A Critical Examination of the Moral Crisis in Western Political Science from Antiquity to Post-Behavioralism

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the moral and epistemological crisis of modern Western political science by tracing its historical development from classical Greek thought to post-behavioralist critique. Drawing on a historical–intellectual methodology complemented by critical comparative political theory, the study reconstructs the classical conception of politics as an ethical enterprise oriented toward justice (dikaiosynē), virtue, and human flourishing (eudaimonia). It then identifies successive epistemic ruptures, including Machiavellian realism, Enlightenment materialism, Social Darwinism, Marxist determinism, and twentieth-century behavioralism, that progressively detached political inquiry from moral philosophy. The findings demonstrate that the positivist commitment to value-neutrality did not eliminate normativity but instead institutionalized a concealed moral deficit, privileging stability, efficiency, and power over justice and the common good. By engaging post-behavioral critiques and comparative, non-Eurocentric epistemologies, the article argues that the crisis of Western political science is fundamentally ontological rather than merely methodological. It concludes that revitalizing the discipline requires reintegrating ethical reasoning, metaphysical commitments, and comparative moral traditions into political analysis and pedagogy.

Introduction

Political science, as a systematic and self-conscious field of inquiry, emerged within the intellectual context of classical Greek philosophy, where political reflection was inseparable from ethical reasoning and metaphysical assumptions about human nature, virtue, and the telos of social life (Aristotle, trans. 1962; Gutek, 1995). For Plato and Aristotle, politics was not merely an instrument for organizing power or managing conflict but a normative

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endeavor oriented toward the realization of justice (*dikaiosynē*) and human flourishing (*eudaimonia*). Political knowledge (*politikē epistēmē*) was thus inherently evaluative, grounded in objective conceptions of the good life and the moral cultivation of both citizens and institutions. In this classical framework, the legitimacy of political authority derived not from procedural efficiency or empirical regularity, but from its alignment with ethical truth.

Over the course of its historical development, however, political science underwent a profound conceptual reorientation. The discipline gradually distanced itself from its philosophical foundations and redefined its purpose in increasingly empirical and instrumental terms. By the modern period, political inquiry increasingly concerned itself with the analysis of power relations, institutional behavior, and the authoritative allocation of values and resources within society (Easton, 1953). This transformation marked a decisive break from the teleological and virtue-centered orientation of classical political thought. Contemporary political science, particularly in its dominant Western forms, now largely presents itself as a descriptive, explanatory, and predictive enterprise, committed to methodological rigor while remaining deliberately agnostic toward substantive moral judgments (Dahl, 1970).

This paper argues that the persistent sense of intellectual and moral fragmentation frequently described as the "crisis" of contemporary political science is not merely the product of unresolved methodological debates, but rather the consequence of a deeper historical rupture between political inquiry and moral philosophy. The discipline's commitment to empirical objectivity and value-neutrality, often defended as a marker of scientific maturity, has simultaneously hollowed out its normative core. As a result, political science finds itself increasingly capable of describing political processes while struggling to articulate defensible standards for evaluating political ends.

The origins of this rupture can be traced to the rise of early modern political realism, most famously articulated in the work of Niccolò Machiavelli. In rejecting classical moral constraints as impractical or illusory, Machiavelli reframed politics as an autonomous domain governed by necessity, power, and contingency rather than virtue (Bluhm, 1978). While this move was motivated by the instability and violence of Renaissance Italy, its long-term intellectual consequence was the erosion of the ethical foundations of political judgment. Subsequent materialist and positivist traditions further reinforced this trajectory by redefining political knowledge in terms that explicitly excluded metaphysical and moral claims as unscientific (Becker, 1932).

This process reached its most explicit institutionalization in the twentieth century through the rise of positivism and behavioralism. Positivist

epistemology, drawing inspiration from the natural sciences, demanded a strict separation between facts and values and treated normative inquiry as fundamentally subjective or ideological. Behavioralism operationalized this demand within political science by privileging observable behavior, quantification, and empirical regularities, while marginalizing questions of justice, legitimacy, and political purpose (Easton, 1953; Dahl, 1970). What emerged was a discipline methodologically sophisticated yet normatively restrained one that could analyze political systems in great detail but hesitated to assess their moral worth.

