Introduction

What Is This Book About?

Think how natural it is in philosophy to begin an argument about what we *should* think with a claim about how we *already* think. One example of such a beginning is the previous sentence. A second example is the inference that because we would save a boy drowning in a nearby pond if we could do so at little cost to ourselves, we should donate money in order to save starving children on the other side of the world. A third is the inference that because we do not think wealth and privilege should influence our choice of political system, we should live in whatever system would be chosen by an individual who did not know what place he or she would come to occupy within it. In this book I argue that the method expressed by these moves does not work, at least in political philosophy, because the pre-existing thoughts it tries to turn into political principles are too messy and inconsistent to be utilised and ultimately systematised in the desired fashion. There are, I claim, no hidden or buried political principles of the right type and pedigree expressed or entailed by the many twists and turns of human thinking. Instead, we should derive political principles from actions, not thoughts. Although I cannot say in this book that actions always speak louder than words, I do say that certain types of action, including certain types of political and criminal action, speak more clearly than any type of thought, and can be treated as grounds for political principles in much the same way as political philosophers currently treat the latter. This means that just as we would consult the diners and not the chef in order to assess the quality of a meal, political philosophers should pay more attention to the behaviour of real citizens than to the reflections of other political philosophers when assessing the quality of different political systems. It also means that rather than thinking about *what we think we would do* in different hypothetical choice situations, political philosophers should think about *what we already do* in different political environments (and note that the previous sentence invoked an analogy for illustration, not an inference for justification).

These claims, of course, provide only a partial flavour of the book, not a description. This is to be expected. Even the best descriptions are partial, which is why in this introduction I want to offer several. The first and best of these is also the most general. It runs as follows. This book is a work *of* and *about* political philosophy. It is a work *of* political philosophy just insofar as it provides an answer to the question 'how should we live?'. It is a work *about* political philosophy just insofar as its chief focus is the particular method by which political philosophers have traditionally attempted to answer that question. As far as descriptions go, that is a good one to be starting off with, even if it already begs a number of questions, including most obviously the question of why the question 'how should we live?' should be seen as the key one for political philosophy. But we will get to *that* question soon enough. If it helps, we can say for now simply that this is a book about both how politics should be organised and how political philosophers should argue about how it should be organised.

A second way of describing this book is to describe it in terms of its key ideas. There are three of these, with three chapters to match. The first of these is *the impossibility thesis*, the idea that political philosophy seems impossible to do despite being impossible to avoid. It *seems* impossible to do just insofar as it seems impossible to provide a convincing and meaningful answer to the question 'how should we live?'. It *is* impossible to avoid just insofar as it is impossible for groups of human beings to avoid living in accordance with one or other such answer, regardless of whether the principles expressed by that answer have been agreed upon, regardless of whether they have ever been made explicit, and regardless of whether they be libertarian or egalitarian, or anarchist or authoritarian in nature. Because we always live with other human beings, however distant those others might be, we are always living under one or other political system, regardless of how unsystematic that system might appear to be.

The second idea is *mentalism*, the idea that the right way of doing political philosophy involves, most fundamentally, the derivation of convincing and meaningful political principles from purported patterns in our normative thoughts, by which I mean patterns that are claimed to exist in the way that we think about both what should and should not be the case in the world and what should and should not be done within it. This idea is developed in the form of two arguments. The first of these is that mentalism is the dominant method in political philosophy. The second is that mentalism can never succeed because the thoughts it tries to turn into principles are too inconsistent both within and between different individuals. Taken together, these arguments serve to explain just why it is that political philosophy appears impossible to do in the manner described by the impossibility thesis.

