

Student Book Features: Four Ways into Political Philosophy

Written by James Wakefield

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JAMES WAKEFIELD, SEP 11 2012

When introducing students to political philosophy, one important task is to familiarise them with the kind of thinking that philosophy involves, teaching them how to articulate considered and sophisticated arguments for and against their views. Another is to show them examples of the best or most influential thinking that the discipline's long history has to offer. These aims can be met separately or in tandem, since each can help develop the skills students need in order to meet the other. However, there is little agreement on what balance is best. Each of the four introductory texts discussed here presents political philosophy in a different way, bringing new students to the discipline via a different route. This feature will assess the extent to which each is successful.

I

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Of these four texts, *Issues in Political Theory* (hereafter *liPT*), edited by Catriona McKinnon, most closely resembles a traditional edited textbook. One obvious advantage of this format is that new students, and especially those coming from school, are likely to appreciate its user-friendly features (on which more later) and matter-of-fact delivery. The book's scope is broad, but care is taken to keep the issues within students' reach. Specialist jargon is used rarely and only with the support of clear definitions and wider explanations. At the end of the book there is a useful glossary and a short description of each of the 'key thinkers' referred to in the foregoing chapters. Thus the book conveys much of the information novices will need to make a tentative start at thinking about political issues in a philosophical way. The real disadvantage of the textbook format is that it tends to compress large issues in order to fit a standard template, and in the process the nuances of philosophical argument fall from view. As a result, *liPT* will equip students with many of the key concepts they need to start thinking about political philosophy, but it will not bring the subject to life.

Each of *liPT*'s fourteen chapters consists of an overview of a particular topic, written by an appropriate (and, in many cases, well-known) specialist. The topics are well chosen, covering major themes like political obligation, citizenship, democracy, multiculturalism and gender. This second edition adds Axel Gosseries' new chapter on 'generations,' or the problems of intergenerational justice. Though this topic is perhaps less well established than the others, it is a growing area of interest, and is as such a good fit with the rest of the book. Its inclusion demonstrates the editor's willingness to offer a representative overview of contemporary political theory as taught in Anglophone politics departments today.

With normative issues leading the way, *liPT*'s readers are encouraged to engage with political theory on terms they are likely to recognise. Particular texts and theorists dominate some chapters, partly as a result of their central roles in the fields in question, and/or because the chapter's author attempts to cover those theorists' theses in special detail. For example: Gillian Brock's chapter on global justice centres on Rawls' *Law of Peoples* and its critics. While much of the recent literature has referred to that book, it is perhaps misleading to give it quite such special prominence. However, Brock's decision to present the matter in this way is in line with probably the most popular version of the debate over global justice. It also allows her to discuss the matter without resorting to over-generalisation. In a like manner, *liPT*'s contributors are generally even-handed, avoiding the temptation to smuggle in their own interpretations of the topics at the expense of rival views.

The chapters share several standard features. Throughout the book there are coloured boxes to highlight key points and texts, often with a quotation or half a dozen sentences summarising an important book. Each chapter ends with both a brief annotated reading list and ten questions that would serve equally well as essay titles, bases for class discussion or to stimulate the reader's interest and so prompt further reading. Also included are links to on-line resources, including the Oxford Resource Centre, which includes materials specially designed for this book. All of these will no doubt prove indispensable to undergraduates when revising for assessment.

Particularly useful are the case studies included at the end of each chapter, framing the foregoing ideas with some real-world example. These include Iraq and the just war tradition; same-sex marriage and toleration of difference; and the 2001 PATRIOT Act and liberty. By focussing on such contentious topics, *liPT*'s contributors can avoid the perils of presenting students with series of reputedly great (though often, on closer inspection, difficult) books, and instead situate political theory's issues in everyday interactions with politics: in news stories, dinner-table conversations and public discourses about opportunity, wealth, human rights, nationality and so forth. In one case study, Jonathan Wolff illustrates the ideas behind 'equality and social justice' by reference to 'what social justice owes to people with disabilities.' He begins with short summaries of several philosophers' responses (or failures to respond) to this question, before describing the development of actual legislation to bring about circumstances so that disabled people 'can overcome prejudice and discrimination, and take their place as equal members of society[.]'[1] Wolff's discussion of the problems involved in generalising the 'social model of disability'[2] ties in with the themes of other chapters, like parental rights and the meaning of liberty.

