

Political Philosophy: The View from Cambridge

QUENTIN SKINNER, chair
PARTHA DASGUPTA, RAYMOND GEUSS, MELISSA LANE,
PETER LASLETT, ONORA O'NEILL, W. G. RUNCIMAN
ANDREW KUPER, rapporteur

This article reports on a conversation convened by Quentin Skinner at the invitation of the Editors of The Journal of Political Philosophy and held in Cambridge on 13 February 2001.

I. HOW TO PROCEED IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

THE first question was how to proceed with the meeting. Should we even attempt to discover and elucidate *the* view from Cambridge? The answer depends heavily on the view one takes of the purposes of political philosophy. Two views were expressed.

Quentin Skinner, as Chair, favoured the structured approach originally planned for the meeting, with nine core questions considered in turn, with a view to finding points of agreement where possible. Where consensus could not be found, that would be an interesting finding; but where consensus could be found, that would certainly be worthwhile. It would enable us to consider issues systematically—given the time constraints—so as to ascertain which questions are living and which are dead in political philosophy, and to focus the agenda for future research. He stressed that, as Chair, he would not debar himself from contributing to the debate, but would devote his main effort to trying to make it run smoothly.

Raymond Geuss favoured an approach that was not directed to trying to find consensus on pre-given questions. Since, on his view, political philosophy is primarily an attempt to see connections between apparently different things, to develop a critical attitude toward the way in which questions (and answers) are formulated, to realise that there is more than one side to any question, and so forth, one gets a skewed view of the subject if one tries to reduce it to a series of individual answers to detached, pre-given questions. This is one of the ways in which virtually all forms of philosophy are different from many other pursuits. (If we were a political party, which had to act urgently, things would be quite different.) To put it another way, the first and most important thing we try to teach students is *not* to think in a way that is susceptible to being captured by the asking and answering of questions in this fashion.

Since the meeting was fairly evenly divided between these two views, and both sides saw merit in each other's view, we decided to proceed with structured questions as originally planned by the chair, but to de-emphasise consensus-

seeking. Our different orientations to the discipline were nevertheless relevant at several points in the discussion to come.

II. WAYS OF READING TEXTS

Cambridge thinkers pioneered the ‘ideas in context’ approach to political thought. Is this now the only way to read historical texts? Does it make sense to talk about a ‘canon’? Is there really anything wrong with the ‘Oxford’ approach of appropriating historical texts and reading them ahistorically for their arguments? Here our views diverged strongly initially; but it became clear that the apparent disagreement was to some extent an indication of different, equally legitimate interests in the text. However, there remained significant divergence in our attitudes to less contextualist ways of reading texts.

Peter Laslett was suspicious of an overhistorical emphasis when it comes to reading texts, and sceptical of perpetuating the tradition that sees political philosophy in the context of reading the classics. Referring to Hobbes, Locke et al. is often unhelpful and we should do it less—for two reasons. First, direct reference tends to raise more questions than it resolves; second, it is often a way to propagandise or defend our views when we are insecure. We are not unique in this appeal to authority, whether accidental or intentional, under the guise of historical awareness: Locke, for instance, quotes Aristotle in a way that we do not think he should have. So, certainly, we should read our predecessors, but any trace of scripturalism should be excoriated. If we are really concerned about contemporary challenges, we are after as theoretical an approach as possible.

Raymond Geuss concurred, and added that there is not and—in the West since the Dark Ages at any rate—never has been a ‘canon’ in the literal sense. That is, there never has been a fixed body of texts that had officially enforced standing as exclusive ways of thinking about and evaluating politics in general. To speak of ‘the canon’ is a reification that might be useful in the context of some particular investigation, but one must argue for its usefulness (and define what one means clearly) in each particular case. We must always ask ‘are we doing more harm than good by constructing a canon?’. There is nothing inherently wrong with using given texts any way one wants, and so *a fortiori* there is nothing inherently disreputable in reading texts without concern for their historical context. That said, there is a reason to read texts in context: one is motivated to get interesting arguments right, and in general a contextual awareness does help.

Melissa Lane observed that the idea of a ‘theoretical enterprise’ is not itself an abstract and timeless one. Historically informed readings remind us of the political and intellectual forces that influenced the theorising of the past. These, by analogy, can sensitise us to the embedded nature of the theorising we ourselves engage in today.

Quentin Skinner added that it is necessary—as thinkers and teachers—to have a syllabus (if not a canon) that treats some texts as more worthy of close attention

and study than others, and this means that the assumption that there is something like a ‘canon’ at any given time has a real historical basis. He pressed RG on one issue: If we are interested in grasping the historical identity of the texts we study, is it not essential to use a method of historically contextual interpretation?

