



Social and Political Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction

John Christman

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The preceding decade has witnessed the publication of a number of thoughtful texts designed to provide an engaging and accessible introduction to contemporary social and political philosophy. John Christman's *Social and Political Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction* is one such text.

According to Christman, the aim of the book is two-fold: first, 'to provide a text that would be useful in general survey courses on contemporary political philosophy', and second, 'to provide a general rendering' of 'current trends' in Anglo-American social and political philosophy, suitable 'for an audience outside of academia' (p. xi). The informative and pervasive influence of these goals quickly becomes evident to the reader.

The book is comprised of an Introduction and two parts, which combine for a total of seven chapters. Part one, 'Basic issues within the liberal paradigm', consists of three chapters that present an overview of the fundamental concerns animating contemporary liberal political philosophy, including the problem of political authority, the nature of distributive justice, the difficulties posed by pluralism, and the limits of toleration. Part two, 'Critique of the liberal paradigm: challenges and departures', contains three chapters that outline several of the well-known critiques of contemporary liberalism, such as those offered by conservatism, communitarianism, critical race theory, feminism, the politics of identity, Marxism, and post-modernism. Christman's focus on 'the liberal paradigm' reflects his belief that it represents the dominant, guiding framework in contemporary social and political philosophy (e.g. p. xi), and as such, it is both appropriate and acceptable to restrict his focus in such a manner, so long as he recognizes and acknowledges, as he does, 'the biases, narrowness, and exclusionary tendencies' associated with such a restriction (p. xii). (Of course, some might wish to question the validity of such a conclusion, but this review is neither an appropriate nor viable forum for such a debate.)

Throughout the course of his examination, Christman engages — to varying degrees — virtually all of the fundamental issues that have animated contemporary liberal political philosophy. These include questions of political legitimacy, equality, liberty, justice, neutrality, respect, and toleration, to name a few. Although the text generally limits itself (as might be expected) to an impartial review of the prominent related arguments, Christman intermittently



ventures beyond mere descriptive commentary and offers assessments of the coherence and validity of certain features of contemporary liberalism, although such interjections are rare.

To help stimulate independent thinking about the issues under examination, Christman has included a 'Case to consider' section near the end of each chapter. These 'cases' pose deceptively demanding questions that provoke the reader to apply the arguments presented in the preceding chapter(s) to practical dilemmas and, in the course of doing so, to assess the validity and viability of the related claims made by the various parties represented in the text. This feature should help to increase the reader's appreciation for the potential usefulness and value of political theorizing. For those seeking to gain further insight into the issues and arguments presented in a given chapter, a 'Notes on further reading' section containing references to additional relevant material is presented immediately following each 'Case to consider' section. Additional resources are also present in the form of a noteworthy independent bibliography and a helpful index.

In general, the text offers an excellent, accessible overview of the principal features and prominent criticisms of contemporary liberal political philosophy. This is not to suggest that there is nothing to criticize. For example, Christman neglects to offer a direct, substantive examination of the problem of political stability, something that would seem to be warranted given the significant influence that this problem has had on the character of liberal political philosophy. He also fails to explain the purpose of his distinction between 'social' and 'political' philosophy. Although he distinguishes between the two, both in the title of the book and in its text (e.g. pp. xi, xii, 2), he never identifies precisely how they differ and why (if at all) it is important to differentiate between the two. Furthermore, he makes a number of explicit statements informing the reader that his concern and focus is contemporary *political* philosophy (e.g. pp. xi, xii, 4, 17). These actions (and lack thereof) leave the reader to question the intent and value of Christman's distinction. Thankfully, such oversights are few and far between and do not drastically undermine the usefulness of the text. In the final analysis, Christman does a very commendable job of achieving the goals he has established for the text (e.g. p. xi).

Studies that seek to provide a general yet edifying and satisfying overview of a given field of study can be extremely difficult to write; however, when written well, they serve an invaluable function. With *Social and Political Philosophy*, Christman has succeeded in producing an engaging and informative survey that will undoubtedly be much appreciated by teachers and students alike of introductory courses in contemporary political philosophy.

Shaun P. Young
University of South Africa.