

PHILOSOPHICAL TOPICS  
PAUL EDWARDS, GENERAL EDITOR

# Contemporary Political Theory



Edited, with an Introduction,  
Notes, and Bibliography by

PHILIP PETTIT

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY



Macmillan Publishing Company  
New York

Collier Macmillan Canada  
Toronto

Maxwell Macmillan International  
New York Oxford Singapore Sydney



# Political Theory: An Overview



## *1. Introduction*

“By political theory,” John Plamenatz wrote, “I do not mean explanations of how governments function; I mean systematic thinking about the purposes of government.”<sup>1</sup> Political theory is a normative discipline, designed to let us evaluate rather than explain; in this it resembles moral or ethical theory. What distinguishes it among normative disciplines is that it is designed to facilitate in particular the evaluation of government or, if that is something more general, the state.<sup>2</sup> We are to identify the purposes of government—more strictly, the *proper* purposes of government—so that we can decide on the best political arrangements for society.

I work with Plamenatz’s definition in this book. The readings offered here are all in one way or another relevant to the normative analysis of the state. I stress this point at the outset as readers interested in explanatory political theory—the sort of theory that ideally informs empirical research on the state—may otherwise be disappointed with what I provide. If such readers know at the beginning what they are getting, then they will have no reason later to complain. Indeed they may even be pleasantly surprised, when they discover that normative political theory, as the essays in this volume represent it—particularly

<sup>1</sup>John Plamenatz, “The Use of Political Theory” (*Political Studies*, Vol 8, 1960), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup>On the various ways of understanding the state see Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit, “Normative Analysis of the State: Some Preliminaries,” in Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit, eds., *The Good Polity* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1989).

those in Part III—is more connected with explanatory theory than they might have expected.

As it has been practiced over the past quarter century or so, normative political theory involves three relatively distinct sorts of enterprise. The first is the study of the values relevant to assessing political arrangements; the second is the study of the sorts of arrangements that we would be likely to choose if we were able to make a social contract of some kind; and the third is the study of the sorts of arrangements that we can expect to remain firmly in place, once put in place. The essays in the volume are in three sections, corresponding to these three kinds of projects. The first project focuses on what is desirable, the second on what is eligible, and the third on what is feasible.

## 2. *The Desirable*

The study of the desirable, as I describe it, means the analysis and assessment of those properties for which we ought to look in political arrangements, according to different political philosophies. One such property is liberty, another equality, another happiness or utility. In the case of each such valuable property, each such value, two main questions arise. The first, the question of analysis, is what is required for the property to be realized; the second, the question of assessment, is what is to be said for or against the value, particularly in the context of other values.

Take a value like equality. The question of analysis ramifies here into a variety of different issues. What subjects are required to be equal: individuals, or just groups of some sort—racial groups, gender groups, social classes, and so on? In what regards are they required to be equal: in opportunities, in holdings, or in some other feature such as resources or capacities or satisfactions? If we cannot attain full equality, how do we rank degrees of inequality? Is it better in a group of one hundred to have ninety well off and equal, with ten miserable at various levels, than to have fewer than ninety well off and equal, with the others spread over an above-misery range?

But even when we have settled our minds on the appropriate analysis of equality, there remains the question of assessment. How important is equality? In particular, how important is it beside other values such as liberty and utility? Is it better to have an equal society with a lower average level of happiness than a slightly unequal society with a slightly higher happiness count? What is the trade-off function, as economists put it, between equality and utility or between equality and liberty? Is equality lexically prior, in the sense that we are allowed to concern ourselves with utility or liberty only after we have done all we can for equality: in effect, after we are looking at alternative arrangements that

do equally well by equality? Or is the trade-off function more continuous, so that we can say that so many units of equality are worth so many of utility or liberty? Or is there no general function available? Have we to rely on intuition, as intuitionists claim, when weighing the importance to be attached to different values in any assessment of political arrangements?

But the question of assessment goes even deeper than these illustrative problems may suggest. There is one particularly important sort of problem that we have so far ignored, a problem that arises, at least in theory, with every putatively valuable property. It is also a problem of trade-off, but the elements in the trade derive from one and the same value.

