

Political Philosophy and Politics

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1 Introduction and Argument

Political philosophers offer no single answer to the question of what politics is. This is not very surprising, since they do not agree about what philosophy is either. Different kinds of philosopher treat issues in quite different ways, seeking different kinds of answer to different kinds of question. Some value analytical precision, absolute clarity of expression, and logical rigour. Others regard such virtues as inappropriately scientific and adopt a more literary or artistic approach. Some put the history of philosophy at the centre of the discipline. Others think that the important questions can be addressed without any historical input. This variety means that any attempt to explain how 'political philosophy' conceptualizes politics is bound to be biased, reflecting the particular views of the person doing the explaining. What follows, then, is not *the* answer to the question of how political philosophy thinks about politics, it is just *an* answer: quite a widely shared answer, to be sure, and an answer that has come to exert considerable influence over the way political philosophy is done in many parts of the world. But, still, there are many who would take a very different line.

Here, in summary, is the view: politics is concerned specifically with the state. And political philosophy asks whether there should be a state, how it should act, what moral principles should govern the way it treats its citizens and what kind of social order it should seek to create. As those 'shoulds' suggest, it is a branch of moral philosophy, interested in justification, in what the state ought (and ought not) to do. But the state, as political philosophers think about it, is not - or

should not be – something separate from and in charge of those who are subject to its laws. Rather it ought to be the collective agent of the citizens, who decide what its laws are. So the question of how the state should treat its citizens is that of how we, as citizens, should treat one another. The state is a coercive instrument. It has various means – police, courts, prisons – of getting people to do what it says, whether they like it or not, whether they approve or disapprove of its decisions. Political philosophy, then, is a very specific sub-set of moral philosophy, and one where the stakes are particularly high. It is not just about what people ought to do, it is about what people are morally permitted, and sometimes morally required, to make each other do.

This can seem a rather narrow and modern way of thinking about politics. It suggests that political philosophy is relevant only to those societies that have states. What about communities that manage their collective affairs without resort to any coercive apparatus? And it assumes that, where there is a state, it must be democratic if it is to be legitimate. What about all those states throughout history that have clearly not been collective agents of those subject to their laws?

Good questions. My answer to the first is that one of the fundamental issues political philosophers raise is precisely whether states are indeed legitimate. It is open to the anarchist to argue that we can get along perfectly well without them, and her case may well appeal to examples of societies that have done so. And political philosophy, even in my narrow sense, is relevant to such societies. Anyone who argued, in a stateless society, that certain desirable goals might better be achieved by means of a state, and that this would justify establishing one, would be doing political philosophy. And anyone who disputed that claim would be doing it too. But if there is no state, or no discussion about whether there should be a state or what it should or could legitimately do, then there is no politics, at least not on the conception of politics I advance here.

The second question accuses me of simply assuming that states should be democratic. (That is the bit about states being the collective agent of the citizens who decide what its laws are.) It is true that my kind of political philosopher works with that conception of the state, but it is a bit misleading to say that we simply assume it. We work on that basis because we think there are good reasons *why* the state should be that way. It is, of course, a legitimate question to ask what form the state should take. Plato famously thought that rule by wise guardians was best. So when I describe my way of thinking about what the state is – or should be – I am, in effect, taking a view *within* political philosophy. That still leaves plenty of questions up for

grabs. What is the proper scope of state authority? Is majority rule always the best way to make political decisions? Is there any room for the idea of political expertise? What kind of reasons can citizens invoke when they vote? These are the questions that my kind of political philosopher tries to answer. So even within our narrow approach to politics, we find more than enough to keep us busy.

2 Morality v. Politics?

Our way of thinking about politics may seem odd. The emphasis is on morality, on what principles should regulate citizens' dealings with one another, and what kinds of state action it would be right or wrong for them to support. The central categories, on this approach, are moral values or ideals, such as rights, justice, liberty, equality, community, democracy. The oddity comes from the feeling that politics is fundamentally different from morality. Politics, it may seem, is the art of the possible. It is about finding the middle ground, about negotiating a solution that is acceptable to people with different interests, about keeping people happy – and getting them to vote for you – rather than giving them, or telling them, what they ought to want. The BBC has a radio programme called *The Moral Maze* which discusses the moral issues that lie behind topical political debates. As soon as contributors start to talk about anything vaguely practical, to worry about the feasibility of a particular proposal, or to factor in electoral considerations, the chairman urges them to stick to the moral questions, putting aside the merely 'political' ones.

