Social Ideals and Policies

Readings in Social and Political Philosophy

Steven Luper

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For my father

Preface

This anthology is a collection of essays that present a range of social ideals or conceptions of justice (part 1), along with two sorts of applications: one dealing with important issues facing contemporary society (part 2) and the other dealing with important issues of international justice (part 3). Of the three, part 1 is most extensive, for the material in it is more important to instructors such as I who teach social and political philosophy.

I provide several different kinds of material: First, there are excerpts from historically important documents, such as Aristotle's *Politics* and Locke's *Second Treatise.* Second, I include excerpts from a wide range of leading contemporary theories, such as the ideas of John Rawls and Robert Nozick. Third, insightful discussions of major historical figures are provided. And fourth, I include lively and accessible discussions of contemporary issues. Special care has been taken to edit historically important documents as little as possible.

The text includes substantial editorial apparatus to ease readers through the material. There is an introduction to each chapter, tying the material within the chapter together. In addition, each reading receives an introduction that presents the main idea, and historical readings receive a more generous introduction. I have designed the text so that there is a natural progression from chapter to chapter. Nonetheless, many instructors will wish to order the selections in other ways.

I welcome constructive criticism. Hence I invite instructors to send me their comments and suggestions, either through the usual mail (Trinity U., 715 Stadium Dr., San Antonio, TX 78212) or at my e-mail address (sluper@trinity.edu).

Finally, let me thank Ms. Karla Barnett and the student workers at Trinity for the work they did on the manuscript of this text, and those who reviewed the manuscript: Kai Draper, Kansas State University; Vincent J. Ferrara, Indiana University of Pennsylvania; Tamara Horowitz, University of Pittsburgh; Neil Luebke, Oklahoma State University; Mario Morelli, Western Illinois University; and Rodney G. Peffer, University of San Diego.

Contents

Introduction

This anthology is a collection of essays that offer answers to the question "What ought society to be like?" together with a few essays that are especially insightful commentaries on historical figures. Part 1 presents a range of social ideals, part 2 investigates the nature of democracy and asks about the limits of legitimate governmental authority, and part 3 considers some problems of international justice.

In organizing the first part of the anthology, I have assumed that there are five main social ideals, or social virtues, on which people have based their recommendations for society's institutions. Over the generations, each of these ideals has been developed into sophisticated accounts by a range of figures, and each ideal finds adherents in the contemporary literature of social and political philosophy. According to the first approach, society ought to be organized according to arrangements that are in the individual's self-interest. This approach is the focus of chapter 1. The second basic view, the topic of chapter 2, is that social arrangements ought to bring about happiness or human flourishing; happiness and flourishing are concepts that, in turn, admit of varying interpretations. Chapter 3 focuses on natural rights or ("negative") liberty and considers the suggestion that the society we ought to support is one that protects people's rights and liberty. A fourth suggestion, pursued in chapter 4, is that what is of paramount importance is equality, or fairness. The final chapter in part 1 is devoted to the suggestion that society ought to be a tightly knit community first and foremost, since individuals derive their identities from their community.

The question "What ought society to be like?" could of course be phrased in different ways. For example, the book as easily could be said to ask "What is a just society like?" But as some people use the term "justice," it is synonymous with "equality" or the closely related term "fairness," and while some of the essays in this book are attempts to explore the nature of a fair or equal society, not all are. In fact, only the essays in chapter 4 (with the possible exception of the selections from Marx) are clearly and unequivocally devoted to fairness and equality. Furthermore, using "justice" in this limited sense has an unfortunate consequence for people like Michael Sandel who think that something other than equality is of paramount importance in the society we ought to support: the limited usage saddles them with the claim that justice should be sacrificed in favor of other virtues a society might display, such as, in the case of Sandel, society's being a tightly knit community. To my ear, this claim sounds as peculiar as the claim that morality should be sacrificed in favor of other goods we might pursue, and though the claims are intelligible, they should be avoided if possible.