Crucially, this modern commitment to value-neutrality bears a striking resemblance to a much older philosophical position: Sophistic relativism. Protagoras's assertion that "man is the measure of all things" encapsulated a view in which truth and value were reduced to individual perception and social convention. Classical philosophers regarded this stance as a fundamental threat to political knowledge. Plato and Aristotle argued that without objective standards of truth and goodness, politics collapses into mere opinion (*doxa*), rhetorical manipulation, and the exercise of power unconstrained by reason (*logos*) (Aristotle, trans. 1962). The unresolved presence of this relativist impulse within contemporary political science suggests that the discipline has yet to overcome the epistemological challenge that shaped its earliest philosophical debates.

The inability of modern political science to generate authoritative normative claims regarding political ideals such as justice, equality, or legitimacy reveals a structural continuity between ancient skepticism and modern methodological orthodoxy. While behavioralism sought to banish philosophical doubt through empirical rigor, it ultimately reproduced the Sophistic dilemma by denying the possibility of objective political values. The result is a discipline that explains political behavior with increasing precision while remaining uncertain about the standards by which political orders ought to be judged (Taylor, 1994).

Methodologically, this paper adopts a historical–intellectual approach supplemented by critical comparative political theory. It first reconstructs the normative foundations of political science in classical Greek thought, emphasizing the inseparability of ethics and politics. It then identifies key epistemic ruptures introduced by Machiavellian realism and modern materialist ideologies, tracing how these shifts reshaped the discipline's self-understanding. The analysis subsequently examines the behavioral revolution of the mid-twentieth century as the culmination of the positivist project and evaluates its limitations. Finally, the paper engages with contemporary responses, including the post-behavioral movement and value-conscious theoretical frameworks, to argue that the resolution of political science's

enduring crisis requires an explicit reintegration of ethical reasoning and empirical inquiry. Rather than undermining scientific rigor, such integration recognizes normative judgment as an unavoidable and essential dimension of political knowledge.

Classical Foundations: Ethics as *Telos*

Systematic political thought in the West began with the ancient Greeks, forming the origin of Western political thought and culture. The key to understanding this civilization was the *polis*, or city-state, conceptualized as an association of citizens designed to promote security and the common welfare. Early Greek literature, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (c. 850 B.C.), embodied the culture's values, seeking an underlying thirst for "universal order and lawfulness" (Goldman, cited in Gutek, 1995:18). Homer's work provided heroic models that intertwined the ideal of a *good person* with that of a *good society* or *polis*, a theme later formalized by Plato and Aristotle.

The Sophists, flourishing from 470 B.C., challenged the possibility of reliable, objective knowledge. Gorgias argued that objective truth could not be known, while Protagoras insisted on the relativism of individual experience. The philosopher Socrates (c. 469-399 B.C.) and his student Plato sought to directly counter this Protagorean relativism by striving to discover universal principles of truth, beauty, and justice. Socratic philosophy defined moral excellence as the central reason for human existence, achieved through a life governed by rationality. Plato, in his quest for certain knowledge, postulated the existence of a world of unchanging, invisible Forms.

Virtue and the *Polis*

The political thinking of the period was systematized and epitomized by Plato and Aristotle, who viewed politics primarily in terms of moral purposes that leaders ought to pursue. Aristotle, defining politics in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, described it as "the most authoritative of the sciences," determining human *happiness* as the "supreme good" and teaching the means to its attainment (Rosenthal, 1962). For both thinkers, the *polis* existed explicitly to seek its common good, civic virtue, and moral perfection, identifying political activity inextricably with moral beliefs and goodness.

The classical tradition thus established virtue ethics as foundational, placing the actor's character and habits at the core of ethical inquiry. This framework asserted a necessary connection between the ethical behavior of the individual and the successful functioning of the state.

