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The Idea of the State

For a half-century or more, political theory has been characterized by a pronounced distrust of metaphysical or ontological speculation. Such a disposition has been sharply at odds with influential currents in post-war philosophy – both analytic and continental – where metaphysical issues have become a central preoccupation. *The Idea of the State* seeks to reaffirm the importance of systematic philosophical inquiry into the foundations of political life, and to show how such an approach can cast a new and highly instructive light on a variety of controversial, seemingly intractable problems of tolerance, civil disobedience, democracy and consent. The author considers the problem of the state in light of recent developments in philosophy and social thought, and seeks to provide an account of what the state really is. In doing so he pursues a range of fundamental issues pertaining to the office, the authority and the internal organization of political society.

PETER J. STEINBERGER is Robert H. and Blanche Day Ellis Professor of Political Science and Humanities and Dean of the Faculty, Reed College. His published books include *Logic and Politics: Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1988) and *The Concept of Political Judgment* (1993).

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Preface

Historically, political philosophy has functioned largely – and also quite self-consciously – as a branch of philosophy *per se*, its propositions deeply embedded in and systematically underwritten by broader philosophical arguments and presumptions about how things in the world really are. This was certainly true of Plato and Aristotle, Cicero and Augustine, Aquinas, Hobbes and Hegel. In each such case, claims about politics and society reflected and were justified explicitly in terms of more fundamental claims of an ontological or metaphysical nature.

This kind of close connection seems no longer to exist. Political thought now purports to operate typically as a more or less independent enterprise, relatively unconnected to and unconstrained by larger traditions of systematic philosophical inquiry and reflecting, thereby, the sharp division of labor characteristic of contemporary academic life. Emblematic here is the well-known proposition that political speculation should indeed be “political, not metaphysical.” Such a proposition is embraced, explicitly or otherwise, not only by those engaged in the detailed analysis of liberal principles but also by those who operate within various traditions of what might be called literary prudence, as exemplified by the writings of, among others, Hannah Arendt and Michael Oakeshott.

Remarkably enough, this rejection of systematic metaphysical speculation in political theory has occurred precisely during an era in which philosophers – “analytic” and “continental” alike – have been deeply and increasingly preoccupied with metaphysical questions. Quine’s account of ontological commitment, Strawson’s conception of descriptive metaphysics, Putnam’s development of an internal realism – these and related notions have become common currency in contemporary Anglo-American philosophical discourse; while from a seemingly quite different perspective, the pursuit of ontological questions by students of Heidegger, most notably Gadamer and Levinas, has become a central focus of present-day hermeneutical and phenomenological inquiry. It is at least somewhat surprising that the fruits of such speculation have only rarely and fitfully found their way into serious writing about politics.

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To be sure, many will regard the putative separation of philosophy and political thought as a good thing, evidence of a new-found appreciation for the distinctiveness of the political enterprise and for the peculiar nobility that it confers upon those so engaged. But it seems to me that the costs of such a separation far outweigh the benefits. Indeed, a political philosophy, and a political practice as well, that is substantially uninformed by and that seeks to distance itself from systematic inquiry into our thoughts about the larger truth of things runs the risk of irrelevance, anachronism and error – including and especially the error of self-delusion. The present work may be thought of as an effort, however modest, to help reestablish at least some of the relevant connections by examining certain fundamental issues of political thought explicitly in the light of broader philosophical themes. It proposes, specifically, a metaphysical or ontological theory of the state. As such, it seeks to address important questions of toleration, limited government, obligation and democracy directly in the context of influential philosophical and social/theoretical arguments – post-Kantian arguments – about the nature of things.¹

It is true, of course, that in a work of conceptual analysis governed, to the degree possible, by principles of objective and dispassionate inquiry, expressions of partisan political sentiment ordinarily have no place. In the present case, however, the risk of serious misinterpretation – in particular, the risk that certain kinds of philosophical arguments will be thought to entail or reflect certain specific partisan political commitments – suggests the need for an exception, if only as a prefatory matter. For what it's worth, then, I myself happen to believe in a sharply progressive income tax. I prefer a broader rather than a narrower interpretation of the first ten amendments to the United States Constitution. I'm a supporter of affirmative action. For both aesthetic and economic reasons, I think we must be willing to accept a great deal of short-term inconvenience in order to protect the natural environment. I believe that men and women are much more alike than different, and that public policy should reflect this fact. Perhaps above all, I am convinced that the natural and social lotteries are inherently unjust and that we should use government, as an instrument of human reason, to reduce or eliminate undeserved inequalities. I am, in

