

Introduction: political philosophy in the twentieth century

CATHERINE H. ZUCKERT

Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century began as a special issue of *The Review of Politics* intended to illustrate the variety and depth of philosophical analyses of politics in the face of the purported demise of political philosophy.¹ With the addition of ten new essays this book expands the range of positions and arguments represented.

We thought it desirable to demonstrate the richness and vitality of philosophical reflection on political issues in the twentieth century in response to the many observations of its weakness, if not death. As Dana Villa observes as the beginning of his chapter on Arendt, “in the 1970s and 1980s, students of political theory invariably encountered the cliché that political theory and philosophy died sometime in the 1950s, only to be revived in 1971 by the publication of John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*.” Much as he admires Rawls’s work, Villa is nevertheless “taken somewhat aback by the radical foreshortening of the history of political thought implied by this cliché. After all, the 1950s and early 1960s saw the publication of some of the most interesting – and enduring – works of political theory of the past sixty years or so.” A few “landmarks” of “what was, in retrospect, a remarkably fertile period for political thought” include Leo Strauss’s *Natural Right and History* (1953), Eric Voegelin’s *Order and History* (1956–7), Isaiah Berlin’s *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969), Jürgen Habermas’s *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1963), Michael Oakeshott’s *Rationalism and Politics* (1962), and Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), *The Human Condition* (1958), and *On Revolution* (1963).

In his chapter on H. L. A. Hart, John Finnis observes, moreover, that the revival of political philosophy attributed to Hart and Rawls was weak and partial. They broke the bounds of political philosophy as conceived by

¹ *The Review of Politics* 71, no. 1 (2009).

Introduction: political philosophy in the twentieth century

many in their analytic philosophical circle by going beyond generalizations about historically given institutions to offer sober accounts of what human persons and groups need and rationally desire. Hart and Rawls also proposed arrangements that are *universally* valuable (good) for beings with the nature we have. But they were not willing to admit the implication – namely, that the asserted autonomy of political from moral philosophy was not sustainable. Nor were they willing to take up the full range of issues raised by the tradition stemming from Plato and Aristotle.

In a speech he was asked to deliver at the Library of Congress on June 9, 1999, Pierre Manent thus lamented,

The twentieth century has witnessed the disappearance, or withering away, of political philosophy.... However highly we might think of the philosophical capacities and results of Heidegger, Bergson, Whitehead, or Wittgenstein, we would not single out any of them for his contribution to *political* philosophy.... It is true that... authors like Sir Karl Popper and Raymond Aron have been worthy contributors to both general epistemology and political inquiry.... And some modern representatives of that venerable tradition of thought, Thomism, have offered serious reflection on moral, social, and political problems within a comprehensive account of the world. But despite such countervailing considerations, the general diagnosis seems to me to be inescapable: no modern original philosopher has been willing or able to include a thorough analysis of political life within his account of the human world, or, conversely, to elaborate his account of the whole from an analysis of our political circumstances.²

As indicated by the title of his speech, “The Return of Political Philosophy,” however, Manent also saw some movement toward a revival. He mentioned several of the authors featured in this volume – Hannah Arendt, Michael Oakeshott, and Leo Strauss – as having taken important steps in this direction.

The wide array of authors and approaches featured in this collection is intended to demonstrate that the three authors Manent named are by no means the only twentieth-century thinkers who perceived the need to bring the rigor of philosophical analysis to bear on questions of politics. Like Socrates, they have continued to ask the question that is first for us, if not first in itself: How can we best live, not merely as individuals, but also in communities that have to coexist, if not actively cooperate, in an ever more closely interrelated world? That is the enterprise of political philosophy in which all the authors featured in this volume have engaged.

² Pierre Manent, “The Return of Political Philosophy,” *First Things* 103 (May 2000): 15.

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Edited by Catherine H. Zuckert

Excerpt

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Introduction: political philosophy in the twentieth century

Sources of the crises – philosophical and political

Why, then, has political philosophy seemed to be such a highly questionable, if not moribund, endeavor to many observers? The answer to that question can be given briefly in two words: science and history.

