

Class Notes, Intro to Political Thought, Thursday January 28

Introduction to Political Thought, pp. 1-20

- “We think that everyone has a *right* to an equal stake in politics” (2)
 - What makes this a political and normative judgment?
 - Who is ‘everyone’? What is ‘an equal stake’?
- “...there are two sets of tools that students of political thought need in order [to] gain critical purchase on the subject. The first is a basic sense of the history and development of political thought; the second is a critical grasp of the theoretical or philosophical issues at the heart of politics” (2)
 - Why is the concept of human rights a good example in this context? (3)
 - § Other examples mentioned include: the state, sovereignty, citizenship, justice
- “Beginning with the idea that laws and constitutions (the instruments of politics) are only good laws and constitutions in so far as they give effective expression to our considered moral and political beliefs, we invite the reader to explore the suggestion that moral and political ideas are the foundations of politics” (4)
- “Moral and political positions are not measured on a single scale with ‘truth’ at one end and ‘falsity’ on the other. In fact there is even considerable disagreement about what standard they are to be measured on at all.” (5)
- “If political science asks ‘*what* are the key building blocks of politics?’ political theory may ask ‘*why* are these the key building blocks of politics?’ (6)
 - The role of **logical positivism** in the 1920s and 1930s, culminating in A.J. Ayer’s calling normative utterances ‘nonsense’...and yet we would all (hopefully) recoil from the message of Swift’s “Modest Proposal”
- “Normative standards often conflict...[and] normative concepts are most often value judgments. People come to their values, beliefs and opinions in a whole variety of ways.” (7)
- Recognizing that there is a range of perspectives, however, is quite distinct from “accepting the further idea that all opinions are equally worthy. This last idea is termed **relativism** and it gives us no critical purchase on the debates.” (8)
- “Behind every moral and political principle is a justifying argument, what we term the theoretical foundations of a principle...foundational arguments take many forms. A cursory glance would reveal moral, religious, rationalist, epistemological, historical, and sociological arguments.” (8-9)
- **n.b.** – “typically people coming to the subject for the first time are so taken by each encounter that it is not unusual for them to agree wholeheartedly with each argument they come across (even when it contradicts the position they embraced the week before!).
- Overview of the book’s main themes: Platonic idealism, Aristotelian teleology, Marxist artificiality, utilitarian consequentialism, Rawlsian distributive justice, anti-foundationalism, multiculturalism (ex: “it may be necessary to treat people differently in order to treat them equally” (14))

***The Economist*, “Onwards and upwards: why is the modern view of progress so impoverished”?**

- Paraphrase of Hungarian Imre Madach’s 1861 “the Tragedy of Man”...
- “The popular view [today] is that, although technology and GDP advance, morals and society are treading water or, depending on your choice of newspaper, sinking back into decadence and barbarism. On the left of politics these days, “progress” comes with a pair of ironic quotation marks attached; on the right, “progressive is a term of abuse”
- “It was not always like that, [especially during the Enlightenment]...some thought people would improve if left to themselves, others that they should be forced to be free; some believed in the nation, others in the end of nations; some wanted a perfect language, others universal education; some put their hope in science, others in commerce; some had faith in wise legislation, others in anarchy. Intellectual life was teeming with grand ideas”
- And yet, as the Cato study shows, we have clearly progressed along many parameters (such as?).
- “Other sources of progress are clothed in tragedy. The Germanic thought that individual progress should be subsumed into the shared destiny of a nation, or *volk*, is fatally associated with Hitler. Whenever nationalism becomes the chief organizing principle of society, state violence is not far behind. Likewise in Soviet Russia...the subjugation of the individual in the interests of the community has lost much of its appeal.”
- What do you think is the ‘dominant paradigm’ of the modern age? Science is clearly one (are there others?), but science is, in many respects, problematically value-neutral.
- Similarly with GDP growth: wealth does not necessarily correlate with happiness. Why?
- Discussing *1984* and *Brave New World*...the *Economist* claims neither of these dystopias have come true, but do you agree?

***The Economist*, “Arguing to death: from Socrates, history’s quintessential nonconformist, lessons for America today”**

- “Socrates would witness a vibrant and proud democracy, and disdain it as an indulgence of the benighted, unphilosophical “herd”.”
- What was Socrates’ preferred method of discourse?
- How are the town hall health care meetings Socrates would have observed “eristic”, and what effect can that have on genuine discourse?
- How would you distinguish **dialectic** from ‘mere arguing’?
- “In America today, Socrates would recognize sophists and rhetoricians in partisan spin doctors such as Karl Rove and David Axelrod or equally in talk show hosts such as Sean Hannity and Keith Olbermann.”
- “Socrates thus resembled, say, the wiser-than-thou and often manipulative comedian-commentators Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert in today’s America. Those who agreed with him found him funny and enlightening. The rest found him merely condescending.”
- “Socrates [had a] habit of demolishing every conceivable opinion but not offering anything positive”
- “...nonconformism is not an absolute virtue and easily veers off into sedition, subversion or other actions deemed unpatriotic...Sometimes truth and virtue require dissent and rebellion. Other times the survival or security of the group takes precedence and requires solidarity.”