In summary, *liPT* does not *pretend* to be a substitute for the extensive reading that students will need to undertake in order to get to grips with political theory. The book's role is to sketch the outlines of the most salient debates in today's political theory, equipping students with the vocabulary needed to engage with case studies and more

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substantial texts. In that respect, it is successful. *liPT*'s useful features make it an obvious choice for the central textbook in an introductory course in contemporary Anglo-American normative political theory. It is less demanding of its readers than the volumes discussed below, and eager students will find enough among its pages to prepare them for the sophisticated arguments they will encounter as their comprehension improves.

II

Colin Bird's *An Introduction to Political Theory (AIPt)*

is divided into two parts. The first covers 'Politics and Justification,' beginning with a fine chapter on 'the puzzle of justification,' in which Bird explains in broad terms what political theory attempts to achieve and why we have good reason to care about it. This is followed with chapters on utilitarianism, the common good and the social contract. The second part's eight chapters on 'Topics in Political Philosophy' have headings similar to those in *liPT*: 'property and wealth,' 'democratic rule,' 'war' and 'living with difference' are among them. *AIPt*'s scope is a little less broad than that of *liPT*, but in several important respects it is a more successful book.

AIPt's stated aims are 'to stimulate critical reflection on political institutions and practices, and on the various arguments that might be offered for and against them;' and 'to give readers an appreciation of the most provocative historical and contemporary contributions to political philosophy.' Bird emphasises that the book's scope is not intended to be 'comprehensive or exhaustive,'[3] and that he means to avoid unnecessary jargon and some of the 'boringly scholastic' in which political philosophy can sometimes become mired.[4] This, I think, is a worthy concession, as no book (and especially one of just over 300 pages) can seriously be said to offer a *comprehensive* introduction to a discipline so broad and varied as this one. Some of the 'scholastic' debates deliberately omitted are by now shop-worn and forbiddingly technical. Students who venture farther into the literature are bound to encounter them at some stage, but early on, when technicality is likely to prove irksome and alienating, they can be avoided without great loss.

Bird's prose is clear and lively throughout. The tone is conversational but never patronising or over-familiar. Objections and misconceptions are anticipated and addressed where appropriate. The overall impression is that of an enthusiastic lecturer speaking to a curious and attentive class. Readers are encouraged to chew over the ideas, treating political philosophy as something that is *done*, rather than a set of claims to be merely read about. Bird teases out the major arguments on any given issue without needless oversimplification or jargon, making effective use of examples to bring out the differences between the theories discussed. Like *liPT*, *AIPt* refers to a wide selection of theorists, which are used to create picture-portraits of his subjects in an economical way. The best-known arguments are taken from famous works and placed in wider discussions, allowing Bird to demonstrate their

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mutual relevance and contrasts. Occasionally, and perhaps inevitably, there are explanatory gaps, but Bird's comprehensive footnotes show readers where to go in search of more expansive discussions.

There are many textbooks that cover much the same material as *AIPT*. It is in a sense a conventional book, and little of what is described will come as a surprise to those with a decent working knowledge of the relevant texts. That is no bad thing, of course. An introductory textbook is not the place to present a radical reinterpretation of the canon. For all that, this book is one of the best of its type. Bird's highly competent exposition, consistent pacing and clarity make it unusually readable, and as such an engaging introduction for novices and their teachers alike. Bird's lightness of touch means that students will enjoy it, which is an essential (though regrettably uncommon) quality for books whose aim is not only to educate but also, crucially, to inspire further exploration of the material.

III

In *Understanding the Political Philosophers (UPP)*, Alan Haworth takes an historical approach to the subject. His selection of philosophers is largely conventional but explicitly justified. Throughout the book there emerges a condensed version of the history of Western political philosophy, or rather, less ambitiously but probably more accurately, an account of the development of the chief ideas in 20th and 21st century political thought, which Haworth identifies as liberalism and socialism. By tracing the philosophical outlines of these undoubtedly influential doctrines, he manages to deflect one charge sometimes levelled at political philosophy by disgruntled undergraduates: that it is irrelevant to real politics.

