



Book Reviews

Coping in Politics with Indeterminate Norms: A Theory of Enlightened Localism

Benjamin Gregg

State University of New York Press, New York, 2003, x + 210pp.

ISBN: 0 7914 5782 6.

Contemporary Political Theory (2004) 3, 342–343. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300138

Universalism, relativism or, if possible, neither or something in-between? That is a question at the heart of much political theory, and Benjamin Gregg's book is another attempt to answer it. Faced with 'normative indeterminacy' — the lack of clear and rationally persuasive knowledge of what normative rules mean and how they should be applied — Gregg sets out what he calls 'enlightened localism' as a *via media* between universalism and relativism. This is offered as both an explanatory and normative theory — 'a sociology of moral knowledge' — and a prescription about how best to deal politically with the fact of normative indeterminacy. Enlightened localism embraces a weak form of objectivity that gives epistemic and political primacy to the local, but is enlightened, rather than parochial, in 'overshooting any particular worldview without positing some universal one' (p. 8). Its two basic components are a form of political proceduralism that rejects complete neutrality and is sensitive to factors of local import, and a form of pragmatism that is neither postmodern nor parochial. Elaborating these ideas takes up roughly the first half of the book.

The second half seeks to 'apply' this conception of enlightened localism in three contexts. First, in explaining the possibility of social critique. Gregg argues that 'a nonlocal, decentred critique of a particular society ... is possible to the extent that critique employs intersubjectively generated standpoints that are both decentred epistemically and potentially or virtually (but never actually) universalist in their normative claims' (p. 95). Secondly, its implications for public policy are explored. Gregg seeks to show how productive discussion and reasoned argument are possible within enlightened localism, with particular reference to the examples of parental rights over the compulsory education of their children and immigration policy. Thirdly, and rather more obscurely, through a discussion of race (a recurring example in the book), Gregg aims to show how enlightened localism can work to mediate social identities in law and morality, drawing on Giddens' ideas of structure and agency. He concludes with a chapter in which he argues against Sheldon Wolin that liberal democracies should aspire to solidarity, not through a unity born of integration, but 'through language, by building particular solidarities' (pp. 167–168). The conclusions are positive and the tone optimistic.



This is a short book (169 pages of text) about a big subject, and at times the argument is over-condensed, and also deficient in philosophical argument. In many respects Gregg's position is an attractive one, especially in its political sensitivity, and he has some interesting things to say, particularly about the possibilities of contextual reasoning and judgement. However, one reason why his position will be found attractive is because it combines features that many of us would like to hang together, but which it is not at all clear can be made to do so. For instance, we want to do justice to the diversity of 'particulars', but of course some particulars are very unpleasant, so we also want a way of criticizing them that has validity beyond the particular. One major source of difficulties in Gregg's attempt to finesse these matters arises out of the relationship between the analytical or descriptive and the normative. The conception of enlightened localism offers both an account of the form reasoning *has* to take in the face of normative indeterminacy and prescribes the form it *ought* to take. However, these claims undercut rather than support each other. Another source of difficulties is a lack of conceptual clarity in crucial areas. So, for instance, we are reminded that 'enlightened localism is still localism' (p. 113), only to be told over the page that it 'suggests a critical stance located beyond localism' (p. 114). This looks like wanting one's cake and eating it too; an impression not dispelled by distinguishing 'parochial' from 'enlightened' localism because that distinction is itself deeply tendentious. The root of these problems, I suggest, lies in the very idea of 'localism', as Gregg deploys it. For, if any claim to universalism is only a disguised form of localism, there is nothing but localism; so any and every normative claim is necessarily local. Matters are not helped by contrasting enlightened localism with only the crudest form of universalism, and by discussing examples in a way that so clearly reflects the political preferences of the author.

While, as indicated, the main argument and the conceptual structure in which it is couched seem to me to be deeply flawed, it would be wrong to imply that the book does not have real merits. One, which is related to its failure, is its ambition. This is a topic on which it is extremely difficult to say something both illuminating and plausible, and there are insights and nuggets of argument that are genuinely revealing. Furthermore, however much it sounds like damning with faint praise, Gregg's failure is itself instructive: one learns from trying to work out how, why and where the argument fails. Unlike in some other areas of intellectual activity, ambitious failure is anything but a disabling quality in a work of political theory. Moreover, developed with greater subtlety and precision of argument, it may even be that enlightened localism can be reconstructed to make it more convincing than as presented here. However, that will require appreciably more philosophical acumen than Gregg displays.

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