Book Review | Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy

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Contemporary Debates in Political Philosophy, John Christiano and John Christman (eds.); New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2009; 473 pages (including index and bibliography); $41.95 (Paperback); 978-1-4051-3322-7.

Over the past decade, a plethora of anthologies on contemporary (non-historical) political philosophy have been published, each one attempting to do the same thing, provide a comprehensive, and non-biased survey of the current state of play, outlining where the field of political philosophy is currently at. With the rise of new technologies, global problems, and new forms of conflict occurring, the field of political philosophy is constantly growing, changing, and adapting to address these issues. Many issues in contemporary political philosophy would not have arisen in debates hundreds of years ago, thus throwing up new questions that political theorist have to deal with. While referring to older philosophical works to deal with these new problems may work in some instances, many of these problems are so far removed from historical thought that new ways of conceiving these issues needs to be developed. Age old problems in political philosophy still exist however, which are not so prone to impacts by recent developments in science, psychology, game theory or other fields. The track the Christiano and Christman take here however, is to address (as a whole) the age old problems in political philosophy that have always caused debate among political philosophers, outlining (as a survey) recent developments in thought and arguments concerning these timeless debates. Thus it is in this light that Christiano and Christman edited this new compilation of many specially commissioned and previously unpublished works.

The book itself is split into six sections, “Questions of Method,” “Liberalism,” “Democracy and its Limits,” “Persons, Identity and Difference,” and “Global Justice.” An extended introduction with some brief commentary on each piece by the editors serves to outline the path that the book takes, as well as summing up the main
arguments for each of the six sections. One point of note here is that the editors do a
great job of linking up the topics and arguments to each other in this introduction,
providing connections between otherwise seemingly distinct issues. This is very
beneficial for undergraduate readers, who do not have the knowledge yet on how
different topics in political philosophy can be interlinked with each other.

The first section, “Questions of Method,” looks at how to proceed when it comes to the
question of political philosophy, especially in relation to the use reason in the
justification of political principles “given the pervasive human tendency to be
irrational” (p.3). Cohen argues that the fundamental principles of political philosophy
must be “fact insensitive” in that these fundamental principles should always hold true
regardless of any facts. Freeman however argues that there is a distinction between
“fundamental principles of conduct” and “fundamental principles of justice” that must
be taken into consideration, and thus that “moral conception[s] of justice should be
‘fact sensitive’” (p.42); his argument being that a “conception of justice should be
compatible with our moral and psychological capacities” (p.42) and “fulfil a social role
in supplying a public basis for justification” (p.42).

The next section on Liberalism is further divided into sub-sections on “Political
Neutrality,” “Liberty and Distributive Justice,” and “Equality.” The section on Political
Neutrality deals with the perfectionist/anti-perfectionist debate. Gaus argues that
“Many of the things that contemporary states do fail the test of Liberal Political
Neutrality – which is to say that contemporary states are not genuinely liberal” (p.95),
an attempt at a reductio ad absurdum. Wall in comparison argues that it is seemingly
impossible to create policies that are justifiable across the spectrum of citizens without
referring to any perfectionist values.

The next part on Liberty and Distributive Justice, is by two prominent libertarians (and
thus in a way a slightly biased/non-representative choice by the authors), Mack arguing
that the two fundamental rights of “each individual over her own person (the right of self-ownership) and the right of each individual to the practice of private property”
(p.121) are the cornerstone of distributive justice. Mack here seeks to discredit the left
libertarian position by arguing that the first fundamental right necessarily dictates the
existence of the second fundamental right, compared to the left libertarian who only
believes in the right of self-ownership. Vallentyne on the other hand, argues for a
version of “Equal Opportunity Left-Libertarianism,” given “the importance of liberty
and security” (p.149), the right to appropriate natural resources without the consent off
others, and equality of life prospects. Vallentyn hits back at Mack here, claiming that
self-ownership rights are consistent with other positions concerning distributive justic
e and not just the single one Mack outlines.

