



Political Beliefs

A Philosophical Introduction

Oliver Traldi



POLITICAL BELIEFS

Anyone who's had an argument about politics with a friend may walk away wondering how this friend could possibly hold the beliefs they do. A few self-reflective people might even wonder about their own political beliefs after such an argument. This book is about the reasons that people have, and could have, for political beliefs: the evidence they might draw on, the psychological sources of their views, and the question of how we ought to form our political beliefs if we want to be rational.

The book's twenty-four chapters are divided into four larger parts, which cover the following: (1) the differences between political and other types of beliefs, (2) theories of political belief formation, (3) sources of our political beliefs and how we might evaluate them, and (4) contemporary phenomena – like polarization, fake news, and conspiracy theories – related to political beliefs.

Along the way, the book addresses questions that will arise naturally for many readers, like:

1. Does the news you choose to watch and your own social media leave you stuck in an “information bubble”?
2. Are you committed to a certain ideology because of the history of your society?
3. Are people who believe “fake news” always acting irrationally?
4. Does democracy do a good job of figuring out what's true?
5. Are some political beliefs good and some evil?

As the book investigates these and other questions, it delves into technical, philosophical topics like epistemic normativity, the connection between belief and action, pragmatic encroachment, debunking arguments, and ideology critique. Chapter summaries and discussion questions will help students and all interested readers better grasp this new, important area on the border of politics and philosophy.

Oliver Traldi is a John and Daria Barry Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the James Madison Program at Princeton University. He received a PhD in philosophy from the University of Notre Dame.

“Gives a broad overview of a range of topics, identifies lots of interesting new ideas, questions, and avenues for further research, and contains a wide array of helpful references to follow up. . . . I think this would work well for philosophy majors but also for PPE students or even philosophy courses for political science majors, communication science majors, or public administration majors. Parts of it could also be a great addition to political philosophy classes.”

– **Jeroen de Ridder**, *Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*

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PREFACE

Two friends – maybe it’s easier to imagine them as lovers – run laughing through the hills and valleys of a great green land. They play a game: when they reach a pair of hills, each stands on one and explains why the other should come to their side. Eventually one is convinced, or playacts as though they are, and they join hands and run again together under a clear sky.

They make their way to a certain pair of hills and take their places as usual. But as they each start to speak to the other, a wind picks up, carrying their words off with it. They try to shout, but the wind only grows louder. Suddenly on each hilltop materializes a huge collection of other people, one surrounding one friend, another surrounding the other. A rope appears, standing taut in midair between the two hills, each group of people pulling as hard as they can from their side.

The friends are left with a dilemma. They can continue their game in a new form, participating in the tug of war instead of the mock debate they’d chosen. Or they can abandon their positions on the hills and go off to do something else. What’s not open to them is to go on as they had been.

Different features of this story will for different readers be attractive illustrations of the difference between political disputes and other kinds of disputes. For some, political disputes fall short of our desired standards of rationality. They are ultimately just matters of tugging, not of offering one’s own reasoning and listening to other people’s. For others, political disputes are what happen when a disagreement is no longer a game. Becoming political is just what happens when participants actually start to care about how the dispute is resolved – when there are “stakes” to it. Yet others might emphasize that political disputes can happen “anywhere” in our belief space – a hill of science, a field of morality, a river of

physical force. It's almost arbitrary whether or not a dispute is "politicized." I don't think any of these views is quite right. But I think the story does capture something important.

You've probably heard many people express their political beliefs. Maybe you've expressed some of your own. In particular, you've probably heard many people have political disagreements – disputes with each other, in words, over their political beliefs. Such disputes occur in debates, in dorm rooms, over the dinner table. They occur between competing candidates, between classmates, between comrades. Maybe you're the instigator of such disagreements. Or maybe you join unwillingly, pulled in by the emotional force of the conversation or the certainty that someone else has said something incorrect or even evil. Or maybe you're the one quietly asking: "Why did you have to make it all political?" Whichever role you play, this book is for you.

As you've probably gathered from the title, this book is a philosophical introduction to political beliefs. It's a book in the branch of philosophy we call epistemology. In epistemology, we study belief and associated concepts like knowledge, certainty, and rationality. The way I think about it, epistemology is the study of how to evaluate our beliefs. So this book is an introduction to debates about how to evaluate our political beliefs. If you like, you can think of it as an introduction to disputes about how to resolve our political disputes.

