

Best Practices: What Should We Do? Inviting Students into Political Theory through Action

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Abstract

Teaching political theory promises better thinkers, better community members, and better democratic citizens. Teaching political theory in a community of learning is often especially rewarding as the lived community experience of the campus becomes food for thought and a site of action. As an assistant professor beginning my first job, my challenge was to design an introductory course that would be compelling to students highly interested in contemporary politics and activism and less excited about theoretical inquiry and ultimate questions. I needed to develop a political theory course for a theory-shy audience. This is the story of a political theory course thematically centered on action. In a world impatient with thought and much more appreciative of the virtues of action, or at least activity, it is possible to invite students into the study of thought by focusing on the question of action.

The Invitation

The guiding question of this class is *What should we do?* This question effectively serves as an invitation to the student to enter into a semester-long discussion with the readings, other students, and me. This guiding question presupposes three questions that are fundamental to the study of the humanities:

- (1) Who am I?
- (2) How should I encounter you?
- (3) How should we arrange our lives together?

No course can answer that first vital question for students, but it can give them resources and interlocutors that can help them explore that question for themselves. As students of political theory, we need to examine different ways of thinking about political action and political actors by reading texts that have been important points of reference for political theorists. Beyond introducing students to key texts, the aim of this course is to proliferate, diversify, and complicate the questions students ask about politics (At the

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end of this essay, I have attached a sample list of questions students formulated at the end of the course.) Helping students ask more interesting questions is at the core of an introduction to political thought. Long after the semester has ended and the details of specific texts have faded, I hope they will remember the critical questioning skills that drove our discussions and readings of the texts. When I teach introductory political theory, my goal is to leave students with a life's supply of proliferating questions that draw them into engagement with the world.

But how did this play out in practice? Before we could contemplate the question "What should we do?" we had to ask, "What *is* political action?" At first, this was a perplexing question for students because they assumed I would give them the answer. In fact, we needed to start our work together by understanding the importance of definitions and the variety of possible answers to any given question. We needed to develop patience and to slow down. We needed to approach the semester as an example of how to answer a complicated or complex question. By encouraging the students to create their own definitions and concepts, I gave them a lens through which to read every text on the syllabus. Naturally, they were also text-specific questions, but the overarching project of our work together was, both individually and collectively, to create a theory of political action.

The first paper topic reflected this agenda by asking students to establish the concept of political action in two separate texts and then to compare those two concepts. The assignment offered students a choice of texts, including Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (1963), Sophocles's *Antigone* (441 BCE), and Plato's *Apology* and *Crito* (399 BCE). Working with the textual evidence, students had to define political action for each reading by considering the basic features of a given action and the way in which the author framed an action in argumentation. The point of this exercise was to get beyond descriptions of action and to highlight the qualities of the action such as a focus on intent or outcome, a concern with justifications in line with either tradition or law, or, for example, an identity-based claim. Moving beyond this foundational question we also asked:

Who is the political actor?

How do political actors justify their actions?

Is political action rational?

Does the action transform or merely reveal the actor?

How can we understand the failure to take action?

What ideas about time and what conditions of space does political action require?

Meeting Students on Their Own Ground

The first month of the semester was designed to give students multiple perspectives on questions such as "Who are we as actors?" After reading King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (1963), a text that made us consider the many audiences, persuasive strategies and justifications for action offered by King, we read Sophocles's *Antigone* (441 BCE) as a text about a young woman, perhaps not so distant in age from the students. Antigone's dilemma—to follow the laws of the land or to fulfill her obligation

to tradition—resonated with students frustrated by the competing standards of justice entailed in political and religious order, respectively. *Antigone* also spoke to them as a story of rebellion against an older generation. Was Antigone’s action a political one? Student opinions were divided. Those who emphasized the importance of one’s intent in acting claimed that Antigone had undertaken a purely private action. Those concerned with outcome tended to underline the threat to political order represented by her disobedience to the king, her uncle, Creon, as a blow to the legitimacy of his regime from a young woman of his own family, one who had obviously escaped his control in private and in public.

