

Introduction

Like the weather, politics presents two starkly contrasting faces. Often, it comes in the form of calm and seemingly cloudless routine, stability, predictability, and consensus. When we survey the political landscape, for example, we find widespread acquiescence in particular modes of political organization and acceptance of the values generally thought to underlie them; entrenched rules and principles widely affirmed within particular communities as a legitimate basis on which to criticize the conduct of their members; the regular circulation of bureaucratic forms and instructions, passports issued and honored, wills written and upheld, contracts enforced, wrongdoers peacefully brought to justice in accordance with accepted procedures.

As often, however, politics brings conflict, struggle, disruption, coercion, brutality, uncertainty, disorder, violence, destruction, fear, subversion, and menace: one thinks of bombing raids, pogroms, terrorist attacks, genocides and “collateral damage”; of coups, revolutions, sweeping legislative change, invasions, electoral reversals, forced evacuations, conscription, hijackings, martial law, and the imposition of violent legal sanctions and penalties; of divided loyalties, naked ambition, sharp moral and religious disagreements, international realignments, and ethnic hatreds; and of intrusive surveillance, invasions of privacy, confiscations of property, arrest, interrogation, and torture.

Some might say that these two faces of politics represent the Jekyll and Hyde of political life. Just as we distinguish between good and bad weather, so we might straightforwardly identify *bad* politics with instability, subversion, and the disconcerting threat of violence and *good* politics with stability, order, and routine.

But a moment's reflection reveals that this Jekyll-and-Hyde theory of politics is far too simple. When we imagine the menacing hum of bomber formations approaching from the far horizon, our first instinct may indeed be to identify with the potential victims, quietly going about their business without realizing that their homes and communities are in grave danger. But while the raid may be terrible for them, in at least some cases we might reluctantly conclude that it could be justified for the greater good. Rather few, if any, significant political achievements have been entirely bloodless, and it is not obvious that we should never be prepared to use violence for the sake of legitimate political ends. Today, the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki that ended the Second World War, or even the "conventional" bombings of Tokyo, Dresden, and Hamburg, are no longer widely defended. But almost no one says we should not have done *anything* about the Nazis, and there are still many who defend the policy of nuclear deterrence as it was practiced during the Cold War, despite the obvious fact that it involved threatening literally *millions* of innocent civilians with incineration. Even if we doubt that these very drastic forms of violence can be justified under any circumstances, we might still concede that the more familiar forms of coercion and violence involved in the regular operation of criminal punishment can be more readily defended.

Furthermore, the mere fact that certain patterns of political cooperation are stable, enduring, and routine does not mean that they are therefore desirable or legitimate. Slavery has very often been a routine and widely accepted practice; so have (and are) child labor, the subordination of women, religious intolerance, and racial and ethnic discrimination. On reflection, then, we will often agree that some of these practices, even when hallowed by tradition, deserve to be swept aside in the name of freedom, equality, justice, and other important social ideals.

So political disruption and subversion, even when violent, may sometimes be good, and acquiescence in stable political routines may often be very bad. If there is a distinction between good and bad politics, then, it is not just the same as the difference between order and disorder, or between stability and instability. But when is politics good and when is it bad? Which forms of political action might be justifiable under what circumstances? When ought we to regard the stability of certain public institutions as a good thing and when ought they to be resisted or destabilized? And destabilized by what means and in favor of ... what?

The Quest for Justification

Humans are not, as Aristotle noted, political animals in the way that ants and bees are, simply programmed by natural instinct to organize themselves in certain iterating structures like nests and hives.¹ Rather, our political communities and institutional practices take many incompatible forms, and people have differed sharply on their relative merits. For example, almost everybody now claims to be for democracy. But until the last couple of centuries “democracy” was more often a term of abuse, rather like the word “fascist” is today. (And we tend to forget, of course, that not *all* fascists were the power-crazed crackpots we find in old war movies – at least some of them were serious, well-intentioned intellectuals who quite sincerely hoped to improve the world.) More generally, there have been theocracies, aristocracies, oligarchies, monarchies, and each has had its defenders and detractors. The variability of human political forms and our judgments about them is one of the most striking facts about us. It means that we cannot avoid thinking of our political practices as alterable, and even (if only in retrospect) as possible objects of choice. We can always ask: why should we continue to organize ourselves *this* way when we could have done it *that* way instead?

To ask such questions is to demand a justification for the current way of organizing things. That demand seems misplaced when behavior is determined by instinct or reflex. Swarming bees and herds of terrified wildebeest fleeing a predator do not have doubts about or demand justifications for what they are doing. Humans have instincts and reflexes, too, and doubtless much of our political activity is habitual and unreflective. But we strongly resist the idea that our political practices are wholly mindless. “Well, I just *do*” may be a perfectly reasonable reply to the question: “Why do you like strawberry ice-cream?” But “We just *do*” does not seem a satisfactory answer to such questions as: why do we enslave people? Why do we allow enormous disparities of wealth between citizens of the prosperous Western nations and the poor around the world? Why are we sometimes prepared to sacrifice innocent life in war? Such questions demand well-reasoned answers. If we are not convinced by any of the proposed justifications, we may conclude that the relevant practices should be

¹ Aristotle 1981, p. 60.

changed or eliminated. This assumes that, at some level, our political arrangements are subject to rational criticism and choice. This assumption lies behind the effort to distinguish political practices and forms of political action that can be justified and those that cannot. That effort, more than anything else, defines the general project of political philosophy.