In the early nineteenth century G. W. F. Hegel famously announced that philosophy as literally the search for wisdom had come to an end, because it had culminated in his work in the possession of science or knowledge. Even more famously Karl Marx stood Hegel on his head by agreeing that there was a necessary course of historical development that was coming to its end, but arguing that this development was determined by the material conditions of production, not by ideas. The neo-Kantian philosophers who succeeded both Hegel and Marx contested the latter's contention that ideas were merely reflections of, or ideological justifications for, underlying economic conditions by arguing that human beings do not have any knowledge of the “world” independent of mental categories or constructions; and Vladimir Lenin transformed “Marxism” from an argument for historical inevitability into a “Marxist-Leninist” political program that provoked vehement responses from right, center, and left. Yet neither the philosophical critique of the historical inevitability thesis offered, for example, by Friedrich Nietzsche, nor the gradual revelation of the repressive policies undertaken by proponents of socialism in one country, prevented academic commentators such as George Sabine and Anthony Quinton from arguing that the great works in political philosophy were simply descriptive accounts of political institutions and activities along with recommendations about the ideal ends that reflected their authors’ time and place.³ Having concluded that all thought was historically conditioned and therefore limited, these scholars did not deem it possible for thinkers to rise above or beyond their particular circumstances in a way that would enable them to consider, much less determine, the best way for human beings to live – as individuals or in communities.

Although the terrible events associated with World War II made members of the generation who experienced the horrors question the validity of all arguments concerning historical inevitability, much less progress, Hegel’s thesis about the “end of history” was revived after the fall of the Berlin Wall

³ George Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York: Holt, 1937); Anthony Quinton, ed., *Political Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1.

Introduction: political philosophy in the twentieth century

and the conclusion of the so-called Cold War in 1989.⁴ This time the claim about the “end” rested less on a claim about the possession of complete knowledge, however, and more on the purportedly universally satisfying social and political arrangements that had been found and established in liberal social-welfare democracies. As the chapters in this volume make clear, that explicitly normative claim has been vigorously contested.

It is impossible to inquire about the best life for a human being, the way traditional political philosophers did, if one is convinced that human thoughts and deeds are historically determined. Why ask about something that cannot be changed? Why strive for a suprahistorical perspective that is impossible for a human being to achieve? Although all the authors featured in this collection agree on the necessity of taking historical circumstances into account, both in reading the works of past authors and in proposing improvements in contemporary conditions, none agrees that human thought and action are historically, materially, or biologically determined. These authors contest deterministic theses, however, on different grounds. Whereas some affirm that there is such a thing as human nature that persists from one historical period to another, others maintain that human life is historically contingent. The predictions or analyses of the authors who argue that human life is essentially contingent are necessarily conditional, and their recommendations tentative. Yet the authors who rest their analyses of political possibilities on assertions about human nature confront the challenge posed by modern natural science, the second major source of doubts about the possibility or validity of what is called political philosophy.

The challenge posed by modern natural-scientific analyses of the world to human freedom and agency was recognized long before the twentieth century. Because the nexus of cause and effect described by modern natural science left no room for human freedom or morality, at the end of the eighteenth century Immanuel Kant was led to posit a transcendental source, or ground. Unhappy with the gap Kant left between the intelligible and the sensible worlds, Hegel famously tried to bring the two back together by means of a historical synthesis. Later critics were not satisfied with Hegel’s account of modern natural science or with his description of the final, best state of human affairs. Neo-Kantian philosophers such as Hermann Cohen again took modern natural science to be the paradigm of human knowledge,

⁴ The most famous exponent of the revived thesis was, of course, Francis Fukuyama in his *The End of History*. See Tim Burns, ed., *After History? Francis Fukuyama and His Critics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994) and Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 2006) for some of the better-known direct critical responses.

