



Interpreting Modern Political Philosophy: From Machiavelli to Marx

Alistair Edwards and Jules Townshend (eds.)

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This collection is a most helpful companion to the history of political philosophy. Instead of a collection of essays on a particular philosopher, or a collection that throws together authors preoccupied with different aspects of different philosophers, the editors have made a distinctive choice. All the essays are dedicated to surveying the major critical responses to a particular philosopher: Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke Hume, Rousseau, Burke, Kant, Hegel, Mill and Marx. In most cases, the contributors are not themselves established interpreters of each philosopher. This is not to say that they are not eminently knowledgeable about their topic; each contribution demonstrates breadth and depth of knowledge, both of primary and secondary literatures. But none of the authors is an ‘insider’ with a particular axe to grind. This allows them to present a balanced assessment of interpretations from many different schools, something otherwise very difficult to find. The collection will be useful for scholars coming to a new philosopher — or wanting to refresh their memories. Above all, though, it will be invaluable for second and third year undergraduates, and beginning postgraduates, who are — understandably — liable to be overwhelmed by the sheer volume and variety of interpretations that have been offered of all these political thinkers.

To give a flavour of some of the contributions: Alistair Edwards examines responses to Hobbes’s thought. He considers commentators from the 1950s and 1960s such as Leo Strauss, JWN Watkins, Michael Oakeshott, CB Macpherson, as well as more recent contributions from Quentin Skinner, Alan Ryan and Richard Tuck. Certain untenable views are firmly rejected — for instance Hobbes as atheist — and historically implausible positions — such as Macpherson’s possessive individualism — are shown to relate to more plausible ideas in other critical positions (such as Strauss on commercialization). Edwards is balanced, but has his own voice: to give ‘a single characterisation of the political tone of this most radical of thinkers, he was a true conservative’ (p. 59).

Katrin Flikschuh examines the varied interpretations of Kant’s political thought. Otfried Hoffe makes much of Kant’s evident debt to Hobbes, going so far as to see Kantian politics as based on self-interest. Paul Guyer finds a consensual, morally motivated social contract in Hobbes, while Patrick Riley



sees Kant's account of history as teleological, heading toward a truly moral political condition. John Rawls and Onora O'Neill distinctively emphasize how moral politics is to be constructed on Kantian principles. While showing each school of thought to have a certain truth, Flikschuh defends O'Neill's account as making the best sense of one of Kant's most distinctive values, his cosmopolitanism.

Or a final example: Jonathan Seglow unpicks the variety of interpretations that have arisen from Mill's double allegiance — to utilitarianism and to the value of individuality. He shows how some interpreters have focused on one or the other, and ultimately endorses the view that it is the value of individuality that is Mill's deepest and most distinctive concern. At the same time, he assesses important attempts — by John Rees, Ronald Dworkin, Alan Ryan and others — to show how a carefully defined utilitarianism might accommodate the value of individuality, though not without offering reasons to think each faces important difficulties.

In sum, this is a distinctive and extremely valuable collection — a useful resource to scholars and a unique 'way in' to the literature for newer students of political philosophy.

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