Plato’s *Apology* (399 BCE) left the class more unified. Students saw Socrates as a political actor and regarded asking questions as a political action. That questions themselves are important had become readily evident by this point in the course. The Socratic method, an extended process of questioning that brings the interrogated person to recognize the unexamined or false aspects of the statement that initiates the exchange, further underlined the importance of dialogue to the study of political thought. The *Apology* shows Socrates defining his actions and defending them as neither teaching nor politics. This dialogue presented students with several interpretations of what it means to engage in a given activity. Defending himself against the charges pressed by Meletus, Socrates argues that one should engage in action regardless of its cost. Speaking to a hypothetical interlocutor, Socrates says, “You are wrong, sir, if you think that a man who is any good at all should take into account the risk of life or death; he should look to this only in his actions, whether what he does is right or wrong, whether he is acting like a good or bad man” (Plato, 28b). As we have no knowledge of death, Socrates argues, it would be irrational to fear death (Plato, 29b).

Socrates remains true to this position in the *Crito* (399 BCE). The *Crito*, perhaps more so than the *Apology*, speaks directly to the central question of the course because Socrates’s well-meaning friend, Crito, is trying to convince him to escape from prison and thereby to avoid death. Here we see the two quite literally struggling with the question, what should we do? Crito, driven in part by his own shame and fear for his reputation, wants his friend to escape:

If you die, it will not be a single misfortune for me. Not only will I be deprived of a friend, the like of whom I shall never find again, but many people who do not know you or me very well will think that I could have saved you if I were willing to spend money, but that I did not care to do so. Surely there can be no worse reputation than to be thought to value money more highly than one’s friends, for the majority will not believe that you yourself were not willing to leave prison while we were eager for you to do so. (44c)

Socrates’s response to Crito is dismissive of the many and their opinions. Indeed, he shames Crito for having thought in this manner:

My dear Crito, your eagerness is worth much if it should have some right aim; if not, then the greater your keenness the more difficult it is to deal with. We must therefore examine whether we should act in this way or not, as not only now but

at all times I am the kind of man who listens only to the argument that on reflection seems best to me. I cannot, now that this fate has come upon me, discard the arguments I use; they seem to me much the same. (46b)

The weight of Socrates's argument for accepting the punishment the jury has chosen for him falls on the story he tells about the laws. The laws, channeled by Socrates, proclaim:

Tell me, Socrates, what are you intending to do? Do you not by this action you are attempting intend to destroy us, the laws, and indeed, the whole city as far as you're concerned? Or do you think it possible for a city not to be destroyed if the verdicts of its courts have no force but are nullified and set at naught by private individuals? (50b)

Here Socrates presents the laws and the city as the condition of philosophy. Without a community, without a body of law, without language even, the philosopher has no one or nothing to question. The city sustained by the laws is thus the precondition of philosophy even at the moment when it threatens to destroy the body of the philosopher.

The arrogant Socrates of the *Apology* (which many argue is more correctly entitled *The Defense*), who thrilled some students and offended others, did not fail to convince most of them of the sincerity they attributed to his actions given his willingness to accept death. But these texts also deeply affected the tenor of our work together in the classroom. Socrates, in claiming that he is not a teacher as defined by Meletus—i.e., a paid teacher of rhetoric committed to helping people get their way in court whether justly or unjustly—forced us to consider what teaching is, and whether it is in itself a political action.

Students as Writers and Writing as Action

Even if Crito's effort to persuade his friend fails, his case that Socrates should flee represents a call to action. The second month of the course was dedicated to calls to action. The main text we read in this context was Students for Democratic Society's (SDS) *The Port Huron Statement* (1962), conceived in Ann Arbor as an organizing tool in 1961 and composed by several dozen young people at the United Auto Workers retreat in Port Huron. This reading offered us an example of a student-authored manifesto. While we had already considered speech and asking questions as potential forms of political action, *The Port Huron Statement* framed the very act of writing as an example of collective political action. In an "introductory note" the authors of SDS write,

This document represents the results of several months of writing and discussion among the membership. . . . It is represented as a document with which SDS officially identifies, but also as a living document open to change with our times and experiences. It is a beginning: in our own debate and education, in our dialogue with society. (p. 1)

The Port Huron Statement encouraged students to take their own potential for political action seriously by recognizing the impact of the student movement in the 60s. Students recognized themselves as a special category of political actors because they often have resources of time, information, and even language that others lack. The youthful SDS authors understood that writing can be a collaborative process that happens over time. Their writing was not a simple representation of an already given bit of information but an intellectual journey in which the presence of others mattered. The successful coinage of the expression “participatory democracy” that became a staple of political speeches across the political spectrum in the decades following *The Port Huron Statement* is a testament to the power students can have in the political arena.