Not everyone uses "justice" in this narrow sense. It is also common for people to use the term "justice" as John Rawls does: it is the first, or most important and basic, virtue of society or of the institutions of society so that no matter what virtues those arrangements

display, they must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust. Using the term "justice" in this way, people like Sandel can avoid the awkward consequence just mentioned. Sandel, for example, could simply say that the just society *is* a tightly knit community; that is, the first virtue of a society is its being a tightly knit community. In fact, we could probably get away with saying that the essays in this volume are devoted to answering the question "What is a just society like?" as long as we use the term "justice" in this wider sense, for then the question will mean "What is the first virtue of society?"

But a problem arises if we focus on the question "What is the first virtue of society?" Talk of the first virtue of society can easily suggest that all the putative social virtues are commensurable from the rational point of view, and one is dominant in the sense that it should always win out in cases of conflict. This assumption is often made, for it is the most straightforward way to approach the resolution of social issues from a single moral point of view: if one value trumps the rest, then it can be appealed to in the final court of arbitration.

A growing number of philosophers, such as Alaisdair MacIntyre and Richard Rorty, would not agree that reason endorses taking one value as dominant; MacIntyre would say that there are several traditions that emphasize distinct social values and that the traditions are incommensurable. Even reason itself, according to MacIntyre and Rorty, is a tradition-relative notion. If no one value trumps the other values, we are left with two main choices. First, we might simply hunker down within the tradition that has shaped our identity, recognizing that it is not selected by reason over and against other traditions. Second, we might opt for pluralism, as suggested, for example, by Isaiah Berlin, and attempt to give free rein within our society to all rival traditions.

I have been speaking of five competing social ideals that are at the heart of the leading answers to the question of how society ought to be arranged. In doing so I do not mean to suggest that the five are utopian visions; this anthology is not devoted to conceptions of utopia. Utopian visionaries depict the perfect society. That is not what people like J. S. Mill, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau were doing. Roughly speaking, what they were describing is the conditions social arrangements must meet if those arrangements are to be acceptable. On their view, social change was mandatory unless certain conditions were met, and their task was to clarify those conditions.

Chapter 1 presented special difficulties. I wanted to begin the book with Plato since historically *The Republic* is a natural place to begin, but I also wanted to begin the book with writings that emphasize that social arrangements should be based on self-interest, for conceptually *that* is a natural place to begin. Fortunately, *The Republic* can be seen as an attempt to sketch the self-interest view, and then to respond to it. That is a sufficient reason to discuss Plato's dialogue under the heading of self-interest. But there is another reason as well, at least on one reading of Plato: to Thrasymachus and Glaucon, who champion the view that people will always do what is in their own interest and ignore justice if they can do so with impunity, Socrates is in effect responding that justice *is* in the individual's interest—as long as people are clear about what their self-interest truly is.

Plato and Aristotle both develop their moral views around the presupposition that the self is to be identified with the community. For us to live the best life is for the community to live the best life, although we can add that individuals may flourish on an individual basis by excelling in their proper role in the community. Accordingly, there is never a real tension between the interests of individuals and those of the group: the group interest *is* the individual interest.

Plato and Aristotle attempt to clarify how the elements of the community or state should be organized so that it will flourish, and they assume that the individual will fall into place by virtue of identifying with the community. Of course, the ancient idea that the individual could be brought into harmony with the group by identifying the individual with the group has been largely abandoned. At least in the West, we have ceased to emphasize the concept of the good in moral philosophy, and, under the influence of the natural law tradition, we have come to emphasize the concept of the right. Moreover, in applying the concept of the right, we presuppose that the world is peopled by individuals and groups whose interests clash in a fundamental way, and we expect the right to provide us with limits that absolutely trump the

pursuit of self-interest, limits that reasonable people will acknowledge and willingly impose upon themselves. We have also come to extend this conception of the right into the notion of *rights,* which limit the ways in which the group may interfere with the individual's pursuit of self-interest. This modern concept of right, and of rights, is absent from the ancient world.

