



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

*Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004, x + 354pp.*

*ISBN: 0 19 927125 9.*

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2005) **4**, 323–325. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300192

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



pluralism, Heidegger, Nietzsche, Derrida, Foucault, Rorty, Connolly and Lyotard. The last two chapters are given over to lengthier discussions of Habermas and Gadamer, and it is with the latter, and especially Gadamer's conception of the hermeneutic circle, that Vincent's own conception of political theory has most affinity. This is elaborated — all too briefly — as a quest for *understanding*, which is 'self-critical, ecumenical, sceptical, fallibilistic, and oriented to the rhetoric of ordinariness', rather than a political theory that is 'unreflexive, rationalistic, abstract, obsessed with its own universality, oriented to impose its order on others, is combative, scornful of the local and concrete, and favours rigorous exact logic over rhetoric' (p. 323). It embraces the idea that foundational questions, although continuously and unavoidably asked, can never be resolved.

One of the most impressive features of the book is Vincent's grasp of such an extensive and diverse range of theorizing. There are many acute observations and thoughtful and challenging features of his narrative. To take only one example, Vincent rejects much of the usual story about how Rawlsian theorizing represented the dramatic rebirth of political theory, stressing instead its continuity with earlier work. Moreover, the brief expositions of various thinkers are often small masterpieces of accuracy and lucidity, although inevitably there are areas where his sympathies, and even occasionally his understanding, seem more strained (for instance, the uncharacteristically insensitive discussions of Wittgenstein's work).

But the twin aspirations of writing a synoptic 'exposition of distinct movements and arguments' that can be 'read independently' (p. 10) and a bold argument about the nature of political theory sometimes pull against each other; and a price is exacted in terms of the detail and cogency with which the more ambitious argument is presented. For instance, although there is a brief elucidation of three meanings of the central idea of foundations (pp. 3–7) further analysis would have been helpful. In one of their meanings, Vincent equates them with 'presuppositions', but this is not as straightforward as he perhaps thinks. The availability of the English language is a presupposition of my writing this review, but it not clear how it is foundational to what I write. And from time to time there is a tendency to *report* views and objections, without a case really being *argued*.

Personally, I find the conception of political theory at which Vincent arrives highly congenial. However, there are difficulties with his argument. Let me just mention three. First, he rather fudges the issue of normativity. He rightly observes of some of the more radically anti-foundationalist positions that, whatever their merits as critiques, they seem to leave political theory with nowhere constructive to go. We are condemned to endless genealogies or deconstructions, but with no sense of what we can do with them. (There are some witheringly pertinent comments on Derrida's late discovery of ethics — pp. 262–263.) But it is not clear that his conception of political theory



entirely escapes this objection either. Insofar as the aim of political theory is taken to be *understanding*, rather than prescription, the question of normativity is left hanging. Secondly, the hermeneutic idea of openness, the ‘fusing of horizons’ and his ecumenicism may indeed be preferable to ‘monological preaching’, but much may depend upon with whom we are engaging. Do we really want to enlarge our horizons to include the views of, say, white supremacists? This is not necessarily a rhetorical question, but it is the kind of issue that could usefully have been addressed.

Finally, we come to familiar problems of reflexivity, or ‘performative contradictions’, which typically bedevil this kind of enquiry. To give only one example (and it is *not* an isolated aberration): Vincent claims that ‘There are no timeless truths, but rather timed and particular historically situated truths’ (p. 323). But what then is the status of this claim? It sounds just like a ‘timeless truth’. Or, if it is not, does this mean there could be other people at other times who did possess some timeless truths? And quite how would that be possible? I do not think that this kind of point can simply be dismissed as a cheap shot: it lies at the very heart of what this book about.

But nor would I want to end on this note. For Vincent has written an erudite, thoughtful and engaging book that everyone interested in questions of meta-theory should read. Moreover, in my view, in the conception of theory that he defends, he is certainly on the side of the angels; but the relative underdevelopment of his argument frustratingly means that the devil is still left with too many good tunes.

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### **Democracy and Tradition**

Jeffrey Stout

*Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2004, 348pp.*

*ISBN: 0 691 10293 7.*

### **The Many and the One**

Richard Madsen and Tracy B. Strong (eds.)

*Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2003, v + 372pp.*

*ISBN: 0 691 09993 6.*

*Contemporary Political Theory* (2005) **4**, 325–329. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300191

Part of Stout’s aim in *Democracy and Tradition* is to leave space for distinctively religious arguments in a liberal democratic polity, as against