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You may think I have some nerve coming from a university to Washington to tell you how to understand politics. Well, I mean how to *understand*, not how to practice. In any event the understanding I propose comes from practice, not really from a university, and it has something to do with nerve—which is not often found at universities. Still less is it understood.

“How to Understand Politics: What the Humanities Can Say to Science”

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with an introduction by
 the program for delivery

A person with “nerve” thinks himself more important than he is. But how do we back up the reproof: How important is he, how important are we? This is the central question in politics. Politics is about who deserves to be more important: which leader from which party with which ideas. Politics assumes that the contest for importance is important; in a grander sense it assumes that human beings are important.

Political science today avoids this question. It is inspired by the famous title of a book by Harold D. Lasswell, published in 1935, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How?* The focus is on the benefits you get—what, when, and how. It ought to be on the *who*—on who you think you are and why you are so important as to deserve what you get. Poets (speaking broadly of all literature) and philosophers have the answer or at least address the question; science does not. The

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ambition of political science to be scientific in the manner of natural science is the reason why it ignores the question of importance. Scientific truth is objective and is no respecter of persons; it regards the concern for importance as a source of bias, the enemy of truth. Individuals in science can claim prizes, nations can take pride in them, but this sort of recognition is outside science, which is in principle and fact a collective, anonymous enterprise. Political science, which by studying politics ought to be sensitive to importance, to the importance of importance, aims to abstract from individual data with names in order to arrive at universal propositions. Survey research is an example.

Yet human beings and their associations always have names; this is how they maintain their individuality. Names mark off the differences between individuals and societies or other groups, and they do so because the differences are important to us. You can think your way to an abstract individual or society without a name, but you cannot be one or live in one. Science is indifferent to proper names, and confines itself to common nouns, but all human life takes place in an atmosphere of proper nouns. “To make a name for yourself,” as we say, is to become important. “To lose your good name,” to suffer a stain on your reputation, is to live thinking less well of yourself, or among others who think less well of you. Does this matter? It appears that human beings like to think they are important. Perhaps they have to think so if they are to live responsibly, for how can you do your duties if they are not ascribed to your name?

Tonight I want to suggest two improvements for today’s understanding of politics arising from the humanities. The first is to recapture the notion of *thumos* in Plato and Aristotle, referring to a part of the soul that makes us want to insist on our own importance. *Thumos* is psychology or biology, hence science as conceived by those philosophers, but I say it is proper to the humanities now because, having been expelled from modern science, *thumos* lingers, unnoticed and unemployed, in the history of science, which is a museum of rejected science. The second improvement is the use of names—proper to literature and foreign to science. Literature tells

stories of characters with names, in places with names, in times with dates. While science ignores names or explains them away, literature uses and respects them.

Let us make our way to *thumos* from an elementary observation. Politics is about what makes you angry, not so much about what you want. Your wants do matter, but mainly because you feel you are entitled to have them satisfied and get angry when they are not. Many times people who seem to us poor do not complain of their wants, because they do not feel entitled to those wants. When you complain, it is not so much that you lack what you want as that you feel slighted or offended in not having what is rightfully yours. In our democracy politics is motivated especially by the sense that you are not being treated equally. The civil rights movement, the women's movement are obvious recent examples. They were initiated not for the sake of gaining benefits but to receive equal honor and respect. We do not worry so much about the wants of the rich and their desire for inequality. In a democracy that desire is latent and suppressed, though in our kind of democracy, a liberal democracy, we make room for the rich and allow inequality in practice if not in principle. But the rich are not allowed to get angry unless their democratic rights are violated.

You can tell who is in charge of a society by noticing who is allowed to get angry and for what cause, rather than by trying to gauge how much each group gets. Blacks and women wanted benefits only as a sign of equality, not to give themselves greater purchasing power. Power is too vague a term when separated from honor; when we say that people are "empowered," that means they have the power that goes with honor. Those not empowered are *disseed*, a word invented by blacks to designate the feeling of being disrespected.