Sometimes, indeed, politics is regarded as something like the *opposite* of morality. 'Was that decision principled, taken on the basis of moral values, by reference to an ideology or set of core ethical beliefs?' 'No, it was political' – for which read opportunistic, unprincipled, strategic, and perhaps even dishonest. Often, it seems, the moral course of action lies in one direction, while the 'politics' of the situation requires one to take another. If politics is the art of the possible, then the art of politics is that of compromise, of wheeling and dealing, fudging, and, if you are a politician today, managing the media. The Italian Machiavelli (1469–1527) believed that political leaders should not feel themselves bound by traditional morality but rather could engage in all kinds of cunning and duplicity in order to hold onto power.

This conventional contrast between politics and morality might suggest that I have set off on the wrong track. I am supposed to be writing about what politics is, not about what politics should be. Yes,

someone might say, there are interesting questions about what politics *ought to be* like. But surely it is going too far to claim that my perspective provides a plausible account of what politics is *actually* like. Does my account not illustrate precisely what is most irrelevant and frustrating about philosophy in general, and political philosophy in particular: that it is too far removed from the real world to be useful, and too abstract and idealistic to have a proper understanding of the phenomena that it is supposed to illuminate?

It is true that, defined my way, political philosophy aims to tell us how political institutions ought to be designed, what policies should be enacted, why individual citizens are justified in voting for one law rather than another. And it is true that much that the state does, and much that individual citizens do to try to get the state to do things, is not usually thought of in such moral-terms. But it is not true that my approach simply misunderstands the nature of politics. On the contrary, it claims to identify what is really happening when the state makes and enforces laws. 'Think about what is actually going on when we do politics', it says. 'You may see politics as a struggle for power between elites, or as a means by which one class maintains its domination over another, or as a beauty contest between more or less charismatic leaders. Doubtless it can, and often does, take those forms. But what politics really is, beneath all that, is a process by which some people get the state to back up, with its coercive apparatus, their preferred ways of doing things – to compel obedience from those who might not want to do things that way.'

The philosophical issues, then, concern what principles should govern the state's activities *given this analysis of what the state – and hence politics – actually is*. Should all those coerced into complying with the state's directives have a say in determining all those directives, or is there a place for non-democratic decision-making? Within democracies, can the majority of citizens simply gang up on the rest and, through sheer force of numbers, vote through legislation that compels the minority to comply with its will? Do laws, to be legitimate and not the mere exercise of force, have to be justifiable to all those who are subject to them? Do individuals have rights – such as freedom of religion or of sexuality – that should take certain issues off the political agenda, beyond the reach of state action? These are moral questions, and very difficult ones, but they are derived from an understanding of what politics is, not simply what it ought to be.

Is my view the *right* view of what politics is? I do not think that matters very much. Any definition of 'politics' is going to be controversial, and the variety of answers given in the various chapters of this book gives a good sense of the different ways in which people use the

concept. What matters is not what words we use to describe or categorize the things we are talking about but whether the things we are talking about are true or false. Concepts – like the concept of 'politics' – are tools. They are ways of cutting up the world that can be more or less useful. But it makes no sense to worry whether they are 'true' or 'right'. What we say using them, propositions that are framed in terms of concepts, those can be true or right. And it matters largely that we make those judgements well. But the words we use, what we call things, is neither here nor there. Shakespeare's Juliet says that 'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.' Whatever our words, the issue of how citizens ought to treat one another, and how they may legitimately employ the coercive power of the state, is an important one. And that is the issue which my kind of political philosophy tries to address.

3 Political Philosophy v. Political Science

The fact that it asks – and answers – moral questions makes political philosophy a different kind of enterprise from political science. Political scientists tell us what happens and why it does. Political philosophers tell us what ought to happen and why it should.

Much of what gets studied as 'politics' in schools or universities is descriptive and explanatory. The aim is, first, to describe what actually happens – or happened – and then to explain it. Sometimes the describing is much easier than the explaining. It is not difficult to say that Party A got x per cent of the vote while Party B got y per cent, but trying to explain that fact. Sometimes even describing a political phenomenon is a difficult and complicated business: what exactly was the sequence of events that preceded the fall of the Berlin Wall? Sometimes things that look like mere descriptions turn out to be controversial: was the Cold War really a 'war'? Explanation is nearly always difficult. Explaining why things happen involves fitting them into some kind of theoretical framework, identifying the important causal processes that generate them, and people disagree about which theories are most accurate or useful. That said, and despite these complications, the aim of political science is clear. Just as natural science aims to describe and explain what goes on in nature, so political science aims to describe and explain what goes on in politics.

