

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION
The System of Studying Government

(1955)

However differently children receive their first impressions of government, they are unlikely to have a clear, valid, and orderly kind of knowledge. It is more a hubbub of ideas, a welter of images, a confusion of conflicting thoughts. Aristotle over 2000 years ago declared that the study of politics should be commenced after one has reached the age of thirty years. He thought that since the subject demanded calm and orderly judgments about complicated and controversial subjects, only mature minds could cope with it. It is easy to see how he came to hold this belief. In the study of American government, for example, one sees an arena of politics as wide as the North American continent and more than a thousand miles deep, in which millions of people are striving to achieve different goals in many different ways, and in which the governments and governmental agencies on all levels are

engaged every day in thousands of various activities. Besides comprehending this vast panorama, one is supposed to pass judgment on it; one is asked to decide who is doing well, who poorly, who is bad and who is good, what is best done now and what later on. One is tempted to suggest that not even a mature mind is enough for the task; that a genius is required, with the patience of Job and the wisdom of Solomon.

The response of the human mind, however, to such enormous range and variety of fact and desire is to select the most important and relevant items for study, to classify them, and to generalize about the categories. The infinite number of atoms in the world does not prevent scientists from deriving principles about atomic behavior. Nor should anyone allow himself to be bogged down by the similar abundance of raw materials for the study of government.

There are three important approaches to the facts of government; they supplement one another, and together they box in the important problems of the field as they arise. One approach to a problem is to ask what is the best solution of it. This is a question of ethics. A second approach to a puzzling situation is to ask what is its structure and what are the possible limits of changing it. The third approach to a problem is to ask what all the people concerned with it are trying to get out of it: what function is it performing in their lives? That is, every fact (or problem, or situation) of government has three sides; an ethical, a structural, and a functional. Asking which one is the first side is comparable to asking whether the chicken or the egg came

first. Each approach can be used independently or along with one or the other, or both, of the two alternative approaches for a complete understanding of the problem or fact. A brief discussion of each approach in turn will perhaps make their meaning and importance clear.

The Functional Approach to Government

An instance of the functional approach has already been given in the first pages of this chapter, where the development of government from the nature of man was explained. Government itself is functional to man. It gets its form and substance from human nature. By functions are meant the needs behind action, and the uses to which the positions achieved by action are put. It might be said of a military rifle company, for example, that its function was to capture and hold territory. It might well have many other functions as well, such as to inflict casualties upon the enemy. Moving closer to government, one can see that the things that Americans value and desire, and the ways in which they go about achieving those things through the agency of government, are problems of the functional approach. Men seek to fulfill their needs by acting individually and in associations, factions, or parties to obtain desired policies from the government. They seek to determine who shall form the government, knowing that their favorite measures will be most likely to secure enactment if they themselves, not their friends, become public officers. They try too to influence the legislature, the heads of the agencies, the President, and anyone else of importance to whom they can find access. The

functional approach studies these behaviors of men, always following the threads of what they want and what they are getting from their activities.

The Structural Approach to Government

The structural approach also appeared in the first pages of this chapter where, it will be recalled, certain limits to conduct were explained. The family set limits to the child's behavior; both in history and in every person's development it determined or hewed out the way he would seek to fulfill his needs. The family was shown to be both a means to a man's political fulfillment and a limit to the kinds of fulfillment he could attain. The next chapters continue the same kind of structural analysis. They show how American government has its origins and limits within a particular sort of development of his needs. That part of history that emerged out of the Mediterranean basin and western Europe is more relevant in accounting for American institutions than any other part of history. The actual history centering about the territory of the United States proper--the colonies and the frontier--is next most pertinent. Finally the political and constitution history of the United States itself leads directly to an explanation of how the political behavior of Americans today is channeled and steered. Americans do not solve their political problems in the same way as the Russians; and the political structures that have evolved in the two countries show by their contrast the different methods for solving these problems employed by the Americans and the Russians. The events of history have fashioned the structure

of the American government.

The results of the historical political process and of current struggles among men of different value systems are represented in the structure of government. What was once a disputed issue is now a law, or an operating structure, or a habit. Consider the matter of giving the vote to women. At first the idea was absolutely opposed; then it was disputed; then it was approved, with the consequence that the vote became a legal political act for women that was protected by the courts. Now it is no longer seriously disputed; and women habitually vote. Part of the structure of American government thus includes women voters taking part in the selection of public officials.

