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## Introduction

RICHARD BOURKE AND RAYMOND GEUSS

### I

Something happened in the West when Socrates began to confront the politicians of his day, the men who spoke in the assemblies and led the armies and navies of Athens, stopping them in the market-place and asking them to give an account of what they were doing and why they were doing it. It was not exactly a new form of inquiry that was being invented, but a new style of investigation. It is not as if this were a complete and radical break with the past or the absolute initiation of an inconceivably new practice, because as long as there have been human societies there have been problems of coordinating action, resolving disputes, and planning for the future; and planning for the future in any detail means envisaging in words alternative eventualities and courses of action. Once one specific possible future has been put into words, it is open to others to describe a different one. And how is discussion then ever to end? The oldest document of Western civilisation, the *Iliad*, begins with a group of men engaged in a common pursuit – the war against Troy – deliberating about how they should act in the face of an unexpected event, a plague. The real plot begins when Achilles refrains from putting an end to the public discussion by killing the reptilian king, Agamemnon, out of hand, and instead insults him.

Individuals and groups; envisaging the future whilst acting in the present; merit as opposed to status; speaking as against doing; cooperation versus conflict; intentions and their results; success and failure: these and other related contrasts mark out a terrain which humans learn to negotiate with as much dexterousness as they can muster. Three centuries after Homer, immediately before the advent of Socrates, during the generation of Thucydides and Protagoras, human beings had not merely accumulated a certain amount of rough-and-ready skill in this area, but had also begun to reflect

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carefully about politics – about its nature, and its demands. Still, for better or for worse, Socrates' mode of questioning, systematically eschewing any reference to traditional practices, received authorities or institutional contexts, and devaluing the cognitive, practical or aesthetic ability of those who are unable to give a sufficiently explicit, abstract and consistent definition of the basic terms they use, does represent the first faltering step down a path which European thought has pursued ever since. Socrates opens what many have thought represented yet another contrast in the domain of collective human action, a contrast between practical skill and a theoretical grasp of 'politics'.

The sequence of transformations which the concept of politics and of what it means to have an understanding of politics has undergone from late fifth-century BC Athens to the early twenty-first-century international *oikoumene* is too complex to trace here in detail, but in the most recent past, say during the last fifty years or so, there has been a significant institutionalisation of the study of politics in universities and related research institutions. This development had two important consequences for the cognitive structure of the enterprise of understanding politics. First, it was associated with a shift from looking at politics from the viewpoint of participants – that is, of political agents – to that of studying political processes from the point of view of notionally impartial observers. Thucydides, the author of the first great work of politics in the West, was, as he tells us himself, a failed and consequently exiled Athenian general who knew of what he spoke from first-hand experience; something similar was true of Cicero, Grotius and Machiavelli. But by the end of the twentieth century studies of politics were being conducted by purportedly neutral, politically detached experts in area studies, psephology, international relations and rational choice theory. The second consequence was that the study of politics came under pressure to conform to certain pre-given conceptions of what a proper academic discipline must be like. Ideally, a respectable academic subject had to have an ontologically distinctive subject-matter ('living things' for biology, specifically designated rules of social coercion for law, texts for philology) or use one of the recognised methods (observation, some form of deductive reasoning, experiment, interpretation, and so on) or, best of all, both. A reputable academic discipline had to have a distinctive theoretical vocabulary of agreed-on, well-defined,

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universally applicable concepts, and some recognised core body of systematically established doctrine. Beyond this, a distinction was recognised between empirical and normative disciplines.

The empirical study of political institutions and processes ideally comprised an interconnected system of facts, generalisations, and universally applicable theories that could be used for explanation and prediction. The practical relevance for politics of the ability to predict, if such an ability actually existed, is obvious; if it is an established ‘law’ that ‘democratic states do not go to war with one another’, then this would be of great importance in helping decide what kind of military preparations a democratic state should make, and against whom.<sup>1</sup> This supposed law, of course, is useful only if it is possible to identify which states are democratic and which are not, and this requires the exercise of at least a rudimentary kind of judgement, the ability to discern under which concept a given actual state falls. There is not much question about the fact that it is possible to study politics in *some* sense as a low-level empirical or descriptive subject; and although this does not preclude great theoretical unclarity about exactly what it is that one knows when one asserts that Angela Merkel is the Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany or that the United Kingdom uses a ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system based on geographically defined constituencies for the House of Commons, there is not really any genuine, or non-philosophical, disagreement that in both these cases one *knows something*.

