The Politics of Tools

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Abstract

A consideration of the political meaning of software that tries to add greater philosophical precision to statements about the politics of tools and tool building in the humanities. Using Michael Oakeshott's formulations of the "politics of faith" and the "politics of skepticism," [Oakeshott 1996] it suggests that while declaring our tools be morally or political neutral may be obvious fallacious, it is equally problematic to suppose that we can predict in advance the political formations that will arise from our tool building. For indeed (as Oakeshott suggests), the tools themselves give rise to what is politically possible.

> Zilu said, "If the ruler of Wei were to entrust you with governance of his state, what would be your first priority?" The Master said, "Most certainly, it would be to rectify names."
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> Confucius, *Analects*

[1] To speak of "the politics of tools" is to take the political nature of technology for granted, and rightfully so. If the generation of historians, literary critics, sociolinguistis, and philosophers who came up in the academy after Foucault are united by anything, it is the idea that most things are wrapped up in issues of power, and therefore cannot be said to stand outside the realm of the political in any way. Such is the case, therefore, with any sort of technology at all — from pencils to weapons systems — and it is the business of humanistic inquiry to make plain the precise ways in which, as Foucault himself put it, "power comes from everywhere" [Foucault 1990]

[2] And yet digital humanities has often been accused of violating this central directive. Alan Liu offered this sobering assessment in 2012.

> While digital humanists develop tools, data, and metadata critically [...] rarely do they extend their critique to the full register of society, economics, politics, or culture. How the digital humanities advances, channels, or resists today's great postindustrial, neoliberal, corporate, and global flows of information-cum-capital is thus a question rarely heard in the digital humanities associations, conferences, journals, and projects with which I am familiar. Not even the clichéd forms of such issues — for example, "the digital divide," "surveillance," "privacy," "copyright," and so on — get much play.

> It is as if, when the order comes down from the funding agencies, university administrations, and other bodies mediating today's dominant socioeconomic and political beliefs, digital humanists just concentrate on pushing the "execute" button on projects that amass the most data for the greatest number, process that data most efficiently and flexibly (flexible efficiency being the hallmark of postindustrialism), and manage the whole through ever "smarter" standards, protocols, schema, templates, and databases uplifting Frederick Winslow Taylor's original scientific industrialism into ultraflexible postindustrial content management systems camouflaged as digital editions, libraries, and archives — all without pausing to

reflect on the relation of the whole digital juggernaut to the new world order. [Liu 2012]

Called now to be "woke" — in a metaphor that hearkens back to one of humanism's more confident eras — digital humanities now struggles to articulate precisely how its work is properly political, and whether its commitment to "tools" is for good or ill.

Liu's essay was hardly the only — or even, in the wider scheme, the most significant — catalyst for subsequent soul searching.[1] And in some sense, Liu's call for a closer critical alignment with cultural studies has been taken far more literally than he could have imagined. The cultural studies to which DH now finds itself in uneasy dialogue is not so much its later refraction in "political readings" of the artifacts of human history, but in the far more concretized politics of the 1968 academy — a world in which a seminar that could not place itself in clear relation to the workers' councils was perhaps not worth holding at all (one is reminded of earlier scholar-activists like Korsch and Lukács). Stephen Greenblatt recalls a moment from the immediate aftermath of that period in which he was attempting to teach Marx with, one assumes, all the nuanced ambivalence one would expect from a competent scholar. "I remember someone finally got up and screamed out in class 'You're either a Bolshevik or a Menshevik — make up your fucking mind'"[Greenblatt 2005]

Liu was not stating the problem so starkly, and yet great swaths of the digital humanities community now take the questions he posed with an urgency and immediacy that is entirely palpable. It is now routine to begin a digital humanities conference with a kind of litany in which the refugee and the immigrant are welcomed, heteronormativity is denounced, misogyny is rejected, assaults on human dignity (bullying, harassment) are banned, and (at least in Canada, Australia, and the U.S.) the stolen lands of the First Nations are acknowledged. Such desiderata are quite obviously commendable (if only in intention), but that such announcements might well precede a discussion of machine learning and metadata highlights the unease. We are haunted by the thought that a "woke coder" or a "leftist web designer" is simply someone who has not made up their mind whether to choose between Athens and Palo Alto. We wonder if the "politics of tools" is not an object of philosophical reflection on the less instrumental aspects of our endeavors, but, as in the *double entendre* of my title, an entirely pejorative description of our own political confusions.