Introduction: political philosophy in the twentieth century

but they argued that the progress of science would be accompanied by the development of a freer and more moral political order. Hegel-influenced but distinctly American “pragmatic” philosophers such as Charles Peirce and William James developed a less systematic and logical, more empirical, hypothetical, and incrementally cumulative understanding of natural science. As David Fott reminds us in the first chapter in this volume, John Dewey argued that this more “pragmatic,” experiment-based understanding of modern natural science was not merely completely compatible with but could actively promote the spread of democratic political institutions and practices. Unfortunately, as the chapters on the émigrés in the second section of this volume show, both popular and philosophical faith in the essential compatibility of the progress of modern natural science and democratic politics were shattered by two world wars and the development of nuclear weapons.

Continuing to take modern natural science as the paradigm of knowledge, “logical positivists” like A. J. Ayer contended that the only things we can know are “facts” based on empirical observations that can be replicated and so verified.⁵ They held that it is possible to analyze what we mean when we use “concepts” such as “the state,” “obligation,” or “law.” Indeed, this became the business of an “analytical,” linguistic political philosopher. Such analyses cannot tell us what to do or provide us with political “ideals,” however, because all judgments of good and bad or “values” are merely expressions of emotional responses having no cognitive status. These admirers of modern natural science did not appear to see, as Nietzsche had, that science (knowledge or truth) is itself a value; human beings would not pursue it if they did not believe that it was good. Although the arguments of the positivists have been thoroughly criticized, if not refuted, by “moral realists,” such positivist views still dominate American social science, and American modes of social science are rapidly spreading throughout the rest of the world.⁶

Responses to the crises – political and philosophical

The authors featured in this volume all respond to the challenge posed by the apparent success of modern natural science by arguing that the frameworks, methods, and models employed by modern natural scientists

⁵ A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: V. Gollancz, 1938).

⁶ See the centennial issue of *The American Political Science Review* (APSR 100, no. 4 [Nov. 2006]: 463–665).

Introduction: political philosophy in the twentieth century

do not capture what is distinctive about human action and thought. To understand what kind of knowledge modern natural science represents as well as its value, they urge that it is necessary to investigate its source, that is, the human beings who seek knowledge, why they seek it, and with what results. Human beings do not merely react to external stimuli, these authors observe; human beings act, which is to say that they choose to act or not to act in certain ways under specified circumstances, and their actions have effects – intended as well as unintended. None of these authors would endeavor to discover how human beings can best live, which is to say, none of these authors would engage in the enterprise generally called political philosophy, if they did not think that human beings have or at least can have some degree of agency. And they would not think that human beings have agency if they thought that human life was historically, materially, or biologically determined.

Beyond an agreement on the possibility, if not fact, of human agency or freedom, the authors featured in this volume disagree markedly about both politics and philosophy. The sheer variety of political positions taken and the philosophical arguments used to support those positions demonstrate the existence of a rich and vibrant tradition of reflection and debate about the most fundamental issues of human existence. And the disagreements among these authors about the answers to such questions as “what is distinctively human?” and “what is the best political order?” speak very much against those commentators who would convince us that we are at “the end of history.” The persistence of disagreement about such fundamental questions nevertheless tempts many observers to believe that these questions cannot be answered and that political philosophy is therefore a fruitless endeavor.

The authors featured in this collection also advance arguments to show how human beings can and should face the dual challenges posed by the successes of modern natural science, on the one hand, and history, on the other. Some, such as John Dewey and Friedrich Hayek, urge us to rely on gradually evolving social orders and experiments that incorporate modern natural science. Others, such as Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and Yves R. Simon, look to philosophy to preserve not merely the memory but also the substance of a distinctively human way of life. Some liberal political philosophers, such as Isaiah Berlin and H. L. A. Hart, emphasize the limitations of human reason and knowledge in arguing that a space or spaces should be created and preserved in which human beings can and should

Introduction: political philosophy in the twentieth century

remain free to direct their own lives – individually as well as politically. Others, such as John Rawls and Richard Rorty, argue that more extensive state action is required not merely to protect but also to provide individuals with the resources they need to develop and follow a life plan of their own. All these liberal political philosophers explicitly jettison the claims about human “nature” made by older “social contract” theorists, however, to avoid the difficulties that modern natural science and history have raised about the grounds of such claims in appeals to “nature” or nature’s God.

