THE BLOOMSBURY COMPANION TO POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

EDITED BY
ANDREW FIALA

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INTRODUCTION

Andrew Fiala

Political philosophy is a broad field of inquiry with a deep history, a vexing set of problems, and a contested methodology. Political philosophy can also have important practical impacts. The field includes a variety of questions about the legitimacy and optimal structure of states, the role of citizens within these states, the proper behavior of governing authorities, relations between states, and the status of norms—such as justice and rights—in both domestic and international contexts.

Beneath this set of issues are profound questions about human nature. Are human beings individuals first, whose membership in social groups is only legitimately derived from individual consent by a social contract? Or are states and other associations historically, ontologically, and normatively more significant than the individuals who constitute them? Are we warlike and competitive or are we cooperative and reasonable? Can we live well without social interaction and legal regulation or do we benefit from the benevolent control of ruling authorities? How ought we regulate our lives, structure our social organizations, and relate to one another across the globe? How do we define and ground key concepts such as human rights, justice, equality, and liberty?

It is no surprise that the big names in the history of political philosophy are, indeed, the important names in the history of philosophy in general: Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Mill. The problems of political philosophy have inspired and troubled the best minds in the philosophical canon; and issues in political philosophy are connected to issues in the rest of philosophy. Contemporary political philosophy builds upon this history, while also criticizing it. Contemporary authors including feminists, cosmopolitans, anarchists, and others are pushing boundaries and challenging the assumptions of the discipline—including the Eurocentric assumptions of the canon of political philosophy.

Political philosophy develops along with the rest of culture. Political philosophy impacts political reality, as political philosophers such as Locke or Marx have inspired revolutions. But political philosophy must also respond to the political world. Issues in the contemporary world drive philosophical inquiry. Locke or Marx, for example, were responding to the concerns of their contemporary political actuality—including issues arising out of the Reformation, colonialism, or the development of capitalism. Today's emerging issues include secularization, modernization, globalization, democratization, liberalization, and the lingering problems of Eurocentrism and postcolonial development.

Our thinking about borders, immigration, and sovereignty is being revised. Our understanding of the power of nonviolence, the norms of warfare, and the role of international law is changing. Also we continue to question the status (and application) of principles of retributive and distributive justice, human rights concepts, and ideas about basic norms of political decision making. Contemporary issues inform contemporary political philosophy, and contemporary political philosophers—from Foucault and Rawls to feminism—inspire political action.

This volume attempts to offer an overview of the field and the depth of the issues. No single text can offer full coverage of a subject as broad as political philosophy. The chapters collected here range across the topic, while attempting to provide sufficient depth to inspire further reflection.

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY, UTOPIA, AND REALISM

There is no single method of political philosophy. Pluralism is implicit in the topic, since there is an ambiguity exposed in the two terms that make up the name of the subject, "political philosophy." On the one hand, philosophy is often conceived as reflection on transcendent categories of being and thought that are contemplated from a disembodied vantage point outside of Plato's cave. On the other hand, political life includes the tumult and change of history, including the rise and fall of cities, civilizations, states, and forms of life. One of the deepest challenges for political philosophy is the question of whether there are transcendental categories, eternal truths, and transcultural norms. A related question is the extent to which philosophical inquiry is itself part of the political landscape engaged in struggles for power and recognition, subject to the changing turmoil of social, cultural, and historical circumstance. While Marx and others would view philosophy as ideology and thus would locate philosophizing in the struggles of political life, others—perhaps following Plato or Hegel—view philosophy as speculative reflection hovering outside of political life. A middle path is found in the work of pragmatists such as Dewey or in the democratic theorizing of someone like Joshua Cohen who maintains that "the point of political philosophy is to contribute reflectively to the public reasoning about what we ought to do that always already forms one part of political life" (Cohen, 2009, 4). Political life involves both power struggles and reason-giving. Cohen, Dewey, and others maintain that political philosophers can help to contribute to this process of reasoning, even if we give up on the quest to escape from Plato's cave.

A related issue is the political danger of doing political philosophy in a political environment that is not conducive to philosophical reflection. Socrates was killed for political reasons. Locke had to flee the country. Marx inspired a global revolution. Those who question the norms and structures of political life continue to find themselves in a precarious situation with regard to life in the polis. This is especially true in parts of the world where authoritarian regimes continue to rule. The freedom to philosophize that we take for granted in the liberal-democratic world is not shared in other political milieus. The problem is found at the heart of Plato's foundational cave allegory. Plato implies that there will be no rest from troubles until philosophers become kings or kings become philosophers. But he also implies that when the philosopher returns to the cave to impart wisdom to

the enslaved masses, the masses will laugh, mock, and kill him. Plato asks us to consider whether political philosophers can be understood and whether it is possible for political philosophers to change the world.