Michael Oakeshott would seem a very unlikely figure in this discussion. The late work I consider most germane to these matters, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism,* is not obviously a book about politics and technology at all, but rather a treatise on what he takes to be the "stylistic" extremes of modernity as enunciated wherever (and whenever) we find ourselves engaged in political activity.[2] It is perhaps wise to let Oakeshott himself speak on the essential nature of these extremes:

> In the politics of faith, the activity of governing is understood to be in the service of the perfection of mankind. There is a doctrine of cosmic optimism which, not from observation but as an inference from the perfection of its creator, attributes an unavoidable perfection to the universe. And there is, further, a doctrine in which human perfection appears as a providential gift, assured but not deserved. But the idea of human perfectibility characteristic of the politics of faith, so far from being derived from either of these doctrines, is hostile to them both. In the politics of faith, human perfection is sought precisely because it is not present; and further, it is believed that we need not, and should not, depend upon the workings of divine providence for the salvation of mankind. Human perfection is to be achieved by human effort, and confidence in the evanescence of imperfection springs here from faith in human power and not from trust in divine providence. We may, perhaps, be permitted to encourage ourselves by believing that our efforts have the approval and even the support of providence, but we are to understand that the achievement of perfection depends upon our own unrelaxed efforts, and that if those efforts are unrelaxed, perfection will appear. [Oakeshott 1996]

The politics of skepticism, by contrast, is "in every way the opposite:"

> [I]n the politics of skepticism governing is understood as a specific activity, and in particular it is understood to be detached from the pursuit of human perfection. [...] [I]n modern times, the politics

of skepticism (regarded as an abstract style of politics) may be said to have its roots either in the radical belief that human perfection is an illusion, or in the less radical belief that we know too little about the conditions of human perfection for it to be wise to concentrate our energies in a single direction by associating its pursuit with the activity of governing. Human perfection (so the argument runs) may be evanescent, and, moreover, it may be a single and simple condition of human circumstances (though this may be doubted), but, even on those assumptions, to pursue perfection in one direction only (and particularly to pursue it as the crow flies, regardless of what there may be to do in the interval before we embrace it) is to invite disappointment and (what might be worse than the mortification of non-arrival) misery on the way. [...] The office of government here is not be the architect of a perfect manner of living, or (as faith understands it) of an improved manner of living, or even (as it turns out) of any manner of living at all. [...] The skeptic in politics observes that men live in proximity with one another and, pursuing various activities, are apt to come into conflict with each other. And this conflict, when it reaches certain dimensions, not only makes life barbaric and intolerable, but may even terminate it abruptly. In this understanding of politics, then, the activity of governing subsists not because it is good, but because it is necessary. Its chief office is to lessen the severity of human conduct by reducing the occasions of it. [Oakeshott 1996]

Upon these two very brief extracts from a lengthy argument, several observations must be made.

For Oakeshott, "governance" does not mean the particular establishment of constitutions, nation states, delineated systems of social order, the credos and platforms of political parties, or even philosophical meditations on governance as such. He has in mind not "Who shall rule?" (and by what warrant), but rather "What shall government do?"[Oakeshott 1996] "Political activity" is conceived as the "understanding and care of public arrangements"[Oakeshott 1996]. Thus Oakeshott puts forth these two forms (or better, "styles") of political activity as unrealizable ideals (in the Platonic sense) and as extremes that are neither found in unattenuated form nor without some mixture of the two occurring either simultaneously or in tension with one another in actual political practice. That is to say, we cannot locate in history a moment in which either tendency has entirely prevailed — and indeed, were such extremes to somehow manifest themselves fully, they would immediately appear as self-contradictory and logically incoherent. Yet at the same time, Oakeshott detects these two tendencies playing out, as a kind of *concordia discours* of the two styles, in the actual practice of political life over the course of the last five hundred years, as well as in the politics of his own day. [3]

