POLITICS AND THE SEARCH FOR THE COMMON GOOD

Rethinking politics in a new vocabulary, Hans Sluga challenges the firmly held assumption that there exists a single common good which politics is meant to realize. He argues that politics is not a natural but a historical phenomenon, and not a single thing but a multiplicity of political forms and values only loosely related. He contrasts two traditions in political philosophy: a "normative theorizing" that extends from Plato to John Rawls and a newer "diagnostic practice" that emerged with Marx and Nietzsche and has found its three most prominent twentieth-century practitioners in Carl Schmitt, Hannah Arendt, and Michel Foucault. He then examines the sources of diagnostic political thinking, analyzes its achievements, and offers a critical assessment of its limitations. His important book will be of interest to a wide range of upper-level students and scholars in political philosophy, political theory, and the history of ideas.

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Acknowledgments

This book was conceived quite some while ago and as I have tried to rethink my questions again and again I have come to profit greatly from reading others and speaking with them. I have gained, in particular, from the lucidly critical writings of my friend Raymond Geuss. Geuss calls himself a "realist" in political philosophy.[1] I like to think of him as an exemplary diagnostic thinker. While I sympathize with everything he writes, I recoil from calling the alternative to the dominant normative paradigm a "realist approach." Political realism is commonly understood to be committed to the idea that human beings are primarily or even exclusively motivated by self-interest; it relies typically on a robust theory of human nature to support that claim; and it addresses itself most often to matters of international politics. Orthogonal political thinkers need not be realist in this sense and Geuss himself is certainly not. Political philosophy must, according to him, examine first of all the way social, economic, political, and other institutions operate at particular moments in particular societies and what motivates human beings to act in given circumstances – not universal norms and general laws of social change and human psychology. Philosophy must recognize furthermore that politics is primarily about action and contexts of action, not about propositions and beliefs. It must understand that politics is like the exercise of a craft or art, not the application of a theory. Political philosophy must finally see that politics is historical in character and that there are no "eternal questions" in it.[2] These assumptions clearly characterize Geuss as a diagnostic thinker in my sense.

I also acknowledge a debt to Stuart Hampshire's observation of an "unavoidable split . . . between the acclaimed virtues of innocence and the undeniable virtues of experience." For Hampshire "most Anglo-American academic books" on the topic of ethics and politics "have

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[1] Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, pp. 18 and 22. Also *History and Illusion in Politics*.
[2] Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, pp. 9–15.

a fairy-tale quality because the realities of politics, both contemporary and past politics, are absent from them."[3] Hampshire allows that societies need to agree on procedures for settling their disputes but these embody only a thin conception of justice. What is more: "The second-order and procedural questions have to be made the subject of political conflict and negotiation."[4] They are, in other words, political and empirical rather than abstract and a priori as the principles of the normative philosophers are assumed to be. Important for me has also been the thought of my teacher, colleague, and friend Bernard Williams, in particular his skepticism about grand normative theorizing, whether in ethics or in politics.[5] I finally need to point out the bearing of Wittgenstein on what I write. Wittgenstein, who was, of course, no political philosopher, thought about language, meaning, and the mind in what I take to have been a diagnostic spirit. His attention to the particular, his descriptive philosophical method, his therapeutic language, and his strong resistance to comprehensive theorizing are all indications of this. Much is to be learned for political philosophy from the way he handled his quite different problems.[6]

This book originated in a course on political philosophy that I have given repeatedly at the University of California at Berkeley. In 2010 I also delivered this course at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Before that a condensed version had been the content of a compact seminar given at the University of Essex in 2009. Earlier versions of some of the chapters have also served as individual talks. The first chapter was initially presented in very different form in the philosophy colloquium at the UC Santa Cruz and at the Chinese University of Hong Kong and then subsequently at the University of Bonn and finally in the fall of 2013 at another colloquium at Hong Kong University. A German version of that talk has since appeared in the *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*. The second chapter was presented in earlier form in German at a conference on "The Anthropological Turn" in Zurich in 2012 and once more in 2013 at the University of Bergen, Norway, and it has since appeared in print. Chapter 4 is based on a talk delivered at Cambridge University a few years ago; part of it has more recently been included in a presentation at a Nietzsche conference at Wake Forrest University in 2012 and was then delivered again at the University of Bergen. That version has also made it separately into print.

[3] Hampshire, *Innocence and Experience*, p. 12.   [4] Hampshire, *Justice is Conflict*, p. 29.
[5] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and the papers in his volume of essays *In the Beginning was the Word*.
[6] Sluga, *Wittgenstein*. On Wittgenstein's skepticism about philosophical theorizing see also "Wittgenstein and Pyrrhonism."

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