CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY
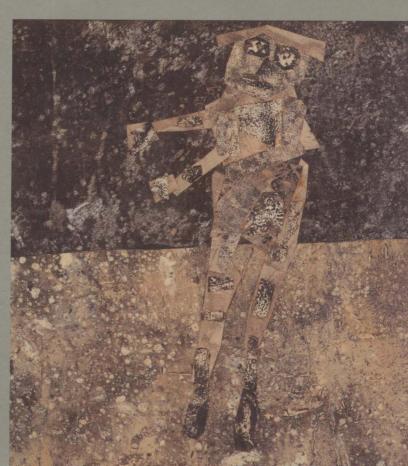
AN INTRODUCTION

WILL KYMLICKA

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Second edition

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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For Sue

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The original edition of this book was written shortly after I finished graduate school. At the time, I thought it was puzzling that there were not more political philosophy textbooks written by older colleagues who presumably had many years of lecture notes to work from, and who had much more experience both teaching and researching these topics.

Twelve years later, it seems to me that only an eager postgraduate, overly confident of his new-found knowledge and convictions, would even have the idea of writing such an ambitious book. I actually had two ambitions for the book. The first was to provide a reasonably comprehensive overview of the most important theories in contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy. The second was to show the interconnections between the various theories. I wanted to show that each theory could be seen as addressing some common questions, and as responding to the weaknesses or limitations in the way previous theories answered them, so that we could see progress over time as the field developed.

Both of these now seem somewhat overambitious. The first task, of providing a comprehensive overview, was probably unrealistic at the time, but has become even more difficult in the last decade, due to the explosion of writing in the field. One indication of this is the exponential growth in journals devoted to the field. When John Rawls wrote *Theory of Justice* in 1971, which I take as ground zero for our debates, there was only one journal (*Ethics*) devoted to the field of political philosophy, and it was more or less moribund. When I wrote the first edition of this book, the revitalized *Ethics* had been joined by a few newcomers like *Philosophy and Public Affairs* and *Political Theory*. Today, we have seen another wave of new journals, including *Journal of Political Philosophy*, *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, and *Journal of Political Ideologies*. We have also seen the birth of new book series devoted to the field—most prominently the 'Oxford Political Theory' series from Oxford University Press, and the 'Contemporary Political Theory' series from Cambridge University Press.

In short, there are more people working in the field, publishing more articles and books, than ever before. And these publications are not simply refining old approaches, but are addressing entirely new topics that were almost invisible in the 1970s and 1980s—topics such as multiculturalism, or deliberative democracy.

So there is simply too much material for me to keep up with, and it is impossible to maintain even the pretence of a fully comprehensive introduction. Indeed, I sometimes think we need an entirely new kind of introduction

to our field: one that picks a few examples to study rather than surveys the field, or one that focuses more on method and less on substantive theories.

However, I confess I have a soft spot in my heart for this book, and enjoy the thought that it has helped introduce what I believe are some very important ideas to new audiences. I think there is still a need for something which at least approximates a survey of the field.

To keep things manageable, I have had to make difficult choices about what material from the past decade to include in this new edition. In my own work, I have focused on issues of citizenship, and I think this has been one of the most fruitful areas of debate in the 1990s. Indeed, some commentators have said that 'citizenship' was the buzzword of the 1990s, like 'justice' in the 1970s, and 'community' in the 1980s. So I have added two new chapters on citizenship. The first focuses on the sorts of skills, virtues, and activities that citizens must exhibit if a democratic polity is to be effective, stable, and just. This is an issue that has been raised most forcefully by civic republicans, although it has been addressed by many schools of thought, and underlies recent accounts of civic virtues, citizenship education, public reason, and deliberative democracy.

The second chapter focuses on the relationship between citizenship and group differences. Citizenship is often assumed to be a status that we should all hold in common, but many groups seek legal and political recognition of their distinct identities, through some form of 'politics of difference' or 'politics of recognition'. This is an issue raised most forcefully by theorists of multiculturalism, but it also raises more general issues of individual versus group rights, nationalism, racism, immigration, and group representation.

These are not the only important new issues raised in the 1990s. In particular, I regret not having a chapter addressing the growing debate concerning our moral obligations to the environment and to animals—a debate which goes to the core of our basic assumptions about the nature of political morality and political community.[1] But I hope that these two new chapters on citizenship, combined with extensive updates to the previous chapters, will give readers a good, if not fully comprehensive, introduction to the field as it stands today.