It is less clear that this is the case when one considers what can be thought of as purely normative approaches to politics, except perhaps where norms are embodied in doctrines and backed by commands. Directives about how social and political life ought to be organised, and how individuals ought to act, have in the past been derived from Scripture or the teachings of Churches, but also from philosophical disciplines like ethics, for example in its utilitarian or Kantian variants, and most recently they have been derived from kinds of economic prescription, including forms of decision theory. That such

<sup>1</sup> For prominent examples of the diverse academic literature on ‘democratic peace’, see Dean V. Babst, ‘A Force for Peace’, *Industrial Research* 14 (April 1972), pp. 55–8; Michael Doyle, ‘Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12 (Summer/Fall 1983), pp. 205–35; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p. 29.

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directives can offer a kind of orientation and guide for action is not in doubt: ‘Always do what the Pope says (when he is speaking *ex cathedra* on a matter of faith or morals!)’ is a clear enough way to structure one’s life, although adopting this norm will require the exercise of some judgement to determine when the Pope has been speaking *ex cathedra*, and when not, and, of course, also judgement about how to apply to particular cases papal injunctions that have been enunciated in a general form. Whether, however, any of these purely doctrinaire approaches can satisfy the expectations they themselves raise as guides to a satisfactory, much less a good, life, is, to say the very least, unproven, and for many of them the suspicion that they are masks for interests other than those they acknowledge is hard to resist.

## II

Is this, then, what politics is about at its best – the exercise of judgement to subsume individual cases under explanatory and predictive general laws, or under universal principles of reason and morality? Over the course of a long and productive career John Dunn has made important contributions to a wide variety of areas of politics, and to the history of thinking about politics as well. Not, perhaps, the least of these contributions has been his break with some of the main constitutive features of the tradition of thinking about politics that has just been described. His work stands orthogonal to this tradition in a number of significant ways. Among these, two of his attempts to undo the impact of what can be seen as a Socratic paradigm of political understanding stand out. The first is his attempt to rehabilitate the standpoint and the cognitive and practical skills of the political actor, and this means recognising the importance of understanding the judgement of real political actors – where ‘judgement’ most definitely does *not* mean simply the subsumption of individual cases under pre-given concepts or rules.<sup>2</sup> Dunn’s second and related innovation is his emphasis on the historical variability and context-specificity of political concepts, once again in opposition to the tacit Socratic and Platonic assumption that key political terms – ‘justice’, ‘happiness’,

<sup>2</sup> This of course is one of the core ambitions of John Dunn’s *The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics* (London: HarperCollins, 2000).

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‘freedom’ and the like – designate in each case something that is definably the same *hic et ubique*. Both of these moves on Dunn’s part have been intended as a challenge to traditional normative and cognitive approaches to the understanding of politics. Together they prompt us to reconsider how political action is standardly conceptualised, and how the judgement of political value is ordinarily understood.

‘Property’ did not mean ‘the same thing’ for Locke as it did for Hayek,<sup>3</sup> and ‘democracy’ very definitely did not ‘mean’, or even designate, ‘the same thing’ for fifth-century Athenians as it does for any of the European societies of the early twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup> In order to resolve the resulting semantic confusion, the strategy that comes most naturally to much contemporary analytic philosophy is that of distinguishing conceptually between the ‘direct democracy’ of the ancients and the ‘representative democracy’ associated with much modern political practice. Each of these might be supplied with some kind of ‘Socratic’ definition, but neither has anything inherently to do with the other. From this perspective, the fact that both phrases contain the same component (‘democracy’) is no more relevant than the fact that ‘cat’ and ‘catapult’ share their first three letters. Recognition of this fact has some signal cognitive advantages, but it also in some sense misses the point, because part of what it is to understand the *political* meaning of representative democracy is to see in what way it derives its motivational attractiveness and persuasive power from a historical transformation of the semantic potential of the Athenian original. Understanding ‘representative democracy’ politically in the contemporary world means, in part, seeing why it can present itself as the appropriate modern version of the project of collective self-rule which expressed itself more vividly and emphatically under the ancient system of direct democracy. The form such understanding takes will have to be one of a complex history of words and concepts, and of

<sup>3</sup> See John Dunn, *The Politics of Socialism: An Essay in Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 9–10; John Dunn, ‘Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy: Compatibilities and Contradictions’ in John Dunn, ed., *The Economic Limits to Modern Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and John Dunn, ‘Property, Justice and the Common Good after Socialism’ in John Dunn, *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> See John Dunn, *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy* (London: Atlantic Books, 2005).

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the human actions these seek to capture – and, more particularly, of the human use of such words and concepts under conditions of potentially large-scale social and economic change. The provision of such complex historical perspectives was never part of the Socratic programme, or of any of its direct or indirect successors. But adopting it as the appropriate prerequisite for understanding politics promises to transform our sense of what political judgement involves.

