

1-2005

# Review of “Understanding the Political Philosophers: From Ancient to Modern Times”

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### Recommended Citation

Mahoney, Jon (2005) "Review of “Understanding the Political Philosophers: From Ancient to Modern Times”," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 18.

# Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 6, No. 1, January 2005

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## Book Review

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*Understanding the Political Philosophers: From Ancient to Modern Times*, by Alan Haworth.  
(Routledge. 2004. pp. i-x +304. ISBN 0-415-27591-1)

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*Understanding the Political Philosophers* is a work on the history of political thought; in it Haworth outlines major developments in political philosophy from Socrates to Rawls. Haworth does not aspire to offer a complete account of these developments yet he does attempt to present themes from the history of political philosophy that speak to a contemporary audience. As the author states, "This book has two related aims. One is to introduce you to the ideas and the arguments of the major political philosophers. The other is to introduce you to their subject, political philosophy itself." (p. 1) I believe Haworth has, with some notable exceptions that are discussed below, succeeded in accomplishing these aims. This is a very readable book. There are a lot of examples and Haworth's commentary is often both helpful and illuminating. It is my view that this book will be of interest to a very wide audience. *Understanding the Political Philosophers* would also make a fine companion to an introductory course in political philosophy.

In this short review I shall attempt to provide the reader with a general overview of Haworth's book. I will also raise some objections.

The book has an introduction, fourteen chapters arranged in three parts (I Athens, II Reason and Revolution and III Modern Times, Modern Themes), and a short postscript. The first four chapters are centered on themes in ancient Greek political philosophy. Most of the discussion focuses on Plato and Aristotle. There is also a nice chapter on Socrates and a short chapter outlining the author's reasons for skipping medieval political philosophy.

In his chapter on Plato, Haworth provides a general summary of *The Republic* and an outline of political culture in ancient Greece. Haworth summarizes Plato's conception of justice as follows:

Plato's state's most fundamental feature is its system of administration. There is a pyramidal class structure, with a ruling group of 'philosopher rulers' or 'guardians' at the pyramid's peak. It is their job, and theirs alone, to rule. That is because they are philosophers which means that they—and they alone—know what is good and will therefore do what is best. (p. 14)

Haworth does a good job placing Plato's conception of justice in both its philosophical and historical context. There is a brief discussion of Plato's epistemology and the theory of forms. Moreover, there is also a very helpful discussion of the differences between Plato's and Socrates'

understanding of public life and the position espoused by Pericles. Haworth explores, for instance, the contrast between Plato's claim that justice "consists in minding your own business" (quoted, p. 19) and the Periclean affirmation that "a man who takes no interest in politics is a man who minds his own business; we say that he has no business here at all." (quoted, p. 11)

The contrast between Plato and Pericles is helpful in explaining the transition from Plato to Aristotle.

It was Plato's ambition to direct our minds away from the world of 'mere' appearance towards the deeper reality which...lies behind it. By contrast, Aristotle is a great observer. As with zoology, so in the case of philosophy generally, he approaches his subjects by recording and systematising numerous observations. (p. 37)

In his chapter on Aristotle, Haworth illustrates how Aristotle's attempt at doing philosophy systematically led him to draw conclusions about politics from a theory of human nature. Take, for example, Aristotle's claim from *The Politics* that "The state is an association of persons whose aim is the best life possible." (quoted, p. 46)

There is also a helpful discussion of the differences between a psychological conception of happiness and Aristotle's decidedly non-psychological and normative conception of happiness. Anyone who has taught introductory philosophy courses knows the frustration students face in trying to come to terms with Aristotle's conception of happiness. The hedonism that underlies the modern understanding of happiness presents an enormous hurdle for those who want to convey the significance of Aristotle's view. Haworth does a fine job addressing this problem and his outline of the Aristotelian notion of proper function and its connection to happiness will be very helpful to those unfamiliar with Aristotle's philosophy.