The Student’s Invitation: A Call to Action

Is *The Port Huron Statement* a successful call to action? Many students said no. They found it heavy in accusations and descriptions of problems and thin on suggested solutions or concrete courses of action. At this point in the semester we stopped reading. Discontent with a merely critical perspective on texts and other people’s arguments, I asked students to prepare and perform their own calls to action.

The assignment instructions required that students give careful thought to their own political identity and location, their targeted audience, the action, the desired outcome of the specific action requested, and also to the most important word in their presentation. Depending upon the number of students in a given class, the presentation time varied from 5 to 10 minutes. Presentations were often passionate, dramatic, and emotionally exhausting. Many students overshot the goal of empowering their listeners to act by focusing on creating a sense of urgency or emotional pain around their chosen political agenda. But some students made outstanding presentations: carefully timed and worded, they managed to both educate and show how to get involved. In an unexpected turn, one student began his presentation by emptying a large bag filled with hypodermic needles on the conference table of our classroom. His presentation evolved from a discussion of his own life with diabetes to a call for the support of stem cell research.

After each presentation I asked students to write some brief notes on whether the call to action was successful:

- Did it define a specific political concern?
- Did it speak to the particular audience?
- Were audience members left with specific next steps?
- Did it empower or involve new actors?

Surprisingly, the most difficult part of this exercise was committing to a specific action to ask of others. Students were more sympathetic to the challenges faced by SDS in authoring *The Port Huron Statement* when they understood from their own experience how hard it is to represent one’s view of the world and how easy it is to take for granted that once one has expressed that view, others will know what to do. They learned to be more patient with political writing and more benevolent in their interpretations. An unexpected and very welcome outcome of this assignment was the publication of a call to

action in the student newspaper. Karen Scholl, a representative of the Environmental Coalition published “Recycle, Damnit!” in *The Comenian*, Moravian’s student newspaper before the semester was out: “We, the members of the Environmental Coalition, students and faculty of Moravian College, inhabitants of our only Earth, see far too many days go by without a decent recycling program” (p. 2).

Back to the Past

Energized by the calls to action, we took on Christine de Pizan’s fifteenth century work entitled *The Book of the Body Politic* (1407). By now students were sensitized to different accounts of action and were able to read *The Book of the Body Politic* with the tools they had constructed in their own efforts to define action as well as in the experience of the call to action. This example of a mirror for princes, a genre of guide books for leaders, shifted our attention away from individuals, such as Antigone and Socrates, and away from groups of subjects, such as SDS, and highlighted political leaders as a special group of political actors. De Pizan’s very visual account of the relationship between rulers and different classes of subjects, imagined as the integral whole of the human body, helped students understand the importance of worldviews to political justifications—de Pizan depicted groups who might conceivably have conflicting interests as harmoniously one in the model of the body. The body as a metaphor for political community suggested to de Pizan that rulers had to consider the interests of all and that imbalance or self-interest would lead to the decline of all.

But de Pizan was also important because her text stands in contrast to Niccolo Machiavelli’s very innovative, deviant addition to the genre of mirrors for princes, *The Prince* (1513). Many introductory political theory classes read parts or the entirety of *The Prince* but few offer students the resources to understand how Machiavelli had his way with the genre. In continuing our focus on leaders as political actors, *The Prince* directed our attention not only to the action but also to the actor. By studying *virtú*, we noticed the many and sometimes potentially competing demands Machiavelli placed on his ideal actor in suspiciously stark contrast to his rather less ambitious view of human nature. The leader is a virtuoso; the subject is easy to manipulate. Given our focus on action, the contrast between the elaborate prescriptions for the ruler and the cynical evaluations of the common subject prompted us to consider whether political action is the skill of the very exceptional or even superhuman. Machiavelli’s pronouncements on the self-interested, cowardly, ungrateful, and fickle nature of the many led us to consider the relationship between human nature claims and visions of political potential. De Pizan had given us a vision of the body as a model of political community. Machiavelli, in turn, prompted us to interrogate the most basic assumptions about subjects and leaders we bring to political thought.

