
Contemporary Social Philosophy

GORDON GRAHAM

CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

Gordon Graham

Basil Blackwell

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Preface

Just what people include under the label 'social philosophy' varies a good deal. Over the last thirty-five or forty years, philosophical fashion has changed the topics that social philosophers tend to discuss. At one time their main concern was with the nature of society and the place of the individual in it – whether there is anything more to society than the people who compose it, whether human beings are essentially social. As the social sciences became more widely studied and philosophers despaired of resolving disputes between different political ideologies, philosophers found a new interest in the nature and scope of social science – is it really science, and how does it help us to understand society? Then, as moral philosophy in general underwent something of a revolution and became interested again in substantive moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia and the like, so social philosophers began to look at substantive social issues – the rights and wrongs of positive discrimination, the proper way to provide medical care, and so on.

This book aims to introduce newcomers to all these different aspects of social philosophy, but in fact the variety is not as great as it might seem. Indeed, part of the purpose of the book is just to show that behind the different trends and fashions there is a great deal of continuity, and that all these topics are closely related to recurring themes and conceptions.

The book is introductory, but this does not mean it is elementary. The aim is to help readers to get to grips with the real and important issues of social philosophy and to start to think about them for themselves. One way to do this would be to set out the ideas of great thinkers past and present, but a better way, in my view, is to present lively and topical arguments with which the reader can engage directly.

This second method, however, has the disadvantage that it

may more easily be misunderstood. Since arguments must reach conclusions on the issues they address, in places it will appear that the book takes sides in a way that an introduction should not. So it needs to be stressed at the outset that, despite appearances to the contrary sometimes, the purpose of this book is to get the reader started on the arguments, not to settle all the issues.

The second feature to which attention must be drawn, since it too can be misunderstood, is the relative simplicity of some of the presentation. Where space is limited decisions have to be made, not just about which subjects to leave out (and some interesting topics have been omitted), but about how much to write on those that are included. Inevitably, where the introduction takes the form of an argument, this means that decisions have to be made about when an argument should stop, and so conclusions are arrived at even when it is evident to those who know the subject well that further replies and counter-replies could be made. So once again it must be stressed that the arguments presented here are not to be thought of as final in any sense.

What is essential to introducing philosophy in this way is that the line of argument should be clear and well informed. This is especially true of social philosophy, because nearly all the topics it discusses are of interest to other branches of social study. Consequently, it is highly desirable to make clear to students of subjects other than philosophy – politics, sociology, economics and social work theory, for instance – just what sort of contribution it is that philosophy can make, and for this reason an introduction must avoid specialist language even more than is usually desirable. On this front I have made a special effort and I hope, therefore, that students of these other disciplines will find the book interesting and useful.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3 are the longest and provide the theoretical background against which specific social issues are discussed in subsequent chapters. The final chapter discusses another range of important topics, raised by the main arguments of the book.

I am grateful to my colleague Christopher Bryant for invaluable help with the word processor.

Gordon Graham
St Andrews

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1

What is Society?

GOVERNMENT, SOCIETY AND STATE

The word 'society' may be used in a host of different ways. The most uncontroversial uses refer to groups of people who get together for some shared professional or recreational purpose – for example, the Society of Motor Manufacturers or the Society of Friends. But when we speak of 'society' in general we normally mean something larger and more important than any of these other societies, something with a public and usually a political character. It is society in this sense which is invoked, for instance, when references are made to people's 'paying their debt to society', an idea which calls up all the highly public institutions of legal punishment – police, courts and prisons. Similarly it is in this very general sense that society is said to do or have failed to have done a wide variety of different things – to determine the relative status and opportunities of individuals and to have duties and obligations towards them, usually in matters of health or education or some other sort of welfare provision.

But what exactly is this 'society' to which debts are owed and upon which responsibilities are so frequently placed? One response to this question which occurs quickly to many people identifies 'society' with 'the government'. But we need not think long about this answer before we see that it will not do. To begin with, governments come and go, they can be elected and replaced, can have support or lack it. None of these things is true about society. Certainly, a society can change, but not by election or appointment, and it is only very rarely that we can date the beginning or end of a society. In the second place, when people argue that society has a duty to provide every child with a decent education, say, and call upon the government of the day to recognize this duty in legislative terms, they do not

mean to suggest that it is only the government of the day which has that obligation, or that the legislation initiated should bind only that government. They mean, of course, that such provision should be made during the rule of any and every government.

We could put the same thing another way by saying that a decent minimum of education should be included in the provisions made by the *state*. This might lead us to think that 'state' and 'society' mean pretty much the same thing. If so, the philosophy of society is really the philosophy of the state (which is the same as saying that social philosophy is really political philosophy). But once again, as soon as we think about it, we can see fairly readily that society and the state are *not* the same thing.