Another illustration of this process appears in the changed methods for selecting chiefs of state. When the American Revolution occurred, most chiefs of state inherited their offices; for it was an age of kings and nobles. The American adopted first a method of rule by elected legislatures of states (in the Confederation government it was the Congress) and then by a dual edifice of elected legislatures and elected chiefs of state (governors and the President). This structure, too, has become undisputed law; it is an old controversy that has been reduced to agreement which is enforced.

The structure of government consists, then, of the crystallized and enforced ways of taking care of problems that are expected to arise from human needs. Thus, matters of rights are referred to courts; questions of new laws are

brought to Congress; problems of foreign policy go to the President or the Department of State; a vice-presidency is created principally so that there will be a specific officer to succeed the President should the President die, resign, be incapacitated, or be removed from office. These are only a few examples of the thousands of regular procedures that make up the structure of the American government.

Perhaps it may be easier to grasp the meaning of structure by using the grammatically clumsy verbal and participial forms structured and structuring rather than the noun form structure. Then government can be said to comprise a structured, a less-structured, and a non-structured part. This means that some offices, procedures, laws, rules, and habits are so fixed that they hardly seem to move. Other offices, procedures, and actions are less fixed; in other terms, certain offices may be temporary, certain procedures are used by one person or administration but not by their successors. Still other actions are unfixed and uncertain; they are not repeated constantly, they do not occur in rigid sequence or order. For example, a President may send a businessman to the Near East to report on the possibilities of harnessing the waters of the Jordan River. This action is unstructured: the businessman holds no political office, for he is a personal appointee; the President may always look for models, but although he finds no law, procedure, or habit for this appointment he goes ahead nonetheless.

The study of the structure or structuring of American government entails the study, not of possible behavior, but

of highly probable behavior. Much of the most important behavior that occurs in government is limited by rules, precedents, and laws; therefore the study of structure is an important approach to an understanding of American government. Once one knows, for example, the qualifications required of a candidate for the presidency or the powers of Congress as established by law, he will be able to predict an enormous quantity of behavior; for he will know that law, with the courts and the sanctions backing it, and custom and precedent as well, will limit the possibilities of adding to or subtracting from the qualifications for the presidency, and of increasing or diminishing the powers of Congress. If he is asked a functional question such as "How does one become President?" he can at least give some answer from his knowledge of the Constitution. Or, if certain people are interested in increasing the number of immigrants, he will know that Congress is delegated the power in law to control such immigration, and that whatever action those interested people take will be ultimately routed through Congress.

The Ethical Approach to Government

Knowing what other people want and how they are succeeding in gaining what they want, and knowing the ways in which wants are limited, directed, and shaped by institutions, are matters of information that are useful to the ethical approach. The ethical approach to American government asks of every fact, or situation, or action it encounters the question: Is it good or bad, and what ought it to be? In a sense, these ethical questions are the most "functional" of

all. It might be said that no knowledge has meaning and usefulness unless a person can say about it that it is good or bad.

However, a major distinction must be insisted upon. By the functional approach is meant an objective statement of what people are seeking and why they are seeking it, and what they will do with it when they get it. By the ethical approach is meant a judgment that those people are good or bad in what they are seeking, the means they are using to seek it, and the use to which they will afterward put it. The distinction means that the central aim of the ethical approach is to build a philosophy that will help all those who agree with it to make such judgments. Such a task, the work of ethics, is fundamentally important to the study of American government. Without ideals and values, the study loses much of its meaning.

Unfortunately, the objective of this book is limited, however, by considerations of space and of purpose. These conditions incline it toward a thorough-going emphasis upon what is happening, structurally and functionally, in the American Way of Government, and toward encouraging among students the active adaptation of the two-way knowledge thus gained to an ethical philosophy of government in accord with their own views of good and bad and those of their friends and teachers. The structural approach adequately serves the purpose of understanding the stability of government; and the functional approach affords insights into what men believe to be worthwhile, and into the ways in which they exercise power.

The moral judgments of ethics upon the knowledge thus gained
give a fitting climax to the study of American government.