Suppose that a liberal government comes to power in a traditionally oppressive society, a government that is devoted to the cause of liberty: in particular, the cause of liberty in the negative sense in which it means, roughly, exemption from interference by others. But suppose further that this government is threatened by a fascist movement that is likely to attain power. What should the liberty-concerned government do? Should it honor or respect the liberty of the fascists to advance their cause within the existing law, even though this means that in the long term liberty overall will suffer? Or should it be prepared to deny the liberty of fascists, suppressing their movement, for the sake of more efficiently promoting liberty overall?

In such a case, the trade to be decided is between honoring a value, as we might say, and promoting it, given that the best way to promote it in some cases is to offend against it. The trade is between the state's honoring liberty by letting the fascists carry on at least their legitimate activities and the state's promoting liberty by suppressing the fascist movement. The problem arises with values generally. Should the state honor equality by never itself treating parties unequally? Or should it promote equality, being prepared to treat parties unequally, if this reduces inequality overall? Should it honor the value of happiness, never allowing itself directly to make others unhappy? Or should it promote happiness, being prepared to cause unhappiness to some, if this means that others generally will create more happiness for others?

These issues are not just of abstract interest. Consider the judge who, acting in the name of the state, has to decide between giving an offender his justly deserved punishment, equal to what is given to relevantly similar others, and giving him an unequal, exemplary sentence in the hope of reducing crime, increasing the proportion of offenders convicted, and thereby increasing the overall equality of offenders in receiving their just deserts. Should the judge honor the value of equality in just deserts or should he seek to promote it, being prepared to give some offenders exemplary and strictly undeserved punishments?

The issue of assessment on which we have been focusing comes in general terms to this. Should an agent, in particular the state, treat every value recognized as an objective to be promoted? Or should it go to the other extreme and treat some values as constraints, as values that require to be honored, even if this makes for their lesser promotion overall? Those who say that all values have the status of objectives to be promoted are described as consequentialists or teleologists. Those who say that at least some values have the status of constraints are described as nonconsequentialists or deontologists.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the values proposed as relevant for the assessment of political arrangements can be regarded in a consequentialist or a nonconsequentialist light. Liberty is often regarded as a value that attracts a nonconsequentialist construal but there is nothing incoherent in the notion of a liberty-concerned government being prepared to ban fascist movements. Utility or happiness is taken invariably as a consequentialist objective, but again there is no strict incoherence in the notion of a state whose motto is never to reduce the level of happiness by its own hands: to keep its own hands clean, so to speak, in the happiness stakes.

The one example of a political value that may seem to be tied to a nonconsequentialist reading is that of having certain rights satisfied. A right is usually regarded as a constraint in our sense, and indeed as a weighty constraint: a constraint that not only requires to be honored even if there is less of that right overall—others honor it less in their mutual dealings—but also requires to be honored even if other goals such as the society's economic performance or level of happiness are thereby compromised.<sup>4</sup> But if rights are constraints in this sense, then don't they call for a deontological response from the state? Not necessarily. The state may be regarded as privileged among other agents and its task may be described in "rights-consequentialist" terms as that of promoting the honoring of certain rights rather than necessarily honoring them itself.

To sum up then, the study of the desirable in political theory involves two tasks: the analysis of the various values proposed for the assessment of political arrangements and the assessment of those values in relation to one another. Questions of analysis vary from one value to another, but in the area of assessment the same sorts of issues arise. One of the most important of these is whether any value should be regarded as a constraint or whether, as consequentialists hold, all values have the status of objectives.

<sup>3</sup>I offer a more detailed characterization in "Consequentialism," in Peter Singer, ed., *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwells, forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup>This view of rights is particularly associated with two contemporary thinkers, Robert Nozick and Ronald Dworkin. I discuss it in "Rights, Constraints and Trumps" (*Analysis*, Vol 47, 1987).

### 3. *The Eligible*

It is a melancholy fact about the study of the desirable that it has not generated much consensus among political theorists. Among philosophers who focus their attention on this sort of project, we can distinguish two more or less pure positions—polar opposites, as it happens. One is the natural rights tradition, under which the only relevant value in the assessment of political arrangements is how far the state honors a few allegedly basic rights: the usual form is classical liberalism or libertarianism—strictly, deontological libertarianism. The other pure position is the utilitarian tradition, under which the only relevant value is how far the state promotes the happiness or utility—this may be variously construed—of the sentient creatures it affects, in particular its own members. But philosophers who have tried the way of the desirable are usually averse to either of these extremes and tend to languish in the uncertain territory between. They go for various mixes of values such as liberty and equality, unsure about how far they are constraints or objectives and unsure about how heavily they should be weighted against each other.