A critical point in understanding the subsequent fragmentation is the classical assertion of a fixed philosophical reference point: *telos*. Classical thought asserted a definitive purpose (*eudaimonia*) for human life and, consequently, for the political association itself. However, the intellectual trajectory of modernity would challenge the philosophical grounds for asserting this fixed "supreme good." If, as later philosophical shifts would suggest, human nature and species are fluid and evolving, then the "end of each form" is not inherent from the beginning (Rawls, 1971). The destruction of the classical view of the fixed and permanent, significantly advanced by Darwinian thought, epistemologically disqualified political science from logically prescribing what the state *should* aim for, thereby forcing the discipline into a descriptive analysis of power rather than a prescriptive account of justice. The ultimate crisis is that modern epistemology structurally inhibits the possibility of asserting a shared, objective ethical goal, a requirement for the classical political project.

The Ethical Rupture: Virtue to Power

Following the Greeks, the Romans exerted influence on Western political thought, though they showed less interest in philosophical speculation than in establishing legal and political institutions (Sabine, 1937). This Roman institutionalism, coupled with the development of European feudalism and the Holy Roman Empire, established a dualistic political structure where governance was separated into the spiritual sphere (Church/Pope) and the temporal sphere (Emperor/Vassals). This dualism weakened the basic message of religion and accelerated the separation of political life from ethics, preparing the ground for the secularization that followed the Renaissance and Reformation (Canning, 1996).

Machiavelli and Political Realism

The most significant rupture with the classical and medieval unity of politics and ethics occurred with the writings of Niccolò Machiavelli. Historically, political theory, tracing back to Aristotle, considered politics a sub-branch of ethics, defining the morality of individuals in organized communities. Machiavelli was the first theorist to decisively divorce politics from ethics, thereby providing a certain autonomy to the study of politics (Bluhm, 1978).

Machiavelli's political realism proposed a focus on the "effectual truth" of politics, seeking pragmatic utility rather than ideal virtue. This intellectual divergence rejected the prevailing medieval conception that rulers must be instruments of divine will or paragons of virtue. Instead, Machiavelli theorized that the successful exercise of power often necessitates morally ambiguous,

even ruthless, actions (Machiavelli, 1532/1997). In doing so, he laid the groundwork for a secular, empirical political science focused on measurable outcomes and state preservation rather than moral adherence. By prioritizing the acquisition of physical power and material benefits, Machiavelli's philosophy virtually replaced God with the Prince.

Machiavelli's realism is often credited with founding empirical political study, yet its deeper implication is the philosophical sanctioning of unethical governance. By establishing that political success is measured by the amount of physical power acquired, realism transitioned from merely describing power dynamics to prescribing the ruthless pursuit of force as the ultimate political end. This provided the structural rationale for subsequent materialist and anti-normative philosophies.

The Traditionalist Critique of Secularization

The fragmentation of the political-ethical unity is viewed critically by scholars from a traditionalist perspective. They argue that the denial of religious authority set in motion by the Reformation and the Renaissance contributed to the complete transformation of Western culture into a "materialistic and God-less one". Rene Guénon, in *The Crisis of the Modern World*, critically surveyed the spirit of the Renaissance, asserting that the entire movement aimed at the "total denial of the Divine guidance". This perspective holds that the literature produced in the West frequently refers to the old Greek and Roman civilizations as a sort of "Paradise Lost" (Ghazi, 1988), reflecting a cultural lament for the loss of a coherent, universally ordered world. The separation of religion and politics ultimately resulted in the removal of ethics from political life, concentrating politics increasingly on the acquisition of material benefits and power.

Materialism: Competition as Ethics

The development of modern political thought was propelled by the Enlightenment, often called the 'Age of Reason'. Enlightenment intellectuals believed that human reason could discover the natural laws governing existence, leading to perfect society. Contract theorists like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau applied this rational law to governmental structures, focusing on securing intrinsic rights (life, liberty, property) or establishing the 'General Will'.