Like Bird's *AIPT*, *UPP* has the benefits of a single voice throughout, and Haworth's presence is felt constantly through his commentary. The tone is familiar, sometimes humorous without detracting from the ideas discussed. This allows the author to convey arguments and (like Bird) address the reader's expected responses in a natural way. For example: Haworth readily concedes that Hegel's style 'can be difficult and obscure [... and even], at times, incomprehensible,' which is doubtlessly heartening for students baffled by *The Philosophy of Right* for the first time;^[5] and that among Bentham's merits are the 'appealingly scientific' and 'anti-pretentious' appearance of his theory, as well as his 'wicked sense of humour.'^[6] Observations like these help to humanise the philosophers on show, and reduce the feeling of alienation that new students often face when reading a difficult text. Quotation is employed regularly but not excessively, allowing students to sample the flavours of classic texts (like Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, mentioned above) with Haworth always on hand to keep them from becoming lost. This helps to

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solve another common problem in textbooks where difficult texts are glossed and described in such a way that their distinctive voices are erased.

The book's structure is worthy of attention. Haworth begins with ancient Athenian philosophy, giving Socrates, Plato and Aristotle a chapter each. In the fourth chapter, Haworth describes 'what happened next,' in a concise but interesting discussion of the long stretch dividing the ancient and modern periods. He writes that it would be 'ridiculous' to try to cover all the philosophical innovations of the two intervening millennia,[7] and, like most historians of political philosophy, he gives this long middle period far less detailed coverage than those either side of it. Nonetheless he 'recognise[s] that readers are owed some account of the period,' if only to explain why there is, on so many conventional versions, such a long pause between Aristotle and Hobbes.[8] The idea here is to bridge the gap by explaining the long shadow cast by the ancient Greeks over and through mediaeval philosophy. Haworth briefly describes Cicero's debt to Plato, then the 'general features of medieval thought' exemplified by St. Augustine's *City of God*. [9] Machiavelli's *The Prince* is noted as 'a useful "marker" for the shift to "modern" conditions,' but otherwise dismissed as a book that does not merit 'more than a passing comment in a book such as this.' [10] After a short paragraph on Grotius, taking us into the seventeenth century, we arrive at Part 2 ('Reason and Revolutions') and the more familiar figures of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. These thinkers are presented with Haworth's characteristic and lively prose, combining thoroughly competent exposition with historical/biographical commentary.

Part 3 ('Modern Times, Modern Themes') begins with a chapter on reactions to the French Revolution, covering Bentham, Burke, Hegel and Wollstonecraft in order to give a general overview of the political philosophy of that period. Over the book's last three chapters, Haworth restricts his focus to just J.S. Mill, Karl Marx and John Rawls. He stresses that the selection and interpretation of texts is his, and is by no means uncontroversial, definitive or final. Prefacing these chapters there is a revealing passage in which he describes the dangers involved in describing the main lines of political philosophy after the early nineteenth century, when the issues become 'increasingly lively' and bound up in still-divisive political (rather than strictly philosophical) questions. One danger is partiality. 'There is no point in my pretending that it's possible to take a neutral position on every issue I discuss,' he writes; '[...] However, I shall try to give every argument I consider a reasonable run for its money, and I shall also try to avoid polemic.' [11] Since Haworth makes clear wherever he finds an argument lacking, this 'partiality objection' may trouble readers who disagree deeply with his interpretations. The second, related danger is 'selectivity'. In the last two centuries, writes Haworth, 'so many political philosophers have lived and written that, if I were to deal with each in the same way that I have so far dealt with [established classics], this book would be much too long and nobody would want to read it.'