In the first place, within a society the state is only one institution amongst many others and may easily be distinguished from industrial companies, banks, churches, universities, football clubs and so on. Of course in most parts of the modern world the state is by far the largest and in many ways the most important social institution. It generally employs large numbers of people, and in some places a majority of the workforce. But it never employs *everyone*. Soldiers, police, judges, tax inspectors and customs men are obviously officers of the state, and there are also a great many clerks, mechanics, cooks and so on, who, if not exactly *officers* of the state, are nevertheless parts of its administrative apparatus. But usually there are also a great many people in these occupations who are not state employees; some occupations – shopkeeping for instance – are hardly represented in the organization of the state; and always there are those who cannot be employees of the state, because they have no paid occupation at all – infants, housewives, the aged or the nomadic. They are still members of society, however, even though they are not parts of the administrative apparatus of the state, and from this we can conclude that state and society are not identical.

Of course, these people are, usually, *subject to* the state – they must obey its laws and edicts – but this does not mean that they are *constituent parts* of it. They need not even be citizens. Foreigners and *Gastarbeiter* (those who have work permits but no right to vote in elections and so on), unlike diplomats, are

subject to the laws of the state in which they reside, even when they are not citizens of that state but of some other. Conversely, we should remember that anthropologists quite properly describe different nomadic tribes as forming distinctive societies of their own, and many such tribes may come under the control of a single state. This is the case, in point of fact, for many of the tribes of East Africa, tribes which have existed as distinct societies for centuries, but have only recently come within the control of a state. And from this it follows once more that state and society cannot be one and the same thing.

Enough should now have been said to show how social philosophy begins, and indeed, how necessary it is. 'Society', 'government', 'state' and 'nation' are words in regular use, not only in newspapers and on television but also in the conversations of most people. Yet, once we begin to think about the sort of remarks people commonly make, we will all be aware of a striking need for clarification. It is for this reason that social philosophy must begin by drawing some distinctions. It would be wrong, however, to suppose that this means we must begin by 'defining our terms'. It is often thought that because most of the moral, social and political matters with which philosophers concern themselves are highly contentious, the best way to begin is by offering definitions of the words that will be used. But this is really quite pointless. If the definition that is offered is uncontentious, this will only be because it is sufficiently vague to span the differences between those in dispute, in which case it can settle none of the interesting questions. Or else it will be precise enough to settle some of the issues (usually in favour of those who offer it), but only by having built into it answers to the questions on which the disputants are divided. If the first of these is true, the definition is unhelpful; if the second, it is merely stipulative, and there is no reason why anyone should abide by someone else's stipulations.

Definitions, then, are worthless, but we still need to be clear on what we are talking about. What we need are not so much definitions as distinctions. Distinctions, unlike definitions, can remain fuzzy at the edges, so long as we can see at least *some* clear and central applications of them. So let us try distinguishing between government, state, and society.

Government

Governments are, relative to the societies they govern, quite small groups of people. Generally a government is formed from only a minority of the parties of people that work to have them elected. Indeed a government may well constitute only a small minority, or even none, of those who are popularly elected as representatives. So, for instance, only a few members of the majority party in the British House of Commons will be members of the government, and in the United States no elected member of Congress can belong to the executive branch of government. Governments come and go. They are, in the main and in relation to the societies they govern, fairly short-lived. In many countries the constitution places a time limit on the life of any one government. This seems not only intelligible, but sensible, whereas it would be absurd to attempt to put a constitutional time limit on the existence of a society. We may say, then, that a government is the set of people which rules a society, and it does so through the apparatus of the state.

State

Unlike that of a government the life of a state cannot be constitutionally limited. States do go out of existence, but they do so through war, conquest, famine, disease or natural disaster, not legislative fiat. A government *uses* and controls the state: it is not identical with it. But we must also distinguish the state from the society of which it is a part. In fact, societies can exist without states. Many have done so in the past and some, commonly nomadic tribes, still do. A state is, roughly, a self-consciously organized institution by means of which a society is regulated and preserved. Nomadic tribes do have means by which their societies are governed – life in them is not a matter of constant chaos – but they need have nothing resembling a state: no legislature, formal judiciary, standing army, tax collection system and so on. The nation-state, with its clearly defined sovereign territory, which nowadays we are inclined to think characteristic of society as such, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Though it is true that complex forms of organized administration for the government of public affairs

can be found very far back in the history of mankind (the Babylonian empire, for instance, had a highly sophisticated administration), it is also true that until recently these were the exception rather than the rule.