The two honor-seeking movements I mentioned have been generalized in the concept of identity politics, illustrating the tendency of political science to perform abstractions and to avoid proper names. For how can you have a politics of identity or of meaning without using the names that go with identity and meaning?

Lyle Lovett has a song “You’re not from Texas” that ends like this: “That’s right you’re not from Texas, but Texas wants you anyway.” Lyle teaches us the central problem of multiculturalism: if it’s so important to come from Texas, how can Texas want you if you’re not? Those of us not from Texas have to live with the shame of it, rather doubtful that Texas wants us anyway. For with honor goes the shame of dishonor.

With honor also goes victory, for although you can lose with honor you must gain it in a contest as opposed to a calculation. Politics is not a fluctuation of gain and loss as in an investment account, or the seeking of power after power, as in a certain modern political science; it is a series of victories and defeats in which every victory for one side is a defeat for the other. True, the series never ends in a final victory. The Left will never finally defeat the Right, nor vice versa—just as war will always return in the next war, and sports always looks forward to next year. Yet along the way politics is punctuated with victories and defeats, many of them ephemeral, some of them decisive if not final. As in war and sports, politics delivers winners and losers, bearing pride and dejection, resentment or shame, not negotiated percentages of power or generalized self-esteem.

Generalized self-esteem or self-satisfaction or power arises from the modern concept of the “self,” which has a history back to the sixteenth century that I will not go into. It is enough to say that the self is a simplification of the notion of soul, created to serve the purposes of the modern sciences of psychology and economics, both of which want you to be happy in a simple, straightforward way they can count. As against simplified modern self-interest I too will simplify—but in a manner that leads away from simplification. In the pre-modern thought of Plato and Aristotle, the soul was inferred from the possibility of voluntary action—what moves you to action—and from the possibility of thought—which makes you stop and think, perhaps think about yourself. This is complication, marking a difference between the contrary requirements of practice and theory. When is it necessary to act, when is it proper to reflect? And when you add to that complication the need to determine what is the good

you move towards and think about, science becomes uneasy and looks for a way out.

Why is science uneasy? Science wants to overcome the discrepancy between practice and theory so that theory can go into effect, for example so that the discovery of DNA can be put to use. The need to count, more generally the resort to mathematics, serves the goal of application. Science wants the fruits of science, and it does not tolerate much doubt about the goodness of those fruits. If you have a doubt about the use of DNA, that is your affair; it is not the business of science to question whether all fathers should be found out. Scientists had a bad conscience about making the atom bomb, it's fair to say, but their doubts were not prompted, still less endorsed by their science.

Now, the way out from complication and doubt is to reduce the good to pleasure, something close to the body, or to utility, something useful to the body, or combining the pleasant and the useful, to power, the energy of the body. The body is considered as a factor all human beings have in common, hence an easy basis for generalization; its tendency to hold us apart, by being individual, is ignored. One's own identity is as foreign to science as the good, and just as the good is reduced to something palpable, one's own is raised to something vaguer but shareable.

The bodily self has a simplified object, its self-interest. Acting in your self-interest is not noble but it is excusable, as for example to leave a country where you are paid fifty cents an hour and go to one where you earn ten dollars. Nobody could blame you for being tempted. That is because self-interest, when simple, is universal; I would do the same as you. I would be propelled toward an obvious good, or toward a good I thought obvious. If self-interest is obvious, it is not really your very own; it has been generalized, perhaps artificially. The conflict of self-interests so propelled is what political science today is all about. But not politics.