Raymond Geuss agreed that it is. *If* your interest is in the historical identity of the text, of course, it is necessary to approach it contextually; however, the identity of the text is only one possible legitimate topic of study. It is inherently perfectly legitimate to study historical texts with the intention of finding in them interesting arguments, useful conceptual tools, or even ‘the truth’ about the world. The view RG was keen to promote was the even stronger one that even if you were *not* specifically interested in the text as a historical object, there were good reasons to adopt a historically informed approach to it. He mentioned five such reasons. First, it is not at all clear whether you even *can* make sense of arguments in a text if you extract them from their contexts completely. Although we have no more ‘Emperors’ in the modern world (except in Japan), if we read Augustine, we try to come to understand what he has to say about Empires and Emperors by reference to the historical context. Since reading ‘ahistorically’ and ‘acontextually’ is not even in principle an option with many texts, why choose to do it in a more shoddy rather than a more sophisticated way? Second, it generally turns out that one gets better, more interesting and enlightening arguments in texts if one reads them historically than if one does not, so even by the narrowest and most philistine criteria (‘only the arguments are important’) contextual readings will have advantages. Third, there is an issue about the economics of study. If one really could extract ‘just the argument’ from a historical text, then why not just read that modern presentation rather than the text itself? One would save much time and energy this way. Fourth, by failing to read the texts historically, one pays a high opportunity cost, depriving oneself of the *best* benefits one can get from reading—namely, seeing alternatives to our way of organising and thinking about politics morality, and society, and learning something about the contingency of the origin of most of our ideas. Finally, why call a certain thesis ‘an argument by Hobbes’ when it is, for instance, actually by ‘Gauthier’? Is it not both unfair—potential slander of Hobbes and deception in advertising—and contrary to the ethos and discipline of intellectual care and honesty that it is one of our aims to inculcate in students?

Quentin Skinner insisted that there is a further identifiable problem with the ‘Oxford’ approach to texts: it abstracts meaning from what is said rather than seeing also what is done. To understand a text it is necessary to understand it as a complex of linguistic actions, and to recover what the author was doing in writing it. The point or force of the text (who and how the author was trying to convince), which is absolutely central to its meaning and to the way the arguments unfold, can be discerned only by placing the text in its convention-governed linguistic context. If one takes this Wittgensteinian thought seriously, then questions about the nature and place of the text *must* be asked.

Onora O'Neill pointed out, however, that where one is concerned with doing good philosophy, mere appropriation of historical texts often confuses the issue—it can be cleaner and sharper to formulate the arguments oneself. If one is only concerned with argument, then the argument from authority has limited appeal. So there have to be further reasons for taking texts seriously, and usually these include the fact that some texts are very good, that someone has thought things through. She herself has only limited patience for spending time on texts other than the very richest, most interesting, and most instructive.

III. MARXISM

What is left of Marxism and its concerns? In what ways, if at all, is the Marxist vision an important influence on current attempts to theorise relations between politics and economics? How does it continue to influence and structure our analyses of exploitation and oppression in particular?

Raymond Geuss began with a brief overview: Marx's economics (including the 'materialist conception of history' and the tacit productivist ethics) seems completely out of date. However, Marx's general conception of human society as a unitary system aimed at self-reproduction still seems plausible, as does his view that every society naturally secretes around itself a system of ideas, beliefs, desires, attitudes, and so on—a system that is best understood by reference to its role in socioeconomic reproduction. Marx's and his successors' accounts of alienation, ideology, the structure of society, and the dynamics of political action are relatively independent of the economics and of undiminished relevance. This is ironic, given that Marx himself would probably have thought that the failure of his economics invalidated the rest of his approach to society.

Partha Dasgupta qualified these claims by arguing that one important aspect of Marx's economics does endure: the idea that there is a powerful (but elusive) connection between the scarcity of goods and services, on the one hand, and the way we live, on the other. That agenda has dominated economics; indeed, it almost defines the subject. Ironically, Chicago economists, if one may use such a description, could be regarded as the true heirs of Marx! Gary Becker's famous work on the household, for example, sees the institution as being concerned solely with a resource allocation problem. This approach to economics has enabled us to come up with sharp predictions of what the data might reveal. It may be narrow, but it disciplined the discipline of economics and enabled it to flower.

Melissa Lane emphasised the lasting impact that the structure of Marxist thought has had on other structures of social and political thought. Theories of emancipation and participation that have changed our world have been structured by the intellectual and historical force of Marxist praxis. For instance, many feminist theories of the 1970s and later, even those which were not explicitly socialist-feminist theories, offered alternative accounts of alienation

and exploitation in terms of gender, and developed their own accounts of what a society unmarred by such divisions would look like.