Chapter 4 is a six page apology for why a work on the history of political philosophy can move directly from Aristotle to Hobbes. Haworth acknowledges that this decision will provoke criticism. But he also claims, "The truth is that, within political philosophy, there were no major developments throughout the period in question." (p. 60) This remark suffers from a serious flaw. It is totally false. Noteworthy pieces of evidence against Haworth's assertion include natural law and just war theory both of which are central and perennial issues in political philosophy. David Rodin's recent book *War and Self-Defense* (Oxford University Press, 2002) is one fine example of a contemporary work in political philosophy that examines the relevance of natural law and just war theory to political philosophy. Many readers will also be familiar with Quentin Skinner's *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1979). It is a shame that Haworth ignores the many reputable sources of scholarship that contradict his view on this matter. Instead, Haworth's crutch for his outlandish claim about the irrelevance of political philosophy between Aristotle and Hobbes is the notoriously untrustworthy scholarship of Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* (see, for example, pp. 61-2). The fact that *Understanding the Political Philosophers* is not intended to be a comprehensive history of philosophy does excuse omission; it does not excuse bogus claims.

The two chapters on Hobbes (5 and 6) are especially well-presented. Haworth does a good job placing Hobbes in historical context as well as explaining Hobbes' contributions to political philosophy. The connections between Hobbes' concerns with political stability, psychological

egoism, and the argument for monarchy are clearly laid out. I found Haworth's discussion of the influence of Descartes and modern science on Hobbes's thinking particularly fun to read. The presentation is very clear, witty, and conversational. A good example of this is Haworth's illustration of Hobbes' antipathy towards divided sovereignty. This antipathy is expressed by Hobbes in his delightful use of metaphor when he offers the following, partial analogy to divided sovereignty:

...I have seen a man, that had another man growing out of his side, with an head, armes, breast, and stomach, of his own: If he had had another man growing out of his other side, the comparison might then have been exact. (quoted, p. 80)

The chapters on Hobbes are arguably the best in the book.

Hobbes is followed by two chapters on Locke and one on Rousseau. The first chapter on Locke focuses mainly on Locke's contract argument and his characterization of the state of nature. The second develops Locke's famous argument for property rights. Haworth's explains Locke's attempt to extend the argument for *self-ownership* to a *property right in one's labor* and thus also a property right in the *products of one's labor*. There is also a discussion on some of the familiar problems with Locke's conception of property rights (e.g. the inequalities of resources that emerge in property-owning democracies). This is an appealing feature of the discussion of Locke if for no other reason than that the Lockean view is so often endorsed without being understood.

The chapter on Rousseau covers familiar themes: autonomy, the general will and the potential for "totalitarian democracy" (p. 149) in Rousseau's conception of sovereignty. In addressing these themes Haworth is certainly correct to claim:

...it makes more sense to think of Rousseau's ideal community as a romanticized *polis* than it does to think of it as a proto-totalitarian state, prefiguring horrors which were to come one hundred and fifty years or so after his death. (p. 158)

Chapters 10-14 cover Bentham and Burke (Chapt. 10), Mill (Chapt. 11), Marx (Chapt. 12), Rawls (Chapt. 13), and libertarianism and communitarianism (Chapt. 14). The chapter on Mill focuses mainly on the connections between Mill's utilitarianism and liberalism. This connection is drawn out through an examination of some of the many progressive positions advanced by Mill. There is, for example, a section on Mill's *The Subjection of Women* and a section on Mill's well-known arguments in favor of free speech.

In presenting Mill's liberalism, Haworth makes clear the differences between two traditions within liberalism. Millian liberals argue on utilitarian—consequentialist grounds that a liberal conception of justice, individuality and personal freedom is the best way to promote societal well-being. By contrast, some liberals (rights foundationalists such as Locke, Kant and Rawls) argue that respect for persons as individual bearers of rights requires a liberal conception of politics. Haworth illustrates with several examples the differences between these two contrasting conceptions of liberalism. One such example is Mill's endorsement of plural voting whereby some citizens should "have more votes than others." (p. 202) Rights foundationalists reject this proposal on the grounds that it violates the liberal ideal of political equality, an ideal understood to be off limits to utility calculations. The differences between consequentialist and non-consequentialist conceptions of

liberalism are clearly an important issue in political philosophy and Haworth does a good job explaining them.