Thumos, in contrast, is by its nature complicated. It is a part of the

soul that connects one's own to the good. It represents the spirited defense of one's own characteristic of the animal body, standing for the bristling reaction of an animal in face of a threat or a possible threat. It is first of all a wary reaction rather than eager forward movement, though it may attack if that is the best defense. The reaction often goes too far when the animal risks its life in all-out attack in order to preserve itself. To risk one's life to save one's life is the paradox of *thumos*, the display of an apparent contradiction. One can even condemn one's life, and say you are sorry and ashamed, for shame is due to *thumos*. Is shame in your interest? It's hard to say yes, and just as hard to say no. Apparently you have a self above your self that's sometimes critical of your self and makes you ashamed. Let's call that a soul. Soulful people are complicated by virtue of holding themselves at a certain distance from themselves. But aren't we all like this, more or less?

In *thumos* we see the animality of man, for men (and especially males) often behave like dogs barking, snakes hissing, birds flapping. But precisely here we also see the humanity of the human animal. A human being not only bristles at a threat but also gets angry, which means reacts for a reason, even for a principle, a cause. Only human beings get angry. When you lose your temper, you look for a reason to justify your conduct; thinking out the reason may take a while, after the moment of feeling wronged is past, but you cannot feel wronged without a reason—good or bad, well considered or taken for granted.

Now consider what happens when you produce that reason. What did Achilles do when his ruler Agamemnon stole his slave-girl? He raised the stakes. He asserted that the trouble was not in this loss alone but in the fact that the wrong sort of man was ruling the Greeks. Heroes, or at least he-men like Achilles, should be in charge rather than lesser beings like Agamemnon who have mainly their lineage to recommend them and who therefore do not give he-men the honors they deserve. Achilles elevated a civil complaint concerning a private wrong to a demand for a change of regime, a revolution in politics. To be sure, not every complaint goes that far. But every complaint

goes in that direction, from anger to reason to politics. The reason is not that Achilles is making a point everyone would concede, as with self-interest. Just the contrary. Because the reason he gives opposes the rule of Agamemnon and challenges the status-quo, one expects it to be contested. To complain of an injustice is an implicit claim to rule. It is a demand that the rulers adjust their rule to provide for you, and not merely as a personal favor but as one case of a general principle. Since the rulers already hold their own principles, you might well want to remove them to make way for yours. Politics is about change, or to speak frankly, let us say revolution—large or small, active or latent. It is not about stability or equilibrium, the goal that political science today borrows from the market.

In a contested situation the asserted reason typically has to be made with bombast and boast because one cannot prove it. Certainly one cannot prove it to the satisfaction of one's opponent or enemy. That is why the atmosphere of politics is laden with reasons that convince one side but not the other. Assertion is a passionate statement with a conclusion to which the asserter is far from indifferent. Socrates said that reasoning means following the course of the argument regardless of where it goes, and of how much it might hurt you: this is the dispassionate spirit of science. But in politics, people make assertions that they try to control; the argument goes where you want it to go. Today this is called spin. Sometimes, of course, the argument turns around and comes back to bite you, as for example when your party gains the presidency after you have loudly attacked the imperial presidency. Here we see the resistance of logic to imperious political assertions. But let us not underestimate human ingenuity in reasoning its way around reason.

Politics is not an exchange between the bargaining positions of a buyer and a seller in which self-interest is clear and the result is either a sale or not, and without fuss. Self-interest, when paramount, cools you off and calms you down; *thumos* pumps you up. That we get angry if we feel cheated, or that we succumb to the charm of salesmanship, shows that self-interest does not explain even commercial transactions. More than a small measure of ego enters

into the behavior of those who pride themselves on calculation. In politics there is bargaining, as in commerce, but with a much greater degree of self-importance. People go into politics to pick a fight, not to avoid one. Self-interest tends towards peace, and if it could replace the *thumos* in our souls it would accomplish universal peace. Meanwhile, however, people want to stand for something, which means opposing those who stand for something else. In the course of opposing they will often resort to insults and name-calling, which are normal in politics though never in your interest. The demand for more civility in politics today should be directed toward improving the quality of our insults, seeking civility in wit rather than blandness.