Chapter 2 presented difficulties as well. Some instructors may be irritated with my decision to put Aristotle in the same chapter with Mill, since Aristotelian *eudaimonia* is not a form of utilitarianism. In my defense I can only say that the topic in the chapter is *flourishing and happiness,* not utility. What I attempt to draw attention to in chapter 2 is the view that the best society should promote happiness. At the most basic level, that is what both Mill and Aristotle want to say, even if they disagree about the nature of happiness and the way to achieve it.

The materials in part 2 of the book concern important issues facing contemporary society. Some instructors might wonder why an introductory anthology devoted to social and political philosophy also includes a chapter on international justice, which is the topic of part 3. My answer is that serious discussion of such issues has begun, and the amount of material written in this area is increasing rapidly.

In the introduction to each chapter I offer brief descriptions of how the readings of that chapter are related to each other. In an attempt to get the student started, the introduction to chapter 1 points out how certain basic notions (such as the self, interests, the good, and so on) are interrelated. The introductions to readings by historical figures include a brief biographical statement. Historical figures also receive a more substantial introduction, since students probably will need extra guidance in reading the likes of Rousseau. In no way will these introductions take the place of reading the primary materials; they are designed simply to provide the student with an entry for the essay that follows.

At the end of each chapter is a set of questions for further reflection. These questions challenge the readings in ways readers might find helpful, and instructors might consider suggesting some of the questions as paper topics or as topics for class discussion.

CHAPTER 1

Self-Interest

Many people have proposed that being moral (in general) or acting justly (in particular) might be analyzed in terms of rational self-interest. Some say, for example, that a policy is just when it is in each person's self-interest. One reason people have been drawn to this way of understanding justice is that the notion of self-interest is relatively clear whereas the notion of justice is relatively unclear; thus, if conceived in terms of self-interest, justice might become more clear. Another reason is that it is relatively obvious why people act in their own self-interest and far less obvious why anyone would act justly. So, if we can show that acting justly is in people's self-interest, we will have given justice a justification of sorts. In fact, some people have maintained that we cannot help but choose what we believe to be in our self-interest. If justice can be analyzed in terms of self-interest, then, the grounds for being just might be made more obvious. However, self-interest accounts of justice face a substantial difficulty: justice certainly appears to constrain people's pursuit of their own rational self-interest, but how could that be, if justice is somehow reducible to, or justifiable in terms of, rational self-interest?

In this chapter we consider some self-interest accounts of justice. Before we turn to these analyses, however, it will help to turn to some preliminaries.

COMMON DISTINCTIONS

Intrinsic/Instrumental Good

Some things are considered good in and of themselves. Other things, such as tools, are not valued in their own right; they are valued because of what they make possible. Let us say that something is an *intrinsic* good when it is good in and of itself and that something is an *instrumental* good when it is a means to an intrinsic good. A related distinction can be made in terms of the object of a desire—that is, in terms of what a desire is for. Thus, when I desire something for its own sake, I regard the object of my desire as intrinsically desirable; things I desire for the sake of something else I regard as instrumentally desirable. Similarly, we can say that a desire is an *ultimate* desire when it is not simply the means to satisfying some other desire; that is, a desire is ultimate when we regard its object as intrinsically good.

Self-Interest

Although the notion of self-interest is relatively clear as compared to the notion of justice, it is far from being completely transparent. Self-interest might be defined narrowly or widely. To see why, let us begin with a simple point: it is possible to say that satisfying *any* of my desires (without thwarting others) is in my own self-interest. One might even define "acting in my own self-interest" as "satisfying any of my de-

sires." But isn't everything we do on purpose an attempt to satisfy our desires? So, if we accept this definition, won't we be saying that we cannot help but act in our own self-interest as we perceive it? Before we accept such a claim, we should notice that people pursue a considerable range of things, and many of these pursuits do not appear to be self-interested at all. What I desire might range from acquiring as much money as I can to devoting myself completely to the wretched of the earth, even to the point of dying in their service. When we speak of people acting in their own self-interest, we do not normally mean to include the behavior of those who desire to die for others.