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"Faith" and "skepticism" have obvious religious overtones, and Oakeshott does not deny that religion has been an important factor in modern political thought and practice (he even, at several points, describes the politics of faith as "essentially Pelagian" [Oakeshott 1996]). But close examination of these two passages will confirm that while a particular religious view might help to enable one or the other, it is just as important to notice that religious worldviews — even very insistent and socially totalizing ones — might inform precisely *one or the other* at any given moment. There are as many varieties of the politics of faith as there are interpretations of the word "perfection,"[Oakeshott 1996] and there is nothing in either notion that requires an explicitly religious vision. When New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, in 2012, sought to ban the sale of sweetened soft drinks that exceeded 16 oz in a serving (as a matter of public health), he might have been engaging in *something like* the politics of faith. But among the many who accused him of instituting a "nanny state," no one suggested that he had spiritual salvation in mind. It is also not the case that either term falls neatly along the conventional axes of left and right. At the risk of summoning Godwin's Law, one might say that the Nazis horrifying vision of "human perfectibility" had much more to do with the politics of faith than its opposite (though, as Oakeshott would no doubt point out, the politics of skepticism is by no means absent from the on-the-ground politics of something like state fascism).

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Again, a brief summary hardly does justice to a complex, book-length argument. But it is perhaps enough to orient us toward the truly provocative idea that Oakeshott introduces into his discussion of the two poles, which is that no serious form of the politics of faith can emerge without the enlistment of technology:

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[In the early modern period], the power of government was also being enlarged by the application of more efficient techniques, most of which had already seen an apprenticeship in some other field of activity, in

commerce or in industry. Indeed, almost the whole apparatus by means of which governments in our own day are able to exercise a minute control over the activities of their subjects — the apparatus of banking and book-keeping, the records, registers, files, passports, dossiers and indexes — was already waiting to be exploited. Without ease of movement and communication, without a ready supply of paper and ink, without all those reports and records which spring up whenever paper, ink and human curiosity are joined, without a literate population, without ready means of identification, without settled frontiers, without (in short) a high degree of mastery over men and things, the prospects of the politics of faith are nugatory; with them, there is little to stand in their way. [Oakeshott 1996]

The analogy with our contemporary moment could not be more vivid. But Oakeshott's boldest thesis is that technology does not come to the aid of an emergent politics of faith, but rather creates the conception in the first place. Those who propose a new form of political activity do not realize its virtues *and then* seize on the technological power that could bring it about, but instead discover a politics of faith precisely when, as in the early modern period, there is "a remarkable and intoxicating increase of human power" borne of technological innovation and expansion [Oakeshott 1996]. States do not discover the virtues of total surveillance and then look around for the means by which surveillance might be undertaken, but instead discover the entire conception of governance as a quest for human perfectibility because the technology of surveillance has appeared as a new affordance.

At least two objections immediately arise.

First: If it is true that technology is logically and temporally prior to the politics it enables, does it not therefore become "neutral?" And is this not like saying that guns are innocent of any ethical association with murder? There are arguments to this effect, of course, and they are often refuted simply by noting that while a pistol might well be used to drive a nail, its "intended use" suggests that ethical intentions are already inscribed in the object itself. Then again, the idea that technologies define the regime of political activity (as opposed to serving as the instrumental outcome of political goals) makes some sense of the numerous occasions in which individual technologists appear innocent of the horrors with which their inventions come to be implicated. Richard Jordan Gatling (1818–1903), among the more important figures in the development of the modern machine gun, offers a classic example. Having noticed that most soldiers in the American Civil War were dying of sickness and disease (as opposed to gunshots):

> It occurred to me that if I could invent a machine gun which could by its rapidity of fire, enable one man to do as much battle duty as a hundred, that it would, to a large extent supersede the necessity of large armies, and consequently, exposure to battle and disease would be greatly diminished. [Wahl 1965]

Even if one accuses Gatling of outright moral stupidity, we are still left with the task of providing an account of his role in the creation of the modern screw propeller. That, after all, is an essential element of every nuclear submarine — a weapon capable of creating levels of suffering and catastrophe of which Gatling could not possibly have conceived. One could, indeed, multiply such examples endlessly. A graduate student with no other purpose save better soybean production invents Agent Orange. A researcher interested in studying learning, creates a tool (the IQ test) beloved of crazed eugenicists to this day. The first thing ever played over a loudspeaker to a crowd were Christmas carols; it wasn't long before Joseph Goebbels was among the first to realize its far more insidious capabilities. So while we cannot declare technology neutral, we can — at least in many cases — proclaim individual technologists to be, at worst, unwitting instruments of forces of which they are mostly unaware. "Technology is not politically neutral" is, in all such cases, a statement not about some individual mechanism, but about a record of instrumental usage pondered with a good deal of hindsight.

