



Political Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide for Students and Politicians

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The idea for this book came when Swift had read that British prime minister, Tony Blair, had contacted Sir Isaiah Berlin, Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford (before his death in 1997), to ask him about his famous distinction between negative and positive liberty. The question was posed in the context of developing ways of thinking about how New Labour could draw upon ideas from the liberal tradition. The text sets out to explain what the fundamental tenets of political philosophy are, focussing upon four core themes: social justice, liberty, equality and community, acknowledging that other important concepts (authority, obligation, democracy, power) had to be left out. The approach is analytical and the format highly accessible for the student or non-specialist. Swift starts with the claim that ‘politics is a confusing business’ and that we need political philosophy for clarification of important values and issues. Philosophers want to know what we mean in order to reach conclusions about whether a statement is true, which is done by ‘thinking hard’ about all the reasons why something may be true as well as untrue. Swift contrasts his approach to postmodern claims (identified as another philosophical position), that there is no such thing as ‘truth’ and that reason itself is always socially constructed leaving it to the readers to judge whether analytical philosophy ‘is indeed worth doing’ (p. 4). He is not providing a history of political philosophy he describes as ‘fascinating and important’ because it is not what matters to him (p. 4).

Swift identifies political philosophy as philosophy about politics and he ultimately identifies it as a branch of moral philosophy. He conventionally identifies ‘the political’ with the State (specifically the liberal democratic state) and is concerned with the central questions of how the state should act, what moral principles should guide its conduct towards its own citizens? and what sort of social order does it create? (p. 5). The first part of the book is about justice, clarifying between ‘concepts’ and ‘conceptions’ whilst foregrounding Hayek vs social justice, Rawls: justice as fairness, Nozick: justice as entitlement and the justice as desert position. The chapter on liberty outlines three distinctions between conceptions of liberty (effective vs formal freedom, freedom as autonomy vs freedom as doing what you want, and freedom as political participation vs freedom from participation in politics). The chapter



on equality distinguishes between philosophical and practical arguments (p. 92), with an emphasis on preserving what Swift recognizes as the important distinction between means and ends. The chapter on community distinguishes between philosophical and political communitarians and demonstrates the ways in which the 'communitarian critique' of liberalism is mired by misrepresentation and misunderstanding. The final section 'Outstanding Issues' discusses the paradox of 'citizen rights' and 'human rights' in the context of liberalism, neutrality, multiculturalism and the nation-state. This section is valuable for its discussion of the scope of liberal principles as 'even if states are culturally homogenous, we would still need to know why liberal principles of justice apply only within states and not across humanity as a whole' (p. 168).

There are various complex interplays in this text that are both conscious and unconscious. It is not hard to imagine a reader misunderstanding Swift's intentions (which is not a defence of liberalism). Many times he claims that he is not arguing anything and that his role is to clarify positions for the reader (which he does admirably), although he admits that the careful reader will detect certain leanings. Whilst Swift provides careful pathways of understanding for the beginner, his very understanding of political philosophy, as something largely concerned with justice existing in a timeframe that stretches back to the 1970s with the emergence of Rawls (a left-liberal), already positions him so to speak (and this is regardless of the fact that the chapter on social justice begins in the 1850s). One does not have to be a postmodern theorist to be slightly dubious of an enterprise that claims to be concerned with 'the truth' (as if it exists in the singular). At times it was hard to see exactly what was political in the text, being more about philosophy than political philosophy or political theory, in the sense that its main concern is thinking as a dialogue with oneself (concepts) rather than actions (events between living beings). He echoes Plato (another philosopher who lacked faith in the political and endorsed the superiority of philosophers in understanding the human condition) when he says 'it is an unfortunate feature of the world that actual politics involves ordinary people, who think in terms of untidy and shifting constellations...how much easier and clearer everything would be if they were all philosophers' (p. 133). Swift never mentions political theorists, whilst philosophers, analytical philosophers, political philosophers and political sociologists all gain from the insights (p. 175).

Considering Swift is concerned with conceptual clarity and notwithstanding his constant denial of arguing anything, it is difficult to understand why he claims there is no difference between liberty and freedom (except that he is following Berlin in choosing to use the terms interchangeably). There is actually quite a huge difference between freedom and liberty (see Arendt, 1961: 143–171) highlighting Swift's non-familiarity with political tradition



(as opposed to its history) and paradoxical lack of conceptual precision. He also suggests that the difference between negative and positive freedom, 'the freedom from' vs 'the freedom to' is actually that they are both really forms of negative liberty in the first place! (p. 53). The brief mentions of totalitarianism and 'Totalitaria' (with the example of not letting citizens go on holiday) does nothing to further our understanding of totalitarianism as mass organizations of atomized and isolated individuals. One strangely perverse twist to the text is Swift's claim that it is for students and Tony Blair (if he were studying political philosophy now). One might only imagine what Blair might think if he were reading it as the entire text is exclusively addressed in the female pronoun 'she'. Whilst this may appear to be fashionably politically correct, it actually warps the conceptual clarity because the reality of political tradition and history is largely premised on the express exclusion of women (Pateman, 1988). The omission is not helped or clarified by glossing over this with an overkill usage of the pronoun 'she'. Overall, the text is clearly presented with arguments and counter-arguments that attempt to dispel confusion about liberalism (its not about self-interest but 'mutual disinterest') and between liberalism and communitarian positions more generally. It most certainly fills a market niche in the international introductory political theory/philosophy textbooks market, although given the time frame covered in the book, it may have been more aptly titled 'Contemporary Political Philosophy' or 'Political Philosophy Today'.

References

- Arendt, H. (1961) *What is Freedom?*, *Between Past and Future*, USA: Penguin.
Pateman, C. (1988) *The Sexual Contract*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

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