Because I think the notion of a political belief is a kind of moving target, as I'll explain soon, there are a lot of different questions we could have about our political beliefs. But I'm going to limit my scope a bit to make this project manageable both for myself and for you. To form political beliefs in a rational or reliable way probably requires that we do basic things like perceive a real, actually existing world, learn from our experiences, and understand basic arithmetic. Philosophers often worry about skeptical challenges to foundational forms of knowledge like the perceptual, inductive, and mathematical. I won't worry about that in this book, though. I'll be concerned with problems that are relatively characteristic of the political realm. At the same time, I won't get too concrete. This book won't tell you how to form political beliefs about any particular issue, like abortion or climate change.

This middle level of abstraction puts us in an area of philosophy which has a very long pedigree but has also seen a very recent rise in interest: social epistemology. Social epistemology asks how we should form our beliefs, and how we should evaluate the ones we have, given that we live in a world with other people. Should we trust other people? What should we do when they disagree with us? Political epistemology, the topic of this book, is much like social epistemology applied to politics, but it also includes a few extra dimensions. First, we don't just live in a world with other individuals; those individuals form groups, and we ourselves are likely members of certain kinds of groups as well. Just what it means for individuals to form a group is difficult to pin down, but many

political theorists take the idea of a group to be part of the essence of politics. Second, political beliefs are often beliefs about what we ought to do, and those sorts of beliefs, what I'll call moral beliefs or values, introduce their own epistemological puzzles. Third, to the extent that politics is a distinct field of inquiry, it may present challenges of its own, like complexity.

The sort of philosophy I do is focused around theories and arguments. Those are two kinds of structures that put together a bunch of different ideas or claims. Sometimes I'll call an idea or claim a *proposition*. A theory is just a bunch of propositions put together. An argument is a bunch of propositions put together with one picked out as a conclusion.

Classical philosophical puzzles of “global skepticism” target all of the knowledge we might think we have. How can we be certain that we're not dreaming? How can we be certain that we're not being tricked by some evil demon? How can we be certain that we're not brains in vats hooked up to some illusion-generating machine? If any of those skeptical scenarios obtain, it could mean that none of our beliefs are true, and that possibility might suggest that we don't truly know anything at all. But such arguments rely on these odd scenarios being saliently possible, and philosophers have resisted global skepticism by resisting either the claim of possibility or the claim of salience in that regard.

When it comes to politics, however, we might worry that we are actually in the odd scenario, which would justify a local skepticism about political beliefs. There are a lot of potential arguments for political skepticism. Some argue that political cognition is subject to too many biases for us to rationally trust our own judgment when it comes to politics or that political cognition is necessarily subject to distorting ideologies. Others argue that there is so much disinformation in the current media environment that it is irrational to trust anyone else. Still others say that politics in the modern world is necessarily too complex to license rational political beliefs. Finally, some say that the mere prevalence of disagreement about politics should be enough to make us unsure about our own political beliefs. These arguments will be seen throughout the book, but it's good to start thinking about them now.

The skeptical perspective is not the only approach people take to political epistemology. Some start with a set of political beliefs they take to be obviously false and then try to characterize what goes wrong when people believe those things. Still others avoid both political skepticism and political dogmatism. They think that there are reliable ways of getting at the truth in social epistemology – those we'll consider include listening to the experts and deferring to the majority or social consensus – and that there's no reason these shouldn't remain reliable when it comes to politics. More generally, some might wonder whether politics deserves its own epistemology at all; what makes it so special?

The plan for the book is as follows. In the first part of the book, I'll go through some preliminaries: the surprisingly rare question of what counts as *political*, the

surprisingly contentious question of what counts as a *belief*, and then the first effort, to my knowledge, of characterizing what counts as *political belief*. Then I'll talk a bit about the nature of *political conflict*, of which various theories have been propounded, and about ways to interpret *political disagreement*, including the principle of charity, which unfortunately does not, in light of the various possible causes of conflict, always give us clear guidance.

In the second part, I'll go through some major *theories of political beliefs*, with some input from philosophers but just as much from social scientists, especially psychologists. What I mean by a theory of political belief here is a scientific, causal account of what gives different people their different beliefs. Some varieties of theories we'll consider: theories based on *personality type*, theories based on *ideology*, theories based on *group membership*, theories based on *social location*, theories based on *cognitive heuristics*, and *minimalist, expressivist, and eliminativist* theories, which suggest that people might not have political beliefs at all.