The notion of *thumos* tells us further that politics is about protection, not primarily about gain. The reason you assert in your defense protects you and people like you that are included in the argument you advance. In an assertive, political argument you assume that you are perfectly OK. You are not apologizing for your self or your soul. The problem lies in things outside you, accidents that have happened or might happen, or the faults of others besides yourself. You therefore want to be protected in your self-satisfaction. If being protected requires gain, so be it. Even the most ambitious and vicious imperialists of our time wanted to conquer the world for the sake of protecting the Aryan race and the proletariat. When on the contrary you are ashamed, you believe that the fault lies in yourself, and your assertiveness falters, even turns against yourself. Consider the reaction of the democracies in Germany and Japan after World War II, or of the American sensitive male in response to the women's movement.

Thumos, like politics, is about one's own and the good. It is not just one or the other, as if one might suppose that politics is simply acting on behalf of what is one's own—realism—or simply advancing the good—idealism. It is about both together and in tension. One's own is never enough on its own; it needs a reason to justify it. But the reason generalizes one's own to what is similar to one's own and thus puts one's own in a class with others; reason socializes and politicizes. But if you are in a class you are part of a whole; your own is part of the

good, the common good. Your realism turns into your idealism. Even the most self-centered libertarian wants everyone to be a libertarian; for the world would be a better place if only everyone were perfectly selfish. Yet the good too is not as independent as it seems to be. If the good is to become actual, it must be established in a society. This requires a political effort to win a contest against an opposing notion of the good in the status quo. In politics you never start from nothing, but always in the face of the good you find inadequate. To defeat this dominant good, you have to espouse the good that you see and make it your own. At that point your motives are no longer pure, and your idealism is tainted with realism. To become accepted, the impersonal good needs to gather support, and in the process it becomes someone's partisan good and loses its impersonality.

The simplified notion of self-interest used by our political and social science cannot tolerate the tension between one's own and the good, for that tension leaves human behavior unpredictable. One cannot penetrate into every individual's private thoughts, and there is no clear way to judge among different conceptions of the good. So in order to overcome the tension, science tries to combine one's own and the good in such a way as to preserve neither. It generalizes one's own as the interest of an average or, better to say, predictable individual who lives his life quantifiably so as to make its study easier for the social scientist. And for the same purpose it vulgarizes the good by eliminating the high and the mighty in our souls (not to mention the low and vicious), transforming our aspiration to nobility and truth into personal preferences of whose value science is incognizant, to which it is indifferent.

Our human *thumos* reminds us that we are animals with bodies that we must defend. But when we defend ourselves using reason, we are also reminded that we have bodies that are open to our souls, and souls that are open to the whole of things. Precisely the part of our soul most concerned with the body is the vehicle for rising above it. When we are impelled to give a reason for our anger, we say in effect that what we are defending is not just our bodies; and when we risk our lives for that reason—now become what we call a cause—we

imply that we are not to be identified with our bodies. Rather, we *are* the cause toward which we strive. Our bodies have become bodiless. To borrow from President Clinton in a way he might not like, the meaning of is is to be bodiless.

The biology of Plato and Aristotle, unlike modern biology, takes account of the soul, the sense of human importance. Modern biology saves lives, but the old biology understands them better. The notion of *thumos* reminds us of our animality because it is visible to the naked eye when we observe animals. Modern biology uses the microscope and uncovers chemical and neurological counterparts to *thumos*, which actually distract us from analysis of the behavior they are meant to explain. We rest satisfied when we have pronounced the word *testosterone* and fail to observe as carefully as old-fashioned naked-eye science. Sociobiology has come up with the concept of turf, an unnoticed reference to *thumos* that we all use today to designate the marking out of one's own. But in human beings, one's turf is one's family, one's party, one's country, one's principle.

Sociobiology reduces the human to the animal instead of observing how the animal becomes human. *Thumos* shows that we are self-important animals. Having eliminated the soul, modern science cannot understand the body in its most important aspect, which is its capacity for self-importance. Modern biology, particularly the theory of evolution, is based on the overriding concern for survival in all life. This is surely wrong in regard to human life. If you cannot look around you and must insist on indulging a taste for the primitive, you have only to visit the ruins of an ancient people and ponder how much of its GNP was devoted to religion, to its sense of the meaning of human life rather than mere survival.