However, the late 19th century introduced a deeper form of materialism rooted in evolutionary biology, fundamentally altering the philosophical landscape. Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) challenged the classical

view held since Aristotle and maintained by medieval thinkers that anything fixed, final, and permanent was superior to that which changed. Darwin's theory, by showing that species themselves change, completed the destruction of the old archetypal view, shifting preoccupation from destiny to the mechanisms of change.

Social Darwinism: Struggle for Survival

Darwin's vision of life as a "universal battlefield" where adaptation determined survival was rapidly politicized, leading to the movement known as Social Darwinism. This movement accepted ruthless struggle and successful competition as ultimately beneficent and the only true source of progress.

Social Darwinism provided a purported scientific justification for competitive, anti-moral ethics, fundamentally replacing the ethical imperative of *justice* with the empirical reality of *struggle*. Herbert Spencer, a leading proponent, explicitly argued that the poor were "unfit to survive and should be eliminated," opposing all devices designed to support weakness, including free education and state-supported public health. This view was echoed by prominent figures like Andrew Carnegie, who stated that competition, while hard for the individual, "is best for the race because it ensures the survival of the fittest in every department". This ideology provided the intellectual scaffolding for unchecked capitalism and global power politics, reducing human political value to biological or economic efficacy.

Marxist Determinism

Parallel to Social Darwinism, the philosophy of materialism, codified by Karl Marx, also rejected the spiritual autonomy of the human being. Marx reduced all spheres of reality including political life to matter and motion, arguing that all changes within society were ascribed to the interplay of the forces of economic production and the distribution of wealth. Historical materialism reversed Hegel's idealism, insisting that consciousness originated entirely in the material world, not outside it (Marx & Engels, 1848/2004). Marx maintained that the course of history was predetermined and that power could only be wrenched from the ruling elite by force and violence, reinforcing a view of political action devoid of intrinsic moral agency. The cumulative impact of these materialist philosophies was the reduction of human political identity to determined forces (biological or economic), establishing a powerful ideological core where economic efficiency and successful competition substitute for justice and compassion.

Behavioralism: Institutionalizing the Moral Deficit

The 20th century saw the emergence of Political Science as a self-proclaimed discipline of the sciences, epitomized by institutions like the London School of Economics (LSE). However, this drive for scientific recognition culminated in the Behavioral revolution, which sought to impose methodological strictures derived from the natural sciences onto the study of politics.

The Value-Neutrality Mandate

Behavioralism demanded a clear separation between basic and applied research, viewing the task of science as describing the world as it *is*, through lawlike statements, without considering the application or ethical consequences of the results. This pursuit of objectivity required a "value-free science" based on the philosophical belief that there is an unbridgeable gap, or dichotomy, between fact and value. This view derives from David Hume's argument that one cannot logically derive an *ought* from an *is*. Value-neutralists insisted that the social researcher must be objective and cannot formulate prescriptions or moral justifications within their field of interest.

This positivist turn defined the parameters of political inquiry. David Easton (1953) offered a conventional guide for political analysis, viewing politics as a set of human interactions concerned with the "authoritative allocation of scarce resources or values in a society" (Easton, 1953). Robert A. Dahl (1970) similarly reformulated the concept of politics to mean "any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves, to a significant extent, power and rule of authority". These definitions explicitly shifted the subject matter from an emphasis on state structures concerned with the *good life* (Aristotle) to systems concerned with power dynamics and resource distribution.

Normativity in Neutrality

The methodological crisis of fragmentation is evidenced by the critique that behavioralism did not, in fact, achieve value-neutrality. Charles Taylor argued persuasively against this claim, noting that the findings of political science are inherently value-laden. Taylor maintained that "a given explanatory framework secretes a notion of good," and that the conceptual structure of analysis implicitly limits the range of adopted values.

This realization exposes that behavioralism, by focusing on measurable concepts such as system stability and efficiency, effectively replaced transparent normative goals (justice, common good) with concealed normative

preferences (procedural stability, measurable outputs). By adopting a framework that analyzes and validates the smooth functioning of existing power relations (Easton's authoritative allocation [Easton, 1953]), the methodology implicitly supports the status quo and structural conservatism.