To make this point clearer, let us add a couple of distinctions. First, let us distinguish between two types of desires: desires that are *self-seeking,* such as my desire for pleasure or safety, and desires that are not self-seeking, for example, my desire that you have a long and prosperous life. Second, let us distinguish between narrow and wide self-interest. We can define the term "narrow self-interest" in terms of self-seeking desires: if something contributes to the satisfaction of my noninstrumental, self-seeking desires, let us say, it is in my narrow self-interest. As for the notion of *wide* self-interest, it can be defined in terms of desires in general, not just ones that are self-seeking: anything that contributes to my desires is in my wide self-interest.

Notice how plausible it is to say that everything we do on purpose is an attempt to act in our wide self-interest. If by "acting in our own self-interest" we *meant* "acting in our *wide* self-interest," it also would be plausible to say that we always try to act in our own self-interest. However, normally when people say that they are acting in their own self-interest, they have in mind their *narrow* self-interest, and they mean to say that ultimately they are attempting to satisfy *self-seeking* desires. So normally the claim that we act exclusively in our own self-interest means that ultimately we act exclusively in our narrow self-interest. And perhaps that is true; perhaps ultimately we really do pursue only self-seeking desires. But it is important to notice that it is not obvious that we are limited in this way, and in any case, whether it is true or not let us be careful not to *conclude* that we act exclusively in our own self-interest *on the grounds that* we always try to act in our wide self-interest, for it is clear that the former does not follow from the latter.

To show that we act *exclusively* in our own self-interest, it would not be enough to show that we always pursue our desires. In addition, we would have to show that self-seeking desires are the only desires we have, or that the objects of self-seeking desires are the only things we regard as intrinsically good. Since it is obvious that we do have desires (such as my desire that you prosper) that are not self-seeking, we are left with the possibility of showing that all desires that are not self-seeking are mere instruments for the satisfaction of desires that are self-seeking. Many philosophers have made this kind of claim. Some have argued, for example, that everything we do is finally aimed at giving ourselves pleasure and that the desire for our own pleasure is a self-seeking desire. On this view, I might wish that you will live long and prosper, but only because in the final analysis I believe that your well-being will give me pleasure.

Later we will return to the view that the only things we regard as intrinsically good are things like pleasure so that our ultimate desires are self-seeking. First let us discuss other ways in which the notion of self-interest is not clear. So far we have said that acting in our self-interest boils down to the attempt to satisfy our self-seeking desires. But when exactly is a desire self-seeking? The answer to this question is not entirely straightforward.

People might be described as self-seeking if they focus on themselves and ignore others. This description suggests that my desire is self-seeking when it is concerned exclusively with myself and not with anyone else—that is, when its object can be fully described by referring to my own states and without referring to anyone else (whether an individual or a group). For example, my desire to experience pleasure meets this first criterion and hence is a self-seeking desire. But do all self-seeking desires meet this suggested criterion? Apparently not. Surely my desire to outdo you in a business deal is self-seeking, but it does not meet the first criterion, since its object irreducibly involves you and not just myself. In general, we tend to think that people can be described as self-seeking not just when they focus on themselves

and ignore others, but also when they take an interest specifically in harming the interests of others. So we will need a second criterion to supplement the first. We might say that desires are self-seeking when harm to the interests of others is an intrinsic part of the objects of those desires. When I want to outdo you, I want to act contrary to your interests, so my desire is self-seeking.

Now let us discuss another way in which the notion of self-seeking is unclear: self-seeking desires are defined in terms of the self and the boundary between the self and others, yet the notion of the self is not altogether clear, and so the boundary between different selves can be elusive. Consider the relationship between the self and groups with which the self identifies: do such group members share an identity? If so, can the group-self have desires, and if it can, are all, some, or none of these group-self desires self-seeking? Can group selves be selfish, and if so relative to whom: their members or other group-selves? (Again, if there can be selfish groups, can that be objectionable from the moral point of view, or are groups, as Hegel thought in the case of states, always "right"?) We will return to such questions in chapter 5, when we discuss communitarian approaches to justice.