The third idea is *normative behaviourism*. This idea holds that rather than trying to convert patterns in human thought into convincing and meaningful political principles, we should try to do the same with patterns in human behaviour, and in particular patterns involving insurrection and crime. What unites these two forms of behaviour, I claim, is the fact that, because they involve considerable personal risk, individuals only engage with them when they are deeply dissatisfied with their current political system, either in terms of the nature and policies of that system, or in terms of the ways of life that system makes available. This means, subject to a number of other arguments, that we should judge political systems that produce less of this behaviour as better than those that produce more, and the one that produces the least, a system I label 'social-liberal-democracy', as the best available. But still, the argument that attempts to apply normative behaviourism in order to prove the superiority of this political system is by no means the most important in the chapter. More important by some way are the arguments directed against the many objections this approach to political philosophy is likely to encounter. These objections, of which there are many, include the claim that normative behaviourism moves from an 'is' to an 'ought' and from 'facts' to 'principles' in an unacceptable manner, the claim that it implicitly relies on some deeper set of normative principles for which no adequate argument has been given, and the claim that it rules out any further political progress by restricting our options solely to those political systems that have already been historically tested.

A further way of describing this book would be to say something about how I arrived at these ideas. For the longest time I could not put my finger on it. Is there something about the subject matter of political philosophy (rights, justice, democracy, legitimacy, liberty, equality, and so on) that makes it impossible to resolve its central disagreements? Is the subject too complicated for any one person to be able to both see the full picture and convince us of the right position within it? Is the subject too young to deliver what we want it to deliver? Or is there something else going on? This book, clearly, is written in the conviction that there is something else, given that I am now convinced that political philosophy perpetually moves from one stalemate to another, which is to say one rationally interminable debate to another, on account of the method by which political philosophers reason to their conclusions. But it was not a conclusion reached overnight. It took years of false starts and wrong turns. It took, not just philosophical enthrallment with the depth and importance of this intractability, but also, if I am completely honest, some sort of political commitment to the idea of having relatively objective standards (if you can forgive the phrase) by which one could measure

political ideals. It took a long and winding intellectual journey, as Chapter 1 attests, before I eventually realised that the problem was, fundamentally, not one of finding a new and magic set of principles – libertarian, egalitarian, democratic, etc. – but rather of the method political philosophers use to generate them.

Such reflections show that if one had to describe this book yet another way, and summarise it with a single term, then one should probably pick the m-word used twice in the previous paragraph: *method*. We might put it like this. Every day, in every part of the world, people argue about politics. Much of this argument is empirical in nature. That is, it is about whether this or that policy will work in the intended fashion. Will this budget boost economic growth? Will this treaty bring climate change under control? Will these measures reduce crime? But not all political argument is like that. The arguments that really bite, that really divide people, are not about whether or not a given policy is effective, where each side agrees what the right effects would be, but rather about whether or not the goals of those policies, and in particular the priorities those goals express, really are the right ones for us to be adopting[1]. This book is a contribution to that kind of argument in two ways. It provides, as noted earlier, an aid to that argument just insofar as it provides a particular set of priorities for us to adopt, along with an argument for why those priorities are the right ones, but that is not the most important thing. More important by far is the fact that it provides a new method, or model of enquiry, or, if you like, a new theory of how the kind of biting and dividing arguments described should be conducted, at least at the somewhat removed level of political philosophy – for I am certainly not insisting that every politician and citizen should always proceed, in every circumstance, in the strictest accordance with what I am calling normative behaviourism.

Finally, we might describe this book, not in terms of its arguments, or indeed the genesis of those arguments, but rather its intended audience. Who are *they*? Or indeed: Who are *you*? Most obviously, the arguments that follow are for political philosophers whose interests are broadly methodological, as well as those who feel intrigued, frustrated, or, like me, a mixture of both at the way arguments currently seem to run out of air in our field. But not just for them. Some readers, I imagine, will be scholars who say that political philosophy should be more political,

[1] I say 'priorities' here because sometimes we agree about the desirability of a given outcome – e.g. 'finding a cure for cancer' – without agreeing on the prioritisation implicit in a particular policy intended to realise that outcome – e.g. 'devote half of all government expenditure to finding a cure for cancer'. Similarly, one can approve of equality of opportunity, or even of outcome, as ideals, without wanting to pay the costs accrued in fully realising them, and thus prioritising them over all such costs.

or historical, or empirical. Some will be those who say that pluralism undermines political theory, or who say the same about the 'realities of politics'. Some will be intrigued by the relationship between facts and principles as well as the connection between that relationship and politico-philosophical argument. And so on and so forth. There are many strains of argument to which the arguments of this book connect, and many readers, at least potentially, accompanying them.