Recognizing that there is no necessity that change will constitute progress if human life is not biologically or historically determined, other twentieth-century political philosophers find an opportunity for active self-definition, if not self-creation, in that very nondeterminism. These more explicitly activist stances vary, from Carl Schmitt’s contention that a people forms itself in a life-or-death decision beyond the law, to Hannah Arendt’s argument that individuals can show themselves to be distinctive only in public deliberations, to Michel Foucault’s late advocacy of a critical philosophy that would reveal the conditions under which “subjects” can transform themselves. Impressed by the power of modern industrial organization and technology to oppress individuals and communities as well as to free them from economic necessity, Jean-Paul Sartre and Jürgen Habermas have articulated different understandings of freedom – individual and communal – as well as means of securing it. Equally impressed by the homogenizing tendencies of modern technologies and state use of them, Michael Oakeshott and Alasdair MacIntyre have both urged their readers to adopt more tradition- and practice-based understandings of politics and community. Yet where Oakeshott is at bottom a radical individualist, MacIntyre condemns both the modern state and its capitalist economy for its fundamental selfishness. Charles Taylor has tried to combine a liberal concern for preserving individual freedom and diversity with a recognition of the fundamentally social character of the dialogical understandings we develop of ourselves and our communities. In some way his work represents a return to the Hegel-based attempt by Antonio Gramsci to adapt Benedetto Croce’s liberal recognition of the infinite diversity of concrete human historical experience to socialist politics.

The accounts presented in this volume of these diverse responses to the challenges posed by modern natural science and history to both politics and philosophy in the twentieth century are organized in the following manner, partly chronological and partly thematic.

Introduction: political philosophy in the twentieth century

Part I features three chapters on three thinkers who represent the three major political alternatives in the first half of the twentieth century: John Dewey (1859–1952), Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), and Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937). On his ninetieth birthday the *New York Times* announced that John Dewey was “America’s Philosopher.” As David Fott explains, Dewey thought that science and democracy would and should progress at the same time, in the same ways. Carl Schmitt’s famous rediscovery of “sovereignty” in the “state of exception” beyond the law and the “concept of the political” in the conflict of friends and enemies was intended to attack and undermine exactly the kind of progressive liberal politics Dewey espoused as well as to respond to the communist threat from the left. As Tracy Strong reminds us, Schmitt was a leading jurist under the Weimar Republic in Germany who joined the Nazi Party in 1933 and never recanted. Although Schmitt did not have a particularly high opinion of Hitler as an individual, he apparently thought that Hitler had demonstrated his ability to realize Schmitt’s understanding of “political theology” by making extralegal sovereign decisions. Antonio Gramsci was one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party in 1921. According to Joseph Buttigieg, Gramsci opposed the positivist doctrines and scientism dear to many more-orthodox Marxist-Leninists. He argued that the socialist goal of liberating the majority of humanity from the rule of the minority would not be brought about by the laws of nature or the inexorable march of history, but rather by “intelligent reflection, at first by just a few people and later by a whole class.”

Part II contains essays on the reflective responses to World War II, the Holocaust, and the development of weapons of mass destruction articulated by a group of philosophically trained émigrés from the continent of Europe: Leo Strauss (1899–1973), Eric Voegelin (1901–85), Yves R. Simon (1903–61), and Hannah Arendt (1906–75). All four became U.S. citizens and publicly argued for the superiority of American political institutions and practices to those of the European nations (Germany and France) from which they had come. Yet all four also suggested that American political life rested on an inadequate understanding of politics that needed to be more historically and philosophically informed. All four gave penetrating critiques of American social science, but their responses to the novel and in many ways frightening political developments of the twentieth century were very different. Strauss, Voegelin, and Simon all suggested that the weakness that the modern liberal democracies had displayed in the face of

Introduction: political philosophy in the twentieth century

the threat posed by the totalitarian regimes was ultimately a moral failure; all three looked to the history of philosophy, more or less broadly construed, for resources to shore up the faltering moral resolve of their fellow citizens. However, they put forward very different understandings of that history. Whereas Strauss argued that the vitality of the Western tradition arose from the fundamental conflict between reason and revelation, both Voegelin and Simon maintained that there was a fundamental continuity. As Steven Smith reminds us, Strauss suggested that a philosopher might need to write esoterically to avoid persecution by the authorities; yet, as Ellis Sandoz and Walter Nicgorski show, both Voegelin and Simon insisted that the philosopher's supreme duty was to proclaim the truth in the face of a hostile community.