Whereas *Antigone* had foregrounded the importance of intent for interpreting action, *The Prince* threw the importance of the outcome into starker relief. Some students were willing to consider Machiavelli’s sense of accountability to outcome as a form of morality. Rather than regarding outcome as a cold-hearted priority over inner conviction and principle, the Machiavellian leader might be understood as moral to the extent that he prioritized his responsibility to the city over what might have been his personal

commitment to the purity of his soul. To care for the needs of the city stands out as a commitment to the needs of others, even if it also serves the purpose of consolidating the power of the ruler. In a contemporary context, we might ask, does the imagined morality of a politician matter more than the outcome he secures in the interest of a community? Student opinions were divided on this point. Yet the discussion allowed them to see a contrast Machiavelli took seriously: the timeless quality of the world of ideals and beliefs as opposed to the dynamic nature of politics. For Machiavelli, to confuse the one realm with the other was to commit a serious failure of political judgment and thereby to doom the outcome of one's action.

Foregrounding the Actor

In this middle part of the course, the actor took center stage. Machiavelli is not only concerned with observing the actions of the successful ruler but also with imagining his inner life, including mental and psychological dispositions. His account of the ideal ruler is a psychic portrait: the ruler's ability to exercise power coincides with his ability to effectively stage himself as powerful. This visible spectacle of power relies on such invisible qualities as patience, foresight, adaptability, and the inexplicable quality of impetuosity. While Machiavelli pays close attention to how political prowess is enacted, i.e., to its outward and dramatic form, he thinks through leadership from the inside out when he worries that rulers will be attuned to the truths of religion and philosophy. He writes:

But since my intent is to write something useful to whoever understands it, it has appeared to me more fitting to go directly to the effectual truth of the thing than to the imagination of it. And many have imagined republics and principalities that have never been seen or known to exist in truth; for it is so far from how one lives to how one should live that he who lets go of what is done for what should be done learns his ruin rather than his preservation. For a man who wants to make a profession of good in all regards must come to ruin among so many who are not good. Hence it is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able not to be good, and to use this and not use this according to necessity. (p.61)

What is this passage but an admission that our inner orientation to the outer world is the foundation of successful political action? On the one hand, it is possible to interpret the passage above as a negation of inner worlds and, even more strongly, as a warning to those who confuse an interest in inner order with the project of founding and maintaining political order. On the other hand, our comprehension of politics begins *inside* the actor. Even Machiavelli, who desires to learn from historical examples and experiences of successful political leaders, knows that the first foundation of political power lies in the mind of the ruler. He defines three kinds of brains: "One that understands by itself, another that discerns what others understand, the third that understands neither by itself nor through others" (p. 61).

We continued our investigation into psychic portraits of power with Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1592). Richard offered students a test case for the Machiavellian grammar of power. This villain, so transparent in the opening and very confessional or perhaps simply conspiratorial soliloquy, is a prince willing to kill and tell. If Machiavelli demanded that would-be rulers master the art of appearances in bold acts of violence that resonated with the population over time, the drama of *Richard III* requires political, theoretical reading skills. In other words, we shifted from political theory to drama in our texts and from thinking of political theory as drama to drama as political theory in our approach. Reading *The Prince* had given us skills for interpreting spectacles.

By now students were keenly aware that persuasive speech and rhetoric is of consequence because it gives shape to realities and possibilities in the world. How we speak about politics, how we represent it is generative of a political world. They knew from Socrates that arguments must be carefully crafted in order to provide a discussion with an axis. They knew from Martin Luther King, Jr. that one could address multiple audiences in one letter and that nonviolence is itself the performance of a political argument, a making visible of one's point. For these reasons, it was not so difficult to direct students' attention to Richard's self-representation. They were willing to consider the theater as a form of political activism. Even before *The Prince*, *The Apology* had already sensitized them to the court of law as a kind of theatrical stage.

A standard reading of Richard has been that he is the quintessential Machiavellian actor. Being Machiavellian is pretty much summed up by three adjectives: cunning, evil, and violent. But how could these three words convincingly represent the complexity of *The Prince*? Given the dilemmas and disagreements we faced in our own close reading of that text, we were not willing to easily accept such claims. It was gratifying to see that students understood how easily political theories turn into simplistic bumper sticker-like messages in general conversation. Having developed more differentiated approaches to *virtú*, they were able to closely examine Richard's arguments and actions and to offer an opinion on whether or not he was a successful Machiavellian actor. Answering this question was the assignment of the second paper.

