Understandings of law and politics are intrinsically bound up with broader visions of the human condition. Sean Coyle argues for a renewed engagement with the juridical and political philosophies of the Western intellectual tradition, and takes up questions pondered by Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, Aquinas and Hobbes in seeking a deeper understanding of law, politics, freedom, justice and order. Criticizing modern theories for their failure to engage with fundamental questions, he explores the profound connections between justice and order and raises the neglected question of whether human beings in all their imperfection can ever achieve truly just order in this life. Above all, he confronts the question of whether the open society is the natural home of liberals who have given up faith in human progress (there are no ideal societies), or whether liberal political order is itself the ideal society?

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To my parents
'I think we have real progress in philosophy when a disputant thinks little of victory as compared with the discovery of what is just and true'

– attributed to Licentius

(Saint Augustine, *Contra Academicos*, Bk 1.3)
CONTENTS

Preface ix
Introduction 1

PART I. Jurisprudence 19
1. Jurisprudence and the liberal order 21
2. Concept and reality in jurisprudence 41
3. On the ‘Protestant’ inheritance of juridical thought 58
4. The form and direction of Anglo-American jurisprudence 77
5. Three approaches to jurisprudence 98

PART II. Understanding the present 119
6. Authority and tradition: visions of law and politics 121
7. Legalism and modernity I: Identifying and understanding the problem 149
8. Legalism and modernity II: Reflections upon the problem 167
9. Political thought and the ‘well-ordered society’ 188
10. The limits of legal ideologies 209
11. Conservatism and its dilemmas 233
12. Liberal jurisprudence and its order 251
### CONTENTS

**PART III. Justice**

13. Justice without mercy 275

14. Justice and moral judgment 298

15. Fallen justice 320

16. Freedom and justice in a democratic age 344

_Bibliography of Works Cited_ 365

_Index_ 378
The origins of this book lie in an ambition to explore a sceptical attitude toward modern jurisprudence and political thought. Modelled upon a kind of Academic scepticism (avoidance of positive doctrines), the intention was to subject key aspects of legal and political thought to question. This gave the book as initially conceived a somewhat looser structure, as a series of more or less independent arguments addressed to each subject in turn. As the book progressed, I decided to change this strategy. Increasingly, there were arguments or ideas that demanded to be affirmed. They could be subjected to question, but not denied. Positive doctrines began to assert themselves in the book’s main line of analysis.

As a result of this, I decided (at quite a late stage) to rewrite the book almost from the ground up. I am grateful to Cambridge University Press for allowing me the extra time it took to complete this process. The result is a book that is more cohesive, but which perhaps retains vestiges of its earlier incarnation. The relationship between the chapters, particularly in the second part of the book, now resembles more a series of reflections upon a body of interrelated ideas: law, liberty, order, community, justice (and others). Each dimension of law and politics is pushed temporarily into the foreground, to be examined and then replaced, whereupon another is called forth. The reflections are underpinned by a vision of law and politics that is developed in the Introduction and the early chapters of the book. The book’s overarching concern, though I did not know it at first, is with justice.

It was necessary to restrict the scope of the book. I consider first and foremost the legal and political experiences of the liberal social order. I have very little to say about established criticisms of liberalism, such as communitarianism, preferring to develop my own line of criticism. My question is above all whether liberalism represents a deepening of man’s moral predicament or, as some liberals seem to suggest, a resolution.

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