even affection, that accompanies its perpetuation of a canon, but partly, too, in the deliberations about political life that figure in each and every theory and make their construction such a slow and drawn out process. In political theory, the dialogue of words spoken is the basis for the theory. When testing political theory, there is not a set process. Theories are often stumbled upon, as in the Republic of Plato. In the Republic, Socrates makes use of questions and examples to help several intellectuals answer their own questions and formulate their own theories. This is often the method favored by political theorists.

One of the most influential political theories is Sheldon Wolin’s Epic Political Theory. The Epic Political Theory attempts to rethink the nature of human beings and usually arises around a time of crisis. These theories are often referred to as thought-deeds-thinking is part of the doing. They are revolutionizing actions that have historically been used to nurture and reinforce the world when it is disharmonious. It is a drive to an establishment of order when intense disorder exists. Political theorists, like Wolin, believe that theory ascends fact because it is broader, more encompassing, and more explanatory. They feel that facts are distinct statements grouped together by theories.

In popular usage, a theory is just a vague and fuzzy sort of fact and a hypothesis is often used as a fancy synonym to `guess’. However, to a scientist a theory is a conceptual framework that explains existing observations and predicts new ones. For instance, suppose you see the Sun rise. This is an existing observation that is explained by the theory of gravity proposed by Newton. This theory, in addition to explaining why we see the Sun move across the sky, also explains many other phenomena such as the path followed by the Sun as it moves across the sky, the phases of the Moon, the phases of Venus, the tides, just to mention a few. A hypothesis is a working assumption. Typically, a scientist devises a hypothesis and then sees if it “holds water” by testing it against available data (obtained from previous experiments and observations). If the hypothesis does hold water, the scientist declares it a theory. Experiments sometimes produce results that cannot be explained with existing theories. In this case, it is the job of scientists to produce new theories that replace the old ones. The new theories should explain all the observations and experiments the old theory did and, in addition, the new set of facts which lead to their development. One can say that new theories devour and assimilate old ones. Scientists continually test existing theories in order to probe how far can they can be applied.

So how does truth change? Well the answer is that it does not. The Universe

is still the same as it ever was. When a theory is said to be true, it means that it agrees with all known experimental evidence. But even the best of theories have, time and again, been shown to be incomplete: though they might explain a lot of phenomena using a few basic principles, and even predict many new and exciting results, eventually new experiments (or more precise

ones) show a discrepancy between the workings of nature and the predictions of the theory. In the strict sense this means that the theory was not “true” after all; but the fact

remains that it is a very good approximation to the truth, at lest where a certain type of phenomena is concerned.

When an accepted theory cannot explain some new data (which has been

confirmed), the researchers working in that field strive to construct a new theory. This task gets increasingly more difficult as our knowledge increases, for the new theory should not

only explain the new data, but also all the old one: a new theory has, as its first duty, to devour and assimilate its predecessors.

One other note about truth: science does not make moral judgments. Anyone who tries to draw moral lessons from the laws of nature is on very dangerous ground. Evolution in particular seems to suffer from this. At one time or another, it seems to have been used to justify Nazism, Communism, and every other -ism in between. These justifications are all completely bogus. Similarly, anyone who says “evolution theory is evil because it is used to

support Communism” has also strayed from the path of logic.

The picture of scientists politely discussing theories, proposing new ones in view of new data, etc. appears to be completely devoid of any emotions. In fact, this is far from the truth, the discussions are very human, and although the bulk of the scientific community will eventually accept a single theory based on it explaining the data and making a series of verified predictions. In its simplest form, this question is unanswerable, since undetected fraud is immeasurable. Of course, there are many known cases of fraud in science. Some use this to argue that all scientific findings (especially those they dislike) are worthless. This ignores the replication of results, which is routinely undertaken by scientists. Any important result will be replicated many times by many different people. The above arguments are weaker in medical research, where data is often fake and distorted in order to support products. For example, tobacco companies regularly produce reports “proving” that smoking is harmless, and drug companies have both faked and suppressed data related to the safety or effectiveness of major products. This type of fraud does not reflect on the validity of the scientific method.

Despite the strong differences of political theory and scientific theory, they are both essential in understanding the world. Theory will always be linked to testability and theories will continue to be formulated and discarded; it is what makes people think. Theory, then, in short: it wants to be local and restricted but the structures of power–political and scientific–are national and global. To theorize the inside one must theorize the outside.