



Book Reviews

What is Political Theory?

S.K. White and J. Donald Moon (eds.)

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This is an updated and expanded production of a 2002 edition of the journal *Political Theory*, that invited its contributors (including some of the grandees of North American political theory) to reflect upon the nature of the discipline at the end of one millennium and the beginning of another. Like any such attempt to both take stock and to look forward, the discussions here are mainly suggestive and illustrative, rather than hugely detailed or contextualized. There is some discussion by Stephen White at the beginning of the book of the famous debate engendered by Isaiah Berlin's question as to whether political theory still existed in the 1950s and Peter Laslett's challenge as to whether it was in fact dead already. And for many, it was not until Rawls's publication of *A Theory of Justice* that the critiques of Berlin and Laslett could be effectively laid to rest. (It should be noted that, as Ira Katznelson's recent book *Desolation and Enlightenment* demonstrates, Berlin and Laslett's diagnoses of political theory were in fact challenged at the time.) Correlatively J. Donald Moon reflects upon the difficult demarcation between political theory, the study of institutions, and the question of pluralism (using Berlin and Rawls as guides) for understanding political theory and for defending liberal democracy.

George Kateb, a participant in the earlier *Political Theory* discussion, offers a typically provocative and often allusive meditation on the relationship between the 'canon' (which revolves, he thinks, around Jesus and Socrates, p. 49), and the threat of nuclear desolation and radical evil. He suggests, not implausibly, that although classic works from Plato to Nietzsche can inspire us to reflect upon the dark underbelly of human actions and human cruelty, the Holocaust did, in spite of everything, radically change our understanding of the nature of evil (p. 38). The works of the classics might despair about the fate of humanity in contemporary civilization, and writers from Rousseau to Weber have informed us of the relationship between disenchantment and social 'progress', but their assumptions of human depravity were never conceived on such a malevolently grand scale. To help, Kateb suggests that a combination of Heidegger and Arendt might be one way in which political theory could move forward to reflect upon its relationship to the notions of radical evil.



In a different section, attempting to deal with method, James Tully provides a précis of his own eclectic approach to the study of political thought, using a combination of Wittgensteinian language games, contextual interpretation, and Foucault inspired analyses of structures of power and domination as social control, to unpack his methodological procedures. Here, he first begins by noting the historicity of individual actors in their own context; he then moves on to think through the implications of the suggestion that what we currently consider as useful, valid or true has not always been thus, which leads into a necessarily historical reconstruction of the context in which an author worked and wrote. Finally, in an attempt to see in this relationship an illustration of which particular ‘technologies’ of control or dominance were at play, Tully suggests that political philosophy should always be a critical activity aware of the impact of processes of governmentality (pp. 84–88). His essay follows neatly from a rich account of the relationship between theory as vision and politics as theory, by Adriana Cavarero, who notes that the attempt to constrain politics through a focus on order has been a mainstay of the Western tradition for millennia (pp. 59ff), and who then moves on to discuss the work of Nancy and Butler. This stands at some remove from the rather more hardheaded approach to the distinction between political theory and political science elaborated upon by Ian Shapiro at the end of the volume, which pleads with political theorists to be more ‘problem-driven’. His discussion of a philosophy of social science that could defend a research programme in political theory as being problem driven is both in some senses a reply to critics concerning his procedure in the book he edited with Donald Green, *Pathologies of Rational Choice Theory*, 1996, as well as an elaboration of a somewhat world weary defence of methodological pragmatism: ‘with methods, as with people, if you focus only on their limitations you will always be disappointed’ (p. 209). Ruth Grant, instead, focuses on the need to contextualise developments in political and intellectual history in order to explain the current character of political science and political theory (pp. 183, 188).

Shapiro’s focus on real-world problems, as it were, represents what Wendy Brown would seem to think of as something like a knee-jerk reaction to those who wish to denigrate political theory for its lack of practical engagement. While wishing to reconcile political theory to politics and counter the limitations of professional specialization, we should be wary of moving too far away from the real concerns of *theoria* which do not always involve questions of how we currently live, but how we might (pp. 119ff). Roland Bleiker, in a related manner, attempts to tease out some of the implications for thinking about political theory and democracy at the global level, even making the rather unusual step of seriously discussing Taoism, to show that the forced distinction between ‘Western’ and ‘Asian’ values outlined by such theorists as Habermas neglects the reality of their blurred boundaries (p. 138). Roxanne



Euben too reflects more broadly still on this relationship, by exploring the importance of travel to the development of theory as an extension of vision and a widening of one's frame of reference. Her defence, therefore, of a comparative political theory assumes that '[first.] political theory is not the purview of any particular culture or historical era and second, disparate cultures are not morally and cognitively incommensurable even if there are serious moral and political disagreements at stake' (p. 162). This attractively open-ended defence might well serve to illustrate the fact that dogmatic approaches to the single best way of doing political theory are, as readers of this journal well know, consistently doomed to fail. Quite what the purpose of political theory is, therefore, remains a question we are unlikely to be able to answer to the satisfaction of everyone, let alone political theorists.

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The Nature of Political Theory

Andrew Vincent

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What is it to do political theory? What are its proper or legitimate purposes? What claims, if any, can it make to truth, or to be an authoritative guide to political action? These questions lie at the heart of Andrew Vincent's ambitious, and in many respects impressive, new book.

Vincent approaches these questions through a critical analysis of the principal approaches to Western political theory in the 20th century. Although the discussion is very roughly chronological, the organizing principle is primarily in terms of different understandings of 'foundations', or lack of them, within various conceptions of political theory. The opening chapter identifies a number of such conceptions that all claim to have firm foundations, and which were at their most robustly self-confident in the early decades of the last century (although it also includes the much later Cambridge historical school). This is followed by a number of chapters that discuss the differing ways in which subsequent conceptions have sought to challenge and/or reconstruct the foundations of political theory. These resist brief summary, but cover *inter alia* topics such as logical positivism, 'ordinary language' philosophy, essential contestability, analytical theories of justice, conventionalism, communitarianism, political liberalism, nationalism, neo-Aristotelianism, Republicanism, various forms of