Politics will always happen where human societies interact and struggle, and social life will always require the activity of judgement. A historical understanding of political action, and the judgements of value that accompany it, is forced to proceed in the absence of guiding norms or determinate concepts. Political judgement may not be a constant mayhem of disorientation and confusion, but neither is it an activity of applying rules or ascertaining norms. Diagnosing an error or thoughtfully avoiding a clearly discerned cul-de-sac is not tantamount to having a firm grasp on ‘the truth’ or a comprehensive map of the terrain that we inhabit. John Dunn has consistently pressed the question of how such practical judgements relate to wider theoretical claims about politics. The papers collected in this volume were written by historians, philosophers and political scientists who have been in one way or another inspired by the perspectives Dunn’s work has opened up. They are all centred in various ways on the question of what political judgement is, and what the prospects are for our coming to an understanding of it that might enable us to enlighten our own political practice.

The first section of the volume, comprising chapters by Raymond Geuss, by Victoria McGeer and Philip Pettit, and by Richard Bourke, deals with general issues about the nature of political judgement. Geuss begins by discussing what it might mean to construe ‘judgement’ not on the model of a human individual who entertains and then affirms or denies a proposition, but rather as a kind of action which is always located in a social, usually an institutional, context. His aim is to show how attempts to construe political judgement in the traditional terms of epistemology are bound to miscarry. The peculiar nature of the kinds of practical imagination involved in the formation of even the most straightforward political judgements ought to encourage us to consider political reasoning on its own terms, rather than as some sort of beleaguered extension of human reasoning as such. McGeer and Pettit, in chapter 2, examine how a focused analysis of the ways

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in which judgements are actually produced might help to improve its flexibility and reduce its pathological results. They underline the psychological vulnerability of human cognitive powers, and indicate how some of the perils of perception, particularly its in-built dogmatism and tendency towards inertia, are paralleled by problems associated with judgement. Judgement is in this sense resistant to change. How, McGeer and Pettit ask, can it be rendered comparatively open to innovation? They explore the idea that the techniques of rhetoric may have a useful cognitive role to play in freeing up the dogmatism of judgement, enabling people to entertain alternative perspectives.

Political innovation must aim at practical improvement. It is not some kind of inspired inventiveness, an idle search for a new style. It requires a sense of the stakes involved in seeking progressive change, an appreciation of the gravity of affairs. The flexibility needed in judging possible change requires a grasp of the significance of change. It depends on imagination and the cultivation of historical sense. It depends on a capacity to imagine the motivational force driving one's opponent's political values, an ability to conceive what is not present in one's own experience. Political judgement is therefore dedicated to imagining the world as it might be, but it must also be adept at assessing practical consequences as they would obtain in that hypothetical situation. In this sense it is a form of historical judgement. Richard Bourke addresses some of the issues that arise from taking seriously the claim that judgement is a *historically* located phenomenon, and the relation between the explanatory and justificatory ambitions of theories of judgement. The distinction between explaining and justifying political action has traditionally been rendered in terms of the difference between historical and philosophical approaches to politics. Taken together, the first three chapters in this collection illustrate how these distinct senses of what practical affairs involves affect how the role of judgement in politics is evaluated and analysed.

## III

The second section of the volume explores the confrontation between philosophical and historical modes of understanding politics through the history of political thought itself. The chapters by Skinner, Hont and Kaviraj examine the fraught relationship between causal and normative judgements about political life. Together they illustrate

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the historical tensions that have existed between the demands of political theory and political practice. The formulation of the tension in these terms extends back as far as the Socratic monologue with which Plato concludes the *Crito*. But the recurrence of this ancient philosophical vocabulary has a tendency to obscure the emergence of new problems in modern contexts still depicted in traditional idioms of thought.

We began this Introduction by recalling that a dominant strain of Western thinking about politics in some sense originated with Socrates. But despite the powerful influence of Socratic argument on philosophy, his importance to the history of political philosophy in particular has always been susceptible to distortion: his vital presence has been mistaken for a central position in the field. This commitment to the centrality of Socratic political theory is itself as old as Plato. But the assumptions underlying Plato's characterisation of the Socratic project are controversial. Can an ethical and epistemological vocation, of the kind that Plato ascribed to Socrates, be properly described as political in its orientation? In the *Gorgias* Plato has Socrates utter the remark that he saw himself as rare, perhaps unique, among the Athenians insofar as he was a practitioner of the only true political craft (*politikê technê*). Socrates' profession of political expertise is based on his claim to aim in life exclusively at what is 'best' instead of fitting in with the common sense of popular opinion.<sup>5</sup> Political judgement is identified with philosophical discrimination, and philosophy with the criticism of prevailing norms. The Socratic legacy to the early political thought of Plato thus assimilates the art of statesmanship to the pursuit of moral theory.