Ideas and Concepts in Political Life

Aristotle put his finger on another, closely related, reason why our political interaction is not like that of bees, ants, and herds of wildebeest. Wildebeest do not talk and they do not use concepts. They do not recognize “authority,” they have no notion of what it is to be “represented” by other wildebeest, and they do not fuss about “wildebeest rights.” Nor do they urge allegiance or resistance to various practices within their herds for the sake of “freedom and equality,” or on the grounds that they are “required” as a matter of “justice,” that they possess or lack “legitimacy,” that they are part of or inimical to the “common good,” and so forth. However, such concepts seem central to human politics and to our efforts to justify our political arrangements to each other.

Broadly, these concepts are of two kinds. Some of them, like the concepts of “justice” or “the common good,” refer to certain ethical *ideals* routinely cited in justifications for (or objections to) political practices and actions. Thus we are often urged to reject slavery as unjust, to embrace democracy for the sake of equality and justice, or to topple dictatorships abroad in the name of freedom. Other concepts, such as those of “authority,” “representation,” “rights,” “property,” “coercion,” or “sovereignty” pick out aspects of political practice that themselves stand in need of justification.

Obviously, concepts of the first sort are most directly relevant to the search for justification in politics. We mainly want to know what justice requires, what a truly free society would look like, what is ruled out as subversive of the “common good,” and so on. And clearly this requires that we reflect on exactly what appeals to “justice” or the “common good” involve, how such concepts have the capacity to justify anything (if indeed they do), how we certify *what* they justify and so forth.

But concepts of the second kind raise philosophical questions as well. If we are asking (say) whether political authority can be justified, and if so when, we had better be clear on what exactly political authority *is*. Are

we? Do we immediately understand, for example, how authority differs from power (does it?), or what exactly it means to say that a judge, rather than my next-door neighbor, has authority over me? Is political authority similar to, or different from, the kind of authority that expert archeologists claim? Facing these questions often leaves us unexpectedly puzzled about things we at first thought we understood. When we ask them, we are not necessarily directly seeking a justification for a mode of political organization. But in order to understand *what* they are trying to justify, political philosophers must address these questions as well.

“Theory and Practice”

We have seen how, in the course of investigating the possible justifications that might be offered for different modes of political organization, we are led to reflect on the nature of political concepts like justice, freedom, authority, the state, and so forth. But some become quickly impatient with the resulting focus on concepts and ideas, and complain that it makes political philosophy an unduly “theoretical” as opposed to “practical” endeavor. Such critics charge that political philosophy is an academic diversion from active political engagement, from going out and “making a difference.” Instead of wasting our time with philosophy, we should go out and join the Labour Party, become a Young Republican, or sign up for the Peace Corps.

Plainly, doing philosophy is not exactly like working for Oxfam, running the country, or implementing public policy. Still, this does not make it helpful to understand the relation between political philosophy and political activity in terms of a broad opposition between “theory” and “practice.” Presumably those who want to “make a difference” by becoming politically active do not want to make *just any* sort of difference. They want to make *the right sort of difference*. The Nazi Party made a big difference, but we would not have much patience for someone who said: “Who cares about justice, equality, and all that? That’s merely theory. Practice is what matters. So I’m off to do my bit for the Third Reich – at least *that way* I’ll make a difference.”

In other words, we need to think intelligently about *where* to try to make a difference, about *which* political causes merit investments of our time and energy. This obviously requires some reflection on the proper goals and aims of political activity. Mostly, when people are asked why they become

politically involved, they will cite beliefs about justice, the common good, freedom, oppression, and equality, among others. As we have seen, these beliefs, and the question of their soundness, form a major part of the subject matter of political philosophy. But rarely can we separate these beliefs about the goals of political action from our actions themselves; usually the two are seamlessly connected. For example, there is not some bit of my voting in an election that is “pure activity,” neatly separable from my beliefs about why a particular candidate deserves my support, or about why I should bother to vote in the first place. My vote and these beliefs about it are of a piece.

This has an important consequence. If the beliefs on which we act in politics do not make sense, our actions may not make sense either. In principle, then, philosophical reflection on these beliefs has the power to expose certain of our political activities as confused, to make it clear that we ought to behave otherwise than we do. Neat and tidy distinctions between “theory” and “practice” obscure this point. The important contrast is not between some pure realm of moral ideals (“theory”) and a disconnected world of political action (“practice”). Rather, it is between political activity informed by relatively sophisticated and defensible beliefs about its goals and political activity guided by beliefs that are indefensible, confused, or simply stupid.