This feature of the study of the desirable is undoubtedly the reason why in recent years more and more political theorists have begun to explore the way of the eligible. Despairing of reaching consensus, even perhaps precision, through focusing directly on the analysis and assessment of candidate values, they have investigated an indirect strategy of political argument. The idea is to ask, not what is of value in political arrangements according to our actual view, but rather what arrangements we would choose to institute were we, counterfactually, put in the position of having to make a social contract.

The idea of the social contract has been familiar for centuries, since it figures in the work of classical authors such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. But most contemporary theorists put the idea to a sort of use quite different from what it has for these writers. They are not so much concerned, as those writers were, with the source of legitimacy of the state: the basis for the legitimacy of the state's claims on the citizen. They use the social contract device to identify what form the state should ideally take: whether it should be a minimal state, restricted to honoring and protecting natural rights, for example, or a state responsible in utilitarian fashion for the promotion of the welfare of its citizens.

Although he was not the first among contemporary authors to invoke the social contract in this role—John Harsanyi did so before him—John Rawls has been the most influential of contractarian political theorists. In his monumental work *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls asks us to imagine ourselves in a position—the original position, as he calls it—to choose between different sets of public rules for organizing social

life: different basic structures for society.<sup>5</sup> In particular, we are to imagine that in that original position we are ignorant of our individual features—our color, our lack of intelligence, our gender, for example—and that we have to make our choice under this veil of ignorance. The question then is what would we choose. The assumption is that whatever we would choose is fair and so far as it is fair, just. Thus Rawls's contractarian procedure is designed as an indirect way of elucidating the requirements of justice as fairness. For the record, he argues that what is required is a basic structure involving two principles: first, and with a nearly absolute priority, a principle of equal, maximal liberty for all; second, a principle allowing that provided there is fair opportunity for all, some may be allowed to be richer than others if this inequality improves the lot of the worst off in the society.

Contractarian approaches have multiplied in the wake of *A Theory of Justice*, published in 1971. In the remainder of this section I shall try to situate Rawls in relation to other approaches, highlighting the differences between Rawls's contractarianism and approaches such as those of Robert Nozick, Jürgen Habermas, and David Gauthier. In doing so I draw on work done elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

There are two important dimensions in which we find differences between political theorists who are or might be described as contractarian. First there are differences on the role of the contract invoked and second there are differences on the nature or kind of contract envisaged. I shall look in turn at Rawls's view of the role and the nature of the contract, contrasting them in each case with alternative views.

On the role of the contract, as it is envisaged by Rawls, there are two things to say. First, that the contract serves in an evaluative rather than a legitimizing role, and second, that it serves in a heuristic rather than a definitional one.

Suppose that someone wonders why it is legitimate, if indeed it is legitimate, for a state to claim authority over its citizens: say, for a state to claim the right to a monopoly of force or the right to tax. One answer, which picks up a long-standing tradition of thought, is to say that implicitly, if not explicitly, the citizens have contracted with one another to give those who occupy political positions such power over them. If a contract is invoked in this way, then we may say that it is given a legitimizing role. It serves to legitimize the existence of the state in question, providing it with a suitable pedigree.

Rawls quite clearly does not mean to accord such a role to his contract. He does not see the contract as something that people have actually undertaken, even if only implicitly. "The undertakings re-

ferred to are purely hypothetical."<sup>7</sup> Thus the contract cannot serve to legitimize the status quo, in the manner of a founding covenant.

The role assigned to the contract in Rawls's approach is evaluative rather than legitimizing. The contract is envisaged as a test such that if a sociopolitical arrangement passes it, that is proof of the justice and thus far of the desirability of the arrangement. If we decide that among a range of sociopolitical options, one candidate would undoubtedly be chosen in the original position, that is meant to show under Rawls's approach that the candidate is to be highly valued.

But if we agree that the contract envisaged is a purely evaluative instrument, a further question about its role immediately arises. Suppose we decide that a candidate X possesses the contractarian property of being the one that would be chosen in the original position. In Plato's *Euthyphro* Socrates asks whether something is holy because the gods love it, or whether the gods love it because it is holy. And similarly here we may now ask whether X, under Rawls's picture of these matters, is just because it would be chosen in the original position or whether it would be chosen because it is just.