Coming to religion, we arrive in the realm of what is particular and individual. Science and religion are nowhere more opposed than in regard to human importance. Religion declares for the importance of humans and seeks to specify what it is. According to Christianity, men are not God, but God came to men as a man, and man was made in the image of God, the only such among the creatures of the world.

A Christian is humble, but he takes pride in his humility. Although one can speak of religion generally as I am doing, religion is always a particular religion; a sociological view of its function misstates that function by making religion too general. That is why I just mentioned Christianity.

Every religion has a distinct view of a personal God or gods that take special care of men, keeping us on track and serving as particular guarantors of human importance. Philosophers in the eighteenth century, skeptical of religion but willing to acknowledge its power, came up with deism, the idea of God without God, caring for the universe without caring for you. True religion shows its concern for the human species by addressing individual human beings. Strange to say, the study of religion and of human biology could learn from each other. Religion can be seen in the very animality of the human body, in the nature of brutish *thumos*, always defending one's own but always reaching beyond oneself in willingness to sacrifice oneself. In defending like a dog for its master, *thumos* defends something higher than itself. When the lower in us defends the higher in us, it exacts a price. The price is partiality to whatever is our own, a human imperfection we can never quite escape. The advantage, however, is that we can respect the importance of the human species through the defense each of us displays for himself. Self-defense in *thumos* is a guarantee of the bond between what is lower in us and what is higher, between the all-too-human and the divine. The bond is mutual, and it ensures that the higher is connected to the lower, as God is not the universal goal of humanity without also being the salvation for each individual and each people.

Science for its part speaks against the special importance of any object of science, including human beings, and in the theory of evolution it seeks to erode the difference between human beings and other animals. The study of primates aims at this goal with particular relish. Hardly a day passes without a breathless science article in the press delivering to our waiting ears a fresh resemblance of chimp to man. But the discovery of chimpanzee religion has not yet been reported. Chimps receive names from human beings with equanimity,

but do not give themselves names. These are items yet to come in the imputed progress of chimpanzee civilization. Their greatest triumph, however, will be the achievement of science. For science, according to science, ought to be the most important attribute of human beings. Modern science especially seems to represent the control of our environment, of nature. To be sure, science as opposed to religion recognizes nothing sacred either outside man or within him. But collectively, science is the assertion of man over non-man, surely an unembarrassed claim to importance and rule. Yet as individuals, scientists are anonymous factors in the scientific enterprise, each one substitutable for another. For all science cares, scientists could as well be numbered as named. We in the humanities will summon up the generosity to give them names.

Every human being has his own name, distinguishing him from all other human beings (except for the many Joneses and Kims). This is a fact by which we indicate that each of us is important as each. We are not necessarily equally important, but our importance is judged as we are individuals. Individuals do belong to groups or classes; still, they too have names, such as Red Sox nation or Phi Beta Kappa, indicating their individuality. If we want to understand human behavior, especially the particular insistence on human individuality that we see in the quality of *thumos*, we must come to terms with human names. We must not merely regard them as embarrassments to be abstracted from, suppressed, and forgotten, as standing for idiosyncrasies that distract us from the main point, which is the laws determining what we do, the generalities we resort to when we cannot establish laws.