¹ It may be that a new-found interest in metaphysical or ontological questions is already brewing among political theorists, though the evidence for this seems to me slim at best. See, for example, Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and David Mayhew, "Political Science and Political Philosophy: Ontological Not Normative," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33 (June 2000). To the degree that there is indeed movement along these lines, I am happy to be part of the trend.

short, a liberal, through and through. How, then, to explain my having written a book that defends the absolute authority of the state, insists on an essentially unlimited area of legitimate state activity, urges an organicist, hence non-individualistic, view of the state itself, and purports to raise serious doubts about the possibility and/or desirability of liberal toleration, civil disobedience and democratic government? Positions such as these would suggest, at least to some people, a sharp anti-liberalism. More seriously, they might seem to resonate with the very darkest impulses of some very dark times. As such, and in the present climate of political and scholarly opinion, they run the risk of appearing, at best, peculiar, unserious, even parodic. Insofar as they are intended to be taken seriously – and I assure the reader that they are – do they not utterly contradict their author's own political inclinations?

In fact, there is no contradiction. The exploration of the idea of the state is neither more nor less than an inquiry into the meaning of an idea, a work of conceptual analysis, hence an attempt to get clear about how we conceive of – how we understand the nature of – a particular part of the world. It is, as such, quite distinct from any and all claims about which kinds of political policies are apt to work best in which kinds of circumstances. Philosophical questions are different from, and not reducible to, pragmatic or prudential ones; and this suggests, as I shall argue, that an examination of the idea of the state should not be confused with an examination of government and policy. Indeed, it seems plain to me that the idea of the state is, in fact, quite consistent with an entire range of political forms and practices. Hobbes argues that a legitimate commonwealth might be monarchically, aristocratically or democratically organized. In saying this, he suggests, in effect, that the notion of the state itself does not entail and does not depend on any specific answers to questions about the best form of government, the proper scope and direction of governmental activity, the true nature and range of civil liberties, and so on. Such a view is shared, *mutatis mutandis*, by a variety of authors – Aristotle, Locke and Rousseau especially come to mind – and it seems to me absolutely correct.

The argument should not be misunderstood, however. If the state is what it is independent of particular public policies, the reverse is not true. For everything that government does is hostage to, and must be reflective of, the idea of the state. In this context, Hobbes's point can be expressed somewhat differently. The state is in fact quite generous regarding government and governmental activity; it can embrace many different kinds. But government – however formulated – is always underwritten by, and must always serve the interests and goals of, the state. To get clear about the idea of the state is to say little if anything about which particular

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governmental forms, procedures and policies should be adopted in any particular circumstance; but it is to provide, nonetheless, at least one indispensable basis for their justification and, at the same time, for ruling out practices that cannot be so justified. Political preferences, whether of the left or right, make sense and can be coherently defended only if they reflect the political state as it really, essentially is; and as I shall argue, this means that they should reflect the fact that the state is, among other things, omniscient in scope, absolute in authority and organic in composition.

Some readers may think of my account as “rationalistic,” and this is a label that I would not disavow. We are often told that everything is “political” in the sense of being ideological, that the laws of logic are not only optional but somehow biased, that political philosophy is primarily an aesthetic endeavor. Indeed, claims such as these seem to compose something of a present-day orthodoxy, but I myself find them largely untenable. I do agree that every kind of discourse – even the most severely technical, the most austere logical – has a rhetorical dimension. But I don’t think it follows from this that all discourse is merely, or even mainly, rhetoric. My analysis of the state presupposes a strong and extremely important difference between sound argument and gaudy assertion, and I am convinced that most of us are at least implicitly committed to such a difference most of the time.

Parts of this book have previously appeared, in a somewhat different form, as articles in learned journals, including the *American Political Science Review*, *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics* and *Kant-Studien*. These sections deal largely with exegetical issues pertaining to, among others, Plato, Hobbes, Kant and Rawls. While each of them seems to have functioned well enough as a self-standing piece, they were all originally conceived and written as integral parts of the present work. I wish to thank the editors in question for permission to republish here the relevant material.

I am profoundly grateful to Jens Bartelson, Casiano Hacker-Cordon, Richard Dagger, Bob Jessop, Jeff Johnson, Michael Parkhurst, Susan Shell, Joseph Tobin and Elizabeth Wingrove, each of whom read all or much of this work in draft and provided, without exception, stimulating, edifying and enormously helpful comments. I am very much indebted, as well, to Cambridge University Press – in particular, to John Haslam and Ian Shapiro – for being willing to publish a book that is in many ways orthogonal, one might say, to much of what is published today in political theory. Finally, and as always, I am enormously grateful to Reed College – students, colleagues, staff, friends – for providing an environment that is most unusual in the degree to which it inspires, sustains and celebrates the activity of being an intellectual.