More generally, there will also be those who are simply looking for something new to get their teeth into after what they see as too many rehashed suppers – particular interpretive debates about Rawls revisited under 'global justice' and 'ideal theory', for example, or particular debates about value-pluralism reissued, all of a sudden, as debates about political realism. More generally still, there will be those who are here because they are frustrated, not just with the lack of progress towards consensus in political philosophy, but also by the fact that that lack encourages the almost complete absence of political philosophy from political practice. After all, how are political philosophers supposed to convince politicians of the right path if they cannot persuade each other? Naturally, like most authors, I would like to reach as wide an audience as possible, and who knows, given the way I try to work up from fairly clear propositions to rather more complex conclusions, perhaps some of my readers will be undergraduate or graduate students needing a single book to give them a taste of the field and (what I take to be) its flaws. Perhaps I'll even have a few philosophically curious members of the general public. Yet none of that is for me to decide. Getting to those audiences requires getting through the more particular and expert audiences already described, and that is no easy task.

This takes us, I think, to the limits of these kinds of descriptions, which is to say the limits of the various perspectives they afford. What we need now is to move beyond such descriptions of this book in order to provide a full, step-by-step synopsis of the arguments it contains. Clearly, my hope is that what has already been said will render more intelligible this synopsis, just as the synopsis should render more intelligible those arguments it distils, and which begin in full as soon as it is over. *And yet*, with all that being said, do bear in mind in what follows that this book, like any other of its kind, is a circle. This means that the answer it provides at the end to the question it asks at the beginning also carries with it an answer to the questions some might have thought begged by the initial enquiry. For example, just as my argument that political philosophy should be understood fundamentally in terms of the question 'how should we live?' cannot be rendered entirely convincing in the absence of an argument as to *how* that question should be

answered, so can the significance and terms of the question 'can we provide an answer to that question in the form of convincing and meaningful political principles?' not be fully vindicated in the absence of providing *those* principles.

Synopsis of Chapter 1

The working title for Derek Parfit's recent magnum opus, *On What Matters*, was *Climbing the Mountain*. That phrase resonates here, and for at least two reasons. First, because what I want to do over the course of these three synopses, as well as in this book as a whole, is slowly take readers, step by step, to the summit of what must seem at the outset a rather improbable argument. Second, because it implies something that is required both of this argument and of any mountain, namely, that one has to start at the very bottom, which means in this case a very simple question: *what is political philosophy?*

Chapter 1 begins with my answer to this question, which is that political philosophy should be defined, not in terms of a concept, such as justice, or an institution, such as the state, but rather itself in terms of a question: *How should we live?* This definition, I believe, is both inclusive and exclusive in the appropriate fashion. It is inclusive just insofar as it does not rule out from the start any one particular approach to political philosophy, including, for example, those who would rather describe what they are doing as political *theory*. To take just a few examples, the 'how' and 'live' can be answered in anarchist or authoritarian terms, the 'we' in terms of all humanity or just twenty-first-century Germans, and the 'should' in terms of rationality or morality, or indeed something else altogether. Yet it is also exclusive, in just the way we would want it to be, given that it rules out any confusion of political philosophy with other subjects, such as moral philosophy, or the many social sciences – including political science – each of which we might further organise in terms of the questions 'how should *I* live?' and 'how *do* we live?'.

The only problem with this question-as-definition is that as soon as we try to answer it, we realise that we have unearthed an even trickier question, namely, *why should we live that way and not another?* This latter question I call political philosophy's 'foundational question' (FQ), in contrast to the former's status as what I call our 'organising question' (OQ). Let me clarify that distinction: whereas the organising question focuses our minds by delineating the relevant subject matter, without ruling out in advance any one way in which it might be approached, the foundational question directs our attention to what is in fact the real philosophical challenge. We might, after all, answer the first by saying

something as simple as 'liberal-democracy'. The problem comes when someone asks 'why?'.