The methodological separation of facts and values, therefore, is not an act of scientific purity, but the institutionalization of the normative deficit. It limits the discipline's capacity for critical ethical appraisal, resulting in fragmentation and providing only descriptive accounts of power dynamics, rather than prescriptive paths toward justice. The following table summarizes the intellectual trajectory that culminated in this crisis:

Table 1: Paradigmatic Shift in Western Political Philosophy

Dimension	Classical-Normative Tradition (Plato/Aristotle)	Modern-Empirical Tradition (Machiavelli/Behavioralism)
Core Purpose (*Telos*)	Attainment of the Supreme Good; Moral Perfection (*Eudaimonia*)	Acquisition and Maintenance of Power/Efficacy (*The Effectual Truth*) [7]
Epistemology	Reason guided by Universal/Objective Truth (Forms); Virtue Ethics	Empirical Observation; Demand for Value-Neutrality (Positivism) [1]
Relationship to Ethics	Politics as a Sub-branch of Ethics (Virtue Ethics) [4]	Politics Decoupled from Morality (Political Realism); Ethics deemed subjective [7]
Criterion of Success	Justice, Moral Excellence, Civic Virtue (Good Man = Good Citizen)	Stability, Efficiency, Successful Competition (Survival of the Fittest) [8]
Unit of Analysis	The *Polis* (Community) seeking the Common Good	The State/Individual (Power/Rule of Authority, Allocation of Resources)

The Ethical Resurgence: Post-Behavioral Critique

The limitations of pure empiricism and the normative deficit of behavioralism led to a critical movement in the 1960s known as Post-Behavioralism. This

approach explicitly rejected the strict adherence to value-neutrality, emphasizing the importance of human values, social contexts, and the necessity of engaging with real-world implications of political phenomena. David Easton, a figure central to the behavioral movement, himself later stressed the importance of value-laden political analysis, recognizing the methodological necessity of confronting ethical presuppositions.

Reviving Normative Inquiry

The resurgence of political theory signifies the revival of normative or value-based philosophical inquiry within the discipline. This revival was driven by the realization that purely empirical approaches lacked the intellectual resources required to defend fundamental democratic values and practices when faced with authoritarian challenges. The Post-Behavioral movement mandates that political science connect research directly to pressing societal issues, encouraging scholars to address the moral and ethical dimensions of research concerning justice and equity.

Contemporary political scientists are returning to the conviction held by the ancient Greeks, viewing politics as the "art of living and working together" (Bluhm, 1978), and thus identifying political activity with moral beliefs. This movement has moved beyond the stark, mid-20th-century opposition between normative and empirical methods, recognizing that the two approaches must complement each other to provide a comprehensive understanding of political phenomena. The Post-Behavioral trajectory suggests that political science must inherently be an advocacy discipline for principles like justice and freedom, thereby restoring the discipline's lost classical *telos* by requiring it to prescribe solutions rather than merely describe observations.

Comparative Critique: Beyond Eurocentric Values

A crucial dimension of the crisis of Western political philosophy is its Eurocentric construction. The curriculum's historical roots were rigorously "nursed" to avoid contact with non-Western intellectual traditions, focusing exclusively on the ancient Greeks, the medieval Church, and subsequent European thinkers. This approach excludes monumental contributions to political thought from thinkers like Imam Al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyah, and Ibn Khaldun. This Eurocentrism results in viewing the Western perspective as objective or absolute, ignoring non-Western contributions and reinforcing Western narratives of progress.

Integrated Epistemologies

The fundamental divergence between Western and integrated political thought lies in epistemology and the status of values. The Western secular tradition, tracing back to the rational traditions of the Greeks and Romans, generally segregates knowledge of the Supreme Being from that of the physical world, relying on evolutionary and rationalist views.