In the third part, I'll go through some sources of evidence or justification for our political beliefs. First will be two types of skeptical arguments for the conclusion that we should doubt or even abandon our political beliefs. A *debunking argument* takes one of the etiologies of political belief and suggests that, if we think our political beliefs were caused in that way, we should abandon them. The argument from *widespread disagreement* suggests that political beliefs are in such controversy that we should abandon many of them. A natural next step is to ask: What about when there is a clear majority on one side or another of a political belief? That's the question of the *epistemology of democracy*. If we don't trust majority votes, we might trust other *decentralized* mechanisms for aggregating the viewpoints of many different people. A central alternative to the epistemology of democracy is the idea that we should *trust the experts*, the subject of the following chapter. We'll consider the possibility that we should determine our political beliefs based on which beliefs would be *morally right or wrong* to hold. Finally, we'll take a close look at specific epistemological issues related to the political theory of *liberalism*.

The fourth part will be similar to the third, except that I'll focus more on real-world political phenomena that have been matters of public debate. I'll talk about *polarization*; "polarization" really is used to name (at least) two different kinds of phenomena, *sorting* and *extremism*. I'll talk about *conspiracy theories* and the difficulty of explaining what's irrational about them without condemning a lot of our normal thinking and theorizing. I'll talk about *propaganda and dehumanization*, tools attributed to powerful people and groups by the ideology theories considered earlier, and about *fake news and political rumors*, which cast doubt on how much of other people's testimony we can believe. I'll talk about political *narratives* and how they affect people's snap judgments about news items. Then I'll close with a relatively underexplored topic, the relationship between

our political beliefs and the *philosophy of history*, especially our narratives about historical progress or historical decline.

Don't get the wrong idea: even in the parts where I'm not providing my own original ideas, my perspective has influenced the way I've written this book, from choices about what to include to the organization of the material to little sidebars and snippets about which arguments I think are good and which arguments I think are bad. So I want to urge you: don't take my word for it. Do your own thinking about everything that comes up in this text; treat it like it's under dispute, just as you would a text about politics itself. To my mind, that's one of the core insights of epistemology, including political epistemology. At some level, at some point, you're on your own. You have to figure it out for yourself.

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Many people have helped me with this project, both with the book itself and with the underlying ideas. It would be impossible to list everyone with whom I've discussed the topic of political beliefs, including academics in philosophy, political science, psychology, and economics; policy wonks and political operatives; and "civilians" with no professional link to politics. I wrote much of this book while traveling; so I'll start by thanking the people who have put me up: Mom and Dad, Matthew and Lesley, Rebecca and Johan, Jeff and Tina, Sara and Jan, Larisa, Joey and Annie, Alice, and any number of Airbnb hosts. They have all talked through my ideas with me as well – well, not the Airbnb hosts, but the others.

The three philosophers who have read the most of my work, and especially the most of my work on political beliefs, are my advisor Blake Roeber, Dan Greco, and Liam Bright, who calls himself an expert on "Oliver Traldi thought." Everyone at Notre Dame has been really helpful to me while I've been there, and I want to thank the undergraduates in my fall 2021 class, which was basically a dry run for this book, in particular, as well as David Eil and Béatrice Leydier, who listened to a different version of it on Zoom. I've had great and encouraging conversations and online "exchanges" with spectacular philosophers of political belief like Rima Basu, Spencer Case, Gabriele Contessa, Kevin Dorst, Michael Hannon, Hrishikesh Joshi, Enzo Rossi, Jason Stanley, Kevin Vallier, Brandon Warmke, and Alex Worsnip, as well as non-philosophers who work on similar topics like Musa al-Gharbi, Paul Bloom, Jonathan Haidt, Dmitri Halikias, Robin Hanson, Philip Tetlock, and Adrian Vermeule. Thanks to Adam Gibbons in particular for many talks over the years and for giving an early draft a thorough read. He made many helpful suggestions which were integrated into the text, as

did two anonymous referees at Routledge. Becca Rothfeld and Jane Cooper also read some short early excerpts and gave me helpful feedback.