Theorizing Time and Space

Our next text was Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic in the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904). The selected passages we read of this text gave us perspectives on internal versus external forms of authority. Weber's unique approach to historical concept formulation made explicit what students had begun to suspect, namely, that understanding the causes and constraints of action requires insight into the sense of self with which a potential actor lives, as well as the meaning he may attribute to what he does. Machiavelli had made it clear that it was not the ruler who stood behind every subject with a big stick but the successful cultivation of an aura or perception of power that governed day-to-day life. In the case of Weber, the analysis of how religious beliefs and practices had over time transformed into attitudes about work and money made sense to them, although they did not recognize these beliefs and practices as a force in their own lives.

Still, Weber's text helped us think about our assumptions about the value of time. We compared our ideas about time and money with our ideas about time and politics and considered whether they were mutually exclusive as worldviews. Practically speaking, would the mindset of a successful economic actor make engagement in political action unlikely? Most students admitted that political action seemed like a luxury they could not afford. For students booked solidly day in and day out with classes, work, and social life, political action seemed like just another invasion of the little time they perceived as their own. At the same time, most believed that participation in the democratic process was a vital and neglected virtue. This was a moment of honesty that punctuated the semester: political action is good; people should engage in it, but we don't have the time.

So, whereas Weber had offered us a theory of why some people are willing to spend more of their time working than others, the students had thought one step further to consider how external time constraints might combine with cultural attitudes about time to mitigate against political activity. Time was so clearly a sore spot for students, either because they felt they had little control over their own time or because they were overwhelmed by their future obligations to work and family. Who would willingly engage in an activity with an uncertain outcome when there was so much work to be done closer to home?

From the temporal conditions of political action we easily transitioned to the question of space. The fragmentation and disappearance of public space as a threat to democracy is the theme of Mike Davis's *City of Quartz* (1990). In the chapter entitled "Fortress LA," Davis documents the shrinking nature of public space, the privatization and surveillance of our everyday life. "Welcome," he writes, "to post-liberal Los Angeles, where the defense of luxury lifestyles is translated into a proliferation of new repressions in space and movement, undergirded by the ubiquitous 'armed response'" (p. 223). At first, Davis's account of increasingly socially divisive architecture and urban planning did not shock students. They were already used to sidewalks nobody walked on, isolated neighborhoods, strip malls, and hyper-dimensional shopping centers surrounded by fields of parking lots. For me, however, having grown up in the pedestrian zones and public squares of Western Europe, these are the very facts of life in the United States that make me so little at home here.

The question that finally brought the cost of this loss of public space home to the students was the following: What kind of public space does political action require? Once I asked this question, they could reflect on what spaces of freedom, freedom from private security forces and the self-determination of private communities, remained for any public show of political engagement. A corresponding question that inevitably rose was whether an action undertaken in a private space could be a political one. This question in turn sparked another, how many people must witness an action to make it political? It's probably increasingly evident that we had come to think of political action not merely in its formal or procedural manifestations, such as voting, volunteering at some point in the political process, or holding office (actually many students questioned whether a professional politician might still be considered a political actor), but in the many creative, spontaneous, and symbolic forms it might take. In our texts, perhaps the most unexpected of these was the sex strike Lysistrata proposed in order to bring an end

to the Peloponnesian War. Lysistrata demands an oath of abstinence from those who would join her in political action:

Calonice: neither my boyfriend, nor my wedded spouse—
Lysistrata: Shall touch me when inflated. Say it, girl!
(Aristophanes, p. 15)

For Davis the loss of public space is even more basic: “Until the final extinction of these last real public spaces—with their democratic intoxications, risks and unscented odors—the pacification of Los Angeles will remain incomplete” (p. 260). Davis’s reading of the city of Los Angeles suggests that we risk losing unregulated and unexpected encounters, encounters that might be vital, but that these days, most people would fear. Davis shows how fear can be created by structure: the less I see people I do not know, the larger the threat of the unknown becomes to me. The structure of the city is thus a form of political socialization that engenders deep distrust of people who are other than me. The fragmentation of different populations into separate spaces means that our audiences or witnesses are always already people who probably think the same as we do. Likewise, the structures we build to police others also turn our gaze to the policing of the self. Weber conveyed the power of the Protestant work ethic, as an internalized form of authority that secured high levels of productivity. Davis shows how the fortification of the spaces we live in does not only protect us from risk but also turns us into prisoners: our visions of self and possible actions are necessarily constrained by the very constraints we have built for others. *Where* would we act and *what* would we do given the spatial configurations of our lives?