In stark contrast, the Islamic theory of knowledge promotes the unity of all knowledge, affirming the conformity of revelation and reason, and placing awareness of the Divine as the central point. This epistemology denies the division between divine and human knowledge, stressing the absolute certainty of revelation versus the relativeness of human knowledge. Unlike Aristotle, who regarded the happiest life as one lived according to reason, this integrated framework holds the intellect to be subservient to Divine revelation, enabling the true experience of happiness.

Modern Western political values, such as "individual autonomy," are defined as relative in nature, derived from secular and democratic systems. Conversely, integrated worldviews hold values as universal and absolute, assuming that knowledge and education are intrinsically value-laden, challenging the secular assumption of value-neutrality.

Ontological Roots of Fragmentation

The comparative philosophical critique suggests that the deepest crisis in Western political science is ontological, stemming from its materialist and secular foundations. The denial of divine guidance, according to traditionalist thinkers, renders modern civilization fragmented. The failure of Western political science to resolve its moral crisis stems from its inability to integrate the metaphysical dimension into its analysis, accepting the fact/value dichotomy which presupposes a political reality devoid of absolute moral truth.

Integrated political frameworks offer a competing, value-rich foundation where ethics are structurally mandated. These systems emphasize principles like *Tawheed* (unity), *Khilafah* (trusteeship), and *Adl* (justice). Al-Ghazali's theo-democratic view insisted that religion and the state are mutually reinforcing, requiring the ruler to ensure efficient government under religion's demands. The principle of *Adl* is considered the necessary condition for political legitimacy and stability. The integration of these principles enhances spiritual governance and ensures that ethical dimensions inform policy-making.

The following table contrasts the foundational differences, illustrating why the Western secular approach inherently results in a normative deficit when faced with complex ethical governance challenges:

Table 2: Epistemological Divergence and the Normative Deficit

Epistemological Dimension	Western Secular Tradition	Comparative/Integrated Tradition (e.g., Islamic)
Source of Ultimate Knowledge	Human Reason, Empirical Observation, Material Forces	Divine Revelation (Reason is Subservient but essential)
Fact/Value Status	Dichotomy: Values are Relative, Subjective, or Sentiment	Unity: Knowledge is Value-Laden; Values are Universal and Absolute
Political *Telos*	Maximization of Power, Resource Allocation, Stability	Realization of Justice (*Adl*), Trusteeship (*Khilafah*), and Common Welfare
Crisis Diagnosis	Methodological Error (Failure to Operationalize Concepts)	Ontological Error (Denial of Divine Guidance, Materialism) (Guénon, 2001)

Conclusion

The crisis of Western political science is not accidental, but the cumulative result of a deliberate, centuries-long trajectory involving key philosophical choices: the abandonment of classical teleology, the adoption of Machiavellian political realism, the reduction of human agency to deterministic material forces (Social Darwinism and Marxism), and the methodological implementation of the fact/value dichotomy by behavioralism. The core crisis is the chronic loss of a coherent, shared philosophical foundation capable of defining the political good.

The ethical inadequacy of positivism, however, has triggered an essential correction. The Post-Behavioral movement confirms that political inquiry must be inherently normative and ethically relevant, serving to guide policy toward desirable social outcomes rather than restricting itself to describing

observable power dynamics. This requires political science to restore its original classical commitment: linking political activity back to the pursuit of moral perfection and civic virtue.

For the discipline to overcome its fragmentation and achieve global relevance, a critical expansion of its epistemological foundations is necessary. This involves moving beyond Eurocentrism and engaging with traditions that treat ethical integrity and justice (*Adl*) as the structural foundation of political life, not merely as subjective preferences. The development of an integrative framework for political science curricula is paramount. This process mandates a rigorous verification of prevailing Western scientific theories and philosophical assumptions in light of universal ethical principles, such as those enshrined in the Holy Qur'an, while simultaneously using empirical investigation for a deep understanding of revelation. Only through the restoration of the essential integration between reason and revelation can political science transition from a discipline preoccupied with survival, competition, and resource allocation to one fundamentally dedicated to justice and the moral perfection of the community.

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