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POLITICAL  
PHILOSOPHY

Fundamentals of Philosophy  
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# Political Philosophy

Dudley Knowles



London

First published 2001  
by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001.

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 1-85728-760-6 (hbk)  
ISBN 1-85728-550-6 (pbk)  
ISBN 0-203-18788-1 Master e-book ISBN  
ISBN 0-203-18911-6 (Glassbook Format)

To my mother, Margaret Knowles, and, in memoriam, GRK, DAK,  
AK, KC and EJC



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# Preface

Political philosophy is a hard subject of study, but an attractive one, too. It is hard because the central concepts have been fashioned as much in the hurly-burly of political dispute as in the philosopher's study. These concepts have served as flags around which contending causes have rallied, banners for which opposing parties have fought – too often literally. Unlike many of the topics of metaphysics, say, they *always* have a resonance for issues of active controversy. They are the recognized currency of political argument and debate. This immersion in our practical concerns might be thought to contaminate the discipline, ensuring that no work in political philosophy is without the taint of allegiance. But this would be to suppose that there is a pristine science of political concepts waiting to be unearthed from the debris of interminable conflict, that the concepts can be scrubbed down and examined free of the scrapes and bruises inflicted by their rhetorical employment. There is no such science; there is no 'first philosophy' of political life. Yet it is vital that political philosophy be a careful academic discipline precisely because it is never merely that. It is vital that it be as scrupulous and transparent as its maker can manage because it will always be taken to be a contribution to struggles for power and campaigns for policies.

This makes it hard to do well. No one with a passion for political ideas can be detached from the circumstances of their employment. Political philosophy is attractive because it promises a deep understanding of the values at stake in daily strife, it promises a

defence of causes that are dear to us. But careful thought may reveal that the defences are flimsy or that the values are confused. Most political philosophers will have a political agenda which governs their personal contribution to public affairs, and no doubt you will have worked out elements of mine by the time you finish this book. But philosophy is an open-minded discipline, so, paradoxically, personal commitments must be regarded as provisional, having no more credibility than is conferred on them by the strength of their supporting arguments.

I am particularly conscious of this since I have to report that my philosophical position has changed during the course of writing this book. When I began it, too long ago, I believed that the basic principles of liberal democracy should find universal acceptance. The grounding beliefs, that mankind is born free and equal, seemed to me to be basic elements of a common culture that have anchored themselves in the mind-sets of modern men and women. We think of *ourselves* in this fashion, willy-nilly. These are the guiding principles history has bequeathed us. So I didn't think of liberalism as a radical point of view. I thought of it as mother's milk to the political sentiments of all good citizens. I believed, in the modern world, that the true conservative who is respectful of the traditions of thought that have formed us and our political environment, would be a liberal at least in the sense of accepting some story about universal freedom and equality, and distrustful of claims to authority. Of course, I recognized that values as loosely conceived as these require clarification and analysis, that tensions and confusions would be revealed as the grounding intuitions were worked up into principles and theories of a specificity that could bear examination and assessment. But I didn't doubt that some cogent articulation of these values was the prospectus of philosophers and thoughtful citizens alike.

What I had ignored was the dire effects of religious belief, in particular the power of religion to corrode sentiments as crucial to peaceful social co-existence as mutual respect and relaxed tolerance. The most noxious human capacities, aggression, hatred and cruelty, seem to coagulate around religious beliefs which advertise their necessary distinctiveness, and then are transmuted into communal militancy. As the hatreds expressive of conflicts between political ideologies seem to have dried up, militant

religion has stepped into the breach and now fuels murderous internecine conflicts worldwide – last year the former Yugoslavia, last month Indonesia, this week Nigeria. Doctors are murdered outside abortion clinics in the USA, and shoppers are blown up in Omagh. Hegel makes us shiver when he describes the mentality of the Terror in Revolutionary France as death, ‘the coldest and meanest of all deaths, with no more significance than cutting off a head of cabbage’.<sup>1</sup> Rarely does a week go by nowadays without our seeing some TV footage of bodies piled into trenches, disposed of in the manner of waste vegetables.

So now I am a partisan, even militant, liberal. I despair of the prospect of finding common ground with those whose religious beliefs prescind from civility, from the task of seeking, minimally, a *modus vivendi* or, maximally, substantial agreement. I no longer see the sole task of political philosophy as the Hegelian enterprise of exploring and refashioning a consensus. Nowadays, we have to give as much attention to the dire task of drawing lines in the sand, marking off values which we recognize that only *some* of our fellows deem worthy of defence, values that are all the more crucial for being seemingly parochial.