Andy Beck, my editor at Routledge, has been great through this whole process, and I'd also like to thank several anonymous reviewers for really helpful comments. I made all sorts of additions based on those comments, added helpful sources and qualified questionable claims I'd made, and fleshed out plenty of sections which were sketchier when I'd submitted them. In particular, I spent September of 2023 integrating nearly every suggestion made by an incredibly helpful review of the entire book manuscript. I talked about these issues constantly at the Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Society conferences in New Orleans, and virtually everyone gave me good ideas and feedback. Some of the ideas in the book's final chapter were initially written as a paper for now-Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett's course on modern constitutional theory in the spring of 2019, which I audited; many thanks to her and to my classmates. The philosopher groups I'm in on Slack and Discord have also helped me relax and formulate my thoughts, and I've gotten pretty much constant feedback from many people on Twitter (now X), much of which is very helpful. I've published versions of some of these ideas in magazines and newspapers, so thanks to all of my editors as well. In particular, this text cites an article of mine in the *Bulwark*, where my editor was Adam Keiper, and a book review of mine from the *Hedgehog Review*, where my editor was B. D. McClay.

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Finally, thanks are very much due to Jeffrey Friedman, whose political epistemology workshop I attended in Berkeley in the summer of 2018. We argued a lot about what good writing is, what good arguments are, whether there's any use to analytic philosophy, whether historicism is mere pedantry, and so on. He passed away in December 2022 and will be missed for his kindness, his scholarship, and his incisive thinking. Though I don't know if he would be any more fond of my approach now than he was then, his ideas are all over this book.

PART I

Preliminaries



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1

WHAT IS POLITICAL?

Just which beliefs are political? In these first few chapters, we'll start by thinking about what it means for something to be political and go on to thinking about what it means for something to be a belief. Hopefully from those two inquiries we should be able to say at least a little bit about what it might mean for something to be a political belief, a topic about which very little has to date been written. I'll offer my own theory by the end of the third chapter, but like most theories in philosophy, it's probably wrong. I hope that, rather than internalizing or memorizing it, the reader will apply the same scrutiny to my theories as I do to other people's throughout this text.

The notion we want to define in these first few chapters is "political belief." In the first chapter, we'll ask which things are political, and in the second chapter, we'll ask which things are beliefs. In the third chapter, I'll give my own view of which beliefs are political. I suspect you'll be able to find ways in which it is overinclusive and underinclusive. The quest for real definitions rarely finds treasure.

Power, conflict, and order

In an unpublished paper, political scientist T. J. Donahue surveys fifteen different analyses of the concept "politics," finding them all ultimately wanting – that is to say, either overinclusive or underinclusive – and then offering his own. Donahue writes¹ that it is "[a]n oddity of political philosophy . . . that it spends so little time answering this question" – that is, the question "what is politics?" This is no doubt correct, and it is true of fields other than political philosophy. For instance, the Routledge textbook *Introduction to Political Psychology*, in an introductory

section called “What is Political Psychology?”,² does not undertake any sort of outlining of what counts as politics, or “political behavior,” the object of study of political psychology, the textbook’s topic. This is especially odd because politics itself includes a great deal of debate about what politics consists of.

Rather than covering all the definitions Donahue considers, I think it’s better to note that they fall roughly into three groups. To some theorists,ⁱ the dividing line between the political and the nonpolitical has something to do with *power*. To other theorists,ⁱⁱ this dividing line has something to do with *conflict*. And to yet more, the line has to do with *setting things in order*.ⁱⁱⁱ Donahue offers quick counterexamples to all the theories he surveys, and quick counterexamples to his own theory are also available. But we should try to say something more general about each of these approaches.

Let’s start with a note about all of the approaches together. A characteristic situation that can be unobjectionably called “political” might involve two or more different “sides” jockeying against each other in one way or another to try to make sure that things are done in a certain way in society. Note that this situation has elements of all three theses: the power, the conflict, and the eventual setting down of some sort of social order, whether by legislation or by some other means. One method for figuring out which definition seems best to you might be to start trying to take away pieces of this situation and see if it still seems “political” to you. For instance, you might think that if no conflict existed, it would be hard to understand what the jockeying for power even involved.

Is “political” really just one thing? Maybe we use the word in multiple senses. Or maybe it doesn’t mean anything: maybe it’s just something we throw around to try to affect how others see things. Or “political” could be what Ludwig Wittgenstein³ called a *family resemblance concept* or *cluster concept*. Whether or not a cluster concept is properly applied in some case depends on a variety of factors, and it is possible that none of them will be either sufficient or necessary. The full range of instances of such concepts thus exhibits only a “family resemblance” among its members. An interesting feature of such concepts is that they can come in degrees based on how many factors in the cluster obtain in some specific case. If some activity or belief can be more easily said to be *more* political or *less* political than some other activity or belief rather than being said to be political or not political full stop, then that might be good reason to think that “political” is a cluster concept.

i Donahue cites Raymond Geuss, Adam Swift, Peter Nicholson, and Max Weber.

ii Donahue cites David Miller, John Dunn, Bernard Crick, Carl Schmitt, Mark Warren, and J. D. B. Miller.

iii Donahue cites Michael Oakshott, Chantal Mouffe, and Bertrand de Jouvenel. His own theory also fits here. (Note that some of the theories he considers could arguably fall into more than one of my categories.)