Partha Dasgupta pointed out a serious source of concern for those that take their theoretical cue from Marx. Marx's actual formulations were analytically—and not just empirically—mistaken (as important work in the 1940s and 1950s demonstrated). In particular, Marxist theory lacked bite in that it did not give sufficient attention to the motivational forces of capitalism, for example, in regard to the way it offers incentives to people to invent and innovate. Schumpeter made this his central concern, to great advantage. This is not to say there are no pages in Marx where he discusses innovation and that sort of thing, but rather that his remarks were words, words, and words, and got lost along the way, either due to his own confusions or to the inadequacies of his interpreters.

Turning to who utilised Marxist theory, Partha Dasgupta argued that Marxism has a very limited impact on the value systems of the poor in Asia and elsewhere. In all his work, he had found little evidence that the poor householders in rural Asia or Africa are interested in much more than tilling the soil, raising a family and relating to neighbours. These are the central concerns of anyone wishing to live, not merely that of the peasant. Theorising of the sort Marxists indulge in is predominantly an elite matter, since peasants are not merely largely innocent of Marxist theoretical thinking, but are also wisely focused on the more immediate need to avoid various forms of exploitation and deprivation. Marxism has had, of course, a tremendous impact at university campuses, but that is just the kind of elitism mentioned.

Garry Runciman agreed that Marxism was predominantly used by intellectuals as a rhetorical weapon with which to attack those seen as oppressors. The irony is that Marx showed overt contempt for peasants and those in what is now called the Third World, and yet their leaders made extensive and effective use of his theory in constructing their rhetoric of political struggle.

Andrew Kuper pointed out the extent to which Marxism drove and legitimated the liberation struggle in South Africa. Marxism was the intellectual scaffolding of resistance, shaping the popular understanding of the link between institutionalised racism and economic exploitation. Moreover, Marxism did get absorbed and expressed by many impoverished and marginalized segments of society, including those illiterate in other matters. Perhaps, where political oppression is so overt—and systematically orchestrated against definite groups—political understanding becomes an immediate need.

Onora O'Neill concluded that what is left of Marxism is above all its concern for social justice. But this includes a fondness for conceptions of social justice that focus on equality of some sort rather than poverty per se, which is a mistake. The real issue when it comes to economic justice (as opposed to, say, equality before the law) is not the shape of the distribution so much as some people having too little. Of course, a skewed distribution of wealth can constitute a situation in which poverty increases, but the ethical focus should be on the underlying

dynamics that lead to poverty, not the distribution or a relation of equality in themselves. The influence of Marxism is also evident in the fading awareness that economics matters to political theory—more faded in some quarters than in others.

IV. RAWLS

There are many questions that might be raised about Rawls's influence on twentieth-century political thought; we focused on three. What is the importance and legacy of Rawls's theory of justice? How far does it help us to see the importance of game-theoretic approaches to the discipline? How real is the Rawls–Habermas accord?

Garry Runciman recalled that he was on record (in the then anonymous *Times Literary Supplement* review of *A Theory of Justice*) as saying that Rawls had produced what would be the most influential book in Western political philosophy since J. S. Mill. But it must nevertheless be read as a document of its time and place. Among the ironies of the book is that it took serious account of game theory, and yet (as Rawls himself recognised) it is possible to construct a pay-off matrix that undermines the idea—so important to Rawls—that rational persons in Rawls's 'original position' would be maximinimisers. The best way to understand Rawls's and also Habermas' work is as a myth just like Plato's myth of the cave in the *Republic*—a way of presenting a better vision of a better world.

Melissa Lane agreed with GR's description of Rawls as offering a myth or a normative vision. Rawls's role in the rebirth of political philosophy had hinged on his insistence that one could reason about normative views while acknowledging their fundamental basis in intuition. Thus the fact–value debate that had been revived in 1950s political science could be left behind, as reasoning about and from values became the task of political philosophy. However, it should be remembered that the intuitive values from which Rawls began even in *A Theory of Justice* were not purely moralistic or Kantian. Fundamentally they were and have remained in his later work the values of democratic citizenship and self-esteem.

Raymond Geuss agreed that Rawls's work was a source of great aesthetic pleasure, and had great persuasive appeal, especially in North America. Furthermore, it had the historical significance of revitalising political philosophy (of a sort) at a time at which many people thought it completely and irreversibly dead. However, abstracting from its rhetorical appeal, its beauty and its salutary historical effect, Rawls's approach never had any particular inherent plausibility. It suffered from three basic difficulties. First, justice is not, as Rawls holds, the central or basic virtue of human society, but at best one of a historically shifting set of social values including (in different proportions at different times): absolute level of wellbeing, dignity, freedom, social benevolence, mercy, efficiency, security, etc. Hobbes is certainly correct to think that

maintenance of physical security is more important than justice, and Marx that productive arrangements are more basic and that relative to them, conceptions of justice are epiphenomena. No approach to human society and its politics that focuses on justice per se is likely to come up with any deep or interesting analysis. Second, political philosophy is not, as Rawls claims, applied ethics; to fail to appreciate the radical difference between individual action and institutionalised forms of collective action is to miss the point of politics. Finally, the radical individualism Rawls assumes is not something one can take for granted if one wants to attain any significant kind of knowledge of society and politics. These reasons together disqualify Rawls's theory from having any lasting theoretical significance.