Second: Do not such technologies serve the politics of skepticism equally? Yes, but here Oakeschott's identification of these two tendencies as distinctive of modernity becomes most legible. The ancient empires maintained their vast domains under arms and with what methods of surveillance they could muster. But in such technologically "primitive" circumstances, even the politics of skepticism cannot fully emerge. The Roman Empire (or the Persian, or the Han) could perhaps hope to avoid strife among a subjected people inconveniently occupying (and in many cases, constituting) the resources they hoped to exploit, but they could not — and over time, proved themselves largely unable

to — develop a vision of, and a set of robust institutions for, the prevention of local conflict borne of nothing more than proximity (the imposition of peace for its own sake, or perhaps "peace as ideology" or as normative political calculus). As for the politics of faith: Even if the Roman imperial cult had had any aspirations toward human perfectibility (and it certainly did not), it is extremely difficult to imagine how that might have been efficiently maintained by Rome even in the less remote regions of the empire. Where no obvious means are available, no obvious ends can properly emerge. Yet late antiquity also sees the rise of Stoicism, Epicureanism, and eventually Christianity as popular forms of social and religious thought. And while none of these creeds (at least in their original, ideal forms) ever succeeds in formulating a concrete political vision, one could scarcely summon more incandescent instances in which the perfectibility of the human person is assumed.

Finally, it is important to note that the question to which Oakeshott's thesis is directed is not primarily that to which the two tendencies offer themselves as solutions ("What shall government do?"), but rather as a way of explaining the ambivalence and ambiguity of modern political discourse. That we do not possess a clear scientific vocabulary with such terms as "right," "justice," "order," "freedom," "democracy," "socialism," or, for that matter, "governance" (one could extend this list infinitely) is a function of the fact that all such terms are ever destined to serve two masters. Each appears — with radically different meanings — in both the politics of faith and the politics of skepticism. Attempts to specify them further with supposedly more precise adjectives — "*natural* rights," "*democratic* socialism," "*individual* freedom" — only serve to deepen the rift. Nowhere is this more evident than in the term "social justice" as used in contemporary anglophone political discourse. Those more aligned with the politics of faith would very much like the adjective "social" to act as a useful clarification, and even perhaps to render the entire term slightly innocuous (who, after all, could object to a "just society?"). For those inspired by skepticism, though, the term is an obvious shibboleth suggestive of an entirely activist and progressive stance. For some, the term can only be employed with yet another qualification: "the social justice *warrior*" who takes up arms against all that is good and decent in a politics manifestly focused on what is traditional and sensible.

It should surprise us not at all, though, to discover that our own political aspirations as academics — our desire to be politically relevant and politically engaged — is a technologically-enabled manifestation of the politics of faith. The humanities, and in particular, the humanities as it is practiced and taught in higher education, has seldom had any other goal than the cultivation of human "consciousness." And by "consciousness," we of course mean, quite unapologetically, "better" and "higher" consciousness. Other reasons might be summoned. "Good citizenship" is still frequently mentioned, and preparation for more concrete endeavors (law, business, medicine, or ministry) remains a sturdy rationale in some quarters. But all such teleologies only reframe the centrality of "consciousness" or "awareness" as ends in themselves. Art for art's sake (we can substitute any humanistic discipline we like for "art" in this venerable formulation) is perhaps a part of the calculation for some, but even the most ardent admirers of Shakespeare will surely see the absurdity of spending enormous sums of money in order to provide their children with four years of aesthetic rapture. If politics is our goal, the elitism of this proverb becomes self-refuting. Yet the study of literature and art, culture and history, philosophy and politics — even in their most narrow and specialized forms — can all be enfolded into the capacious realm of "consciousness." If the humanities has a politics, it is a politics that relies heavily on the idea of human perfectibility. Skeptics we may be, but we are not practitioners of the *politics* of skepticism. Perhaps in other times and places, it has been precisely the purpose of higher education to do nothing more than fecklessly maintain existing structures bent on no more noble purpose than maintaining order within an eternally defective human community. But the humanities in particular — understood in as broad a way as possible — has perhaps never known such an academy, or has known it only as its natural enemy.