The question at issue is whether the contractarian property of being such as to be chosen in the original position is definitional of what it is to be just, or whether it is a property that merely signals the presence of the independent property of being just: a property that may provide a heuristic procedure for identifying just arrangements, but that does not definitionally mean that they are just.

For Rawls the contractarian property is meant to serve as something symptomatic rather than constitutive or definitional of justice. He conceives of the contract he envisages as having a heuristic role. It is meant to provide evidence on which among the arrangements under discussion is the most just but it is not supposed to define *ab initio* what it is to be just. If the argument goes through and people are persuaded to see justice the contractarian way, then they may come to define it in such terms.<sup>8</sup> But the contractarian account is not presented merely as a definitional exercise; it is offered as a way of explicating an antecedently identified notion of justice. The notion explicated, as we have seen, is that of justice as fairness.

The fact that Rawls sees the role of contract as evaluative rather than legitimizing, and heuristic rather than definitional, enables us to situate his approach relative to other contemporary contractarians. All such contractarians agree that the role is evaluative rather than legitimizing but they differ on the heuristic-definitional issue.

Contemporary heuristic contractarians will certainly include John Harsanyi, who looks to his contract to determine which candidate on

<sup>5</sup>*A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).

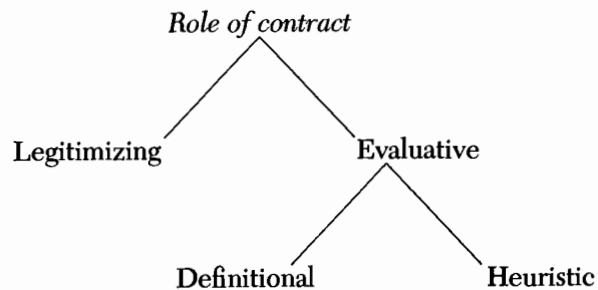
<sup>6</sup>Chandran Kukathas and Philip Pettit, *Rawls: A Theory of Justice and Its Critics* (Oxford: Polity Press, Blackwells, 1990).

<sup>7</sup>*A Theory of Justice*, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup>See *A Theory of Justice*, p. 111.

offer promises to maximize overall utility; and James Buchanan, who sees unanimous agreement as the only test that an arrangement is Pareto-superior to alternatives: such superiority means that it is preferred by at least some relevant parties and no others prefer anything else.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary definitional contractarians include David Gauthier, who defines what is right in terms of what would be agreeable to rational parties under certain hypothetical circumstances; and Tim Scanlon, who defines what is right in terms of what no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed unforced general agreement.<sup>10</sup> Someone like Jürgen Habermas, on the other hand, does not really come clean on the question of whether the contract he envisages relates heuristically or definitionally to justice.<sup>11</sup>

The variations possible in contractarian theory on the role of the contract invoked can be represented in a tree diagram. At each fork in the diagram Rawls's position lies to the right.



But the variations on the nature of the contract invoked are even more numerous in contractarian theory than variations on its role. We turn now to these. There are three questions that arise here and therefore three things to say in specification of Rawls's position: that he envisages, first, an intentional contract rather than any unintended quasicontractual arrangement; second, an economic contract rather than a political one; and third, a noninteractive rather than an interactive contract.

The first question is one on which Rawls's position, and indeed that of most contractarian thinkers, differs from that of Robert Nozick.<sup>12</sup> It

<sup>9</sup>See John Harsanyi, *Essays on Ethics, Social Behaviour and Scientific Explanation* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1976) and Geoffrey Brennan, "The Buchanan Contribution" (*Finanzarchiv*, Vol 45, 1987, pp. 1–24). I assume here that for Buchanan choice does not necessarily reveal preference; otherwise he is a definitional contractarian.

<sup>10</sup>See David Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) and T.M. Scanlon, "Contractualism and Utilitarianism," in A. Sen and B. Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

<sup>11</sup>See my "Habermas on Truth and Justice," reprinted in this volume.