On to power. The basic problem with theories that define politics in terms of power is that “power” itself is a poorly defined term. If we take power to be any sort of influence, then anyone convincing anyone else to do anything at all would count as political; Donahue gives the example of one person convincing another to give them a ride when the first person’s car has run out of gas.⁴ But if we narrow the sort of power we’re talking about, we end up excluding from the scope of “political” activities that should definitely count as politics. For instance, a definition of politics in terms of *state* power ignores all the sorts of political activity that might occur in the absence of formally organized states;⁵ a definition of politics in terms of *force* ignores all the sorts of political activity that might involve attempts at rational persuasion.⁶

Now consider a possible way of protecting theses about power. A power theorist might say: “You’re right that the term ‘power’ is too general. What we really mean is *political* power.” This response would neglect the task at hand. The task at hand is precisely to say what it means for something to be political. To qualify a term in a proposed analysis of politics by restricting it to political phenomena is to propose no analysis at all, for the same reason that we are taught in school not to include a word in its own definition: it relies on what it provides prior to the provision.

There is a more concrete problem with the idea of “power,” too. We can distinguish between the power *over* others and the power *to* perform certain kinds of actions.⁷ An analysis of politics that includes all instances of both types of power is clearly overinclusive. We gain the power to do new things when, for instance, we learn to play an instrument or to speak a language, but those are generally not political activities. However, to entirely exclude power-to from the analysis of politics would seem underinclusive. The fact that society is, at least according to some, set up in a way that determines that members of certain (privileged) groups have a wider scope of action than members of other (disprivileged) groups is arguably a central case of a political fact. Even including all instances of power-over in the analysis of politics might be a mistake. People can gain power over other people by being beautiful, charming, or talented. But it seems clearly overinclusive to think that all performances of beauty, charm, and talent are political activities.

Arguments against defining politics in terms of conflict⁸ are similar in form to the arguments against defining politics in terms of power. There are plenty of conflicts that aren’t political (say, a physical fight between two people who both want the last piece of a delicious cake). Are there political situations that don’t involve conflict? Say an emergency situation arises in some country. Everyone agrees on what the government should do about it, and effecting this outcome requires that the legislature pass a certain bill, which indeed does pass unanimously. Was the event of that bill’s passage not a political event? The possibility of bipartisan political action might mean that defining politics in terms of conflict

is underinclusive. However, we might still save the definition if bipartisan political action is political only when undertaken in institutions which are ordinarily conflictual.

I have a little argument which favors seeing politics as a matter of conflict. When people append the word “politics” to the name of some other activity, as in the phrases “academic politics” and “office politics,” they are referring to an aspect of that activity that involves some sort of conflict. So it is natural to think that the “political” side of an activity will be the conflictual one. Though I think it’s cute, this argument should not move the needle very much. This use of phrases like “office politics” would be comprehensible even if conflict were merely a frequent feature of politics rather than an essential one. And “politics” could indicate something more general than conflict, like unpleasantness.

Donahue argues against most theories of politics as a matter of setting things in order because they exclude cases of purely negative political expression – political actions which seek only to break a group’s current arrangements, radicals setting themselves on fire to protest the passage of a statute, and so forth.⁹ This includes theories of politics that essentially involve concepts like governing and ruling. To my mind, these theories, including Donahue’s, also suffer from a problem we saw that plagued theories of politics as power: just as there are intuitively political and nonpolitical instances of power, there are intuitively political and nonpolitical instances of order. Take a case in which four friends have decided to play a board game together every few weeks and must pick a time and a place for those regular meetings. These friends will set their affairs in order as a group and make general arrangements which are relevant to their goals. (They might even overcome some conflict.) However, it doesn’t seem natural to me to say that the friends are doing politics. There are aspects of the activity that kind of seem political, but something seems to be missing, too. Readers, of course, might disagree.

