Review of “Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology”

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Recommended Citation
Essays in Philosophy
A Biannual Journal
Vol. 6, No. 2, June 2005

Book Review


Getting the Lay of the Land: A Consideration of Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology

In their Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology, editors Derek Matravers and Jon Pike undertake the arduous task of offering a survey of the major movements in political philosophy over the last twenty years. The resulting collection of essays, which includes selections from the majority of the major thinkers over that time frame, can be deemed a success. Twenty-five principle selections in all, the essays are arranged into seven principle sections with the first three covering what the editors call the fundamental philosophical issues facing political theory. These key questions include the philosophy of social explanation, the idea of distributive justice, and the general discussions surrounding the liberalism/communitarianism debate. The last four sections address specific problems facing theorists today, including a consideration of the concept of citizenship, nationalism, the nature of democracy and developments surrounding theories of punishment. Each section is preceded by a brief introductory essay that directs the reader to central themes and questions that need to be considered as the individual essays develop. Since the text is designed as a primary or secondary source for students taking courses in recent political theory, the editors hope that the collection of essays serves as evidence that “political philosophy is flourishing” even as political philosophy as a discipline may be said to be moving increasingly closer to normative ethics since the 1971 publication of John Rawls’ A Theory of Justice, (1-2).

While offering four essays, Part I, “The Philosophy of Social Explanation,” hinges on Jon Elster's “Marxism, Functionalism, and Game Theory: The case for methodological individualism.” Elster's essay argues that methodological individualism helps us avoid mistakes inherent in functionalism because of functionalism's lack of an account of the intentional action of a subject. Elster instead offers game theory as an alternative to functionalism because there “the individual emerges as a microcosm epitomizing the whole network of social relations,” (36). In a reply to Elster’s essay, G. A. Cohen attempts to defend functional explanations within historical materialism, in part by arguing that such explanations are central and irreplaceable aspects of historical materialism. He adds that functional explanations can consistently be defended when they are analyzed in terms of dispositional facts and consequence laws of the form (E®F)®E. Other essays in Part I include Steven Lukes "Methodological Individualism" and "Marxism and Methodological Individualism" by Erik Olin Wright, Andrew Levine and Elliott Sober.

In Part II, “Distributive Justice,” Matravers and Pike begin not by considering a selection of Rawls’, the
figure whose thinking dominates the section, but instead start with a reading from Robert Nozick’s *Anarchy, State and Utopia*. Although Rawls does make an appearance in a later selection, his absence at the start of this section is one of the few faults that I find with the collection. Regardless, Nozick, Harry Frankfurt and Cohen raise objections to a Rawlsian conception of distributive justice. Nozick presents his famous and controversial Wilt Chamberlain example as a case where inequality does not imply injustice. Frankfurt places our focus on the concept of adequacy rather than equality ["what is important from the point of view of morality is not that everyone should have the same but that each could have enough," (82)]. Cohen takes a different tact, arguing that a Rawlsian political structure does not go far enough in recognizing that “the personal is political” and that the principles of justice directly govern not just the basic structure of a just society, but individual life choices as well, (106). Cohen argues that “justice requires an ethos governing daily choice which goes beyond one of obedience to just rules, on grounds which do not . . . exploit things” by sustaining inequality in terms of unjust incentives or preventing individual liberty by informal social pressures, (102-4).

The last essay in this section, Derek Parfit's "Equality and Priority," takes a different view on the subject by addressing Thomas Nagel's conception of equality; characterizing it as an example not of egalitarianism but of prioritarianism. The chief difference between the two, according to Parfit, is that egalitarians "are concerned with relatives: with how each person's level compares with the level of other people. On the Priority View, we are concerned only with people's absolute levels. This is a fundamental structural difference," (124). According to Parfit, the reason we are often confused in our understanding of what constitutes egalitarianism, even though "Most of us believe in some kind of equality," is that we are rarely systematic enough to realize important distinctions between conceptions of equality, (117). To help resolve this problem, Parfit outlines various formulations of egalitarianism (including teleological/telic and deontological/deontic egalitarians) and how they differ from the priority views discussed above.

The third section of the text, "Liberalism and Communitarianism," is perhaps the section that most directly lends itself to the classroom, in that this section's readings clearly outline key points of conflict between the two views: beginning with a selection from Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* and John Rawls' 1989 essay "The Domain of the Political and the Overlapping Consensus." This section also offers Amy Gutmann's reply to communitarian critiques (including Sandel as well as Alasdair MacIntyre). Gutmann concludes her selection by offering a basis for constructive potential between the two schools of thought, stating that "Communitarianism has the potential for helping us discover a politics that combines community with a commitment to basic liberal values," (190). On this point, the editors rightly raise the question as to the degree to which "a conception of justice can borrow from particular conceptions of the good and remain liberal," raising an area of inquiry that would certainly lead to fruitful classroom discussion, (138).

As stated earlier, the remaining four sections address topical problems that Matravers and Pike see as having direct implications for public policy. An instructor could select one or all of these sections and use them as a means to ground the issues discussed in the preceding three sections within the context of practical applied questions in political theory. For example, the section dealing with "Citizenship and Multiculturalism" offers a discussion of the degree to which liberalism's conception of citizenship can survive given the strains inherent in a society that is "divided on the ground of race and ethnicity, religious, national and regional antagonisms," (215). This section includes a selection from Iris Marion Young's *Justice and the Politics of Difference* in which she presents her argument for assigning rights not on a purely general basis, but using group representation instead, because it "best institutionalizes
fairness under the circumstances of social oppression and domination," by providing special mechanisms for the representation of disadvantaged groups including, but not limited to, women, gay and lesbian persons, African-Americans, the elderly, as well as the physically and mentally disabled, (229). Brian Berry offers a partial response to Young in a selection from his recent *Culture and Equality*. In this essay, Berry argues that religious groups would not count as a group in need of special political arrangements to ensure justice, endorsing what the editors call "the traditional liberal approach to religious beliefs of constraining them to the private sphere," (217).

The remaining three sections also offer opportunities for the application of the theories debated in the first three sections to nationalistic unity (with essays by Roger Scruton, MacIntyre and David Miller), the inner-workings of a democratic system ruled by the people (Jon Elster, Joshua Cohen and Michael Walzer), and the justification for punishment (Antony Duff, Andrew Von Hirsch and Daniel Farrell).

With few exceptions, Matravers and Pike have done an excellent job in giving their readers the lay of the land in contemporary political philosophy. They have even taken the time to include an index, an important tool not always found in readers such as this. While the text is solid overall, one area that they fail to adequately cover is the feminist criticisms of liberalism. For example, the absence of a selection from Susan Moller Okin's criticism of Rawls is a problem that any instructor using this text would need to supplement with additional readings. Regardless, any survey text of this size and scope is bound to leave certain figures out, and Matravers and Pike do as much as they can to limit a criticism from absence.

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