Partha Dasgupta contributed a few reflections as an economist. Rawls is unquestionably the most influential political philosopher on the discipline of economics, but why? Why has he had such a sympathetic ride from economists? The answer is that economists were paying back in kind for the fact that he had taken economics seriously and had studied it with care before making essential use of it in building his theory. Contrary to what is often said, though, Rawls's work is not game-theoretic: it is decision-theoretic. The veil of ignorance, as Rawls formulated it, removes the scope for strategic behaviour. The huge commonality of the human experience permits Rawls to engage in his thought experiment. The presumption is that behind the veil people will make the same choice, about the basic structure of society. On a personal note, PD recalled that Rawls himself had been a role model for him. As a young lecturer in the early 1970s, PD wrote an article which sought to show that Rawls's saving rule was incoherent. Rawls's response was not that PD had misunderstood him, but rather, 'So, what shall we do, how do we put the matter right?'

Onora O'Neill, whose doctoral dissertation at Harvard was supervised by Rawls during the period just preceding the publication of *A Theory of Justice*, began by emphasising a salutary historical effect of Rawls's work. It made many people more cautious about how much can be shown and more thoughtful about what they can assume, and about the reach or scope that their work will have (or certainly that others' work will have). Although Rawls's work is in some respects very specific to the USA, it has now had a much wider impact—oddly, this took a long time. In her view, Rawls is not helpful for those who want to adopt a game-theoretic approach—this approach is explicitly repudiated in his late work. Even in his early work, the Original Position is a subordinate notion, intended to model something deeper—a sense of fairness.

Raymond Geuss thought that Rawls's theory had been able to play such an important ideological role in the United States because it allowed US society to see itself in a relatively sophisticated, self-adulatory way. This was a two-step process. First, by narrowing the focus of political philosophy to discussions of (domestic) distribution, Rawls directed attention away from other equally contentious political and evaluative issues. Second, within this highly restricted

field of discussion—domestic distributional questions only—Rawls allowed a society to earn his highest evaluative accolade (‘a just, well-ordered society’) if in it enough crumbs fell from the tables of the supremely well-off for the condition of the most disadvantaged to be even minimally improved. Rawls’s theory was all the more successful as an ideology because it was a much more subtle, indirect and sophisticated vehicle of self-adulation than this crude sketch of it makes it appear. It suggested not that everything was for the best in the USA, but that reformist energy should be directed within the existing political, social and economic arrangements at relatively well-defined problems. In the realm of ideology, such indirect endorsement of the *status quo* was often more effective than more direct approaches. Rawls’s theory also has had some attraction among Western-oriented elites outside the US, but much of this is to be attributed to the demonstration effect of US economic, political, and military power: Rawls was seen in some places as a way to fill the conceptual gap left when indigenous modes of thought had been radically discredited. This was very strikingly the case in West Germany in the mid-1970s. As far as the convergence between Rawls and Habermas is concerned, neo-Kantianism is one of the natural forms of political thinking in periods of reaction, such as that from the late 1970s to the present, and so it is perfectly understandable that both Rawls and Habermas succumbed to it. Kantian structures are in general also theoretically highly restrictive, so convergence between neo-Kantians is not surprising.

Onora O’Neill thought that a real cause for sadness was that Rawls’s later work has not always moved on. His conception of public reason as grounded in deliberation between fellow *citizens* avoids the major questions of the late twentieth century—namely, globalisation and the problems of states. A notable consequence is that he does not allow for the difference principle to be global in scope. She doubted whether the Rawls–Habermas accord goes very deep.

Andrew Kuper argued that the rapprochement is largely a failure, pointing to the very different aims and limitations of Rawls and Habermas. Consider Rousseau’s dictum to take ‘men as they are and laws as they might be’. Habermas falls short on the first part of the dictum, since he is still wedded to quasi-Marxist hopes of both radically transforming people and bringing about intensive solidarity. For example, he anticipates that people can assume an ‘ideal “we” perspective’. Rawls falls short on the second part of the dictum, since he incorporates existing and unnecessary injustices by presenting a theory of *inter-statal* justice that is tolerant of rather illiberal regimes. Regardless of any reconciliation at the level of modes of public reasoning, then, the rapprochement cannot succeed: the two theories are utopian in fundamentally different senses.

