Why Political Theory is Still Relevant and How it can Help Us Understand the World of Today

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RONALD BEINER, MAR 30 2011

The topic announced in my title was formulated by one of e-IR's commissioning editors. I have to say that it has a more instrumentalist ring than I feel comfortable with. It makes it sound as if political theorists could speak with one authoritative voice with respect to what is required for the world to put its normative house in order. Or as if theorists and philosophers have more reliable practical judgment than other citizens (which they rarely do). Both of these considerations are important, and both supply important reasons for being skeptical about an instrumentalist view of how theory relates to practical decisions concerning contemporary politics.

With respect to the first: As is the case with citizens who devote their lives to occupations other than the life of theory, the theorists' guild includes libertarians and collectivists, virtue theorists and liberal neutralists, theorists who privilege the civic aspect of life and those who are agnostic about it, and so on. In the world of theory, one is enriched by maximal intellectual pluralism, but precisely this plurality of robust and vibrantly contested views makes it pointless to look to the theorists for singular guidance about how to set the world aright (or even to reform it incrementally). With respect to the second: Suppose political philosophy can supply compelling normative reasons for believing that despotic rule is illegitimate, and that political authority must respect popular will. (If it can't supply normative foundations with respect to this, what can it supply?) But can we extrapolate from such principles (assuming they're available) in trying to settle the issue of whether it's reasonable or not reasonable for NATO to intervene militarily in Libya? No. For good or ill, the articulation of theoretical principles falls far short of determining how to apply those principles in concrete situations. So what good is theory? I think it's easy to answer that question, provided that one doesn't feel obliged to answer it in a way that promises an immediate payoff for political practice in "the world of today."

I'd prefer to formulate the question negatively: what would it mean for human beings not to have an intellectual discipline tasked with ambitious reflection on the fundamental normative issues raised by life in a social and political context? Or is it even conceivable that human beings could be human beings without such a mode of reflection?

Just to get a sense of the basic character of the enterprise, let's provide a quick sketch of (arguably) the four most influential political theorists of the last half-century, namely Hannah Arendt, John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and Michel Foucault. Arendt was committed to a very robust conception of the good, even though she was never willing to call it that, and would probably have resisted if someone like me had invoked this vocabulary on her behalf. Arendt was committed to a conception of the human being as a "civic animal": speaking great words, performing great deeds, and shining in the glorious light of the public. For Arendt this was what potentially imbued human existence with its central meaningfulness, and she tended to presume that the problem of human meaning would be impossible to solve without it. This was a powerful conception of human life when it was first articulated in Aristotle's Politics, and when it was developed in the Italian Renaissance, and it remains a powerful conception today. Perhaps Arendt was going too far in thinking that it could function as a comprehensive purpose in human life; but it can by no means be dismissed as a candidate among the various rival conceptions of the good. As I mentioned above, Arendt would not have accepted the vocabulary I am applying to her political philosophy, but my own view is that this very vocabulary helps decisively to explain why that political philosophy was received so seriously, and why it continues to receive serious attention from a great many theorists.

Although John Rawls himself insists that his political philosophy presumes a "priority of the right to the good," it is possible to speak of a Rawlsian conception of the good, namely setting up and committing oneself to basic political institutions that are fair and just. This is a liberalized version of the conception of human beings as civic animals. Rawls, too, didn't conceptualize this as a conception of the good (in fact, none of the four thinkers I'll cite did!); yet I think it yields a more coherent account of his political philosophy – just as it yields a more coherent account of Arendt's political philosophy. The ultimate human vocation is moral reciprocity, and citizenship is a crucial aspect of a morally well-developed human life because it provides a privileged locus for this practice of moral reciprocity. We create civic institutions and share practices of mutual provision in order to satisfy the high human purpose of living in a just society.

One might think of Jürgen Habermas as a cross between Arendt and Rawls. He certainly wants a less heroic conception of political life than Arendt offers, but wants more of the pathos of publicity and sharing of a public realm than one can squeeze out of Rawls. What Habermas does is basically to drop Arendt's emphasis on "performativity," and to play up the idea of public discourse. Habermas's civic animal is a talking animal, and it's in the exchange of reasonable opinions that human beings vindicate their political nature. And lastly, Michel Foucault. The term I've used elsewhere to encapsulate Foucault's political philosophy is "hyper-liberalism." Unlike standard liberals, Foucault doesn't think that it's the state alone (with its network of state agencies and state bureaucracies) that is trying to shoehorn us into truncated categories that do violence to our unlimited self-defined identities; the same assertion of power is also associated with schools, factories, hospitals, prisons, and countless other agencies of social "normalization." Power is everywhere, and therefore resistance must be everywhere; the omnipresence of power requires the omnipresence of resistance. Foucault would certainly never use the vocabulary of conceptions of the good, which he would see as a "normalizing" discourse par excellence. But I will take it upon myself to say that his conception of the good is: resistance to normalization.

These four possibilities – leaving aside other ambitious contemporary political philosophies, of which there are many, to say nothing of the multitude of epic theories in the history of political philosophy (such as the idea of justice in the soul for Plato, or civic self-rule for Machiavelli and Rousseau, or sovereignty for Hobbes, or self-legislated duty for Kant, or history as the march of liberty for Hegel, or class-based emancipation for Marx, or nobility and slavishness for Nietzsche) – already yield a pretty interesting debate on the ends of life. And to pose my question once again: What would it mean to be a human being in the absence of high-aspiring philosophical reflection and debate concerning the ends of life?

This is not to say that there aren't occasions when political philosophy has a striking and unexpected relevance for events unfolding in the world of today. Hannah Arendt, as sketched above, is the theorist of the human importance of spontaneous eruptions of civic agency. And what we've been seeing in the political earthquakes rattling North Africa and the Middle East since the start of 2011 is precisely a whole series of radically spontaneous eruptions of civic agency. So Arendtian theorizing has acquired renewed relevance (just as it did during the epochal events of 1989 as well as the attempted Iranian Green Revolution of 2009). But this is a bonus. The principal reason for taking political philosophy seriously is not its possible relevance to contingent events in the world but simply its capacity to open up intellectual space for human beings to do something that's part and parcel of their humanity – reflecting on what actually defines a fully human existence.

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Ronald Beiner *is Chair of the Dept. of Political Science, University of Toronto Mississauga. His most recent book is titled, Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy.*

For more on this subject see a companion piece by Edward Andrew