As I noted earlier, one of my ambitions in the first edition was to identify the ways in which new theories can be seen as relating to older theories, building on their strengths and remedying their weaknesses. This task too is more complicated today, given the growing diversity of topics and approaches in the field. It is more difficult to see a consistent logic or narrative which explains or encompasses all the assorted developments in the field, or to find ways of measuring 'progress' in the literature.

Indeed, confronted with a growing diversity of approaches, each with its own vocabulary and preoccupations, it may seem that contemporary political philosophy is simply a disconnected series of discrete arguments or debates,

each developing according to its own inner logic, unrelated to the rest of the field. The dizzying array of new theories in the last decade only increases this sense of fragmentation and dislocation.

In my view, however, this multiplication of theories and vocabularies can obscure the fact that political philosophers must all grapple with some common problems, and must do so in light of the same realities of modern life, with its characteristic needs, aspirations, and complexities. Theorists disagree about how to interpret these problems and realities, but we miss the point and purpose of these different theories if we do not keep sight of the common issues they are dealing with. And once we see these common objectives, we can also start to form judgements about whether we are making progress towards achieving them.

Indeed, it is difficult for me to understand why anyone would get involved in the project of political philosophy if they did not think we could make progress on these issues. Since this promise of progress seems to me essential to the project, I have not shied away from identifying cases where I think new theories offer not only different, but also better, answers to these common problems.

What are these common themes or problems which the various theories are trying to address? One theme which I emphasized in the first edition was the way each theory could be seen as trying to interpret what it means for governments to show 'equal concern and respect' to their citizens. I discuss this idea at length in the Introduction, and how it enables us to evaluate competing theories, so will not repeat it here.

But there are two other common themes which were implicit in the first edition, and which I have tried to highlight more strongly in this new edition. The first is the centrality of liberal democracy to contemporary political philosophy. To oversimplify, we can say that contemporary political philosophers fall into two camps. On the one hand, we have those who endorse the basic tenets of liberal democracy, and who are concerned to provide the best philosophical defence of these values. To date, there have been three main approaches to defending liberal democracy: utilitarianism, liberal equality, and libertarianism. Taken together, they have come to define the language of political debate in Anglo-American liberal democracies. The cluster of concepts associated with these three approaches—'rights', 'liberty', 'the greatest good of the greatest number', 'equal opportunity', etc.—dominates political discourse at both the theoretical and practical level. Indeed, the hegemony of these theories is so great that, to some people, they provide 'the only political language that can sound a convincing moral note in our public realms' (Grant 1974: 5).

The first three chapters of this book evaluate these three influential defences of liberal democracy. We can describe these three theories as forming the

'mainstream' of contemporary political philosophy. But there have always been those who reject liberal democracy, in whole or in part, and who offer an alternative set of concepts and principles to supplement or replace the liberal-democratic vocabulary. Chapters 4–9 look at five such schools of criticism: Marxism, communitarianism, feminism, civic republicanism, and multiculturalism. We can describe these theories as forming 'critiques and alternatives' to the mainstream liberal-democratic theories.

However, as we will see, each of these five approaches exhibits an ambivalent relationship to the idea of liberal democracy. On the one hand, they criticize mainstream theories, which they see as operating to justify or obscure fundamental problems with society, such as the exploitation and alienation of wage-labourers (Marxism), social atomism (communitarianism), the subordination of women (feminism), cultural marginalization or assimilation (multiculturalism), or political apathy (civic republicanism). But on the other hand, they often suggest that the problem is not so much with the principles of liberal democracy, but rather with their imperfect implementation, or the lack of appropriate preconditions for implementing them. To solve these problems, do we need to abandon liberal-democratic principles, or better fulfil them? Are these principles sufficient, or do they need to be supplemented?

Viewing each of these theories as offering a different defence or critique of liberal democracy helps us, I think, to see better precisely what they have in common, and where they differ.