But it is not our "liberalism" that makes this assignation relevant. The humanities has certainly also known, in prior ages, a politics of faith with entirely "conservative" ends in mind. Humanistic education has very often been conceived precisely as a way of policing racial, religious, gender, and class boundaries with the quite obvious goal of "perfecting" those who are conceived as worthy of perfection, and who will perforce rule those less enlightened. Even the apparent move to popularize humanistic knowledge that prevailed in the first half of the twentieth century in both the U.S. and the U.K. (*Great Books of the Western World,* the launch of Penguin Books, *The Loeb Classical Library*) left no doubt as to who was properly in charge of perfection.

The trouble, of course, is that the humanities are hardly the only manifestation of the politics of faith in modern society. For surely, one could not find a more luminous example of the politics of faith than Silicon Valley and all its works. We are subjected daily to its inexorable reframing of human desire and human potential — a torrent of "apps" and "sites" focused not merely on idle pleasures and diversions, but (more crucially) on "wellness;" on the virtues of being hyper-informed and aware of whatever occupies the instant; on the transhuman fantasy of the "quantified" self; on the essential excellence of various "balances" (work/life, self/other, body/spirit); on happiness in the fullest, and even the most ancient sense of the word; and, of course, "productivity" as a morally efficacious activity. Such bids for human perfectibility are irreducibly voluntarist in almost every sense of the term. In fact, they are so committed to the idea that our beliefs are entirely ours to choose without interference, that it is not even clear that those who are manifestly engaged in the manipulation of our desires and beliefs regard it as manipulation. Within the totalizing logic of the market, one experiences coercion as merely the marriage of two freedoms: the freedom to buy and the freedom to sell. That this will absolutely lead to the purchase of many more iPhones escapes no one at all; the only question is how to expand this logic further afield, so that more might come to know the salvation on offer. The anxious ethical dilemmas of former ages can be dispensed with in a phrase: "Don't be evil."

Both visions are enabled by the same sources of power: the "banking and book-keeping, the records, registers, files, passports, dossiers and indexes." [Oakeshott 1996] Or rather, by the "intoxicating increase"[Oakeshott 1996] of their digital successors: the user profiles, digital signatures, and network graphs; the mining and the analytics; the ability not only to account for the present, but perhaps even to predict the future (the heretofore unattainable dream of every king). The "corporatization" of the university is, in fact, precisely this: a conception of the way we undertake political arrangements within the university now made available by data, metrics, a concern with measurable outcomes, and the (invariably digital) tools that have brought these affordances into view.

Still, if the matter of "how one uses the tools" has any intelligibility at all (as a spectrum of ethical choices and options), that intelligibility lies mainly with the perfectibility one has in mind. And on this point, Silicon Valley and the humanistic academy are almost incommensurable paradigms. Where the one posits a genial and mostly circumscribed "wellness," the other repeatedly and eternally offers the same as speculation and question. One has a short attention span; the other remains irrefragably committed to the *longue durée*. One quantifies the self; the other complicates it and rediscovers it. One loves binary terms; the other approaches them archly and with suspicion. Voluntaristic conceptions of belief (says *Humanitas*) are just so many shadows on the wall of the cave; one can scarcely imagine a class in the humanities that does not begin with the observation of its fatuousness and propose a journey (however tortuous an inconclusive) upward. That it is not possible to discover "in the tools themselves" some sort of political meaning that is ontologically prior to these commitments should perhaps not deter us from declaring them "not politically neutral," but it should render a great number of common statements about the politics of tools at least banal if not tautological. It matters not at all that one might compose either *Mein Kampf or* the Sermon on the Mount using a word processor. It might matter a great deal that neither one, as a matter of historical fact, was produced with this particular technology. To speak of such matters is not to locate one means with two entirely different ends, but rather two means fully and distinctly defined by ends that are not entirely void of metaphysical similarity.