A natural thought is that we might be able to find a definition of “politics” or “political” that includes power, conflict, *and* order. But I think there are still obviously conflicts over power which involve setting affairs in order which aren’t political. For instance, imagine that two friends each want to be the one to choose where the group goes to dinner tonight, and one of the two friends very nastily unplugs the other friend’s phone, so that they can’t call a restaurant to make a reservation, leaving the first friend with the power to do so. This involves power (the power to make the reservation), conflict (the conflict over where to eat), and setting things in order (deciding where the group will eat), but I think it’s intuitively not a political event or a political struggle. Just as before, we want to say: this isn’t a matter of *political* power; this isn’t a matter of *political* conflict; this isn’t setting things in order in a *political* sense. That this response is natural indicates that there’s some other sense of “political” lurking behind all these definitions.

Is everything political?

In an introduction to the volume *What is Politics?* Adrian Leftwich writes of politics that “debates about its proper definition and the scope of its subject matter are themselves political.”¹⁰ But it’s very hard to make sense of this sentence if “political” is left undefined. Indeed, that it may be a “political” matter what counts as “political” leads some into odd inferences. After all, though we may all agree that it is a political matter, we may not know what that entails until we *resolve* that political matter: until we figure out what “political” means. Some extremists about the nature of politics may take the view that there is no truth in political matters – that they are inevitably resolved by force, for instance, and that there is no ultimate “fact of the matter” where they’re concerned. But then there is no genuine inference to be made from the fact that it is a political matter what counts as political, since there is no ultimate “fact of the matter” about what inferences can be made from something counting as political. Even worse, some people argue from the premise that it’s a political matter what counts as political to the conclusion that *everything* is political. This recently popular catchphrase is rationally unsupportable, and indeed if it were true it would be hard to make sense of sentences including words like “politics” and “political” or to understand phrases like “political debate” or “political science.”

Bad arguments are sometimes worth careful study; seeing how they went wrong can help us do better when we come up with our own arguments. One sometimes sees other bad arguments for the conclusion that everything is political.

A first such argument starts from the observation that whenever we spend our time doing something other than politics (or that seems to be other than politics), or whenever we introduce concerns into our decision-making that aren’t political (or that seem not to be political), we are giving political considerations less weight than we might, which itself is a political choice. Thus, the argument seems to go, *every* choice is a political choice, insofar as every choice involves making some sort of decision about how to weigh political considerations. This argument can be defeated by an analogous parody. Consider the idea that the choice not to engage in musical activity is a musical choice. After all, it involves weighing musical goals against other goals and deciding that they are not important enough to guide a choice. By this logic, we could argue that every *token* choice is in part every *type of* choice: that everything we do is political, musical, economical, romantic, gustatory, artistic, recreational, medical, and so on all at once. This is obviously an implausible conclusion. Perhaps there is something different about political choices which makes this kind of premise more plausible in the political case than in other cases. But in fact none of the analyses of the concept of politics we examined led to such a conclusion. The argument for an overly broad conception of politics assumes an overly broad conception of politics to begin with.

Another such argument starts from the observation that many individuals, objects, and situations have been affected by politics in some way, at some point in what philosophers might call their “causal history.” Politics might be part of the historical explanation of why your clothes are made of a certain material, why your meal is seasoned with a certain spice, why certain courses are offered at your college, and so on. Such historical facts can of course be very interesting. But first, not *every* object has been affected by politics: take celestial objects, for instance. And second, it is not in general the case that every part of an object’s causal history inheres in that object. A novelist having written a book while listening to classical music would not make that book a piece of music, let alone a piece of classical music; and this is the case whether or not the piece of music caused the novelist to write the book. Objects are forgetful in this way, and perhaps this justifies a certain amount of envy toward them. Again, there could be something unique about politics such that an object’s having a causal history bound up with politics justifies calling that object “political,” but it’s hard to see what that would be.