The question that truly organises this book, however, involves a third, though again related, formulation: *is it possible to provide a convincing and meaningful answer to political philosophy's organising question?* This question – our 'guiding question' (GQ) – is the question the rest of the book sets out to answer. We can explain this question by explaining its two key terms. Consider first of all that attempts to answer our organising question can be more or less precise and more or less persuasive. This means that when I say I want a *meaningful* answer, what I mean is that I want an answer capable of giving us a clear and reasonably full picture as regards how either a given society or set of societies, or indeed all societies, should regulate their collective political life. This does not mean that for an answer to be meaningful it has to set out for us every last detail of an ideal constitution. What it means is that, even if that answer comes, as it probably will, in the form of general political principles, those principles must be determinate enough to ensure that, when applied with local facts, and whatever concrete processes the particular principles require, a fairly clear picture of that constitution can be generated. Consider the same point from another angle. A useful rule of thumb here is that for an answer to OQ to be meaningful, it must at the least be able to distinguish between the leading answers to OQ put forward in our time, such as libertarianism and egalitarianism in political philosophy, and communism and fascism in political practice. For example, any answer that does nothing more than claim that the right answer to OQ is that all political systems should ensure clean water for everyone, will clearly have failed by the standard of comprehensiveness expressed by both this rule and the concept of 'meaningfulness' it represents.

By a *convincing* answer, in turn, I mean an answer that is rationally more compelling than any other offered answer. So, although I do not say that such an answer has to be demonstrably correct, I do hold that a convincing answer has to be demonstrably more attractive, and thus at least 'more' correct, than any other suggested answer. Consider once more the relationship between OQ and FQ. For an answer to OQ to convince us, it must be accompanied by a convincing answer to FQ. It must, that is, be able to convince us not just that a particular set of political principles is demonstrably more attractive in terms of some prior normative standard, but also that that standard is itself the most convincing one available. Our answer to OQ, therefore, is supposed to convince human beings of the attractiveness of a given set of political principles, which means, amongst other things, that it must be able to convince them of the merits of every step of argument it takes along the

way, right from the very beginning, or, if one prefers a different metaphor, from the ground up.

So how do we find such an answer? We start by working through the most influential arguments in our subject. This quest, like most quests in contemporary political philosophy, begins with Rawls, even if it does not stay with him for long. In fact, rather than dwelling too long on any one argument at this stage of our enquiry, the point at first will simply be to juxtapose a large number of well-known arguments in terms of their answers to OQ and FQ – including libertarian, egalitarian, and communitarian alternatives to Rawls' case – in order to see just what kind of argument is likely to be necessary to generate the sort of convincing and meaningful political principles we seek. Or, alternatively put, rather than pausing too long to examine the many details of each argument, together with the details of those arguments directed against them, the aim at this stage is rather to identify the type of argument deployed by each thinker in order to see just what prospect there is for producing an argument of that type capable of convincing all of these different thinkers.

This point about focusing on the 'kind' or 'type' of argument employed is difficult to fully capture in advance, although it should become at least a little clearer if I say that the gist of my conclusion at the end of this stage is that each of the thinkers considered tries to make convincing their particular set of political principles by grounding that set in some further set of values, the force of which is supposedly secured by yet a further case to the effect that these are values to which we are *already* committed. It should also become clearer if I say that, following this tentative conclusion, and also the conclusion that not one of these thinkers is likely to convince the others in terms of the particular set of values they put forward, my attention shifts to a set of arguments that at least *claims* to do something fundamentally different to the first group considered. These arguments tend to be arguments that begin by saying that they accept some or other form of 'value-pluralism', even if they do not always use that term. A wide number of thinkers and positions are examined here. As regards thinkers who appear to provide a way past such pluralism, special attention is paid to Isaiah Berlin, the later Rawls of *Political Liberalism*, Stuart Hampshire, Joseph Raz, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Richard Rorty. And, as regards some of the more collaborative efforts that claim to have transcended this deadlock, special attention is paid to arguments that attempt to unite us either with a particular ideal of democracy or with a particular ideal of tolerance. It turns out, however, that these arguments do little better than their forerunners. A brief sketch of the problems they encounter, starting with Berlin, runs as follows.