The Banality of Evil

Having begun the semester with a seemingly simple question—“What should we do?”—our final text confronted us with an actor whose sense of what he had done was so bizarre and so disconnected from reality that he baffled an entire jury, although he did not escape execution. Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem—A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) recounts the trial of the bureaucrat Eichmann, who so clearly failed to reveal himself as a monster and yet whose actions were so clearly monstrous. How should one make sense of a person who seems so utterly incapable of making sense of himself? The anti-Semitism and evil intention many wanted to attribute to him were not in evidence during the trial. Eichmann’s case showed that people were perfectly capable of doing evil without evil intent. His careerism, his thoughtlessness, and the sheer self-centeredness of his concern with ever-improved efficiency—the banality of evil as Arendt called it—proved that modernity was anything but antithetical to the extreme violations of humanity that marked mid-twentieth century Europe.

With the case of Eichmann, students had to reconsider the triangular relationship they had come to sketch between an actor’s intent, the action and its outcome. In Eichmann’s self-representations there is a noticeable absence of the radical evil his accusers sought to find. His actions do not appear to be driven by evil intent. In fact, Eichmann rarely frames his activities as actions. His emphasis on his obedience to laws

and superiors would seem to suggest that he understood himself as nothing more than a cog in the machine. The relationship between his intent, his actions and their outcome puzzled those present at the trial. Whereas the outcome of his actions was horrific, it was difficult to identify an equivalent intent in him that would have motivated such actions.

This account of Eichmann is misleading; Eichmann was ambitious to do more than to fulfill the concrete specifications of orders and laws. He admits an aspiration to fulfill even the unspoken essence of what he imagined to be Hitler's will. The importance of Eichmann's intent becomes apparent in his twisted rendition of the Kantian imperative: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (p. 37). The categorical imperative formulated by the German enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant in his work entitled *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) is an effort to derive standards for justice from reason. In Eichmann's usage, this standard took a bad turn. He had a clear sense of duty and what it meant to obey orders and the law, but he also seemed confused about the relative merits of blind obedience as opposed to the dangers of what is called in German *Kadavergerhorsam*; the "obedience of corpses," as Arendt translates it quite literally.

In other words, Eichmann did not lack a vocabulary that might have aided him in making ethical decisions. "And," writes Arendt, "to the surprise of everybody Eichmann came up with an approximately correct definition of the categorical imperative: 'I meant by my remark about Kant that the principle of my will must always be such that it can become the principle of general law'" (p.163). So far so good, but Eichmann had distorted Kant's philosophy and had replaced reason with the will of the Führer (such as he must have imagined it). Therefore, Eichmann cannot be said to have simply done his duty. By his own admission he was convinced "that nothing less than going beyond the call of duty will do" (p. 137).

Arendt is clear in her condemnation of Eichmann and her discontent with the verdict. The ending of her trial report is unexpected: Arendt finds it necessary to create her own more adequate judgment of Eichmann in the final pages of her epilogue. This commentary was necessary, in her opinion, because the judges had misunderstood the nature of Eichmann as a criminal as well as the nature of his crime. In the words of our class, Arendt believed that the court had failed to make sense of Eichmann *as an actor* and to make sense of his crime. Where the jury had been looking for malicious intent, Arendt saw the failure to understand crime in the context of totalitarianism. "Foremost among the larger issues at stake in the Eichmann trial was the assumption current in all modern legal systems that intent to do wrong is necessary for the commission of a crime" (p. 277). The judges and the prosecutor had been looking for a preconceived form of intent, the absence of which had complicated their interpretation of Eichmann's case, although it is abundantly clear in the trial report that Eichmann had been found guilty before the trial ever began. The closing of Arendt's proposed verdict shifts the focus from intent to the question of obedience. If Eichmann had consciously obeyed, he was guilty. "For politics is not like the nursery; in politics obedience and support are the same" (p. 279).

The potential of committing a crime without intent troubled students deeply. This insight politicized their everyday taken-for-granted actions. The familiar and the habitual, the routine and the procedural, all might be the beginnings of catastrophe. As much as

they were horrified by Eichmann, they were also sympathetic to the nature of everyday life in which people focus on their own careers, their own families, and their own interests. Arendt's equation of obedience and support seemed unacceptable to some, but to others, that equation expressed the dangers of careerism and conformism.