A central question of political philosophy is whether Plato's paternalistic view of philosophical wisdom is really appropriate in an age of democracy. It might be that there is no a priori vantage point—no access to the world outside of the cave—as Dewey, Rorty, and other pragmatists and postmoderns imply. Platonic political philosophy is utopian: it imagines an ideal of political life and imparts its wisdom from the outside. Some may reject this entirely and locate philosophy itself within political struggle. Thrasymachus, Marx, and Nietzsche point in this direction, understanding philosophy as simply another form of ideology. Most contemporary political philosophy is found somewhere between these extremes. Consider Rawls's understanding of political philosophy as "realistically utopian": political philosophy *extends* the limits of practical political possibility while also *reconciling* us to our political and social condition (Rawls, 2001). Utopian thought *extends* by imagining ideals and aspirations, while realism *reconciles* us to political reality. Political philosophy involves a process of balancing between extension and reconciliation, idealism and realism.

The idealists and utopians will argue that philosophizing about political life should aim to provide us with true answers and a correct or optimal theory of political reality. But realists will argue that, given the fact of diversity, no such agreement is possible and the best we can do is to establish a pragmatic and partial accommodation and agreement. Again Rawls is helpful: his idea of *overlapping consensus* is an account of how we might agree to disagree. But this points toward an intractable problem at the heart of political philosophy. The liberal idea of overlapping consensus acknowledges that diversity is a fundamental fact of political life, while other more idealistic political theories aim to eliminate diversity by establishing a normative theory grounded in fundamental truth. The tough question of political philosophy is whether political philosophy is grounded in fundamental truth or whether it is grounded in the fundamental fact that we disagree about fundamental truth. This leaves us either with intractable conflict, with a mere *modus vivendi* that simply avoids violence while giving up hope for agreement, or with a more substantial but similarly fragile overlapping consensus that establishes coexistence and cooperation without deeper agreement.

We see this problem in the very etymology of the term *political philosophy*—which is a term loaded with European baggage. It is common to begin a discussion of political philosophy by acknowledging that both terms, *political* and *philosophy*, come to us from Greek origins. The root of the word *political* is the word *polis*, the name of the city-states of ancient Greece. The word *philosophia* can be literally translated from the Greek as "love of wisdom." Combining these terms gives us love of wisdom about the city-state. One wonders whether the endeavor to philosophize about the political is merely a product of Western culture. Can there be a political philosophy articulated in Chinese, Navajo, or Swahili? Would those who do not live in cities need a political philosophy? Would those who do not philosophize in the Greek sense—say, religious fundamentalists—be receptive to political philosophy? A significant worry in our postcolonial era is whether the enterprise of political philosophy is inescapably Eurocentric. Does political philosophy describes states, justice, human rights,

and human nature from a privileged vantage point? Or can political philosophers transcend the blinders of the citadels of power and see political reality without ideological and historical limitation?

Rousseau and other radical critics (such as the neoprimitivist "green anarchists") have suggested that the norms of political philosophy only make sense within the context of "civilization" (another value-laden Eurocentric concept)—and that uncivilized people in the state of nature may have no use for these concepts. Of course, it is nearly impossible for us to imagine what life would be like for "noble savages" in a Rousseau-ian state of nature. But the primitivists remind us that we ought not take civilization and political life for granted: it is possible at least to imagine *Homo sapiens* in a prepolitical state—and indeed *Homo sapiens* lived quite well for long millennia without developing cities. The city, the state, and political philosophy are quite late developments in the life of our species. Thus political philosophers ought to pay attention to the findings of sociobiologists, archaeologists, and anthropologists who offer suggestions about the evolutionary roots of social cooperation and the stability of hunter–gatherer social structure.

While the musings of contemporary anarcho-primitivists may seem like a minor current in the ocean of political philosophy, the question of whether human beings are naturally political beings is a serious philosophical concern. We often take it for granted that Aristotle was right that to be human is to live in cities and to be political. But Christian authors from Augustine to Aquinas and Ockham wondered whether political life was merely a necessity of our post-lapsarian condition. Augustinian political philosophy tends to hold that after the fall of man, political authority is necessary to prevent human beings from falling further, with political dominion understood as protective care for those who are ruled by a benevolent statesman who cares for his subjects as a father cares for his family. Thomistic political thought tends to hold that political authority is less focused on negative restriction as a remedy for sin and more oriented toward promoting human flourishing and the common good. This dispute has implications for how we think about the relation between divine (or natural) law and civil law and for ideas about the separation of church and state. Religious speculation about the origins of political life directs our attention to questions about paternalism and the common good. Also the ideal of genuine community as imagined in some Edenic paradise has often inspired utopian political aspiration.