Berlin's case fails in the first instance because his argument that history shows both the truth of pluralism and the horrors of its political denial, and thus in turn the necessity of liberalism, is undone by the fact that pluralism itself, on account of its insistence on the incommensurability of different human values, undermines the absolute political prioritisation of avoiding human suffering. But this is just the initial problem. His case fails in the second instance because when he tries to bolster that position by claiming that there are historically proven universal evils to be avoided, it turns out that even if this is true, the avoidance of such things is only a very general political goal achievable by a wide range of regime types, which means that we are still a long way short of distinctive and thus meaningful political principles.

Rawls' argument in *Political Liberalism*, by contrast, has no such struggle in generating sufficiently precise principles. His problem is that those principles are unconvincing. They are unconvincing because, even if he is right that a particular ideal of reasonableness requires that we accept whatever answer to OQ is generated by his well-known impartial choice situation, the 'original position', he is wrong to think that at least modern Western societies share that ideal in the way that would be required in order for its entailments to be convincing. His particular conception of reasonableness, it turns out, differs considerably from conceptions that could be said to be shared in the required fashion, which means that it is hard to escape the conclusion that it would be perfectly reasonable to be convinced by a completely different set of political principles to the ones that he claims are generated by the 'original position'.

This takes us to the arguments concerning, respectively, democracy and tolerance. The democratic case is perhaps the stronger of the two. This case – as advanced or contributed to by the likes of Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, Thomas Nagel, James Bohman, and Richard Bellamy – holds that rather than trying to decide on the right answer to OQ through philosophical argument, we should try to decide on at least some of its trickier parts through public debate. The primary problem with this case is that the values it draws on in order to set the necessary rules of this debate, together with the wider political system required by these rules, cannot be produced themselves, and thus justified, by that debate. The secondary problem is that the thinkers who advance these rules provide even less defence of them than can be found in the libertarian, egalitarian, and communitarian cases considered at the first stage of our enquiry, with not one part of those defences, even when combined with other arguments, appearing at all capable of convincing most people in the required manner.

The case for tolerance also relies on a set of values for which insufficient argument has been offered, despite beginning, just like the democratic case, with what appears to be a rather promising idea. This idea is that different people could be convinced by a single answer to OQ provided that that answer gave enough leeway to different cultural groups to ensure that everyone's way of life is supported, regardless of the different opinions each group holds about the lifestyles of the others. The problem with this position is that it elides much too readily between the interests of traditional cultural groups and the interests of the individuals who inhabit them. It is claimed by the proponents of this case that the well-being of all is well served by a system that protects the traditional cultural identities already found in a given political system, but that is just not true. What *is* true is that the well-being of those who prize such traditional cultural ways of life above all else is promoted at the expense of those who do not, including most obviously those who inhabit cultural groupings that stand at odds with their own personal ideals and ambitions. This means that the case for such a political order cannot be put in terms that would be rationally compelling to a large number of those who would have to live with it, and thus that that the order itself cannot be deemed a convincing answer to OQ.

This takes us to Stuart Hampshire, who echoes Berlin's second line of argument by saying that the idea of universal evils holds the key to our problems. He also echoes Berlin by saying that a proper understanding of history is crucial, although the particular historical story he tells is rather different. His story centres on an idea he calls 'adversarial reasoning', which is the kind of reasoning that occurs when a verdict is reached through a comparison of two or more rival positions. This is the kind of reasoning we find in law courts and parliamentary debates, but not just here. According to Hampshire, it has been the successful political model adopted through the ages, on account of its ability to solve fierce disputes whilst avoiding universal evils. And, of course, it is also the kind of reasoning that Hampshire thinks gives us our convincing answer to OQ, just insofar as it brings with it clear requirements for the kinds of political system required for such reasoning to occur. But just how clear are those requirements?

Hampshire admits that in different cultures the two questions of (1) what kinds of political claims are settled by such reasoning and (2) how those claims should be balanced have been answered very differently, which is why he thinks the particular institutions adopted in each society will differ significantly. But this is rather worrying. What happens politically when different sections of society disagree both about the current political framework and the decision it reaches? And, on a more philosophical level, who