Plainly Haworth is conscious that some readers will insist – as philosophers are wont to do – that no adequate discussion of later-nineteenth and twentieth-century political philosophy can *possibly* do without Nietzsche, or Arendt, or Foucault, or Nozick, or Habermas, or whoever else the reader happens to find most interesting. To such hypothetical objectors, Haworth replies that 'everyone has to tell a story in their own way. All I can say is that I am sure that even those readers who would have told the story differently will not think my approach too eccentric.' [12] I suspect that Haworth is right about this. *UPP* does not claim to be a comprehensive introduction to political philosophy, which has, after all, a vast literature, covering a multitude of topics and positions. An adequate or better-than-adequate treatment of three significant and influential theories from this period has advantages over a shallower treatment of more; and while no doubt there are other candidates for inclusion in a shortlist of three, Marx, Mill and Rawls are hard to beat for influence in the politics of the last century or so.

UPP's real merit is in the richness (and economy) of its descriptions of its subjects. When presented as a series of ideas that appeared as though without prompting, the history of political philosophy can seem a frustratingly abstract discipline. Conversely, if context is allowed to overshadow philosophy proper, students can find themselves studying a version of political history without appreciating how old ideas can be applied to new circumstances. In this book, readers are given instructive glimpses of the contexts from which important ideas emerged, without this ever obscuring the ideas themselves. As mentioned, the philosophers Haworth describes emerge as real human beings, possessing serious and (usually) still-relevant concerns, and reflecting upon each other's ideas in much the same way that readers are encouraged to reflect upon them as they read *UPP*. Haworth addresses a narrower range of authors and issues than Bird, McKinnon or Zwolinski, but adds a strong historical narrative to give readers insights

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into not only philosophers' ideas, but also the philosophers themselves.

IV

Matt Zwolinski's edited collection, *Arguing about Political Philosophy (AaPP)*, differs from the other books here discussed. It is not a textbook, but instead an anthology of previously published material. Nonetheless, the book is presented as an introduction to political philosophy, and it is, I think, very successful as such. Of the four books discussed here, *AaPP* is the most demanding of its readers, but no doubt an able and enthusiastic class could benefit enormously from the wide range of ideas on offer.

Much of the book's success is down to the measured contribution of its editor. Zwolinski confines his input to a brief general introduction, a few pages to introduce each of the twelve sections (political authority; rights; justice; political economy; property rights; distributive justice; freedom; equality; immigration; global distributive justice; secession; and war, humanitarianism, and torture), and a short paragraph to introduce each text. Otherwise he leaves the talking to his contributors – a mixture of authors old and new, including familiar standards like Hume and Rousseau, as well as their more recent descendants.

Zwolinski's selection of texts is first-class. They are sufficiently varied and powerfully argued to make its introductions at once accessible and intellectually stimulating. He draws overwhelmingly on English-language works, and then mainly on American authors; but given the quantity and quality of American political thought in recent decades, this is neither a surprise nor a problem. The oldest source included is Hobbes' *Leviathan*, and the most recent were published in the last decade. It must be emphasised this is not just a conventional political philosophy anthology, with the standard indispensable heavyweight tomes of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and company cut, compressed and dispensed as more manageable alternatives to whole books (which, after all, undergraduates cannot always be relied upon to read). Instead, brief excerpts are used to represent an author's position on some specific topic. In fitting with its title, *AaPP* is a book about *arguments* rather than venerated, canonical *texts*.

What separates this book from many other anthologies is its presentation of classic arguments alongside contrasting views from more recent authors. No special priority is granted to either, as Zwolinski makes his selections on the basis of mutual relevance and strength of argument. The first four chapters cover political authority, using the idea of humankind in some pre-social situation. To begin, students are presented with not an exposition of Hobbes, but instead manageably short excerpts from *Leviathan's* account of the state of nature. Following this is Locke's very different account of the same. So far, so conventional. But then in chapter 3 we turn to Robert Axelrod's application of game theory to the same idea, followed in chapter 4 by Murray N. Rothbard's arguments for the *continuation* of a stateless condition. With this mix of different views, Zwolinski wisely resists the temptation to offer a *definitive* selection of important texts, and instead settles – in exchange for great benefits – for an *interesting* one, worth returning to for reasons other than the individual works represented in it. Big ideas are illuminated from many angles, and diverse thinkers' voices are given sufficient space to make their cases without any being allowed to dominate.