When my efforts are set against this agenda, I don’t claim to have accomplished much. On reflection, rarely do I reach definitive conclusions. What I do hope is to have placed some intellectual resources at the disposal of openly enquiring minds, raising questions, drafting lines of argument, provoking the kind of disagreement that challenges the reader to respond. I have concentrated on what I believe are the central areas of investigation. Though I am no card-carrying utilitarian, I examine the utilitarian theory in detail because I believe it is the most powerful, sophisticated and influential normative *theory* which is available to us, for better or worse. Next, I examine the core ideals of liberty, rights and justice in the distribution of goods. Next, I study the problem of political obligation, asking whether the state can make good its claim to rightful authority over its citizens. Finally, I look at constitutional issues, investigating the ethical credentials of democracy.

This self-directed focus has made it impossible for me to discuss many issues in political philosophy which have a direct bearing on practical and often urgent policy issues. So I don’t discuss separately the politics of race, the particular injustice of racial

discrimination or the legitimacy of affirmative action or reverse discrimination. I don't discuss justice between the sexes or the feminist contribution to political philosophy. I don't discuss the acceptability of nationalism, the ethical implications of multiculturalism, or the proper conduct of international relations, except by way of example when other issues are in focus. I regret all of these omissions, but hope that those who are encouraged to tackle the questions I haven't raised may find in the book materials to help them in their efforts.

It is impossible to complete a work of this sort without accumulating debts. Some of them are acknowledged in the text, some unfortunately not. The bibliography furnishes a partial guide to my reading, but I should record the books I have had alongside my desk throughout the period of composition. Unsurprisingly perhaps, these have been Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Locke's *Second Treatise*, Hume's *Treatise*, *Second Enquiry* and *Essays*, Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* and *Social Contract*, Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, J.S. Mill's *Utilitarianism* and *On Liberty*, Rawls's *Theory of Justice*. Temperamentally, I don't seem to make much progress in political philosophy without first stepping back and studying what these giants of the discipline have to say.

My acknowledgement of personal debts must also be patchy. Students can always be relied upon to prompt their teachers into rethinking positions which would otherwise solidify into nostrums. Colleagues who, after reading students' work or listening to them in tutorials, stop me in the corridor and ask 'Do you tell them *that*?', have similar effects – collapse of stout party and back to the drawing-board. Over the years, bits of this material have been read to philosophers in Glasgow and other universities, and I have welcomed and sometimes used their comments. Nick Zangwill read some of the manuscript material and I benefited from his advice. John Shand read early versions of the first five chapters, correcting errors and helping me clarify obscure material. Pat Shaw has read just about all of it; his criticisms, advice and encouragement have been invaluable. I am a duffer with a word processor and all things IT. My neighbours on the top floor of the philosophy department in Glasgow, Angus McKay and Susan Stuart, have responded kindly and patiently to my pathetic, panicky, pleas for assistance. John Shand, the series editor, and Tony Bruce and

Muna Khogali at Routledge, have been helpful and accommodating in the face of my prevarications and the anonymous referees they have recruited have improved the final version.

Since I expect that this book will be used largely for teaching, it is appropriate that I thank my teachers of political philosophy. I was first introduced to the subject at Kirkham Grammar School by Bernard Coates. There was no National Curriculum and political philosophy was certainly not on the examination syllabus, but Bernard thought it would be interesting for us to discuss the contract theories of Hobbes and Locke, so we did. I was so excited I immediately took the only valuable book in the house, a beautiful, many-volume work on *The Horse: Its Treatment in Health and Disease*, and swapped it for a tatty copy of Sabine's *History of Political Thought*. I suspect the booksellers, Messrs Halewood, of Friargate, Preston, are still laughing. This initial interest was rekindled in London, when I found myself preparing abstracts of material directed to questions my brother had spotted for his final exams at the LSE, but unfortunately had not had any time to study. It was fostered at Bedford College, London, by David Lloyd-Thomas, who had the wonderful, generous gift of finding good and interesting ideas in the most hurried and turgid essays I presented to him. My interests were further encouraged by Robin Downie when I came to Glasgow. It's a pleasure to acknowledge my debts to all of them and express my gratitude.

My wife, Anne, has had a lot to suffer in the preparation of this book. Mercifully she takes no interest at all in its contents, not having a philosophical bone in her body – so I thank her for the blessed relief.