Usually the state claims for itself a monopoly of the legitimate use of coercive force, which is a way of saying that the officers of the state (army, police, prison guards, militia and so on) are the only people who may properly employ force in ensuring that other people comply with their commands. This is a feature of the state which some philosophers and political theorists have thought to be its peculiar and distinguishing characteristic. It is, after all, the idea of *legitimate* coercion which distinguishes the police from the Mafia. Without legitimacy, the state appears no better than a more permanent and perhaps somewhat more civilized equivalent of the marauding robber barons of the past. But there are difficulties in taking legitimate coercion to be the defining characteristic of states. First, there seems no *logical* reason why a state should not permit self-defence or citizen's arrest: many do. Where these things are permitted people who are not officers of the state may properly use force on occasion, and from this it follows that the state is *not* the monopolist of legitimate force. Secondly, questions and even doubts can be raised about the basis of legitimacy which this definition assumes. In saying that the state is the sole legitimate user of coercive force, we can hardly mean that the state is the monopolist of *legally* permitted coercion, because this would make the characterization trivially true, since the state makes the laws. But if we mean that its use of force is *morally* legitimate, we face the objections both of those who believe that no force whatever is morally legitimate and of those who think that on occasion an individual may be morally justified in using force, even against the state. Finally, modern states engage in many activities where their coercive powers cannot properly be used. The state might run a system of hospitals, for instance, but it does not follow from the fact that they are state-run that citizens can legitimately be coerced into using them.

For these reasons, amongst others, it does not seem right to characterize the state in terms of force. Let us agree, then, to describe states as the administrative institutions by which

(some) societies are governed. This is somewhat vaguer than the characterization we have rejected, but since it does not purport to be an exhaustive definition, only a general description that will allow us to distinguish states from governments, it can still provide sufficient clarity for a profitable discussion of many of the most interesting questions of social philosophy to begin.

Society

If the state is an institution, society plainly is not. It has no constitution, no budget, no personnel. Rather than being some one thing, indeed, it seems to be more of an umbrella, a catch-all by which we refer to a plethora of individuals and organizations – businesses, churches, schools, clubs, charities, councils, lawcourts, prisons and so on, which we believe stand in some relation to each other, even if we don't quite know what that relation is. But even this is not certain, because it is not at all clear where the boundaries between societies are to be drawn, at least in the way that it is usually clear where the boundaries between different states lie. People quite readily speak of British, French or American society, which suggests boundaries of a vaguely political sort, but they speak just as readily of Western society, which has cultural as well as political overtones, and seems to imply that one society is able to contain many others. These various ways of talking leave it unclear whether we should think of the concept of 'society' primarily in political terms, that is to say alongside the concepts of 'state', 'government' and so on, or whether we should think of it chiefly as having a place alongside concepts like 'language' and 'culture'.

These and other related questions are the stock in trade of social philosophy. This is because they admit of no easy or straightforward answers, but can be answered only by extended thought and argument. Indeed it is not really correct to say that they can be answered at all. Rather, in response to the question 'What is a society?' we can offer arguments and considerations which will, if we pursue them properly, lead to an understanding of the range and complexity of the issues that such a question raises.

Conceptions of society

In fact, as we will see, the question 'What is a society?' is somewhat misleading. It suggests an inquiry into some matter of fact – social facts or facts about concepts – whereas what is needed is *normative* inquiry. That is to say, the proper question which lies at the heart of social philosophy is not really a question about how things are but about how we ought to think about them, not what a society is so much as how it ought to be conceived. We could mark this difference by saying that there is no one discoverable *concept* of society, only a variety of competing *conceptions*. And faced with this variety, social philosophy is just the inquiry which asks 'Which conception of society have I most reason to employ?'

Social philosophy, then, is a normative or evaluative inquiry, but this does not mean that it has no interest in matters of fact, no place for the observation of social realities or the careful delineation of concepts as they are used. On the contrary, since the competing conceptions of society between which social philosophy attempts to adjudicate make many appeals to facts of one sort or another, factual argument must play an important part in social philosophy. But the facts are not important on their own. Rather, which facts we need to know and how much of what we already know is relevant to thinking about society, has to be established by an overall concern with social and moral *values*. For instance, different conceptions of society carry different recommendations for social policy, and the plausibility of these recommendations will depend in part upon what social inquiry tells us are possible ways for human beings to live together. A policy which, if it is to be successful, requires *saintliness* amongst those to whom it applies, will be defective just on the grounds that human beings are *not* saints. Social philosophy, then, must be *well informed*.

Nevertheless, the truly evaluative nature of the subject will be apparent as we turn from theoretical questions about the nature of society to questions about the desirability of different forms of social organization, and the values those different social forms seek to realize. But to begin the argument we must first set out, in a largely schematic way, the various conceptions of society in terms of which these facts and policies are to be understood.

INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COMMUNITARIANISM

Of the many conceptions of society that have been advanced in the history of human thought, two are specially important, because they have influenced the course of social theory, social policy and political debate more than any other. Moreover, though they themselves admit of variation, together they underlie almost all the major political programmes of the modern world. These two conceptions are called by a variety of names. Amongst the commonest are 'individualism', 'social atomism', 'communitarianism' and 'collectivism'. I shall use the terms 'individualism' and 'communitarianism' in order to avoid some of the associations that 'atomism' and 'collectivism' now have. Labels, however, are not important in themselves, and there need be no confusion over different uses so long as we are clear about just which ideas are being referred to. In any case, the two conceptions of society with which we are concerned are best thought of as clusters of ideas, rather than precisely formulated theories.

Individualism

At the heart of individualism is the view that in social philosophy, political theory and practice, in moral thought and action, it is individual human beings who must, in some sense, be regarded as prior to society. In just what sense the individual is to be thought primary is one of the main topics to be discussed in this book, but whatever we take the best version of this claim to be, it carries with it an implied view of society, namely that society is a sort of *association*. An association in this sense is a group that we join, usually, though not necessarily, for our mutual benefit. Most associations are voluntary – we belong to them only because and so long as we choose to – but more importantly, perhaps, they are organizations which are constituted, criticized, reformed, and occasionally abolished according to their ability to satisfy the interests and purposes of their members. In short, they are *for* the people who belong to them. So, for instance, a stamp club, which, because of the way it was organized, actually *prevented* its members from collecting stamps satisfactorily, would unquestionably require reform,

because we can see straight away that something has gone wrong when a club or association of this limited sort appears to be being run for its own sake rather than for the sake of the people who belong to it.

Society, of course, could not be quite like any other association. To begin with it seems implausible to suppose that it is voluntary – how could we set about leaving? We could leave one society, it seems, only to find ourselves, willy-nilly, in some other. The most determined hermits will belong to some society or other at some point in their lives. This is, perhaps, what most people mean when they say ‘Man is a social animal’. They mean that human beings are always members of some society or other, rather than that they are by nature *sociable*, that is, fond of being in the company of others. Whether membership of society is in the strongest sense necessary for human beings, and therefore not a voluntary matter, is a question we shall be asking in due course, but on the surface, there is at least this striking difference between society at large and any other club or association.

John Locke

Still, this fact does not prevent us from thinking of society as primarily an association, and if we do, this will have implications for how we think about the state. Many of these implications are made plain in one of the first and most obviously individualist theories to be formulated explicitly, namely John Locke’s theory in his *Second Treatise of Government*. Locke was an English philosopher writing around the time of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. To understand his political thought, two features of this revolution are worth noting. First, the king and queen who ascended the throne following the deposition of James II, William and Mary, had no real legal right to do so. They were merely offered the crown by representatives of Parliament, which is to say, in a sense, by representatives of the people. Secondly, the revolution resulted, among other things, in a Bill of Rights, which gave individual citizens certain protective rights against their political masters. On Locke’s view of society, this is just how things should be, since an organized society, as opposed to the natural societies

which animals form and which primeval people may have formed, is an association called into existence precisely to serve the purposes of those who join it. Consequently, the state should be thought of as the management structure of a society and judged accordingly, by its efficiency and success.

Locke may well have been the most articulate spokesman of the individualist conception of society rather than its originator, but so influential has that conception been that it is hard for us to appreciate the radical revolution in thought which in its day it constituted. Hitherto, subjects had been regarded as servants of their rulers, and the relation between subject and monarch was thought personal rather than legal, more like the relation of child to parent, say, than the relation between employer and employee. It was this personal conception that Locke attacked in his *First Treatise*, a critique of Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* which advocated the conception of the monarch as father of his people. But with the idea of the people *choosing* their own rulers and having legal rights against them came the belief that it is the rulers who are servants of the people rather than the other way about, and that the relation between them is a contractual one, based on a *social* contract, just as other relations are based on *legal* contracts.

The limited state

Now if we think of social and political relationships in this way it will become apparent immediately that we can accept only some conceptions of the state, namely conceptions of a *limited* state. For, if the nature of society is to help each of us go about our own business, the state must be thought of as merely an instrument for the more efficient functioning of society, something whose constitution and conduct cannot be a law unto itself, but must be scrutinized, corrected and even resisted, in the light of its usefulness to the purposes of its citizens. On this conception, then, there are things that the state cannot do and rights which individuals possess independently of the legal system under which they live – natural rather than legal rights – by which loyalty to the state is bounded.

Of course, even if we accept this conception of society and with it a belief in the limited state, we have not accepted any