This is not just a point for those who consciously decide to become politically active in various ways. To adapt a famous remark of Leon Trotsky’s: “You may not be interested in politics, but politics is interested in you.” The point here is that, independently of our decisions to become politically active, we nonetheless find ourselves dragooned into concerted political action in a variety of other ways. This is why so much of our political involvement is expressed in the passive voice. In politics, we are constantly being expected, required, ordered, authorized (etc.) to ..., being manipulated, coerced, recruited, bullied, conscripted (etc.) into ..., and being organized, regulated, controlled (etc.) so that ... Very little of this is in any sense voluntary; much of it goes on without our even noticing, like sales taxes.

Consider, for example, our relationship to the modern state. This immensely powerful and ubiquitous political agency makes significant claims on us. In order to reproduce itself, to promote its goals, to perform its functions, to fight its wars, citizens are recruited, usually involuntarily, into organized action. In this sense, the state makes us all politically active

despite ourselves – it transforms us into the agents of *its* projects. Most go along with this out of habit and socialization, encouraged from an early age to believe (perhaps) that the state promotes justice and our common good, that we have some sort of obligation to comply with it, that it represents us and our interests, that it is an agent of our collective self-government, and so forth. These familiar beliefs and habits of thought purport to justify the state and the forms of collective action over which it presides. But as before, when political philosophers ask whether those beliefs make sense, they are also asking whether these forms of collective action and organization themselves make sense. Insofar as these practices and beliefs partly constitute the terms on which we understand and conduct our own lives, the question of whether they make sense is hardly a purely abstract or “theoretical” one.

The Plan of the Book

This book is divided into three parts. Part I (Chapters 1–6) raises the general question of how philosophers can gain appropriate critical distance on public affairs. Chapter 1 explains why the effort to achieve such critical perspective has proven notoriously problematic, and elaborates some of the philosophical challenges it faces. The next three chapters discuss and evaluate one family of attempts to meet those challenges, organized around a framing ideal of the “common good.” Chapter 2 introduces the general idea of a “common good” in politics before setting out some challenging features of Plato’s perfectionist approach to it. Chapters 3 and 4 cover the contrasting account of the “common good” developed by classical utilitarianism. The following pair of chapters discuss the tradition of social-contract theory, which differs from the common-good approach in that it organizes political criticism, not around a conception of well-being, but rather around notions of willing agreement. In Chapter 5, I discuss the classical theory of the social contract as developed in the seventeenth century by Hobbes and Locke, and explain why it fell into disfavor in the eighteenth century. Chapter 6 describes and evaluates John Rawls’s attempt (in the late twentieth century) to revive social-contract theory for contemporary use.

Part II (Chapters 7–13) moves away from these more general issues of philosophical approach to address more overtly political questions. It deals

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directly with several largely independent, free-standing political topics: economic inequality and distributive justice (Chapters 7–8); territorial rights and immigration (Chapter 9); climate change and environmental justice (Chapter 10); war and international conflict (Chapter 11); political freedom (Chapter 12); and democracy (Chapter 13).

Part III (Chapters 14–15) returns to some of the more general questions left over from Part I and reconsiders them in the light of the intervening discussion. Chapter 14 asks how philosophical arguments might inform political practice, and engages extensively with Marx’s views on this topic. Although it dissents from some Marxian claims, it cautiously endorses others. The final chapter addresses a major contemporary debate over the value of “ideal theory” as it was influentially conceived by Rawls, which has recently been called into question by several critics. Though influenced by Marx, these critics have often been more interested in the plight of marginalized identity groups (especially groups defined by race, gender, and sexual orientation) than he was. Chapter 15 accordingly sets this general debate about “ideal theory” in the context of racial exclusion.

The three parts of the book are loosely cumulative. Part III presupposes acquaintance with the material in the first two parts. However, Part II is largely written as a free-standing discussion, as are each of its constituent chapters. Readers should therefore be able to dip into them without having read any of the earlier chapters, and in any order they like.

Part I

Politics and Critical Morality

1 Forms of Political Criticism

Mary Midgely once suggested that philosophy is like plumbing: nobody notices it until something goes wrong.¹ Whatever might be said about other areas of philosophical inquiry, Midgely's thought provides a helpful point of entry into reflection about the scope and purposes of political philosophy, and about the challenges it faces in accomplishing its critical aims. This opening chapter explores some of these general issues.

Exposing the Pipes

We noted in the Introduction that, although often sustained by habit and unreflective conformity, political practices are not wholly mindless. They are rather underpinned by at least tacit understandings of why they matter, of their purposes and value, and of our reasons for maintaining them. We rarely think very deeply, or even at all, before complying with legal requirements to pay our taxes, to have our car inspected annually, or to stop at a red light, but if someone asks us why we bother to do these things, we are not left speechless. To the contrary, various reasons for doing so will come readily to mind: considerations of fairness, safety, reciprocity, etc. Similarly, citizens of Western liberal democracies frequently take for granted their rights to vote, to speak and associate freely, and to engage in their preferred forms of religious worship. But again, they will not greet someone who argues that they should be stripped of these rights with shrugs of indifference. More likely, they will unleash a tirade about the importance of such rights for justice, equality, personal liberty, or the realization of democratic ideals.

¹ Midgley 1992.