The chapter on Marx covers standard topics: Marx's characterization and critique of capitalism, labor, production, alienation and exploitation. Some informed readers may have some reservations with Haworth's treatment of some of these facets of Marx's thought. For example, Haworth's discussion of Marx's concept of alienation emphasizes the first-personal psychological component to alienation. This is misleading because, after reading Haworth's account, the reader might think that for Marx a worker is alienated *if she feels* alienated. In fact, however, for Marx there are *normative criteria* that can be used to show whether or not existing economic relations engender alienation. In other words, the contrast between alienation and emancipation cannot be reduced to an agent's first-personal assessment of what she thinks about her life. Haworth does not explicitly claim that this is Marx's position, but his presentation at times seems to suggest that it is. Consider the following passage:

...suppose that you have both capitalism and a happy, or at least contented, workforce. Just flesh it out, suppose—if you like—that you are a researcher in industrial psychology. You visit a factory and you ask a group of production line workers to complete a questionnaire. The work is routine and, in itself, boring. However, the workers tell you that they enjoy the factory atmosphere, they welcome the chance to meet their friends and exchange gossip (plus there is MTV, a drinks machine, good coffee, and so on). Does it follow from Marx's argument that these workers are no longer alienated? (pp. 228-9)

Now, to be fair, Haworth does make it clear that for Marx alienation has both *psychological* and *structural* components. The problem, however, is that his examples and analysis are cast in manner that implies an overly psychologistic understanding of Marx's conception of alienation and false consciousness. A point stressed earlier by Haworth merits attention here. Recall that for Aristotle happiness is a normative, non-psychological concept. An agent is not happy simply because he thinks he's happy. It would have been helpful had Haworth presented Marx's conception of alienation in a way that made it more clear that, like Aristotle on happiness, alienation is not something that can be adequately characterized from the first-personal point of view of an agent who reports how she feels.

The chapter on Rawls reviews the most central and basic concepts that underlie Rawls's theory of justice. First, Haworth outlines the *original position* which is a device of representation used by Rawls to model impartiality and the initial situation in which principles of justice are selected. Haworth then outlines Rawls's two principles of justice. The first is the Liberty Principle: "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive total system of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar system of liberty for all." (quoted, p. 240). The second is a principle of equality that has two components. The first states social and economic inequalities are to be arranged to guarantee fair equality of opportunity; the second states that inequalities are justified when they benefit the least advantaged. This is followed by a discussion of Rawls's attempt to defend a contractarian conception of justice while rejecting utilitarian conceptions on the grounds that utilitarianism cannot provide an adequate defense of individual rights.

Haworth's summary of Rawls's complex and multi-faceted theory of justice is clear and accessible.

There is, however, one misleading argument in the Rawls chapter. Haworth raises a possible objection to Rawls's use of the maximin rule (i.e. under conditions of uncertainty, choose the least bad outcome) when he states:

I am sure most readers will agree with me that...'least risk' is not always the most rational policy to pursue. And there are plenty of everyday examples with which the same point might have been illustrated. What would you say about someone who always carried a heavy overcoat, even on the sunniest day; or someone who never ate at a restaurant for fear of food poisoning? (p.256)

There is a serious problem with this passage. First of all, it rests upon bad analogies. As Rawls himself makes clear, the role of the maximin rule within his theory of justice *applies to the selection of principles of justice that are to apply to the basic structure of society*. Clearly, this choice situation is very unlike the choice situations described in Haworth's examples. Secondly, as Rawls also makes clear, the maximin rule is a principle of rational choice *that should be adopted within the uniquely formulated conditions of the original position*. On Rawls's view, the maximin rule is not properly understood on the model of a Kantian maxim or rule that applies to agents whenever they are faced with a choice under conditions of uncertainty. When Haworth claims, "...my main point is that it can be far from rational not to take risks" (p.256) he is missing the point of Rawls's use of the maximin rule. Rawls never claims that it is *always* rational to adopt a policy of risk aversion.

My only complaint about the chapter on libertarianism and communitarianism is that it is too short (it's only 6 pages long). Haworth nevertheless does provide synopses of the two most representative critics of Rawls, namely, Sandel and Nozick. Sandel's communitarianism is presented as a model of political society that stresses the importance of common values and a shared sense of social identity. Nozick's libertarianism is presented as a theory of justice that places special emphasis on individual liberty, most especially, the natural right to property.

In the Postscript, Haworth concludes with an idea affirmed by Max Weber. Weber argued that "a state is a human community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." (p.268) Coercion, legitimacy and the exercise of political power are indeed among the most perennial issues in political philosophy. This is as true in the era of globalization as it was in the era of the nation-state. Weber's claim is perfect for a final thought. This is a nice way to end the book.

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