Having considered the importance of human importance, and how it makes us individuals, we may now compare science and literature. Let me propose that literature and science have the same aim of finding and telling the truth, but, obviously, literature also seeks to entertain. Although some of the greatest works of science are well-written, science finds its elegance in mathematics and not in the charm of a good story well told. The social sciences are in a special difficulty because they cover the same field of human behavior as

literature. As science, they must claim to improve upon the prejudice and superstition of common sense, and are therefore compelled to restate the language of common sense, full of implication and innuendo, in irreproachable, blameless, scientific prose innocent of bias or any other subtlety. In response, the name common sense gives to this sort of talk is jargon. Science is required to be replicable in principle to everyone; so it speaks directly and without concealment, thus in mathematics as much as possible. In practice, unfortunately, lack of mathematics in the public and lack of communication skills (an example of jargon) in scientists leaves the latter dependent on non-scientist publicists to inform the public and, not incidentally politicians, of what science has found. These publicists usually have an axe to grind, and so science, despite its noble intent to rise above petty human partisanship, often becomes involved in it.

Literature, to repeat, besides seeking truth, also seeks to entertain—and why is this? The reason is not so much that some people have a base talent for telling stories and can't keep quiet. The reason, fundamentally, is that literature knows something that science does not: the human resistance to hearing the truth. Science does not inform scientists of this basic fact, and most of them are too consistent in devotion to science to learn it from any source outside science such as common sense. The wisdom of literature arises mainly from its attention to this point. To overcome the resistance to truth, literature makes use of fictions that are images of truth. To understand the fictions requires interpretation, an operation that literature welcomes and science hates for the same reason: that interpreters disagree. Literature is open to different degrees of understanding from a child's to a philosopher's, and yet somehow has something for everyone, whereas science achieves universality by speaking without rhetoric in a monotone, and succeeds in addressing only the company of scientists. Science is unable to reach the major part of humanity except by providing us with its obvious benefits. Literature takes on the big questions of human life that science ignores—what to do about a boring husband, for example. Science studies the very small and the very large, surely material for drama but not exploited by science because in its view the measure of small

and large is merely human. Literature offers evidence for its insights from the observations of writers, above all from the judgment of great writers. These insights are replicable to readers according to their competence without the guarantee of scientific method that what one scientist sends is the same as what another receives. While science aims at agreement among scientists, in literature as in philosophy the greatest names disagree with one another.

“The greatest names”: here is my last topic. Human greatness is the height of human importance, where the best that humans can do is tested, and it is the work of great individuals. The great Tocqueville—and I refuse to give a lecture on politics without mentioning his name—alluded to himself and his favorite readers as “the true friends of liberty and human greatness.” Somehow liberty and human greatness go together, a hint that nature cares only for the human species and leaves its greatness to be revealed by free human action, by our assertiveness prompted by *thumos*. To be great one must become great, requiring an effort of ambition. Not everyone has that ambition; most of us are content with modest careers in safe niches, like tenured professors. But we all feel ambition in our small ways, and, moreover, we know something of great ambition when admiring it. Now it may be hard to believe, but I must tell you that the political science of our day almost entirely ignores ambition. It is, for example, anxious over the problem of how to recover our spirit of civil engagement, but it looks mostly at what moves most people to vote, which it calls by the vague term “participation.” The trouble is that ambition smacks of greatness; it is not average enough to be the object of a science that knows nothing of individuality, hence nothing of greatness. Even the word “great” is unscientific because it is pretentious. But we human beings are animals with pretensions.

My profession needs to open its eyes and admit to its curriculum the help of literature and history. It should be unafraid to risk considering what is ignored by science and may lack the approval of science. The humanities too, whose professors often suffer from a faint heart, need to recover their faith in what is individual and their courage to defend it. *Thumos* is not merely theoretical. To learn of it will improve your

life as well as your thinking. It is up to you to improve your life by behaving as if it were important, but let me provide a summary of the things that you will know better after reflecting on the nature of *thumos*: the contrast between anger and gain; the insistence on victory; the function of protectiveness; the stubbornness of partisanship; the role of assertiveness; the ever-presence of one's own; the task of religion; the result of individuality; the ambition of greatness. Altogether *thumos* is one basis for a human science aware of the body but not bound to it, a science with soul and taught by poetry well interpreted.

At the end someone might object: Have I left out love? The answer is yes, I have. For tonight. Love is a further complication.

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