(UNIVERSAL) ETHICAL EGOISM

Some philosophers have analyzed "good" and "right" directly in terms of self-interest. The view called *ethical egoism* does so. According to the most common version of ethical egoism (which might be called *universal* ethical egoism), the good for person A is that which is in A's rational self-interest, while the good for person B is that which is in B's interest, and so on. Then the egoist analyzes the concept of right in terms of the concept of the good: the right thing for A to do is that which maximizes the good for A, the right thing for B to do is that which maximizes the good for B, and so on. Notice that on the egoist approach the good and the right are defined *relative* to agents so that things are assessed only from individual points of view. Probably the egoist advocates agent-relative assessments of things because the egoist believes that this is the only kind of assessment there is, the only kind that makes sense. There is no impartial or agent-neutral way to assess things, that is, no useful assessment from a point of view that is not tied to particular persons. If we ask such an ethical egoist whether something is good, the egoist will likely respond with the question "Good for whom?" If we in turn respond by saying that we don't want to know whether something is good for a particular person, but rather whether it is good *period,* whether it is *objectively* good, the egoist will likely say that the question makes no sense and that we may sensibly ask only whether something is subjectively good. Such an egoist denies the existence of objective values, which are values that are identified from a perspective that abstracts away from individual, subjective perspectives.

A *normative* view is one that makes a claim concerning what is good or valuable, which a *descriptive* view (such as any scientific theory) makes value-neutral claims of fact. Ethical egoism is a normative view. As such, it should be distinguished from *psychological egoism;* the latter is the claim that as a matter of psychological fact people always choose that which they think is in their own self-interest. So psychological egoism is a descriptive view.

We have said that the notion of self-interest might be defined narrowly or widely, so offhand the psychological egoist might maintain that we always choose what we regard as being in our narrow or wide self-interest, and the ethical egoist might maintain that the good for person A is that which is in A's wide or narrow self-interest. However, in practice psychological egoism and ethical egoism almost always are defined in terms of our narrow self-interest so that psychological egoism refers to the view that the only things we regard as intrinsically desirable are the objects of self-seeking desires and the only things we choose are ultimately things we think will help us to satisfy these self-seeking desires. And ethical egoism typically is the view that our good and what we ought to choose is that which is most in our narrow self-interest. We should be interested in other people only when the condition of others affects our narrow self-interest, and if we choose to help our friends, ultimately it should be because we want something such as pleasure that is in our narrow self-interest.

Thomas Hobbes defends this narrow kind of psychological and ethical egoism. Other philosophers have defended a still narrower form of egoism.

Jeremy Bentham, the mentor of John Stuart Mill (discussed in chapter 3), is a prominent example. Bentham defended a doctrine called psychological *hedonism.* According to psychological hedonism, we choose only what we think will give us pleasure, directly or indirectly. Contrast the corresponding doctrine of *ethical* hedonism, which says that the good for person A is A's pleasure and that which gives A pleasure, and the right thing for A to do is that which maximizes the good for A. Epicurus is another proponent of ethical hedonism. After firmly rejecting psychological hedonism, Friedrich Nietzsche defends sophisticated versions of the views that we always choose what we think will enhance our power (a type of psychological egoism) and that our power is good for us (a type of ethical egoism).

Ethical egoism, whether restricted to the narrow version or not, certainly has the virtue of making it clear why each of us would want what is just or moral: for each of us, the just or moral thing is that which is most in our own rational self-interest. However, there is plenty to say against ethical egoism as well. Sometimes it is criticized on the grounds that it is morally wrong ("selfish") to act in our self-interest. But surely that criticism is too strong. It is not objectionable to choose various things on the grounds that they are in our narrow (or wide) self-interest. We may eat a dessert because it will taste good, or refuse a marriage proposal on virtually any grounds whatever, including the fact that we do not *like* our suitor, or take medicine because it will save our lives.