Inferring political conclusions from the analysis of politics

Occasionally, people talk as though we can infer conclusions about what political actors *ought to do* from an analysis of politics. In particular, commentators who adhere to the slogan “politics is about power” will often say that this means that political actors *ought to* focus on accumulating and deploying political power rather than thinking about what’s right or wrong or trying not to fall afoul of political norms.¹¹ Apart from the problems with the power-based analysis of politics that we saw earlier, this sort of conclusion can never really be justified from a premise about what politics consists in. For the mere fact that politics is “about” some kind of activity or goal cannot explain why we *ought to* engage in that activity or work toward that goal. There is a big academic debate about this which concerns the thesis of “political realism,” which has it, roughly, that moral concerns are out of place in politics. In a recent article,¹² Jonathan Leader Maynard and Alex Worsnip consider five arguments in favor of this kind of conclusion, finding all of them wanting. To me, the biggest problem with this sort of idea is that it undermines the very political appeals its supporters tend to make. If you tell me that politics isn’t concerned with what we ought to do, then I’ll respond: “So much the worse for politics. Let’s not do it anymore.” Charitably, I think what’s actually at work a lot of the time when people say “politics is about power” is not necessarily a denial that political actors should do what’s right but an attempt to emphasize that to do what’s right sometimes requires background conditions, like the possession of political power. This is obviously true. If you want to get elected or pass a bill, you need the votes. If you want to prevent criminal organizations from terrorizing a neighborhood or prevent evil dictators

from brutalizing their subjects, you need a police force or an army. So there's a kind of soft reading of the notion that politics is about power rather than morality which interprets it to mean instead that being morally right isn't enough and that one must plan carefully and gather resources to be able to execute one's plans, including moral ones. But we'll see more about this kind of idea in the chapter on political conflict.

Conclusion

We haven't come to much of a conclusion about what politics is. Power, conflict, and order all seem to have something to do with politics, without there being an easy way to make them individually or jointly into a real definition of politics. But I think we may see a way to make use of what we have done. For now, though, let's go on to consider what beliefs might be.

Discussion questions

1. Say two people are arguing over whether something is political. What do you take them to be disagreeing about? See if you can state the disagreement without using words like "political" or "politics." Just what is the importance of the category of "political"?
2. What are some political activities you engage in or that the people around you engage in? What sets them apart as political?
3. In 2005, former President George H. W. Bush said of helping raise money for recovery efforts after a tsunami in Japan: "This is bigger than politics. This is about saving lives." In 2017, the then-House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi was quoted as saying of the 2016 presidential election: "The integrity of our elections, this is bigger than politics, bigger than Democrats and Republicans. This is about our country." In 2019, describing a vote to impeach Donald Trump, Representative Elissa Slotkin was quoted as saying: "This is bigger than politics." In 2021, an adviser for the campaign to recall the then-Governor of California Gavin Newsom was quoted as saying about the recall: "This is not a Republican recall; this is a group of concerned citizens. This is bigger than politics."¹³ What do you think these people mean when they say something is bigger than politics? What do these instances make you think about the word "political"?

2

WHAT ARE BELIEFS?

We've thought about what politics might be, so our next step in figuring out what political beliefs might be is to figure out what beliefs might be. Since philosophers use the word "belief" in a specialized way, it is important to clear up a few potential misunderstandings first. When nonphilosophers use words like "belief" and "opinion," they sometimes mean to contrast them with words like "truth" or "fact," with the intended contrast being that beliefs and opinions are uncertain, sort of up for grabs, whereas truths and facts are certain. This is not the contrast that philosophers usually draw between these ideas, though. Philosophers generally use words like "belief" and "opinion" to refer to things that, so to speak, have bearers, what we'll sometimes call *epistemic agents*. These epistemic agents are individuals who *hold* those beliefs and opinions – who, in verb form, *believe* or *opine* in the relevant way. Truths and facts, on the other hand, don't have bearers. They are part of the world. However, the way philosophers use these terms, an epistemic agent can believe a truth, even a completely certain one, just as an epistemic agent can believe an uncertain truth or a falsehood. A retort like "that's not my belief; it's a fact" thus doesn't make much sense the way we use these words, although I think it is sensible in everyday language.

Epistemologists sometimes prefer to talk not about beliefs but about closely linked attitudes called *credences*. Roughly, a credence is something like a level of confidence in a proposition. Thinking there's a 60 percent chance that it will rain is something like having a credence of .6 in the proposition that it will rain. The relationship between belief and credence is contested (see Jackson 2020 for some of the leading theories and arguments about those theories). Some epistemologists think credences are just beliefs about likelihoods while others think beliefs are just credences that meet a certain threshold.¹ Some epistemologists

eschew talk of credences while others eschew talk about beliefs.² I would hate to take a stand on those sorts of deep theoretical issues in a text of this nature. Instead, I'll sometimes talk about credences but usually talk about beliefs, and the reader should generally take my intent to be that comments about one kind of attitude will be translatable into comments about the other attitude in a straightforward way.

