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An Introduction to Political Philosophy

This book provides a comprehensive introduction to political philosophy. Combining discussion of historical and contemporary figures, together with numerous real-life examples, it covers an unusually broad range of topics in the field, including the just distribution of wealth, both within countries and globally; the nature and justification of political authority; the meaning and significance of freedom; arguments for and against democratic rule; the problem of war; and the grounds for toleration in public life. It also offers an accessible, non-technical discussion of perfectionism, utilitarianism, theories of the social contract, and of recently popular forms of critical theory. Throughout, the book challenges readers to think critically about political arguments and institutions that they might otherwise take for granted. It will be a provocative text for any student of philosophy and political science.

COLIN BIRD is Associate Professor at the Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics, University of Virginia. He is author of *The Myth of Liberal Individualism* (1999).

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
Published in the United States of America by Cambridge
University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521544825

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First published 2006

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN-13 978-0-521-83625-8 hardback
ISBN-10 0-521-83625-5 hardback
ISBN-13 978-0-521-54482-5 paperback
ISBN-10 0-521-54482-3 paperback

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To Adrienne, Nicholas, Teddy, and Tatiana

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Preface

This book has two aims: first, to stimulate critical reflection on political institutions and practices, and on the various arguments that might be offered for and against them; and second, to give readers an appreciation of the most provocative historical and contemporary contributions to political philosophy.

The book could be used as a free-standing text in an introductory course, or in conjunction with assigned readings from some of the major texts discussed (Plato, Hobbes, Rawls, and others). Although I have aimed for wide coverage, the immense scope of the field necessitates some selectivity, and this book does not pretend to be comprehensive or exhaustive. As a general rule, I have tried as far as possible to steer clear of excessive technical jargon, and of those contemporary debates that seem to me to have become boringly scholastic (e.g. “equality of resources” vs. “equality of welfare”; “individualism” vs. “communitarianism,” and so on).

Although I have not avoided *all* references to schools of thought, I have also deliberately chosen not to organize the book around ideological worldviews like “liberalism,” “libertarianism,” “socialism,” “feminism,” or “conservatism”. The most interesting arguments too often flow between these various positions. Moreover, I have found that emphasizing them encourages the false view that these ideological fixtures are natural kinds when in fact they reflect highly parochial political divisions. Focusing on them also implies that political philosophers are servants of ideologies, helping to make them more plausible, systematic, and rhetorically effective. We should discourage this perception. Political philosophers need not be loyal to particular ideological positions or movements and define their activities in these terms. Of course, there are many who today write in this vein – a liberal theory of this, a feminist theory of that, a libertarian defense of such and such – but I think this is clearly the *wrong* way to make

philosophy politically relevant. I hope this book helps readers to see a better way.

Thanks are due to Robert Amdur, Steven Wall, George Klosko, Stephen White, Illan Nam, Meghan Sullivan, Ryan Pevnick, Mindy Martin, Chris Zirpoli, Scott Weingaertner, Adrienne Kim Bird, and Graham and Louise Bird, all of whom have been immensely generous, either in taking the time to read and comment on drafts of various chapters, or in providing indispensable support and encouragement as I struggled to complete the manuscript. I am grateful to my current class of Politics Honors students for serving as involuntary guinea pigs, and for providing valuable feedback on readability. I must also thank an anonymous reviewer for Cambridge University Press for helpful suggestions about the final chapter. I am indebted also to Hilary Gaskin, for first floating the idea of this text, and for her patience and encouragement during the writing. Finally, special thanks to the staff of the Alderman Library coffee bar for vital chemical sustenance: I could not have finished, or even begun, this book without it.