One cumulative effect of the attempts pursued in this volume to deepen our understanding of political judgement is to cast doubt on the tenability of Socrates' claim to statesmanship. But doubt should not be mistaken for sceptical complacency. Scepticism about Socratic and Platonic political pretensions must always be on its guard because its target is so resourceful. When Plato has Socrates describe himself as a politician in the *Gorgias*, there is a sense in which the remark is supposed to be taken as ironic. The irony is not intended as a mere decorative display of wit; it is deployed instead as a provocation and

<sup>5</sup> *Gorgias*, 521d6–e1.

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a challenge. Socratic irony has long been recognised as an instrument of fundamental criticism.<sup>6</sup> In presenting Socrates' mission as *political* in nature, Plato wanted to expose the degraded values driving current affairs – to attack the prevailing norms of Athenian political culture. Since the reigning justifications for political arrangements at Athens were based in Plato's view on the emptiest of claims to justice, the principled rejection of such hollow pretences could be characterised as an exercise in true politics.

In the *Republic*, the Socratic claim to statesmanship is restated, but further complicated. In Book VI of the dialogue Adeimantus responds to Socrates' definition of political justice in terms of the coincidence between philosophy and practical skill by subjecting the ambition of philosophical politics to ridicule: in practice philosophers are known to be either vicious or plain useless, Adeimantus protests. However, the appearance of vice among the pretenders to philosophy cannot be blamed on the love of wisdom itself, Socrates responds; the uselessness of philosophers is the fault of the failure to make good use of them. The blame here must be understood to lie with popular prejudice, not upright philosophers.<sup>7</sup> Philosophical judgement should in principle be seen as an expression of genuine political judgement, we are obliged to conclude, but under current circumstances it is disabled by the corruption of morals and the debasement of wisdom. What code of behaviour ought then to govern the conduct of philosophy towards practical affairs under conditions of moral and political corruption? The variety of possible responses to this question has given rise to an assortment of opposing schools of thought, but none of them has convincingly engaged the pressing demands of politics. This lack of theoretical purchase on the distinct characteristics of political struggle poses a challenge to the adequacy of our inherited notions of political judgement.

<sup>6</sup> On the historical and philosophical import of Socratic irony, see, variously, G. W. F. Hegel, *Geschichte der Philosophie in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegels Werke: Vollständige Ausgabe*, ed. Phillipp Marheineke et al. (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1832–45), XIV, pp. 59–67; Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 259–71; and Gregory Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 21–44.

<sup>7</sup> *Republic*, 487b1–491b1.

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In Book IX of the *Republic* Socrates lays out for Glaucon what the implications of developing a philosophical paradigm of justice might be for the morally responsible citizen forced to act in a city pervaded by injustice. Should enlightened citizens neglect political affairs, Glaucon pointedly wonders? They should orientate themselves in terms of the best city they can imagine, Socrates answers, not the country in which they happen to have been born. The philosophical citizen will therefore focus on the care of his own soul – unless ‘chance’ presents the opportunity for radical reform.<sup>8</sup> John Dunn has argued that the various strands of Platonic political argument arising out of the confrontation between philosophical enlightenment and political injustice have developed into three theoretical options since the original composition of the *Republic*.<sup>9</sup> Each of these is distinctly anti-political in its orientation, while the third in addition entails the corruption of its underlying principles. This intricate set of statements formulated in connection with the responsibilities that confront the critical moralist in Plato’s thinking can be interpreted as enjoining three different programmes of action.

The duty to care for one’s soul or develop inner ethical harmony could be interpreted, on the one hand, as promoting an attitude of disengagement from practical affairs. Moreover, disengagement can in reality amount to unacknowledged complicity in the political arrangements which disengagement was designed to reject. But since the Platonic programme of ethical self-development is geared towards the formation of true principles of justice, it is prone on the other hand to promote a critical posture towards prevailing values. While straightforward complicity might be avoided here, the precise import of social criticism remains problematically inchoate. As a result, both of these options can be seen as at bottom anti-political in nature – the first, insofar as it is definitively removed from ‘the practical dynamics of political conflict’, in Dunn’s words; the second, insofar as it is aimlessly dissenting, a directionless form of ironising complaint.<sup>10</sup> Neither approach offers a secure basis for the exercise of political judgement since politics is evidently absent in each case.

<sup>8</sup> *Republic*, 592a1–592b5.

<sup>9</sup> John Dunn, ‘The History of Political Theory’ (1992), repr. in *The History of Political Theory and Other Essays*, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*