## ***Chapter 1***

# **Introduction**

Young children, we understand, are born philosophers. They ask exasperated parents such deep questions as ‘Where is my mind?’ or ‘Is Granny living with all the other dead people in the churchyard?’. The spirit for philosophy which is born out of naïveté is soon extinguished, so the taste for philosophical reflection has to be rediscovered. I conjecture that it is an acquired taste, prompted by some strange contingency. Who knows the story behind your picking up this book? Still, some brands of philosophical enquiry are more likely to be prompted than others. An adolescent who found himself pondering the nature of numbers would be a splendid eccentric. By contrast, youthful rebellion can be relied upon to kindle low-level philosophical musings about the rules of behaviour. If parents say such and such is the right thing to do and the teenager insists that he does no wrong in not doing it, the conflict of views is likely to raise all sorts of philosophical questions: What is the nature and extent of parents’ authority? What sort of respect is required for their rules? They can enforce their demands and prudence may dictate compliance, but does that

make it right? If the question of who decides what behaviour is acceptable and what is not seems up for grabs, the question of how to decide will surely follow. Is it a matter of choice or preference or personal belief? And so on.

Such questions (and many more) comprise the subject of ethics, and I suspect that most people dip their toes into the water in the minimal sense of recognizing that there are questions to be answered, issues to be debated. Political life has the same character of putting philosophical questions up front. Authoritarian regimes prompt the same reflections as authoritarian parents. Democratic regimes conduct debates about competing policies in terms of the values such policies embody. Liberty may be opposed to justice. The public interest may require the sacrifice of persons' rights. This is the diet of editorials in tabloids as well as the broadsheet newspapers. Questions of ethics and political philosophy are ubiquitous, in the very air we breathe. The surprise for many is that the problems are not novel, that there is a rich history of careful deliberation about them, that the questions which seem fresh in 2000AD have often been recorded as debated for the last two and a half millennia.

We are heirs to this rich tradition of philosophical dispute. Though philosophical problems seemingly spring up afresh each day like mushrooms, similar problems have been worrying folks for as long as intellectual problems have been recorded. When we take seriously the philosophical questions posed directly in political life, we encounter immediately a vast literature organized around the problems mankind has encountered, the philosophers who have contributed to their solution and the theories that have been recurrently proposed as the means of tackling them.

The prospect can appear dismal. You ask: Do I have an obligation to obey the law? and one of nature's teachers gives you a reading-list – as they say, from Plato to NATO. In truth, this should be a source of excitement, since the history of philosophy does not parade itself as a progressive discipline in the manner of the history of science. You can learn from the Ancient Greeks, not least because the present is a small parish inhibited by parochial concerns. Escape into past ways of thinking, in philosophy if not in physics, can be a liberation. What a marvel it is to read Plato's report in the *Republic* of Socrates working out why might is not

right, or Hobbes at the time of the English Civil War describing anarchy and arguing for the necessity of an absolute or unrestricted sovereign power. These are people you will want to argue with and you will find, to your pleasure, that it can be hard to do so.

Everyone who studies political philosophy has to know something about the history of the subject because that history is a priceless resource as much as it is an antiquarian interest. But this book will not address this history directly. Rather we shall concentrate on the central questions of political philosophy and the leading theories that have been employed to answer them. For the moment, I want to examine the methodology of political philosophy, to say a little more about the relationship of theory to judgement in the sphere of ethics – of which political philosophy is evidently a part.

## **The methods of ethics and political philosophy**

### ***A methodological impasse?***

Let's begin our reflections with a hackneyed example. Suppose we have a sheriff who, along with utilitarian thinkers, believes the right action is the one that produces the greatest human welfare. Faced with a rioting mob, he decides a scapegoat is required to prevent widespread harm. He selects a plausible (but innocent) culprit for punishment and calm is restored. Harm and injustice is done to the poor innocent – but the greater evil is averted. The utilitarian sheriff defends his action as the right thing to do in the circumstances. A critic objects. The sheriff's action was wrong because it was unjust. No amount of benefit to any number of third parties can vindicate the punishment of an innocent man or woman. That principle is inviolable.

How are we to adjudicate the issue? On the side of the sheriff, supposing all the facts of the case are right, is a deep and plausible moral theory. The pity is that this theory of what constitutes right action commits him to doing what would normally be judged a wrong action. On the side of the critic is the principle ('intuition' is the term often used here) that it is unjust, and therefore wrong,