A second, more specific, theme which emerges throughout the book concerns ideas of responsibility. The idea that 'responsibility' should be a central category of political thought is sometimes associated with feminism and civic republicanism, both of which chastise liberals for their supposed preoccupation with 'rights'. But as we will see, the idea of responsibility is central to all of these theories. Indeed they can be rephrased as an account of who is responsible for meeting which needs or costs or choices. They differ, not over the centrality of responsibility per se, but over more specific questions about personal responsibility and collective responsibility. For example, are we responsible for our own choices, in the sense that we should pay for the costs of our choices, and not expect others to subsidize our voluntarily incurred expenses? Are we responsible for remedying the involuntary disadvantages that others find themselves in, such that no one is disadvantaged by undeserved and unchosen inequalities in life-chances? Responsibility for self and responsibility for others are basic to all the theories, and thinking of the theories in these terms helps to clarify their points of agreement and disagreement.

Treating people with equal concern and respect; defences and critiques of liberal democracy; responsibility for self and other—these are some of the

common themes which I have tried to weave throughout the text, and which I think provide a useful skeleton framework for understanding and evaluating the diverse and growing range of theories in the field.

My hope is that when the reader has finished this book, he or she will be able to pick up one of the journals I mentioned earlier and feel at home with the articles in it. My book will not have defined or explained all the terminology encountered in these journals, but I hope it will explain the major topics and approaches discussed in today's journals. Moreover, I hope it will explain why these topics and approaches have become matters of debate. I hope the reader will know why some topics are seen as a weakness for certain approaches, and how other approaches have emerged to remedy these weaknesses.[2]

I should emphasize that this book is not a light read. It is an introduction, but my goal is to introduce people to the cutting-edge work being done in the field. As I said in the introduction to the first edition, I believe that some truly great work has been done in the field, and I want to tell people about it.

This cutting-edge work is often quite sophisticated: the concepts are multi-faceted, and the arguments rest on subtle distinctions or examples. I have tried to explain these concepts and distinctions as clearly as possible for those who are new to the material, but I have not tried to avoid the complexity or subtlety.

Put another way, this is not just an introduction to the main questions addressed in contemporary political philosophy, but also an introduction to the best answers we have to those questions. Understanding the arguments may require some concentration, but I hope you will agree the payoff is worth the effort.

NOTES

1. Consider, for example, the important Great Ape Project, an international movement to extend certain basic 'human' rights to the great apes (Cavalieri and Singer 1993). For more general issues of the extension of the moral community to include non-human animals, see DeGrazia 1995; Regan 2001. For debates about the moral status of the environment, see Eckersley 1992; Dobson 1990; Zimmerman 1993; Goodin 1992a, De-Shalit 2000.

2. Needless to say, there is a great deal of interesting work in political philosophy outside the Anglo-American tradition, often with very different preoccupations. For an account of 'the return of political philosophy' in post-war Europe, see Manent 2000.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS FOR THE SECOND EDITION

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CONTENTS

1

INTRODUCTION

1. THE PROJECT

This book is intended to provide an introduction to, and critical appraisal of, the major schools of thought which dominate contemporary debates in political philosophy. The material covered is almost entirely comprised of recent works in normative political philosophy and, more particularly, recent theories of a just or free or good society. It does not cover, except incidentally, the major historical figures, nor does it cover many other subjects that were once considered the focal point of political philosophy—e.g. the conceptual analysis of the meaning of power, or sovereignty, or of the nature of law. These were popular topics thirty-five years ago, but the recent emphasis has been on the ideals of justice, freedom, and community which are invoked when evaluating political institutions and policies. I will not, of course, attempt to cover all the recent developments in these areas, but will concentrate on those theories which have attracted a certain allegiance, and which offer a more or less comprehensive vision of the ideals of politics.

One reason for writing this book is my belief that there is a remarkable amount of interesting and important work being done in the field. To put it simply, the intellectual landscape in political philosophy today is quite different from what it was twenty, or even ten years, ago. The arguments being advanced are often genuinely original, not only in developing new variations on old themes (e.g. Nozick's development of Lockean natural rights theory), but also in the development of new perspectives (e.g. feminism). One result of these developments is that the traditional categories within which political theories are discussed and evaluated are increasingly inadequate.

Our traditional picture of the political landscape views political principles as falling somewhere on a single line, stretching from left to right. According to this traditional picture, people on the left believe in equality, and hence endorse some form of socialism, while those on the right believe in freedom, and hence endorse some form of free-market capitalism. In the middle are the liberals, who believe in a wishy-washy mixture of equality and freedom, and

hence endorse some form of welfare state capitalism. There are, of course, many positions in between these three points, and many people accept different parts of different theories. But it is often thought that the best way to understand or describe someone's political principles is to try to locate them somewhere on that line.