<sup>12</sup>*Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

may not be quite right, and indeed it runs counter to his own intuitions, to describe Nozick as a contractarian.<sup>13</sup> But his approach is close enough to the contractarian tradition to warrant mention here. Nozick is a believer in certain libertarian rights, a position that forces him to explain how any state, no matter how minimal, can be justified. He justifies a minimal state system, however, on the grounds that were people placed in a socially organized situation lacking a polity—John Locke's state of nature—then the inconveniences of their position, in particular the lack of protection for their rights, would drive them rationally to make arrangements with one another that approximate, without their necessarily foreseeing this, to a minimal state. Moreover, their individually rational choices would give rise to such a system without the infringement—or at least the uncompensated infringement—of anyone's rights. If the situation that the antistate libertarian would presumably have to hail as the ideal would lead under pressure of rationality, and without moral offence, to a minimal state system, then Nozick argues that this gives all libertarians reason to endorse such a system.

The difference between the quasicontractual procedure envisaged by Nozick and a contract proper, certainly a contract in Rawls's sense, is that although the parties in Nozick's procedure need have no idea where their individual bargains with others are collectively leading, the parties to a contract proper are concerned precisely with the choice between different collective and system-level arrangements. If they converge on some particular arrangement, they do so intentionally, not as the unforeseen and unintended result of more specific negotiations.

The second question to do with the nature of the contract envisaged is whether it is a political or economic contract. The terms in which the question is phrased are not self-explanatory, however, and we need to make clearer the matter at issue.

When two or more people seek to make an agreement that affects their interests differently, so that each would most prefer a different arrangement from the other, the agreement may be pursued in either of two ways: one I describe as economic and the other as political. The economic way is for each to calculate what best suits his own interests and then to try to get this: say, to bargain with the other or others, seeking to win the largest benefit possible at the least possible concession from themselves. The political way is for the parties to put aside their own particular interests and to debate about the arrangement that best answers to those considerations—usually considerations in some sense to do with the common good—that all can countenance as relevant. The economic approach is institutionalized in the process of market negotiation, the political—at least ideally—in the forum of

<sup>13</sup>*Anarchy, State and Utopia*, p. 132.

discussion in which the parties are blocked, if only by the sanction of social disapproval, from arguing by reference to special as distinct from common concerns.

Jürgen Habermas's theory is the clearest current example of a contractarian approach in which the contract envisaged is one of a political character.<sup>14</sup> He sees matters of justice as determined by what would be agreed to by the parties involved in an act of collective decision, under what he describes as conditions of ideal speech or communication: these conditions are meant to ensure that everyone has the same rights and opportunities of speech, that there are no distorting differences of power and influence, that the culture is one of radical questioning, and the like. A consequence of envisaging the relevant contract in this way is of course that Habermas leaves himself unable to tell how the parties would in fact decide. Thus this contractarian approach does not have the methodological attractions of alternatives.

Clearly Rawls's notion of the contract is economic rather than political. He sees the parties as each making up their minds by reference to how well the candidate arrangements discussed answer to their personal interests. There is no suggestion that they will step aside from those interests and try to judge arrangements by appeal to considerations of common concern, though of course their personal interests are assumed to incorporate the interests of their family lines.

The third and final question on the nature of contract is whether it is envisaged as a noninteractive or as an interactive exchange. The best example among contractarians of someone who thinks of the contract as an interactive procedure is David Gauthier.<sup>15</sup> In Gauthier's picture the parties are involved in a process of economic negotiation with one another, each seeking to drive the best bargain he can get. The distinguishing mark of Gauthier's work is that he tries to apply and indeed to develop bargaining theory in the attempt to show that there is a favored solution. In a sense he takes on a challenge put by Rawls, who would argue that if the original position generates a bargaining problem, then that problem will be "hopelessly complicated." "Even if theoretically a solution were to exist, we would not, at present anyway, be able to determine it."<sup>16</sup>

Rawls's own conception of the contract is noninteractive. He sees the parties as each deciding what to choose without the necessity of negotiating with one another. This conception is not motivated by a desire to avoid the bargaining problem, though he obviously welcomes it on those grounds. As he sees things, it falls out quite naturally once the