None of this absolves digital humanities of anything. Even with radically different — and even opposed — teleologies in view, the fact that so many of our tools and techniques are handed to us by an industry with its own distinct politics of faith suggests, at least, a hardy vigilance. That we might merely advance and channel, and thus fail to resist, "today's great postindustrial, neoliberal, corporate, and global flows of information-cum-capital"[Liu 2012] remains a possibility. But the mere use of digital tools does not automatically forecast that failure, and the adumbration of a supposedly "activist" form of digital humanities work does not guarantee success. If that failure were to come, it could only come from a disavowal of the far grander aims of the humanities itself. Breaking "faith" with that vision, however ramified in its possibilities and articulations, would be devastating indeed. At the edge of that event horizon, digital humanities would not even succeed in being what its most bitter detractors imagine it to be. At that point, no one would be capable of asking the questions Liu asks, because "digital humanities" will have become something far worse than a paradox or an oxymoron. It will have become the quaint term of art once used by a benighted group who still believed that the humanities had purpose and meaning. On that day, the global flows of information-cum-capital — pursuing faith or

skepticism as they please — will have presumably won.

Oakeshott's formulation is extreme, because it suggests that the "intoxicating increase"[Oakeshott 1996] of technological power is not some new affordance toward which the humanities may stand in some merely practical or instrumental way. On this account, one might say that the expansion of technological power created the digital humanities — making it not only possible, but conceivable. And following that thought to its conclusion, we find that the term "tool" is itself among the ambivalent and ambiguous terms of its political discourse, ever ready to be taken one way or another as one conceives or reconceives the nature of the humanities itself. Oakeshott, though, would claim a virtue in such ambiguity:

> Politics is a conversation between diverse interests, in which activities that circumstantially limit one
> another are saved from violent collision; and here, words (words, indeed, which have a continuous range
> of meaning in which the extreme meanings are mediated to one another) may sometimes serve our turn
> better than a scientific vocabulary designed to exclude all doubleness. [Oakeshott 1996]

To ask "What is the politics of tools?" is to ask a question as rife with possibility — and confusion — as "What is justice?" or "What is democracy?" We sense that there are such things as justice and democracy, and we likewise suspect that tools "have a politics." But as with justice and democracy, one might more profitably ask what underlies our deployment of tools as political interventions.

Perhaps this is only to restate Liu's complaint in slightly different terms. Certainly, nothing in the preceding discussion lessens the urgency of our need to avoid "just pressing the execute button" on our projects. Still, one must acknowledge that accurate assessment of the political meaning of our tools is no easy matter, and certainly not a simple matter of, as Liu put it, "scaling" our thinking about metadata into "thinking critically about the power, finance, and other governance protocols of the world."[Liu 2012] If, in fact, it is true that our tool-building, while favoring a politics of faith, cannot define or predict the specific political arrangements that may later arise, we should perhaps be most circumspect not when we are tempted to imagine our efforts to be neutral, but rather when we imagine our tools to be acts of "resistance" or outright political activism. The former indicates a fallacy to which any humanist at all is hopefully alive; the latter, though, reflects a potentially more dangerous naiveté about the outworkings of power. Ethical thinking, political responsibility, and critique are undoubtedly obligations of the present. But thinking critically about the politics of our tools must surely also mean a certain skepticism toward the essential goodness of what we are doing. The future that awaits may well realize entire political formations on the basis of our endeavors; they may also, despite our best efforts and loudest protestations, turn our efforts to political ends entirely opposed to those for which we now long.

Notes

[1] See, for example, Matthew K. Kirschenbaum's trenchant precis of this and similar detractions in his 2014 essay, "What is 'Digital Humanities,' And Why Are They Saying Such Terrible Things About It?" [Kirschenbaum 2014]

[2] The manuscript for *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Skepticism* was found among Oakeshott's papers after his death in 1990, and published posthumously in 1996. It is not entirely clear when it was written, and while a nascent form of its ideas may be detected in an essay from 1929 ("Religion and the World"), I feel justified in considering it a "late work".

[3] Oakeshott is quite insistent that these two tendencies characterize political modernity. He does not, for example, align Aristotle's notion of human flourishing (εὐδαιμονία) as a politics of faith alternative to the politics of skepticism that may well have predominated in the Greek city states (or at least, he does not mention what seems to me an obvious antecedent). He nonetheless admits to various manifestations of the politics of skepticism prior to the early modern period, and avers that such was perhaps the predominant political attitude of medieval Europe.

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