Political philosophy has a different agenda. It seeks to evaluate what happens, to pass moral judgement on events. How the Conservative government in the United Kingdom came to enact the poll tax, and how its doing so led to the resignation of the then Prime Minister,

Mrs Thatcher, are matters for political scientists. Political philosophers want to know whether the poll tax was a good thing. Not whether it was good for Mrs Thatcher. We know the answer to that. The philosophical issue is whether it was good morally speaking. Is it fair to charge people a flat-rate tax for local services or should their contribution depend on their ability to pay? Even if we think that overall levels of taxation should reflect people's means, does that imply that each and every individual tax should do so? Could the poll tax be justified on the ground that it helps to keep local government expenditure responsive to the democratic will?

These are challenging questions. Political philosophers think that they are exciting ones too. And some of the excitement comes from the feeling that the answers to these philosophical questions can make a difference to what happens. What people do depends, in part, on what they think is the right thing to do. To be sure, it is far from clear to what extent people's political activity is guided by moral motivations rather than narrow self-interest. Do people vote for the party they think will be best for them, or the one that they think will be morally best, best for the society as a whole? Are political revolutions best explained by looking at the economic interests of those involved, or are revolutionaries motivated by moral ideals? Those are empirical questions, to be answered by political scientists. But even those sceptical about the explanatory significance of moral answers for what people do would be hard pressed to deny them *any* role in guiding people's behaviour. And in that case changing people's minds, morally speaking, can change what happens.

4 What Political Philosophers Do

I think of political philosophy as proceeding in two stages. First, a lot of time and effort are spent making sure it is absolutely clear what claims are being made, what propositions are being asserted. Sometimes this is called 'conceptual analysis', which makes it look scary and tedious. Don't be put off. This is just a fancy name for the obviously important job of working out exactly what people mean when they say things. (Asked at a New York cocktail party what philosophers actually do, one replied: 'You clarify a few concepts. You make a few distinctions. It's a living'.) Suppose a friend tells you that she believes in equality of opportunity. Do you know what she believes in? I don't. All kinds of different views get called that – all the way from the innocuous position which holds that universities and employers should not be biased on grounds of gender or race to the

radical view that all people, however talented or untalented, should have the same resources to devote to their life-plans. Something similar applies to all the other concepts that political philosophers are interested in. You never hear anybody saying she does not care about justice, or liberty, but that does not mean that everybody agrees on anything definite." Before we know whether we agree with someone, whether what she says is true, we have to know what it is she is saying. So we explore the different ways that people use words, investigate differing conceptions of the same concept, track how concepts have changed meaning over time or have different connotations in different cultures, and so on.

But this is just the first step, getting rid of confusion or misunderstanding so that we know exactly what it is that we are talking about. The second step is to decide what is the right thing to say about it. My kind of philosopher wants to know what statements mean in order to decide whether they are true. I cannot assess the validity of your views about the injustice of the poll tax, or the moral significance of equality of opportunity, or why socialism would be better than capitalism, until I know precisely what those views are. So, having clarified what we are talking about, we make arguments in support of particular conclusions, trying to explain where those who disagree with us have gone wrong. We explore each other's claims, seeing whether they stand up to scrutiny. Does the conclusion really follow from the premises? Are the premises true? Is your way of thinking about justice coherent or can I show that you seem to hold two inconsistent views? If so, both views *cannot* be right, so which, if either, are you going to defend?

This second step distinguishes my kind of political philosopher from a different kind, the postmodern kind who regards our interest in truth and reason as terribly old-fashioned. Postmodernism comes in a variety of (dis)guises but, applied to politics, it tends to involve scepticism about the idea that there is such a thing as 'truth' and a mistrust of 'reason' as itself 'socially constructed' rather than a genuinely independent or objective basis for assessing and criticizing society. Since some postmodernists are doubtful about the idea of truth in sciences like physics and biology, it is hardly surprising that they should be wary of the suggestion that one can apply that category to claims of the kind made in politics.

Many of my students, though prepared to accept that the natural sciences – and even political science – can lead us in the direction of true facts, and perhaps even true explanatory theories, share this suspicion about the kind of moral judgement that political philosophy (like all moral philosophy) is about. According to them, views about

what is good and bad, what is right and what is wrong, are subjective judgements, a matter of personal taste or preference. Although I remember once believing something similar, I now find it hard to take this kind of scepticism seriously. Here is a moral judgement: 'It is wrong to torture innocent children for pleasure and we do right when we instruct our state to do what it can to prevent people engaging in that activity.' Can we really think that this is just a subjective judgement? Is my view that the statement is true really no more than a preference or expression of my personal taste? Does somebody who disagrees with me simply see things differently, with no basis for deciding who is right, as if she and I simply like different flavours of ice-cream?