Onora O’Neill agreed and added to the list of divergences. It is true that both Habermas and Rawls placed a lot of early emphasis on ideals, and then retreated to more of an emphasis on process—when they found that those ideals were difficult to justify. However, Habermas has never given up on the hope of having a theory of everything, whereas Rawls became ever more wedded to the idea that

an account of justice should not be extended too far, should not become a moral theory that incorporates much of life. (Those domains of life are pretty much left alone to be regulated by ‘conceptions of the good’; but this apparently respectable phrase is generally used without a clear set of criteria. It cannot plausibly mean mere preferences—say, betting on the races—so what does it mean?) The differences in Rawls and Habermas are partly traceable to the political problems that motivated their work. For Habermas, it was the German legacy and the construction of a constitutional order that could overcome the historical and potential depredations of nationalism. For Rawls, it was the civil rights movement, and a few other struggles. To take only two instances: he remained relatively unaffected by feminism, and did not think through the implications of the family for justice; and it is extraordinary that he said next to nothing about the greatest internal political saga in the United States for the past forty years, the failed struggle for universal health care (it took Norman Daniels, a faithful Rawls interpreter, to extend his work in this direction). So when it comes to Rawls and Habermas, she agreed with AK that there are too many different premises heading in too many different directions—even if the theories do sometimes pass in the night—for us to believe that there is a rapprochement.

V. SOCIAL CHOICE

The next, vexed question was this: What is the importance and legacy of axiomatic social choice theory, and mathematical modelling more generally, for the discipline as a whole?

Partha Dasgupta said that axiomatic social choice theory and mathematical modelling should not be taken to be the same thing. Historically, the most important papers were those of Duncan Black, in the late 1940s, on majority voting, and then Kenneth Arrow, whose 1951 book, *Social Choice and Individual Values*, not only provided what continues to be the outstanding result in social choice theory, but defined the area. Later interpretations were, unfortunately, sometimes off base. Arrow’s work on social choice was about voting rules. The idea is to program a computer to translate individual values into a social ordering of states of affairs. As is well known, one of Arrow’s axioms on the voting rules he wished to consider ruled out interpersonal comparisons of wellbeing. A huge subsequent literature on aggregation with interpersonal comparisons has been interpreted as having found a way out of the dilemma for democracy created by Arrow’s impossibility result. The common interpretation of the subsequent literature is that it has shown how, by permitting interpersonal comparisons to be accommodated in the voting rule, Arrow’s paradox can be avoided.

But try devising such a voting rule acceptable by citizens at a polling station (for example, adding up people’s utilities at the station)! PD believes that the positive results on aggregation incorporating interpersonal comparisons that

were discovered in the 1970s (for example, the beautiful results of Eric Maskin and Peter Hammond on utilitarianism and maximin, respectively) were about individual values, not about aggregating individual values. The title of Arrow's book is revealing. Arrow assumed that individuals vote on the basis not of their personal preferences but their ethical values. Thus they will have been assumed to have conducted already the interpersonal comparisons they find relevant for arriving at their values (that is, their ranking of states of affairs). Hammond's and Maskin's results are of the greatest interest to voters before they come to the polling station. The voting rule used on their individual values cannot be expected to incorporate interpersonal preferences. It is an absurd thought. So, Arrow's theorem remains the standard around which social choice (as opposed to individual values) should continue to be discussed. The techniques of analysis Arrow created in his classic text continue to act as a powerful disciplining force on the entire range of questions concerning public economics. It is unquestionably one of the two or three greatest works of the twentieth century in the social sciences and humanities. PD said 'one of' only as a form of insurance; he personally could not think of another book with the same depth, range and originality.

Raymond Geuss felt somewhat differently: the notions of 'rationality' that play a central role in mathematical modelling, game theory, social choice theory, etc. are of great use in well-defined areas; but the most important fact about politics is that it is not a closed, well-defined area. This means that modelling, game theory, social choice theory, etc. have extremely limited value as analytic tools in politics.

Andrew Kuper agreed that such theories pare away much that is socially significant and cannot be neatly modelled—a reductionism renders this kind of theory valuable only as a kind of 'aspect-seeing'. Social choice theory highlights merely some of the relevant features of a situation; it would be (and often is) disastrous to use it as an unmediated basis for social policy and action.

Onora O'Neill added that she suspected that social choice theory and related kinds of theory deploy an unsatisfactory conception of action. Preference-based theories are false under an empirical interpretation (people constantly take themselves to act against their desires) and unilluminating under a non-empirical interpretation (revealed preferences makes too much of the analysis tautologous). The task of developing an alternative and more plausible account of action, practical reasoning and social decision should be a central focus for moral and political philosophers.

VI. FEMINISM

Feminism and its influence are difficult to pin down. How has feminism changed us, as persons and theoreticians? Has it alerted us to additional dimensions of oppression? Increased more generally our concern for corporeality? Has it

increased our understanding and pursuit of identity politics? How important has feminism been for challenging various forms of essentialism and promoting contrasting models of a constructivist kind?