The next part on equality offers two opposing arguments for egalitarianism. Temkin
argues in favour of the principle of equality, defending it from the common attack that
an equal distribution implies one must always prefer an equal distribution to an unequal distribution where everyone is better off, saying that all this counter argument shows is that the principle of equality is not the only principle of morality, and not that the principle of equality is counter intuitive and thus false. Kekes argues against this, saying that “Human beings differ in character, personality, circumstances, talents and weaknesses, capacities and incapacities, virtues and vices” (p.179) and that given this “Why should they, then, be shown equal, rather than unequal, concern?” (p.179).

The third section on “Democracy and its Limits” contains parts on “The Value of Democracy,” “Deliberative Democracy,” and “Constitutionalism.” In the first part, Arneson argues that whenever a person exercises power over another, this can only be justified in terms of the consequences it has for the interests and rights of the person over whom it is exercised. Given this, Arneson does not think we require democracy, reinforcing this position by arguing that we seem perfectly happy with the current hierarchies we live in (businesses, universities, churches etc.), and that if we didn’t, we would move to more democratic alternatives instead. He also backs this up with the argument that equality is a necessary feature of society where division of labour is necessary and where each citizen’s input is tiny. Anderson on the other hand believes that for voting and democratic participation, “in virtue of [their] instrumental value, it acquire a non-instrumental value too – if not, for many citizens, as an activity people enjoy” (p.213), in that it is the process of participating itself and not just the outcome which is of value to people in a democracy.

In “Deliberative Democracy,” Hardin gives statistics showing that “about a fifth of U.S voters call themselves conservatives and vote accordingly but take liberal stands on major issues” (p.231), and that in relation to blogs on species extinction “A survey of thirty sites reveals that they claim from one to several thousand every day” (p.231) even though “scientific consensus on rates of species extinctions are currently a maximum of between 74 and 150 species going extinct every day” (p.231). This for Hardin is the proof in the pudding, whereby “the typical voter is politically ignorant and often misguided” and thus for him, deliberative democracy is not all it is hyped up to be.

Cohen also is suspicious about the feasibility of large scale deliberative democracies due to group think and narrow mindedness, however unlike Hardin, he believes in it as an ideal (whereas Hardin doesn’t even agree with it in principle) with the potential to have very positive effects, and hopes that it can be achieved, acknowledging that “it is hard to achieve both, but the project of advancing both is coherent, attractive, and worth our attention” (p.248). His hope for society, is that by bringing smaller, more specialised issues to the forefront of debate for the wider community (say housing in particular area, or a specific medical condition in a small town etc.), that this will provide impetus for discussions about the larger issues such as “war and peace, health insurance, public pensions, and the distribution of wealth” (p.260), as well as greater knowledge of the items at stake with these issues.
In “Constitutionalism,” Waldrom presents a very sceptical view of constitutions, based on the “ideological antipathy between constitutionalism and many of democracy’s characteristic aims” (p.279) due to “constitutionalism’s embrace of the idea of limited government” (p.279). Alexander on the other hand explicitly “reject[s] a moral right to democratic decision-making” (p.297), since the “alleged moral right to democracy surely does not follow from any plausible egalitarianism.” (p.297). He argues that equality of welfare and resources are better achieved via “benign despotism.”

The next part, “Persons, Identity and Difference,” is written by two authors, opposed to the current liberal school of thought. It begins with a section on “Individualism and Community,” with Dagger arguing for a form of “civic republicanism” whereby community is more narrowly defined so as to capture the uniqueness and importance of these relations, while not placing value judgments on these communities themselves. Thus the political dimension of these communal relations means that the citizens’ freedom and well-being are defined by being a citizen in a functioning democracy, thus giving an alternative to the liberal position which is still intuitively plausible.

Moore’s paper purports that “if we take seriously the possibility that interpreting equality as equal treatment might, in the context of deep differences in material and social position, and in culture and identity, have unfair results, then what multiculturalism demands is that liberals attend to, rather than abstract from, difference” (p.322) thus digging away at the liberal position of rational individualism which is opposed to socio-historical ties.