There is some truth to this way of thinking about Western political theory. But it is increasingly inadequate. First, it ignores a number of important issues. For example, left and right are distinguished by their views of freedom and justice in the traditionally male-dominated spheres of government and economy. But what about the fairness or freedom of the traditionally female spheres of home and family? Mainstream political theorists from left to right have tended to either neglect these other spheres, or to claim that they do not raise questions of justice and freedom. An adequate theory of sexual equality will involve considerations that simply are not addressed in traditional left–right debates. The traditional picture has also been criticized for ignoring issues of historical context. Theories on both the left and right seek to provide us with principles we can use to test and criticize our historical traditions and cultural practices. But communitarians believe that evaluating political institutions cannot be a matter of judging them against some independent ahistorical standard. They believe that political judgement is a matter of interpreting the traditions and practices we already find ourselves in. So there are issues of our historical and communal 'embeddedness' which are not addressed in traditional left–right disputes. We cannot begin to understand feminism or communitarianism if we insist on locating them somewhere on a single left–right continuum.

So one problem concerns the narrowness of the traditional picture. This objection is a fairly common one now, and most commentators in the field have tried to bring out the greater range of principles that get invoked in political debate. But there is another feature of the traditional picture which I believe is equally in need of revision. The traditional picture suggests that different theories have different foundational values: the reason that right and left disagree over capitalism is that the left believes in equality while the right believes in freedom. Since they disagree over fundamental values, their differences are not rationally resolvable. The left can argue that if you believe in equality, then you should support socialism; and the right can argue that if you believe in freedom, you should support capitalism. But there is no way to argue for equality over freedom, or freedom over equality, since these are foundational values, with no higher value or premiss that both sides can jointly appeal to. The deeper we probe these political debates, the more intractable they become, for we are left with nothing but conflicting appeals to ultimate, and ultimately opposed, values.

This feature of the traditional picture has remained largely unquestioned,

even by those commentators who reject the traditional left–right classifications. Each of the new theories is also assumed to appeal to a different ultimate value. Thus we are told that alongside the older appeal to 'equality' (socialism) and 'liberty' (libertarianism), political theories now appeal to the ultimate values of 'contractual agreement' (Rawls), 'the common good' (communitarianism), 'utility' (utilitarianism), 'rights' (Dworkin), 'identity' (multiculturalism), or 'androgyny' (feminism).[1] So we now have an even greater number of ultimate values between which there can be no rational arguments. But this explosion of potential ultimate values raises an obvious problem for the whole project of developing a single comprehensive theory of justice. If there are so many potential ultimate values, why should we continue to think that an adequate political theory can be based on just one of them? Surely the only sensible response to this plurality of proposed ultimate values is to give up the idea of developing a 'monistic' theory of justice. To subordinate all other values to one overriding value seems almost fanatical.

A successful theory of justice, therefore, will have to accept bits and pieces from most of the existing theories. But if the disagreements between these values really are foundational, how can they be integrated into a single theory? One traditional aim of political philosophy was to find coherent and comprehensive rules for deciding between conflicting political values. But how can we have such comprehensive criteria unless there is some deeper value in terms of which the conflicting values are judged? Without such a deeper value, there could only be ad hoc and localized resolutions of conflicts. We would have to accept the inevitable compromises that are required between theories, rather than hope for any one theory to provide comprehensive guidance. And indeed this is what many commentators believe is the fate of contemporary theorizing about justice. Political philosophy is, on this view, drowning in its own success. There has been an explosion of interest in the traditional aim of finding the one true theory of justice, but the result of this explosion has been to make that traditional aim seem wholly implausible.

Is this an accurate picture of the political landscape? Do contemporary political theories appeal to conflicting ultimate values? I want to explore a suggestion, advanced by Ronald Dworkin, that modern political theories do not have different foundational values. On Dworkin's view, every plausible political theory has the same ultimate value, which is equality. They are all 'egalitarian' theories (Dworkin: 1977 179–83; 1983: 24; 1986: 296–301; 1987: 7–8; cf. Nagel 1979: 111). That suggestion is clearly false if by 'egalitarian theory' we mean a theory which supports an equal distribution of income. But there is another, more abstract and more fundamental, idea of equality in political theory—namely, the idea of treating people 'as equals'. There are various ways to express this more basic idea of equality. A theory is egalitarian

in this sense if it accepts that the interests of each member of the community matter, and matter equally. Put another way, egalitarian theories require that the government treat its citizens with equal consideration; each citizen is entitled to equal concern and respect. This more basic notion of equality is found in Nozick's libertarianism as much as in Marx's communism. While leftists believe that equality of income or wealth is a precondition for treating people as equals, those on the right believe that equal rights over one's labour and property are a precondition for treating people as equals.