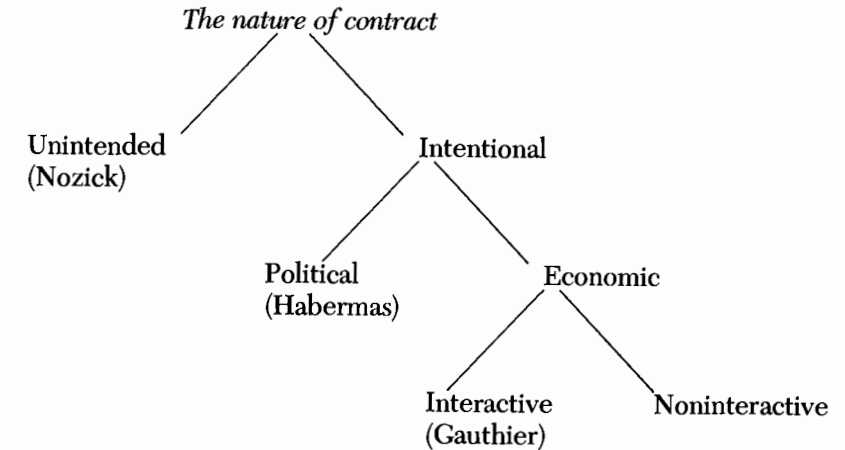
<sup>14</sup>See my "Habermas on Truth and Justice" and Jon Elster, "The Market and the Forum," both reprinted in this volume.

<sup>15</sup>See his *Morals by Agreement*.

<sup>16</sup>A *Theory of Justice*, p. 140.

original position is constrained so as to ensure that any agreements reached there are fair.

We can sum up the different positions on the nature of the contract in a tree diagram similar to that used for positions on the role of the contract. As before, Rawls's position lies on the right of each fork.



#### 4. The Feasible

Contractarianism has been the most distinctive feature of recent political theory, but there is a second feature that may prove to be even of greater importance in the development of the discipline. In backing away from the study of the desirable, many political theorists have seen the best hope for the subject in the study, not of the eligible, but of the feasible.

When we ask which sort of political arrangement is most desirable, it has been common among political theorists to assume full compliance: to assume, for each arrangement considered, that it is possible to set it up and keep it going, with people being brought to behave as it requires. But clearly this is not always a reasonable assumption to make. We might argue that the best regime conceivable is one under which each maximizes overall utility. But it is not clear how interesting a result this is. After all, people are never going to be motivated to try to maximize overall utility and, even if they were, they would not have the capacity generally to get the sums right. The arrangement envisaged is not a feasible option.

The thought motivating the study of the feasible is that if we analyze

alternative political arrangements on the score of feasibility, we may find that the feasible set of options is small: so small, ideally, that there is no trouble in determining which is the most desirable. As the study of the eligible is motivated by its promising an indirect route to the destination that is so elusive along the direct way of the desirable, so the study of the feasible is attractive for similar reasons.

The study of the feasible is possible only so far as we are able to make certain assumptions about human nature. If we think that human nature is utterly malleable, so that habitation can get people to act in just any old way, no matter how self-serving or how self-sacrificing, then we will think that no institutional arrangement can fail the feasibility test. The judgment that some arrangements are feasible, some not, presupposes the view that it is impossible for people to overcome certain natural or institutional restrictions; it is the arrangements that require such restrictions to be overcome that are then discounted as not being feasible.

A certain tradition of structural or functional thinking in social science, in particular a certain variety of Marxism, would suggest that there are important institutional restrictions on what people can be expected to be able to do. Thus a Marxist might hold that it is utopian to imagine any arrangement that, however abstractly attractive, requires the interests of the ruling class to be repressed. He will say that no such arrangement is going to be feasible, that it is an iron law that the interests of the ruling class are furthered by whatever political structure prevails in society.

Among contemporary social theorists there is less confidence than there once was that we can identify such universally valid institutional restrictions on how people can behave. Thus the study of the feasible, as that is pursued by political theorists, has tended to look to natural rather than institutional restrictions. In particular it has looked to the tradition of rational choice theory, rather than social theory in a structural or functional mold, for an account of restrictions that must be satisfied by any feasible political arrangement.