But if some things may be done because they are in our self-interest, not everything may. Notice ethical egoism implies that what each of us ought to do depends on the interest we take in others and, more saliently, on how much power we have over others. If I take no interest in you and your family, and I have the power to prevent you from acting contrary to my wishes (by killing you, for example), I ought to press my interests against you and your family, regardless of how badly you are served. Only if you have the power to interfere with my plans ought I concern myself with their impact on you, and then only because placating you is now necessary for me to pursue my interests efficiently. Most of us reject these repugnant results, and ethical egoism along with them. In the excerpt from *A Theory of Justice,* John Rawls goes so far as to claim that ethical egoism is not really a moral view at all, because the egoist principle implies that our duty depends on our power, and the very point of a moral conception is to enable us "to avoid the appeal to force and cunning."

Nevertheless, many people who reject ethical egoism still think that there is a close link between morality and rational self-interest, and various other suggestions about this link have been made.

ETHICAL AUTOCRACY

Perhaps justice is simply what is in the interest of the ruler of society (no matter who that might be), a position defended by Thrasymachus, a character in Plato's *Republic,* the first selection. We might call this view *ethical autocracy;* sometimes it is called *political cynicism* or even *individual ethical egoism.* However, this first alternative to ethical egoism has many counterintuitive consequences. Chief among these unpalatable consequences is the fact that ethical autocracy suggests that the ruler or rulers may press their interests against the rest of us with impunity; in effect, the ruler and only the ruler gets to act like an ethical egoist. But what about our own interests? If justice requires everyone to promote the interests of the ruler, doesn't that mean that justice ignores the interests of everyone else? Such considerations may suggest that ethical autocracy is unacceptable.

Nonetheless, an enormously influential philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, defends a view that is closely allied with ethical autocracy. According to Hobbes's account of justice, the subjects of an absolute sovereign must follow the sovereign's policies, whatever they may be, and nothing the sovereign does is unjust.

Ethical autocracy can be rendered more palatable if combined with the idea that the state is a kind of collective person whose desires are solely those of the ruler but with whom everyone ought to identify. If everyone in some sense *is* the state, and the state's desires are those of the ruler, then those desires are also everyone's desires. Individuals might have individual desires as well, and those desires might conflict with the ruler's, but if individuals' "true" self is the state, then what individuals "truly" want is what the ruler wants. Such an idea, which is suggested by Hobbes

(primarily in chapter 16 of *Leviathan*), might strike a contemporary reader as implausible. But as we move from chapter to chapter, we will see various philosophers recommending versions of the view that individuals do or should or must derive their "true" identity from the collective, whether that is the community, the city, or the state; and if we agree, we will be a short distance away from the further view that what the ruler wants we want. That the very identity of the person (and therefore the notion of self-interest as well) is deeply controversial is something we must recognize from the outset.

THE COMMON INTEREST VIEW

The thought that justice ought to take everyone's interests into account leads naturally to a second, more plausible suggestion. Suppose we say that something is in the collective interest only when it is in each and every person's rational self-interest. Perhaps, then, justice is simply that which is in the collective interest, a view we might call the *common interest view.* If so, all of us would have a compelling reason to want our society to be just, for justice would be in each person's rational self-interest.

A version of the common interest view is discussed in the reading by Plato, and it seems to be the view defended by Epicurus in *Principal Doctrines* 33–38. The common interest view is also attributed to Thomas Hobbes by David Gauthier and Gregory Kavka in their selections. Gauthier also defends a version of the common interest view in his own right. David Hume might be said to defend a version of the common interest view if we interpret "self-interest" in the wide sense. Kavka suggests a somewhat weaker view: that normally it is in our rational self-interest to be moral.