Two theories of belief (or credence)

So what are beliefs (or credences, if we prefer)? Two kinds of views are popular.³ One *representationalist* view has it that beliefs are kinds of pictures or markers in the mind. In my head somewhere is the belief that Paris is the capital of France; it's part, in some sense, of my inner life, with a relationship to my outer life that might be rather complicated. Another *dispositionalist* view has it that the relationship is not so complicated as all that; according to this view, beliefs just are dispositions to behave in a certain way, so that my belief that Paris is the capital of France is just the disposition to say that Paris is the capital of France, to act as though Paris is the capital of France, to be surprised when people say that other cities might be the capital of France, and so on. Dispositionalism fit well within a period in intellectual history during which philosophers were very reluctant to posit mental entities and had ambitions to reduce our typology of the mental to fully observable physical phenomena. It also seems to explain some of our habits of attributing beliefs to others based on actions.

But there is a big problem for at least naive theories of dispositionalism, which we can see if we think a bit more about how we attribute beliefs based on actions. Philosophers have often thought that belief has a special relationship to action, especially action that is *intentional*. Joseph Raz wrote that “[a]cting with an intention or a purpose is acting (as things appear to one) for a reason,”⁴ and Donald Davidson wrote that

[w]henever someone does something for a reason, . . . he can be characterized as (a) having some sort of pro attitude toward actions of a certain kind, and (b) believing (or knowing, perceiving, noticing, remembering) that his action is of that kind.⁵

Similarly, Robert Audi writes that “actions [are] doings that have a description under which they are intentional (this holds with at most a few exceptions)” and “intentional action is explainable by appeal to a set of beliefs and desires.”⁶ Philosophers call *theoretical reasoning* the process of coming to conclusions about what it is rational to *believe*. Philosophers call *practical reasoning* the process of coming to conclusions about what it is rational to *do*. A rational process of coming to conclusions begins with *premises*, which form the rational basis for

the conclusions. But for me to reason from a premise to some conclusion, and for me to go on to accept the conclusion as rationally compelling when it comes to the question of what I ought to believe or do, it seems that I must believe that premise.

If this sounds a bit technical, a few examples should simplify it. If I desire a chocolate bar, and I believe that I can get a chocolate bar by checking the candy bowl in the department office, then that explains and justifies as rational my action to check the candy bowl in the department office. What if I didn't desire a chocolate bar or didn't believe that there would be one in the candy bowl? Then the action wouldn't make so much sense. Now, in some cases, I'll have multiple desires, and they might conflict. I might want to go to the party because someone with whom I am enamored will be present; I might want to stay at home because it is sleeting outside. Thus I have reasons to do two incompatible things. Philosophers sometimes say these are *pro tanto* reasons, or reasons to a certain extent, and that the conclusions they can provide about what is rational for me to do are *ceteris paribus* conclusions, or conclusions about what is rational "all else being equal."

The multiplicity of possible desires and the fact that we never have just one belief at a time are problematic for dispositionalism. If I believe that you are innocent, then I might be disposed to speak out in your favor to help exonerate you; then again, my desire might be to spite you, so that I will keep quiet about my belief. If I don't like the rain, then I might be disposed to get an umbrella; but if I do, then I might be disposed to act as though it isn't raining at all. And adding another belief can remove the apparent disposition to act from a first belief. If I believe (erroneously, of course) that chocolate is poisonous, I might not be disposed to check for it in the department candy bowl, but I might still believe that it's there. In addition, not all beliefs eventuate in actions; Eric Schwitzgebel gives the example of "an American homebody's belief that there is at least one church in Nice."⁷ On the other hand, we will see that people may be at least a bit less reliable when it comes to such inactive beliefs. Dispositionalism also seems to be less intuitive than representationalism when it comes to the sort of project we're undertaking in this book: evaluating our belief-forming processes normatively with regard to how rational they are.⁸ The idea of representation seems to have built into it a correctness condition: a representation can be faithful or unfaithful, accurate or inaccurate. This explains something of our sense that beliefs go wrong when they are false – that they "aim at truth," in a philosophical slogan. This connection between belief and truth, mediated by normative notions like rationality, justification, and knowledge, is at the core of epistemology, and so we might think that our theory of belief ought to give a good account of it.

We might also think that although dispositionalism connects belief to action, it somehow reverses the connection in doing so by defining belief in terms of action rather than vice versa. Our experience of belief and action is that we are