The rational choice tradition postulates, first, that people tend, at least in recurrent situations, to act in ways that advance their interests; and second, that the interests they have are in large part self-regarding. The first postulate is one of rationality and the second one of partiality. The partiality postulate is sometimes understood narrowly, so that people are said to be concerned only with the direct returns to themselves, in particular returns with more or less clear monetary values: their only interest is in economic gain. But under a more plausible reading, it postulates a concern both with economic gain and with social acceptance; this latter is an indirect return on action and it is difficult to put a monetary value on it. Thus John Harsanyi, a prominent rational choice theorist, writes: "People's behaviour can be largely

explained in terms of two dominant interests: economic gain and social acceptance."<sup>17</sup>

Rational choice assumptions have been widely invoked in recent political theory to argue that various arrangements hitherto found attractive are in fact not feasible. Public choice theory, as it is called, has been particularly influential here.<sup>18</sup> Public choice theorists argue that the tradition of assuming that the state can step in to put right the failures of the market and of other such decentralized systems is uncritical and utopian. It fails to recognize that if we create political institutions that empower individuals to intervene in this way, we may be creating only further problems for ourselves; we may be opening the way to the abuse of power in the service of sectional interest, not to its benign employment.

The public choice school is closely linked with an economic approach to things political and sometimes the study of the feasible looks like an economic takeover of political theory. But although the use of rational choice assumptions is distinctive of the economic method of thinking, it can in principle lead in directions far removed from traditional economic views of how things should be; it can even lead away from the faith in the free market that most economists display. There has been a growing literature in rational choice Marxism, for example, and this often harnesses the economic method to quite novel ends.<sup>19</sup>

It will be said by some that the rational choice assumptions are too pessimistic about human concerns, that people are more altruistic than they allow. But this criticism may be misplaced. If we are going to put our faith in a political arrangement, then we will want it to be resilient and feasible even under the pessimistic assumption that people are often partial in their concerns; we will want to err on the side of caution. The rational choice assumptions are well suited in this regard to the task of feasibility analysis: better suited, perhaps, than in the relative optimism that they display about people's rationality. In *A Theory of Justice* John Rawls spends nearly two hundred pages arguing, on the basis of certain psychological assumptions, that his two princi-

<sup>17</sup>"Rational Choice Models of Behaviour Versus Functionalist and Conformist Theories" (*World Politics*, Vol 22, 1969), quoted with approval by Michael Taylor in Michael Taylor, ed., *Rationality and Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 66). See also my "Virtus Normativa: Rational Choice Perspectives," *Ethics*, Vol 100, 1990).

<sup>18</sup>See Iain McLean, *Public Choice* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1987).

<sup>19</sup>See, for example, G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); John Roemer, *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).



ples of justice represent a stable and feasible basic structure for society. That part of his work has had little impact, however, on others and the reason may be that he allows himself to be too optimistic.

### 5. Conclusion

I hope that this overview suffices to give a sense of the lineaments of contemporary political theory. The division of concerns into my three categories is not standard, but I think it may be helpful. There are things to be said against it, no doubt, for as it gives prominence to some of the concerns of political theorists, so it downplays others. Thus it assumes that issues of political ethics, such as that of the political obligation of the citizen, belong with ethics rather than political theory. But it would scarcely be fruitful to go into such matters here.

In concluding this overview, however, there is one further matter that is worth discussing. Contemporary political theory, as it is represented here, is often accused of being uncritically individualistic, especially by communitarians.<sup>20</sup> Sometimes the charge is that such theory treats individual agents as if their relations with one another were not constitutive in any part of their identities: it is metaphysically atomistic. The charge in this form raises a question about the feasibility of any proposals that come of such theory but it is too wide-ranging to consider here.<sup>21</sup> The more usual form of the accusation, and the one we will address, is that the sort of theory represented in this book concentrates on the benefits that individuals can enjoy, to the neglect of more distinctively social returns: it is morally individualistic.

Moral individualists hold that if one political arrangement is better than another, that can be only because of how it affects individuals; this might be called the principle of individual relevance. Moral individualism in this sense is certainly assumed by the bulk of political theorists today and the question is whether it is a reasonable doctrine. In concluding this overview I would like to show that it is, drawing on work done elsewhere.<sup>22</sup>

The principle of individual relevance says that an arrangement is good so far and only so far as it constitutes or brings about something that affects individuals suitably: something that is good *for* individuals. I shall defend it by distinguishing it from three other doctrines. These

<sup>20</sup>See the authors represented, for example, in Michael Sandel, ed., *Liberalism and Its Critics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

<sup>21</sup>For the record, I endorse the rejection of atomism but derive a different sort of lesson. See my paper "The Freedom of the City: A Republican Ideal," in Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit, eds., *The Good Polity*, op. cit. See also John Braithwaite and Philip Pettit, *Not Just Deserts: A Republican Theory of Criminal Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>22</sup>See Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit, "Normative Analysis of the State: Some Preliminaries," op. cit.

say, respectively, that what makes any arrangement good is that it constitutes or brings about something that is a good *in* people, something that is a good *by* or according to people, or something that is a good *of* people. I believe that the only reason anyone could have for rejecting the principle of individual relevance—the *for*-individuals doctrine—is that he fails to distinguish it from these other theories.