Melissa Lane met general assent to her contention that the most important lasting legacy of feminism is the idea (and slogan) that the personal is political. It constituted an attack on the rigid public–private distinction, and brought out the need for a critical analysis of one’s identity and how it is shaped. It was also successful in bringing both the family and the body squarely within the ambit of political philosophy—Carol Gilligan’s notion of voice as incorporating corporeality is an excellent case in point. Feminism has been handicapped, however, by the extent to which it has inherited the Marxist search for a unified consciousness attaching to a unified (or potentially unified) social group. When success in defining a singular identity for ‘woman’ proved impossible, we saw an explosion of literature on difference. The exploration of difference needs to be complemented by the exploration of common goals, values and strategies which can unite a group prospectively despite that group not being unified by any already given identity. Hooks’s work is an important example of such an approach.

Peter Laslett stressed the massive changes to our awareness brought about by feminism. The blatant suppression of half of humanity was blanked out by superficially looking at individuals; and we needed feminism to see a marked distinction between male and female experience, and to open our eyes to the extraordinary grip and persistence of masculine behaviour. This kind of insight is tremendously important to another kind of understanding that we need to attain and foreground: the idea of older people as relevant and different in society. There is a similar sense in which they have been pushed aside and ignored; and their appeal to commonality is *learned* from feminism.

Since ML and PL had mentioned largely positive aspects of feminism, Onora O’Neill chose to emphasise its less salutary effects. It was, of course, highly beneficial to challenge the public–private boundary; and feminism has certainly changed us (some of us more than others). But feminist thought has not in general gone past a very limited notion of diversity—the idea that ‘women should not be like men’. Thus at present we are stuck with identity politics of a feminist flavour. What is strange in this kind of politics is that the group is always assumed as a *given*—which is incoherent if one takes difference seriously. As a consequence we are burdened with social practices (for example, ethnic monitoring) that look at relative rates of success of members of ideologically favoured ‘groups’, with which people may not identify themselves, such as ‘Afro-Caribbean’ and ‘Irish’, tacitly understood as excluding the Protestant Irish. A lot of feminist work has supported misleading and ultimately oppressive forms of identity politics, and reliance on statistical views of equality: on this view, it is alright if people do badly provided that the same proportion of every ‘group’ does badly!

Quentin Skinner said that feminism had impacted hugely on him personally. For instance, he was recently asked to edit one of his early articles for republication; he found he had to rewrite it significantly. An awareness of many problematic components implicit in our language and our behaviour has made a great difference to his practice. He asked: did others feel the same?

Raymond Geuss did not. He is younger than Skinner and grew up in New York in the 1960s when the most important theoretical advances had already been made. To be sure, some ideas had not yet been fully realised in social institutions, but that had little theoretical significance (although great practical importance). What has happened in the West is that the usual liberal values of individualism, autonomy, equality, etc. have slowly begun to be expanded to encompass women. Fortunately there is every reason to believe this will continue in the West. It is unclear what will happen in the rest of the world (especially in the Islamic world).

What struck Garry Runciman, as a sociologist, was that the awareness of feminist issues took so long to develop: Evans-Pritchard and others had written about the position of women in so-called 'primitive' societies and Eileen Power had written about women in medieval European society, but they had not been followed up as might have been expected by other anthropologists and historians. In the end, however, feminism as a political influence had a significant impact on sociology: the agendas of empiricists as well as theorists are being influenced by the recognition that they have hitherto underemphasized feminist issues.

Quentin Skinner and Raymond Geuss together clarified four issues about feminism that needed to be distinguished. First, what theoretical advances had been made and when had they been made? There was general agreement that feminism represented a major theoretical advance, but several of those present felt that since the early 1970s progress had been limited. Second, how did feminism affect the lives of various people? Here we differed on how much impact we thought that feminism had had on us personally. Third, how had feminism been implemented in political movements and legislation and how had it influenced widespread social attitudes? We agreed that it had significantly changed the awareness of most sectors of society during the past thirty years, and that it had some important institutional and political effects, however these seemed to be limited to certain parts of the globe. The fact that 93 per cent of the (full) professors at Cambridge are male indicates that some social attitudes are still obdurate and that the appropriate full political and social implementation of the feminist agenda is still outstanding. Fourth, none of the above rules out the point that some feminist foci, such as difference and identity politics, are seriously misguided—or at least, that attention needs to be refocused on more cogent, pressing concerns.

VII. POST-MODERNISM

How plausible and influential are structuralist, post-structuralist and deconstructionist approaches, and will they have a lasting relevance? We found

significant divergence between us on the questions of how post-modernism had influenced us, where post-modernism now stands, and where we now stand in relation to it.