Was Adolf Eichmann an actor? If the actor is defined by an intent directed towards an outcome, as some argued, he is not. Others were not willing to accept the excuse that he was merely embedded in a larger hierarchy of power, although they recognized that Eichmann was not the powerful or demonic operator the prosecution made him out to be. What is so disturbing about Eichmann is his mediocrity. In what many thought was an inappropriately sarcastic tone, Arendt depicted Eichmann as a laughable loser incapable of thought and lost in cliché-laden language that had ceased to be meaningful. This surprising new criminal with his dreadful new crime is at the center of Arendt's claims that the conceptual apparatus inherited from the past is inadequate for making sense of the new, that which for her defines the political. All the legal categories had failed in the interpretation of Eichmann: he had a conscience but at some point it started working the other way around. He had a concept of duty, but he had not questioned what it meant to fulfill that duty. He was law-abiding, but the regime he supported in obeying laws was criminal. And, as already addressed, he had no monstrous intent. Totalitarianism, viewed through the case of Eichmann, poses various problems of category that cannot be made sense of by reference to the past or to familiar standards of good and evil, humanity, crime, the actor, etc. If Adolf Eichmann was a political actor, he certainly did not conform to the heroic image many students initially associated with the term.

Adolf Eichmann was executed soon after the trial in 1961. As we reviewed the class before the final examination, death as a cost of action came into view. Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated, Antigone had committed suicide after having been entombed by her uncle, Socrates was poisoned by drinking hemlock, Richard III (fictional) died on the battlefield at the hands of Richmond, and Eichmann was hung in the Ramleh Prison in Israel. This intimate relationship between political action and death in the history of Western political thought struck me as an important reminder of the blind spot Americans suffer when we consider others barbaric for being willing to die for their beliefs.

Student Questions

Ultimately, this course was defined neither by endings nor by death. On the contrary, it was evident at the end of the semester that new discussions of politics had become possible. In the lists of questions about politics students wrote towards the end of this course I could see the beginnings of a more differentiated approach to politics. We had left the realm of Republican versus Democrat for good. Some of my favorite student questions include the following:

1. Which has more relevance in the effectiveness of a political action: inherent truths and meanings or the power of the spectacle?
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2. Language is corrupt and lacking, but the means of political expression. Where does this leave the ability of politics to be “just”?
3. Are there any real answers to political questions? Do we get answers from political questions or just more questions?
4. Is an action political if it doesn’t challenge an existing power? And, what is more effective: the actor or the action?
5. What persuades anyone to do anything that involves politics?
6. When is apathy a political action?
7. How big is this? (I like this question as it expresses the student's insight into previously unsuspected connections and implications that had become apparent while studying political thought.)
8. How long does a political action affect the world? Is there any way to stop the effects of a political action? How does one know that politics is still being affected by a previous action?
9. If a political action fails, is it still a political action?
10. How could Arendt’s “Banality of Evil” thesis explain American politics?
11. When does public space become private space? When is it no longer acceptable for a person to freely do whatever he or she wants in a public space?
12. Are all members of a social movement considered political actors?
13. How much time is necessary for a political action?
14. When is teaching a political action?
15. Can an action be political without the intent to be so?

What is the purpose of an introduction to political thought? From a disciplinary perspective, studying the history of political thought, closely reading texts that have become points of reference and acquiring verbal and written skills of interpretation and argumentation are undoubtedly the core requirements of such a course. Recall that the design of this course was directly responsive to the claim that its audience was theory-shy, perhaps even averse. To study thought through the lens of action and portraits of actors invited students into texts and modes of inquiry they might have otherwise avoided. Moreover, the presence of an overarching question—what should we do?—both personalized the inquiry for students and unified our collective thought process throughout the semester. The repeated return to this motivating question and the generation of related questions facilitated students’ access to the texts. They soon developed their own perspective on action and, therefore, encountered our readings as potential answers in an ongoing discussion. The centrality of questions in this course also emphasized the responsibility of students as learners; in generating their own questions, they created their own theoretical agenda and slowly constructed their own theory of political action.

It is possible and important to invite students who show signs of theory resistance into the study of political thought. As in all disciplines, teachers of political theory must consider different types of learning as well as students’ habits and inclinations. Inviting students into political theory by asking questions that clearly bridge the personal with the

political engages students both intellectually and as members of communities, from the campus to the world.

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