Of course, the issues addressed by political philosophy are less clear-cut than that. There is often room for reasonable disagreement. Intelligent and morally serious people can take different views about a whole range of questions that arise when we think about how we may legitimately direct the state to act on our behalf. We can disagree about whether there should be a state at all. (Anarchists think not.) We can disagree about whether the state should serve merely as a night watchman, enforcing respect for property rights and perhaps providing basic public goods such as defence and traffic lights. (Libertarians think it should do no more.) We can disagree about social justice: does the realization of that ideal require distribution according to need or desert (or a bit of both)? Is it unfair for people to be better or worse off than one another merely because they happen to have been lucky or unlucky? If it is unfair, is it the state's job to rectify the unfairness? I could fill this chapter with similar examples, and to do that would be to give a list of the issues that preoccupy political philosophers.

But the crucial point is this. When they disagree about these matters, philosophers are disagreeing about what is the *right* thing to think about them, about which beliefs about them are true and which false or mistaken. Perhaps the anarchists are right. Perhaps we should not have a state at all. Perhaps the libertarian claim that only a minimal state can be justified is true. Perhaps liberal egalitarians are correct when they suggest that the state may legitimately tax high earners to compensate those who, through no fault of their own, are worst off. Working out which beliefs on these matters are true and which false requires careful thought and rigorous argument. Careful thinking and rigorous arguing are what political philosophers spend their time trying to do. But, whoever is right or wrong on these issues, it must be the case that the dispute is about who is right or wrong, not simply about who prefers what. If it is wrong to deny individuals the

freedom to worship their own god, then that is wrong not because we think it so, but for reasons independent of our thinking it so. If those (like rich film stars or sportsmen) lucky enough to possess highly marketable productive assets have a duty to share their good fortune with less fortunate others, a duty enforceable by the state, then such a claim is true. If not, it is false. We track truth when we make such judgements, and we can track it more or less well. When we criticize each other for making mistakes, some of us are right, correctly identifying the truth, and some of us are wrong, failing to do so. This is the, I hope innocuous, sense in which political philosophy pursues truth.

5 Political Procedures and Political Philosophy

Some people dislike the philosophical approach to politics because they think it is basically irrelevant. A scientific understanding of how politics works would reveal that moral considerations play no role in explaining political behaviour. Philosophers are wasting their time working out what justice requires, or what rights individuals have, since, in the real world, the answers to that kind of question simply cut no ice. Others dislike it because it aims to identify the truth, the right way to think about whatever political issue is in the spotlight. They fear that this perspective somehow fails to respect the nature of politics, which should properly be understood rather as a process of negotiation or compromise between different views, or of citizens coming together collectively to decide what *they* think about how their public affairs should be organized, and, presumably, what they think about which of their affairs are indeed properly public (to be decided politically) rather than private (to be left to the discretion of the individual citizen without state interference). Political philosophy, with its pretensions to truth and right answers, seems implicitly to involve a will to dominate, to impose its truths upon a polity in a dictatorial way. This fear is misplaced and seeing where it goes wrong should help to explain how my kind of political philosophy sees politics.

To put it simply, political philosophers do not only have views about what political decisions should be made, they also have views about how decisions should be made. They make claims about which procedures or processes are the right ones to use when making political decisions. Sometimes they do not take a view about which decision would be right, and sometimes that is because they do not think there is a right answer to be found, independent of the

procedure used to reach it. Consider a community deciding whether to build a swimming pool or an ice rink. We can argue that its members should discuss the merits and demerits of both options, that they should deliberate collectively and try to form a view about which would be better, that it would be appropriate for them to take into account how many people prefer which facility, and perhaps how strongly they prefer it, that in the end it may come down to a vote. But it does not necessarily make sense to say that, independently of that kind of procedure, the philosopher – or anybody else – is in a position to judge which decision would be best,

On other issues, philosophers may indeed take a more substantive, less procedural, view. Suppose a politician stands for office on an anti-welfare platform. He seeks to slash welfare provision for those in need, and to reduce state expenditure on health and education. A philosopher can argue *both* that he should be allowed to do so – that proper procedures require his views to be debated and voted on along with everybody else's – *and* that his views about what citizens owe to one another is fundamentally mistaken. In that kind of case, the philosopher has a view about how the decision should be made but she also has a view about what the decision should be.