“Structural Injustice and the Politics of Difference” starts with a paper by Laden, arguing that liberalism does not do a very good job of accounting for all the in justices suffered for various identity groups (such as women, cultural minorities etc.). He concludes by saying the Liberalism needs to be restructured to address these challenges, with a conception of justice not based on individual rights, but rather on the types of social relations that should be enjoyed. Young also is critical of contemporary liberalism, since “Equating equality with equal treatment ignores deep material differences in social position, division of labor, socialized capacities, normalizing standards and ways of living that continue to disadvantage members of historically excluded groups” (p.362). Thus Young argues that, “Commitment to substantial equality thus requires attending to rather than ignoring such differences” (p.362), contrary to what contemporary liberalism purports.

The final part of the book on “Global justice” is split into two chapters on “Cosmopolitanism” and “Human Rights”. In “Cosmopolitanism,” Caney argues strongly for a more global view of distributive justice, saying that what is required is “a political morality that is based on respecting persons – not qua members of one's nation nor qua members of one's economic scheme – but as fellow human beings” (p.403). Mandle however differs slightly on this, agreeing that human rights should be enforced
on a global scale, but not distributive justice. He states that, “If we accept that there is a
human right to a share of resources necessary for a decent level of human functioning,
this obviously implies that we all have a duty not to deprive people of those resources.
But it also implies that there is a duty to assist them in securing such necessities. And
given the extent of severe poverty in the world today, we citizens of wealthy countries
are violating the positive duties – and arguably some negative duties as well – that we
owe towards those in extreme poverty” (p.409). Thus this he believes, gives
justification to global enforcement of human rights, but not global enforcement of
distributive justice.

The final chapter in the part on “Human Rights” contains papers by O’Neill and Nickel.
O’Neill posits that only negative human rights exist, since rights have corresponding
duties. To O’Neill, we have negative rights against everyone (e.g. not to be innocently
killed), which do not have to be assigned by any institutions or to anyone in particular.
Positive rights on the other hand (to feed the poor) must be assigned by institutions
(Who must feed the poor?), thus leading to the difficult conclusion that positive rights
necessitates assigning a duty to an entity which is a contingent product of institutional
arrangements. Nickel on the other hand supports the view that there are indeed positive
human rights, because respect of human dignity implies a need to protect the
fundamental interests of people. He however believes that the institution to fulfil these
negative rights should be the state in which the person lives (or if this fails, then another
state), and not any individual as such.

One thing to note is that many contemporary problems (Climate Justice, Refugees,
Religion and Politic etc.), and many other issues are not addressed. It seems like this
book or more of an anthology on “Political theory” as opposed to “applied political
philosophy.” The format of this book is to present two opposing viewpoints on each
issue, with the authors aim being for “reader[s] to participate in head-to-head debate”
(blurb). This however seems quite misleading, as while some of the twin pieces do have
some semblance of “debate” (responding to and trying to defeat the opponent’s
arguments), many of the pieces just seem to justify their own positions without any
reference or criticism of the opposing piece. Many pieces even seem to agree with each
other’s viewpoints, just providing different arguments to support their cases.

Thus while Christiano and Christman’s aim to for a collection that “invites the reader to
participate in the exchange of arguments,” this is not really achieved. This book serves
more as a collection of wide ranging arguments for different positions that can be held
on various topics. As a collection of different positions on various topics this book
serves this purpose very well, but as a book of “debates” on certain issues, this book
fails, as many of the authors do not really respond to the others arguments.

Overall this easily accessible book is of value for undergraduate courses in Political
Philosophy, due to its fairly wide-ranging coverage of the issues facing political
philosophy today. However it cannot function as a standalone textbook, due to many competing theories, and criticisms not being addressed at all. On the whole the editors have done a satisfactory job of compiling an anthology on political philosophy, however there is plenty of room for improvement in both their selection of articles, and their description of the books contents and intentions.