Aside from excerpts from familiar, 'classic' works, there are important and provocative essays by more recent

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authors (e.g. Harry Frankfurt's 'Equality as a Moral Ideal' and Peter Singer's 'Famine, Affluence and Morality'). There is even some fiction: Kurt Vonnegut's story 'Harrison Bergeron' is used as a neat *reductio* of a certain conception of equality. By presenting students with such powerful and provocative accounts of a range of positions on each of the issues covered, *AaPP* forces students to wrestle with ideas. They are deprived of the opportunity to take another author's interpretation as given; they must engage directly with some of the best political thinkers of the last four centuries. Zwolinski asks more of his readers than any of the other authors discussed here, but if students are able to rise to the challenge, they stand to gain a great deal from it.

All of this makes *AaPP* a formidable contribution as a general introduction to political philosophy. The book's contents are rich enough that it will outlast the reader's tenure as a beginner. The essays and excerpts included therein are worthy of repeat reading, and will give even old hands the opportunity to see ideas presented in new and interesting ways.

For a student taking her first steps in political philosophy (or theory, or thought), the question of which textbook to buy is more often than not determined by the structure of the course she is taking. If it is structured historically, covering key moments in the history of political thought, it will not do much good to invest in a book like McKinnon's, which emphasises the contemporary relevance of political theory and the live issues entailed in it. Conversely, a course that eschews history and classic texts in favour of today's Anglo-American theory, or the application of theory to current affairs, will not be served directly by Bird or Haworth's lucid accounts of Athens as it appeared to Plato and Aristotle. But this does not make a moot point of the choice between these four books. As we have seen, they each have special qualities that would lend themselves to particular teaching programmes, depending on both the course content and the amount of attention that students can be expected to dedicate to their reading.

None of the books here discussed is a failure. All are competently written and presented, although their aims differ along with their respective characterisations of political philosophy. They also make different demands of their readers. McKinnon's book eases students into the discipline's terms of reference and modes of discussion, laying out important ideas in a clear and accessible way. For some students this will be enough; as I have said, they will pick up the basic tools they need to begin thinking like political philosophers.

In their respective books, Bird and Haworth go deeper than *liPT*'s contributors, although their scopes are rather more modest. They are both good examples of how students should go about weighing and comparing ideas. Bird's *AIPT* and Haworth's *UPP* are very different in some respects, but they make similar demands of their readers, conveying rich and detailed ideas while remaining engaging and amusing. Still, they require more sustained attention from the reader than does *liPT*.

Zwolinski's book is the most demanding of the four. The features that make it distinctive (chiefly its emphasis on primary sources) might prove less congenial to students than to their teachers, who are, presumably, already *au fait* with the ways in which political philosophers go about their business. I have said already that Zwolinski's work as an editor helps to mitigate the problems that beginners often have comprehending primary source materials, but since he has the original authors' words to work with, he has limited powers to make complex ideas entirely plain. A student dispirited and baffled by some text in *AaPP* can always move to an adjacent text in search of something better suited to her way of thinking. Ideally, of course, eager students would give all these texts the time and attention required to reap the great rewards contained therein. Since this cannot be guaranteed, any teacher thinking of using *AaPP* as the *central* textbook for a given introductory course would be well advised to investigate the range of available secondary literature in case students find themselves overwhelmed.

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If you are a publisher and would like to bring your books to our attention for inclusion in a future student books feature, get in touch.

[1] Wolff, in McKinnon (2012) [163]

[2] Wolff, in McKinnon (2012) [164]

[3] ...although the back-flap blurb assures us that the book provides 'a comprehensive introduction to political philosophy.'

[4] Bird (2006) [ix]

[5] Haworth (2012) [181]

[6] Haworth (2012) [179]

[7] Haworth (2012) [66]

[8] Haworth (2012) [61]

[9] Haworth (2012) [69]

[10] Haworth (2012) [77]

[11] Haworth (2012) [194]

[12] Haworth (2012) [194-5]

About the author:

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