So the abstract idea of equality can be interpreted in various ways, without necessarily favouring equality in any particular area, be it income, wealth, opportunities, or liberties. It is a matter of debate between these theories which specific kind of equality is required by the more abstract idea of treating people as equals. Not every political theory ever invented is egalitarian in this broad sense. But if a theory claimed that some people were not entitled to equal consideration from the government, if it claimed that certain kinds of people just do not matter as much as others, then most people in the modern world would reject that theory immediately. Dworkin's suggestion is that the idea that each person matters equally is at the heart of all plausible political theories.

This is the suggestion I want to explore in this book, for I believe it is as important as any of the particular theories which it attempts to interpret. (One of its advantages is that it makes the quest for a single comprehensive theory of justice seem more intelligible.) Not everyone agrees that each of these theories is based on a principle of equality, and I will be looking at other ways of interpreting them. For example, I will be discussing what it might mean for libertarianism to have freedom as its foundational value, or for utilitarianism to have utility as its foundational value. In each case, I will compare the different interpretations to see which presents the most coherent and attractive account of the theory in question.

If Dworkin's suggestion is correct, then the scepticism many people feel about the possibility of rationally resolving debates between theories of justice may be misplaced, or, at any rate, too hasty. If each theory shares the same 'egalitarian plateau'—that is, if each theory is attempting to define the social, economic, and political conditions under which the members of the community are treated as equals—then we might be able to show that one of the theories does a better job living up to the standard that they all recognize. Whereas the traditional view tells us that the fundamental argument in political theory is whether to accept equality as a value, this revised view tells us that the fundamental argument is not whether to accept equality, but how best to interpret it. And that means people would be arguing on the same wavelength, so to speak, even those who do not fit on the traditional left–right continuum. Thus the idea of an egalitarian plateau for political argument

is potentially better able to accommodate both the diversity and unity of contemporary political philosophy.

2. A NOTE ON METHOD

It is common in a book of this sort to say something about one's methodology, about how one understands the enterprise of political philosophy, what distinguishes it from other intellectual enterprises, such as moral philosophy, and how one goes about judging its success. I will not say much about these questions here, partly because I do not think there is much that can be said at a general level. Each of the theories examined below answers these questions in a different way—each offers its own account of the division between moral and political philosophy, and its own account of the criteria of successful argument. Evaluating a particular account of the nature of political philosophy, therefore, cannot be separated out from, or done in advance of, evaluating substantive theories of justice.

However, it may be helpful to foreshadow some of the points discussed in later chapters. I believe there is a fundamental continuity between moral and political philosophy, in at least two respects. First, as Robert Nozick puts it, 'moral philosophy sets the background for, and boundaries of, political philosophy. What persons may and may not do to one another limits what they may do through the apparatus of a state, or do to establish such an apparatus. The moral prohibitions it is permissible to enforce are the source of whatever legitimacy the state's fundamental coercive power has' (Nozick 1974: 6). We have moral obligations towards each other, some of which are matters of public responsibility, enforced through public institutions, others of which are matters of personal responsibility, involving rules of personal conduct. Political philosophy focuses on those obligations which justify the use of public institutions. Different theories distinguish public and private responsibility in different ways, but I agree with Nozick that the content of these responsibilities, and the line between them, must be determined by appeal to deeper moral principles.

Secondly, and relatedly, any account of our public responsibilities must fit into a broader moral framework that makes room for, and makes sense of, our private responsibilities. Even where a political theory makes a sharp distinction between public and private responsibility, so that the political principles it endorses have little immediate bearing on rules of personal conduct, it still must not crowd out (in theory or practice) our sense of personal responsibility for helping friends, keeping promises, pursuing projects. This is a problem, I believe, for utilitarian accounts of justice (Chapter 2). On the other hand, it is equally true that any account of our personal obligations must make room