Leaving religion aside, we might still wonder whether political hierarchy, division of labor, and the social and political structures of civilization are merely contingent ways of organizing human life. Could there be a political philosophy of hunter–gatherers that ignores or rejects the idea of the nation-state? If we continue to evolve beyond the era of nation-states in a cosmopolitan direction, what would a political philosophy of the future look like? The modern Western tradition assumes that humanity made a necessary, logical, and progressive step when it left the state of nature and created the original social contract, which left us with a world carved up into nation-states. But critics have pointed out that the leap into political life cannot be assumed to be unequivocally good and that the move toward the social contract often served the interests of the powerful. Cosmopolitan critics add that the modern emphasis on nation-states may impede us from delivering on the promise of global justice.

Critics also contend that the contemporary global system of nation-states rests upon an often sordid history of colonial and imperial domination of the rest by the West. One might argue that the categories of political philosophy are universal and are thus not liable to the sort of genealogical criticism that wants to throw Western political philosophy baby out with the Eurocentric bathwater. In this volume, James Alexander suggests, for example, that "*Europe is to the World what Greece was to Rome.*" He means that we cannot deny the historical source of political philosophy, even though we have developed a global political philosophy that has developed beyond its European roots. Critics will wonder whether the categories of political thought are tainted by this historical origin. Eduardo Mendieta argues in this volume that contemporary political philosophy ought to reimagine and reconstruct the colonialist narratives of our philosophical inheritance. He worries that "*the future remains mortgaged to the vision of progress projected by both Occidentalism and Orientalism.*"

There is a deep methodological question here. On the one hand, we do not suspect that mathematical truths are tainted by their Greek origin in Euclid or Pythagoras. So why should the truths of political philosophy be tainted by their origin in Plato or Aristotle—or Augustine, Hobbes, Locke, and Kant for that matter? On the one hand, those who suspect a taint here will point out that the ideas of European political philosophy have been used to support crusades, colonialism, imperialism, and other pernicious endeavors. But, on the other hand, it may not be fair to lay blame for the misbehavior of political agents on the philosophers whose ideas were appropriated (and often distorted) by unphilosophical political agents.

The deeper methodological question is whether the supposed truths of political philosophy are members of the same species as the truths of other sciences. We don't think that geometry is a uniquely Greek or Pythagorean science. But what about political philosophy: is it merely "political" or do the truths of political philosophy have a nonpolitical status similar to the truths of geometry? This points toward a fundamental disagreement about the very nature of the topic under discussion and the method of inquiry. Can political philosophy arrive at knowledge, truth, and wisdom? Or do the concepts of political philosophy merely reflect the contingent ideologies of a particular and limited form of life? How do we ground values and normative concepts such as liberty, human rights, democracy, equality, etc.? Do these concepts point to real things: are "rights" real—grounded perhaps in the endowment of some Creator? Or are "rights" merely conventions of the Hobbesian sort—or even worse, "nonsense on stilts" as Bentham argued? The significant problem here is methodological: how do we know what we are talking about in political philosophy—and what access do we have to the objects of political ontology? This methodological problem comes to a head in the question of normativity: what provides the normative impetus of political thinking? Is there a natural law of some sort that helps us understand and ground a normative hierarchy of political structures and values? Or are the norms of political philosophy merely the product of a historically contingent perspective subject to the deflationary critique of conventionalists and nominalists?

What method should we employ to work our way through these sorts of questions: empirical political science or speculative political metaphysics? Other branches of

philosophical inquiry have begun to turn toward empirical and naturalistic explanations and accounts of value. Perhaps political philosophy ought to be reduced to social science and give up on its normative aspirations. Others may argue, following Wittgenstein (or Rorty), that since we cannot make progress toward fundamental truth about politics, we should give up on the effort (perhaps, after going through appropriate Wittgensteinian therapy). Yet, nothing seems more important than finding ways to ground the norms of political life. Without such a grounding—in natural law, social contract, dialectical materialism, or some other approach—we are left unable to criticize political life, unable to justify revolutionary activity, unable to justify and legitimate states and constitutions.

