Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy

Edited by

Thomas Christiano and John Christman

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Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Thomas Christiano and John Christman

"Man was born free and he is everywhere in chains. . . . How can this be made legitimate?" Jean-Jacques Rousseau's profound observation and question express the fundamental concerns of political philosophy. Accordingly, political philosophy is primarily a normative project, one whose main focus is on the principles that guide the evaluation and reform of political and economic institutions that have pervasive effects on our lives. Government, bureaucracy, law, police, property, markets, the welfare state and courts have profound effects on all our lives. And while these institutions enhance our freedom and benefit almost all of us in a great variety of ways, they also impose costs and restrict our freedom in many ways as well. The protection of the property of a person guarantees the freedom of the property holder, for example, but it also restricts the freedom of those who do not hold this property. The efforts to ensure a reasonable distribution of wealth require that taxes be imposed on some to benefit others. Indeed, the whole scheme of institutions guaranteeing security is costly and so requires each to make a contribution to its maintenance.

The question for us as members of societies is which of these types of institutions are ethically defensible? And how should we reform institutions if they are ethically defective? This is a significant part of the stuff of political debates in democratic societies. But this raises the question about what the appropriate normative standards are by which we make these assessments. The assessments we make are at least partly based in more general principles, but we disagree often about the basic principles as much as about the policy questions. One does political philosophy when one articulates and rationally defends some of these principles and criticizes others.

There is much disagreement concerning the legitimacy of each one of the activities modern states engage in, raising the suspicion in each case that they are merely the misguided efforts of some or the thievery of others. Many argue, for example, that there is not enough redistribution of wealth in society or there is too much inequality and that as a consequence the protection of private property is in effect the protection of a privileged class of persons. Others argue that there is *too much* redistribution and

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that the government that carries out these activities is engaged in simple thievery no matter how fine sounding its rhetoric may be. A theory of distributive justice attempts to elaborate and defend principles by which we can adjudicate these issues by determining the correct answers to the general question of what justice requires regarding the distribution of wealth.

Furthermore, when there is such pervasive disagreement about how society should be organized, we must then ask who ought to decide such contentious issues? Traditionally many argued that the wisest ought to decide, but in the modern world it is generally assumed that people ought to decide together as equals in a democracy. Still others argue that there ought to be severe limits on what democracies can decide, leaving the leftover areas of social life to be determined by individuals themselves. But how extensive should these limits be? Who ought to decide this matter? Theories of democracy and constitutionalism attempt to answer these questions in rationally defensible ways.

Moreover, one of the profound questions of political philosophy concerns how to deal with the centuries-long *injustices* done to minorities, women and others, especially since the injustices of the past have had a tremendous impact on the present (if indeed they have ended at all). These injustices and their current effects often remain unacknowledged or at least ignored by the larger society and thus create fresh new injustices in the present. The experiences of minorities are belittled and their plights blamed on them. What is the just response to the overhang of great injustice of this sort? Again, the activity of political philosophy expresses the hope that these questions can be given generally defensible answers.

Finally, the focus of political philosophy has expanded in the last thirty years beyond its initial focus on the assessment of the nation-state to include questions about the nature of global justice and the place of the nation-state in the larger global order. Some have argued that the principles that were thought to apply to individual political societies in fact apply to the world as a whole. Why, these thinkers ask, should we focus on issues of poverty only in our own societies? Why shouldn't we be even more concerned with global poverty, which is often much more serious? These cosmopolitan views are criticized by those who think that there is still an important place for the modern state in our moral appraisals of political power. They argue that citizens have special obligations to their compatriots that they do not have towards others and that these obligations include those of distributive justice. But all theorists agree that the assessment of the modern state and its policies must now be carried out with an eye to its position in the larger global order. Many theorists, then, are interested in developing conceptions of human rights that take into account the interests of all human beings and that set minimal standards for the assessment of the activities of states towards people in other countries. Still there is much disagreement about the nature and basis of human rights among contemporary theorists.

For most philosophers, political theory involves a commitment to the idea that the questions above have objectively valid answers and that the issues can be understood and progress can be made on them by means of rational argument and good judgment. Many of the papers in this volume display the efforts at rational discussion central to the project of political philosophy. They approach the issues with an eye towards clarifying the central concepts and problems. They advance alternative

systematic theories of the principles of justice and the common good. And they defend theories by means of rational arguments in favor of the theory and against alternatives. To be sure, even this commitment should be brought under scrutiny when we think as philosophers, as the fourth essay does. The book as a whole can be thought of as an invitation to participate in rational debates on the basic standards by which we evaluate modern political societies and their place in the world.

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In this volume we attempt to capture the main currents of contemporary political philosophy as practiced, for the most part, in the so-called analytic style but with due attention to alternative approaches. This is perforce a selective enterprise, where many themes are left in the background despite their importance and relevance. Surveying the present landscape, though, suggests certain dominant preoccupations as well as trajectories in new directions. In this Introduction, then, we will discuss some of the main trends and topic areas that have preoccupied political philosophers in the current landscape and, in so doing, provide a brief overview of the excellent papers contained in the volume.

Questions of Method

How should political philosophy proceed? What mode of thought should predominate in theoretical exchanges about such complex and tortuous controversies as are the subject matter of politics? The legacy of the European Enlightenment, and the modernist philosophical framework it helped spawn, has long suggested that "reason" in some form provide the fundamental basis for moral principle and thus, by extension, the justification of political principles. However, much nineteenth- and twentieth-century political and philosophical thought insisted that we reappraise the role of reason in the justification of political positions especially given the pervasive human tendency to be irrational, moved by subconscious motives, given to rationalizations and subterfuge, and so on, not to mention the fact that various injustices that were supported by "reason" in those Enlightenment (and later) thinkers themselves.

Stephen White, in Chapter 4, takes as a starting point the radical challenges to the modernist approach to political justification, challenges which pointed out these patterns of subterfuge and domination under the banner of reason. In his examination of the aftermath of these challenges, he surveys ways that being "reasonable" might now substitute for a traditional foundational understanding of the grounding of principles in untethered "reason." He proceeds to examine the way "reasonableness" functions in four areas of political discussion: the justification of basic social and political structures; the foundations of ethical-political judgments; and the struggle for recognition of identity. He considers the ways that seeing ideal rationality as a personal and social (and philosophical) ideal has, in the past, led to all manners of exclusion and domination (specifically of those "others" who were by implication labeled "non-rational"). He traces the idea of "reasonableness" as a substitute for the traditional idea of reason as the foundation of political power in ways that is more sensitive to our many and deep differences as well as our mortality and finitude.