As Dana Villa tells us, Arendt's investigation of the "origins of totalitarianism" led her to a very different analysis of the problem. By depriving human beings of any public or social space for free movement and discourses and by stripping them of the capacity for spontaneity by means of ideological conditioning and constant terror, totalitarian regimes had shown they could transform human nature. Asking how this dehumanization could have been carried out in the heart of civilized Europe, Arendt thought she had found the source of the problem in the history of philosophy itself: "From the Platonic analogy between the structure of the soul and that of the 'just' polity, to Aristotle's insistence on 'natural' relations of hierarchy, to Hobbes's and Rousseau's doctrines of a unitary sovereign will (whether monarchical or popular), to, finally, the Marxian idea of a society without class divisions that has 'overcome' politics . . . the tradition [had effaced] the *sine qua non* of authentic politics: the discursive relations of *plural equals*." Arendt attempted, therefore, to resuscitate a prephilosophical, ancient Greek understanding of politics as "the activity of debate, deliberation, and decision exercised by . . . diverse civic equals in a legally and institutionally articulated public space" that is diametrically opposed to Schmitt's more violent and moral "concept of the political."

Part III includes chapters on six different attempts on the part of two generations of Anglo-American political philosophers to articulate new and better defenses of liberal democratic political institutions in the face of challenges they faced from both left and right. Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992), Michael Oakeshott (1901–90), and Isaiah Berlin (1909–97) presented three very different arguments for limiting government to preserve what has come (to a considerable extent as a result of Berlin's work) to be known

Introduction: political philosophy in the twentieth century

as “negative” rather than “positive” freedom. These chapters are followed by accounts of the arguments given by H. L. A. Hart (1907–92), John Rawls (1921–2002), and Richard Rorty (1931–2007) to support liberal political principles and practices. Whereas Hart and Rawls attempted to revive modified forms of social contract theory, Rorty argued that such theory should be jettisoned entirely.

Hayek, Oakeshott, and Berlin all raised questions about both the rationality and the beneficial results of attempts by the central government to plan and direct economic or other forms of development. In contrast to earlier “social contract” thinkers, however, their arguments in favor of preserving liberty by limiting government did not rely on claims about human nature or an original compact. All three were too aware of historical contingency and change. As a result, all three emphasized the essential diversity, plurality, and incommensurability of the varied goods or goals human beings seek.

As Eric Mack shows, Hayek extended the economic analysis of “spontaneous,” unintended, and evolving order derived from Adam Smith to biology, language, morality, and law. Government was or ought to be one of the specialized associations that are intentionally created to serve a particular function – in this case, the enforcement of the “just rules of conduct” that secure the liberties of individuals. Hayek generally presented himself as an empirical social scientist whose findings were “value-free,” but Mack wonders whether Hayek could or should have so understood his prescriptions with regard to the rules of just conduct.

Reflecting his Hegelian education, Oakeshott, like Dewey, denied the validity of the empiricist suggestion that there is a difference between “the world” and the world of our experience. Yet, as Timothy Fuller reports, Oakeshott emphasized the differences among the modes of interpreting that experience that human beings invent for themselves. In particular, he argued that science, which understands the world in terms of stable, quantitative relationships; history, which makes sense of the world by treating all experience as past; and practice, which, including both politics and religion, understands the world as a tension between “what is” and “what ought to be,” are essentially different. In seeking knowledge of the whole, philosophy must thus investigate and expose the limitations of each of these modes. Rather than constituting a form of “politics by other means,” political philosophy for Oakeshott thus became a critique of attempts to make politics scientific or to begin everything anew, abstracting from history and tradition.