The view that what makes a state or any other arrangement good is that it constitutes or brings about a good *in* people asserts an extreme moral individualism. It says that states are to be assessed by effects within people of a wholly atomistic kind: effects such that those people could logically have enjoyed them in isolation from one another. An example of such individualism is the utilitarian doctrine that what matters is just the pleasure, or the subjective preference-satisfaction, enjoyed by people taken separately. It says that all that matters in assessing a sociopolitical arrangement is the impact made by the arrangement on such private, subjective feelings.

It should be clear that moral individualism does not entail any such solipsistic view. Being a good *for* individuals does not entail being a good *in* individuals. For all that moral individualism says, the good brought about by a state may logically require social relations between individuals; it may not be something private that the individual can enjoy even in the absence of others. The good, for example, may be that of a person's actual equality in some regards with other people, or the good of his enjoying relations of friendship with them.

The second doctrine from which I distinguish moral individualism says that what makes the state good is that it constitutes or brings about something that is good *by* individuals: that is, something that individuals explicitly judge to be good. This doctrine will be found plausible by many, particularly those who insist that the state should respond to people's actual perceptions and preferences. Still, the appeal of the doctrine is not overwhelming. It rules out any political philosophy, for example, that praises the state for satisfying rights, needs, or other claims that individuals themselves do not recognize at the time of satisfaction.


Again, I hope it is clear that moral individualism does not entail this doctrine. Being a good *for* individuals does not entail being a good *by* individuals. It may be that something being a good *for* individuals entails that it would be a good *by* those people, that it would be something judged to be good among those people, if they were fully reflective concerning their preferences. But the proposition entailed falls far short of the approach embodied in the *by* doctrine.

The third doctrine from which I distinguish moral individualism says that what makes a state good is that it constitutes or brings about a good *of* individuals. This doctrine is less demanding, and less controversial, than either of the other two, but it is still more demanding than the

moral individualism that contemporary political theorists endorse. The *of* doctrine decrees that the only goods in virtue of which a state can be praised are items that belong to individual people, such as their liberty, their happiness, their equality, or whatever. It rules out the approval of a sociopolitical arrangement for the production of goods that, though they affect people, belong in the first place to aggregate-level entities. Examples of such aggregate goods might be the solidarity of a community, the continuity of a culture, or the harmony of relations between racial groups. It is typical of such aggregate goods that although their realization affects individuals, there is no one way in which it affects them all. Thus there is a sense in which they are not goods of people and so the third doctrine would deny that a state ought to be approved for producing such benefits.

I think that moral individualism does not entail even this relatively mild doctrine. A good that is not a good *of* individuals can still be argued to be a good *for* individuals. Community solidarity may be judged good according to the extent that it furnishes good for the individuals involved, even though those individual goods may differ from person to person. When political theorists say that all that is relevant in the assessment of a sociopolitical arrangement is the good of those taking part in it, I think it is clear that they do not mean to rule out the possibility that an arrangement should be approved for producing aggregate goods that make a favorable impact on individuals.

I conclude that moral individualism, the *for*-individuals principle, is distinct from the three doctrines that we may describe as the *in*-individuals, the *by*-individuals, and the *of*-individuals principles. Once it is clear that moral individualism is indeed distinct from such approaches, I believe that it ought to be overwhelmingly attractive. Thus I do not think that the commitment to moral individualism entitles anyone to dismiss the sort of political theory represented in this book.



## PART 1 THE DESIRABLE: WHAT SHOULD WE VALUE?



THE ESSAYS IN this section represent some recent investigations, informed by contemporary perspectives, of old themes. The first five essays deal, respectively, with rights, with liberty, with democracy, with utility, and with an important element in discussions of equality, poverty. The last essay represents a critique of the evaluative concerns of most political theory, from a feminist standpoint. Both aspects to the study of the desirable are represented in the section: all the essays are focused to a degree on the analysis of values; and some are also concerned with the assessment of the values analyzed.