Political philosophers are perfectly well aware that the truth of a philosophical claim is not sufficient reason to justify imposing it on anybody. The aim is not to come up with right answers and then, by some kind of philosophical coup d'état, get the state to coerce people into complying with them. On the contrary. Much political philosophy is concerned precisely to identify the conditions under which the state may legitimately be used to enforce compliance with particular views about how things should be. No serious philosopher today argues that the mere fact that those views are true counts as a valid reason. Philosophers have developed rich and complex theories of political legitimacy, all of which make claims about when citizens may properly use their collective agent, the state, to command compliance.

Now those theories – theories about legitimacy – are themselves understood as being either true or false. But that can hardly be an objection. After all, that kind of truth claim is also asserted by the critic who fears philosophical dictatorship. Someone who thinks that it is for citizens democratically to decide what their laws should be presumably thinks it is *true* that that is how their laws should be made. They may be right about that, they may be wrong, and political philosophers can help them see which it is. But, either way, it is surely not simply a matter of opinion.

The truth about the conditions that must be met for a state to be legitimate provides reasons for us not simply to impose other kinds of

truth on our fellow citizens. So far I have spelled out legitimacy in terms of democracy: it matters that citizens participate in the making of the laws under which they are to live, and although there is likely to be disagreement about what those laws should be, so not everybody will be living under laws they have themselves chosen, we can think of democratic procedures as providing a legitimate mechanism for resolving those disagreements. Here is another way of thinking about it, one that has come to prominence recently, and one that takes us back to the fundamental issue about what the state is.

On this view, legitimacy requires that the state's decisions be justifiable, to those who are compelled to obey it, in terms that it would be unreasonable for them to reject. Suppose, for example, that I am absolutely convinced that my religion is true. I regard all those who fail to acknowledge its truth as headed to everlasting damnation. Am I therefore justified in using the state to back up my religious view, forcing people to follow the one true faith? Not if I adopt this approach to legitimacy and accept that I cannot show others the truth of my religion without appealing to reasons that they could reasonably reject. The nature of politics itself – the fact that the state is the joint power of free and equal citizens – rules out some kinds of reason as morally inappropriate grounds for state action. The mere fact that my religious doctrine is true is beside the point. It would be illegitimate for me to ground my political view, a view about how the state should act, in a doctrine that my fellow citizens could reasonably reject. After all, the state is not mine, it is ours.

6 Conclusion

Contemporary politics is a confusing business. It is hard to tell who believes in what. Sometimes it is hard to tell whether anybody believes in anything. Politicians converge on the middle ground, worrying about focus groups, scared to say things that might be spun into ammunition by their opponents. There is some serious debate about policies, but little about the moral values that underlie them. When it comes to principles we have to make do with rhetoric, the fuzzy invocation of feel-good concepts. Who is against community, democracy, justice or liberty? This makes it look as if values are uncontroversial. Politics comes to seem a merely technical matter: politicians disagree about how best to achieve agreed goals and voters try to decide which of them has got it right.

The reality is different. Beneath the surface, concealed by the vagueness of these grand ideals, lurk crucial disagreements. Politicians

who share the view that liberty matters, or that community is important, may have very different ideas about what they involve. Even where they agree about what values mean, they may weight them differently. These disagreements feed through into policy. What we ought to do about tax rates, welfare, education, abortion, pornography, drugs, and everything else depends, in part, on how and what we think about values. Some politicians may be clear about which interpretations of which ideals guide their policy preferences, and how important each is compared to the others. Many are not. And even where they are, that does not necessarily help those whose job it is to choose between them. To do that, we need to be aware of the different interpretations of these ideals. We need to see where claims presented in their terms conflict and, when they conflict, we need to decide which is right. We need political philosophy.

Good political philosophy makes for good politics. It clarifies what is at stake in political debate, helping us to understand who is saying what, what exactly it is that they are saying, and what we think about it. And it raises deep questions about the nature of politics, forcing us to keep in mind quite what politics involves – the coercive imposition of some people's views about how our collective affairs should be managed on others who may disagree with them profoundly (and who may even disagree about what should count as 'our collective affairs'). By sharpening understanding of the matters debated within day-to-day politics, by giving us the equipment we need to decide who is right, and by reminding us of the fundamental moral issues that underpin the whole enterprise of politics in the first place, political philosophy has a vital role to play in making politics what it can and should be.

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