Melissa Lane proposed a paradox in the postmodernist attack on metanarratives and foundations. The attack on metanarratives risks itself becoming a metanarrative, obsessed with showing the deep-rootedness of the fallacious assumptions in Western thought. And the attack on metaphysical foundations for ethics must be compared to the elusive but persistent way that postmodern theorists themselves invoke some kind of ethical dimension in their theorising. Consider Derrida on justice, or Rorty on solidarity, for example. Her recent work on the modern and postmodern reception of Plato had made her question the coherence and necessity of positing that past theorists had clung to metaphysical foundations for ethics at all. The self-presentation of postmodernism as speaking the previously unspeakable often depends on an oversimplification of the past.

Raymond Geuss felt that Rorty had had a pernicious influence in one respect: Rorty speaks as if the end of ideology should mean that we should stop trying to provide ourselves with general theories in politics. Yet as finite human beings we have no alternative but to have theories—we cannot in fact lead our lives without appealing to any number of such theories and to pretend otherwise is self-deception. Of course we know that no single theory will give us the final truth, but that is not reason to jettison theoretical activity altogether. Rorty is completely wrong to interpret Pragmatism in this anti-theoretical light. Dewey—unlike most postmodernists—was not against the attempt to find theories, only against misguided forms of philosophising about the theories we use.

Quentin Skinner asked if any of us had changed our practice as a result of postmodernism.

Onora O'Neill said that it had changed her approach, by making her take sceptical challenges to reason seriously. There was a time when Richard Rorty used to intervene in seminars by saying 'so what?'. She thought that if he and other postmodernists were right, then we should all just shut up shop. She for one would not want to be associated with the academic enterprise if that were correct. So she started to think about how to keep the shop open. The postmodern challenge led her to spend far more time thinking about the authority of reasoning. What are we doing when we seek and formulate reasons for thinking and acting in certain ways? This sort of question must be at the centre of our theoretical enterprise. So the irony of postmodernism is that it helped us to see and think about why reason is so important.

Quentin Skinner said that his own practice had been profoundly changed by reading postmodern critiques: the stress on ambiguity; the idea that some arguments are just tissues of metaphor; the insight that language takes on a structuring role such that we end up placing a large question mark next to authorial authority. In QS's own writings, the author is not dead but in very bad

health. And he attends carefully to metaphors, which is why he reads the title of *Leviathan* as a metaphor that tells one everything about the text. Later, QS agreed that there is of course more to texts than the metaphorical.

This led to a discussion of the purported distinctiveness and originality of postmodernism. Raymond Geuss insisted that there is little in postmodernism that was not available in the Western tradition already, especially in the tradition of ancient rhetoric. Postmodernism perhaps had a salubrious effect at a particular historical conjuncture, since it brought certain issues back on to the table, but it does not represent any new contribution that can be isolated and admired. Peter Laslett added that postmodernism had had very little influence on him. It contains the tradition of sceptical humanism dressed up with a journalist's phrase—and it is both philosophically incoherent and pernicious. Garry Runciman agreed that postmodernism is profoundly incoherent and felt that QS's book on Hobbes is better read as deriving from the classical rhetorical tradition and from John Austin's *How to Do Things with Words*. He remarked that when Quine was told that followers of Derrida were appropriating him as an ally in their cause, Quine was enraged: the difference between his philosophical logic and Derrida's literary word play is enormous.

Melissa Lane sought to link the points made by RG and GR to the earlier discussion of rhetoric in relation to Rawls. Political philosophy normally deploys rhetoric in its aim to persuade; reason and arguments have to be ultimately embedded in intuitions and those intuitions recommended to the reader. But she agreed with RG and with OO that postmodernism à la Rorty goes wrong when it takes the use of rhetoric and intuition to dispense with the need for reason and theory. Advancing and arguing about theories was something that humans, and political philosophers in particular, do, and the notion of good and bad arguments was inherent in and assumed by any such practice.

VIII. RELATIONS WITH EMPIRICAL SOCIAL SCIENCE

How do we now see the relationship between the normative and the empirical? Have the empirical social sciences enabled us to arrive at better moral and political theories? And have political theorists enabled empirical social scientists to ask better questions and arrive at better results?

Garry Runciman thought that the fact–value distinction, which was central to the debates of the 1950s, remains a fundamental issue. Since then, the terms of debate have been refined and deepened, and the practice of social scientists has changed in ways that have helped to clarify contemporary debates in political philosophy. For instance, we now have a much better understanding of the traditional problem of social order, in the light of the findings of anthropologists and others. For instance, we know, thanks to work being done by evolutionary psychologists on lethal violence, that young men in any and all societies and

cultures are enormously more likely to be killers than coeval women or older men.

