

How to Evaluate a Theory?

1. The commonly recognized principles for evaluating a Theory include the following:

1. Explanatory power of the theory.

2. Simplicity.

3. Clarity

4. Consistency

5. Defensible Implications.

- 2.1. **Explanatory power:** the strength of a theory is in its ability to explain some important area of human thought, some significant process, institution, or set of concepts. A powerful theory should organize and explain its subject matter in a way that offers new insight and understanding.
 - a) **A circular theory:** The opposite of a powerful theory is a circular theory that is in fact a question begging theory. It assumes what it claims to prove and therefore, does not prove anything. But it is useful for scholars because it presents the same issue can be seen in another perspective. But no one talks, refers to, or debates a circular theory as it is misleading.
 - b) Students and Researchers need to discover a circular theory or question or argument when they come across it. It appears to offer a new

explanation, when in fact it is saying the same thing in two different ways.

- c) When the explanatory power of a theory is examined by students they need to consider ‘**what the theory purports to explain?**’ The more it claims to do the more powerful it is, provided it is not begging any question. **The basic assumptions** in a theory must first **be determined** carefully, and then **link how** those assumptions are **developed to lead to the conclusions** in the theory.

2.2. **Simplicity:** A powerful theory rests on **intuitive foundational assumptions**. It should not bring in controversial assumptions to explain anything that could be explained without controversy. Simplicity here means ‘**noting extra**’ and ‘**nothing superfluous**’. But do not confuse ‘simple elegance’ in explanation, with a simplistic one. The explanation of a complex matter should be as complex as required by the subject matter. Leaving out necessary and essential aspects is not a virtue of simple elegance in explanation. **The principle of simplicity** says only that ‘if each of the two theories provides a complete explanation, all other things being equal, the simpler one is the better’.

2.3. **Clarity:** A powerful theory must be clear, not vague. Clarity comes from well- defined terms used in the theory. This enables the reader to understand the implications of the terms and to evaluate its conclusion.

- a) The theory should **be open to verification** or falsification. This is possible only when there are **some criteria** that can count for it or against it. If nothing can be counted against it, the theory is not telling anything. It is a virtue of a theory that even if it is wrong, it should be clearly wrong.
- b) In the legal and political sphere nothing can be stated precisely in mathematical formulae. **The life of law is experience** and not logic. As such a legal theory should be as clear and unambiguous as possible. For example, a painting of a foggy day, if depicted as clear day, is a foggy picture. This is because what it needed to depict is the fog that is missing. Similarly, logical analysis can sometimes make problems

‘appear to disappear’ when in fact the problem is simply being defined out of view.

- c) In sum, a legal or a political theory should be **as clear, precise, and specific as possible**. It need not be formal in the sense of formal logic. One needs to carefully **note how clarity is achieved in the theory**.

- 2.4. **Consistency:** A theory should not embody contradictory elements or have contradictory implications. It should be consistent in its development without any hurdles of inbuilt contradictions. This condition is very hard to meet while developing a powerful theory. The strongest criticism that can be made against a powerful theory is that it has a contradiction in its own terms.

In political philosophy, theoretical contradictions may reflect actual contradiction in human life. Therefore, for better accuracy political theories generalize the sub-sets of the problem into one set of problem area. A political theory analyst therefore, has to decide whether the contradictions were unavoidable or whether they have been included to misinform or misdirect. As such, self-contradiction is a serious problem in analysing consistency in a theory.

- 2.5. **Defensible Implications:** In addition to self-contradictions a theory also contains counterexamples that expose implications of a theory. Some of these are either unacceptable or questionable. These may be implications that run counter to widely shared assumptions or values or those undermine some other powerful theory, institution or even world view. But this ground gives weaker arguments against the theory.

Stronger and more important arguments come from theories about law and society. Also there may be no argument at all against a theory because that theory may be intended to benefit society by challenging widely held assumptions, values, worldviews, and long standing theories. The function of revolutionary theories is to change old attitudes or explanations. This criterion of defensible implications is a two edged weapon.

The more challenging a theory is, the more potentially powerful it is. But the more challenging it is the more powerful it needs to be to survive the onslaught of criticism. However, it should not be assumed that a theory must be challenging to be good.

Some theories are powerful and useful because they are able to explain a subject in a way not seen before. Or they organize the contradictions in a way that that renders them connected and consistent.