CLASSIFICATION SCHEMES AND ASSUMPTIONS

A primary concern of political philosophy has traditionally been the classification, organization, and justification of structures of power. A very basic method found in Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel is to apply mathematical notions to political structures, leaving us with an account of ruling power that says either that one rules (monarchy), some rule (oligarchy), all rule (democracy), or that there is no rule whatsoever (anarchy). Such a metapolitical analytic is compelling in its purity. But analysis without norms leaves us merely with a cold and abstract calculus that is unable to rank the mathematical alternatives. Is rule of one better than rule by all—and how would we know? So disputes continue about which basic constitution is better. While the European sphere of interest has embraced the idea of democracy, other parts of the world continue to refuse the liberal-democratic impetus of the modern age, maintaining that monarchic (or even theocratic) rule is best.

Another approach in political philosophy resists analytical schematism, focusing instead on the nature of "the political" as a sphere of conflict, domination, and social struggle. This more radical approach is associated with a tradition running from Heraclitus and the Cynics to Marx, Nietzsche, Schmitt, Arendt, Marcuse, and Foucault. From this perspective, the analytical effort to classify constitutional schemes is insufficient since it ignores the motive force of political life, which is power or the struggle for recognition. The analytical effort of the radical theorists is to understand and describe ways that power is organized and channeled. Again the normative problem arises and some of the efforts to describe social conflict slide over toward social theory and sociology (in so far as they resist the effort to impose norms on "the political").

Another tradition turns away from the political entirely either to focus on the next world (as Christian anarchists have occasionally done) or to focus on a simple life of a-political domesticity (as Epicureans of all ages have done). While apolitical and anarchist trends in political philosophizing are often ignored as merely rejectionist, the challenge from outside of the city is to show why participation in political life is either necessary or optimal for human flourishing. Indeed, some of the most radical anarchist critics reject the basic claim, which goes back to Aristotle, that man is a political animal (*zoon politikon*). This idea may itself be an ideological imposition used to condemn the outsiders. Aristotle suggested that only gods or beasts live outside of cities—and since human beings are not gods, this includes an

implicit condemnation of the "barbarians" who live outside city walls. The claim that "man" is a "political animal" (as Aristotle's *anthropos* is often translated) is also loaded with gendered assumptions, as feminists will point out. The idea that "man" is political is also loaded with theological assumptions about the fallen or imperfect nature of political life (as Augustine argued).

While Aristotle suggests that human beings flourish in political communities, there is no doubt that political formations are only a part of a larger whole of human life that includes the domestic sphere that was traditionally associated with the female. Aristotle locates political philosophy within the broader inquiry of ethics and what he calls the "philosophy of human affairs" (*anthropeia philosophia*) at the end of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1181b). This reminds us that political philosophy is only a portion of a larger inquiry into human nature or anthropology. As Aristotle explains in Book I of *Nicomachean Ethics*, a student of politics must study the nature of happiness, the nature of human activity, the nature of virtue, and the nature of the soul. Thus political philosophy includes an open and difficult question about what is natural for human beings. It may be that only gods and beasts do not live in cities—but we are still working out the details of whether we ought to strive to become more divine or more beastly, and whether we should be content with our middle position as *zoon politikon*. That deep normative question is central to the spirit that animates inquiry in political philosophy. Who are we? How ought we to live? And how should we organize our communal life?

The term "political" contains a variety of connotations and denotations. The political may be viewed as merely focused on issues of "public" concern (as opposed to the private sphere of domestic life, which was often viewed as the domain of women and slaves). However, the term political has further connotations that include both power struggles within private affairs (marriages, families, friendships, and careers contain an element of the political in this sense) and the question of international, global organization (as in the somewhat oxymoronic term *cosmopolitan*—the city of the whole cosmos). While the ancient Greeks wrangled about the relation between law, morality, and religion—and about the proper structure of society, the family, and the polis—profound puzzles remain, as indicated by recent work by Žižek and others who call the ontology of "the political" into question. Žižek indicates that our use of the term "political" presumes a fundamental ontology containing a normative hierarchy. As Žižek puts it, drawing upon insights found in the work of Arendt, "in human society, the political is the englobing structuring principle, so that every neutralization of some partial content as 'nonpolitical' is a political gesture par excellence" (Žižek, 2000, 191). From this vantage point, everything is political (love, ethics, religion, Darwinian evolution, and so on). Even when we attempt to identify a nonpolitical sphere of concern (say in domestic life or in the private sphere or in "the state of nature"), the effort to isolate the nonpolitical is connected to "the political." It is certainly "political" in this sense to say that femininity is private, domestic, and nonpolitical. The political is a primary term and starting place so that attempts to find something a-political or nonpolitical can only proceed by negation. Our concepts and categories are laden with political significance (it is curious that "the state of nature" includes the word "state," for example). A related point is made by Raymond Geuss who cautions against