Partha Dasgupta, as the other behavioural scientist at the table, agreed with GR but insisted that we should be wary of being too complimentary about the contribution made to these fields by political philosophy. This very journal, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, is hugely textual, with articles primarily focused on authors, and especially major historical thinkers. There is very little empirical work in it; and that is indicative of the fact that we are in trouble: we need empiricism to be brought in more, because it has a disciplining effect on our thinking. Recently, he read a sociology textbook three times over: the problem was that there was not a single sentence in it that was testable! And this concern with testability is missing in a great deal of political philosophy. If PD had any message for this journal, it would be that more empirical articles should be commissioned. Historical thinkers are of course important, but Aristotle and others simply did not think about many of our issues. Further, political philosophy needs to take account of recent advances in economics in theorising needs, preferences and desires. Economists have also developed a better understanding of the instrumental value of institutions and of the tensions that institutions suffer. They can test two or more variables to see if there is a positive or a negative relation between things of value. For example, how does democracy relate to economic progress and quality of life (however measured)? We often think there is a clash, and that worry becomes powerful and poignant when one reads—as PD did only a little while ago—that the President of Côte d'Ivoire had remarked that democracy and development do not go well together. Yet PD's own work shows a positive relation between democracy and prosperity. Such empirical findings knock out certain arguments—such as the dangerous one that democracy is a luxury good—even if they do not clinch the matter. So of course we need the insights of political philosophy and evolutionary psychology to interpret the direct evidence; but there is much of the latter, and there are good and bad ways to go about analysing it. Empiricism disciplines our thinking.

Raymond Geuss offered more sceptical reflections about empirical social science. If one thinks that it is the mark of an 'empirical science' to yield successful, reasonably precise predictions that go beyond the pronouncements of common sense in complex and changing situations, then it is a genuinely open question whether there are any social sciences. If, on the other hand, one thinks that 'empirical science' need not have this property of robust predictive power, it is unclear why there should be any reason for there to be a *special* connection between political theory and social science. If the general point—of exploring the relations between political philosophy and the social sciences—is to ask how one should train the next generation of students of politics, then it might be suggested that all should have as much knowledge of economics and history as possible. Beyond that, different people will need different things; and different journals will commission different articles.

IX. HOW ARE WE DOING—AND WHERE ARE WE GOING?

Finally, we wanted to consider the present and future of the discipline: Do we feel that there is progress to register in the treatment of substantive topics in political philosophy? We touched on the following: Justice and Distribution; Democracy and Deliberation; Democracy and Freedom; Internationalism and Globalisation; Civil Society and Social Capital. Do we think of any particular issues as being for the moment settled or moribund? What are the real nerve centres and growth points in the discipline?

Raymond Geuss started with a broad and contentious overview of the issues. He felt that our understanding of our conception of justice had been increased by the ‘debate’ between Rawls and Nozick et al.; but since justice is of no great importance, this does not matter much, in RG’s view. Issues of ‘distribution’ also struck him as of less than direct interest to political theory; these issues should be appropriately divided up and distributed to (a) economics (questions of efficiency), (b) social psychology (the analysis of envy), and (c) law (property rights). There has, on the other hand, probably been a cumulative increase in sophistication in dealing with phenomena like ‘democracy’ and it would now appear merely quaint simply to identify ‘democracy’ with contingent early twentieth-century European forms of parliamentarianism. Deliberation is one of the most important parts of politics but also one that remains the least understood. Freedom, on the other hand, is too contested a concept to do anything foundational with it—rather than operating as a single potentially unified and unifying concept, it collapses on scrutiny into a multiplicity of highly diverse uses. The only way to deal with this is to integrate freedom into wider ethical conceptions (Luther’s ‘freedom of the Christian’, Kant’s ‘autonomy’, Humboldt’s conception of freedom as development of the powers and capacities of the individual, Constant’s ‘liberty of the moderns’, and so forth). But when one does that, freedom loses its apparent unity and much of its specious motivational power, and will need to be replaced by something more comprehensive and complete (Christianity, *laissez-faire*, existentialism, etc.). Any such more concrete replacement will of course evidently be highly controversial, replacing a mere illusion of consensus with the reality of gross disagreement. So it is difficult to see which way to go. As for ‘civil society’, this seems a completely confused concept that is not worth anyone’s time trying to untangle.

Melissa Lane disagreed on the question of freedom. Progress has been made in our understanding of the structure of different possible accounts of freedom. Significant advances have been made, for example, by Amartya Sen in elucidating the notion of capabilities, by Joseph Raz in elaborating an account of personal autonomy and its relation to the availability of valuable choices, and by Philip Pettit and Quentin Skinner in recovering and developing republican conceptions of liberty. She agreed with RG that the choice between such diverse accounts would depend on one’s attitude to broader ethical conceptions, yet such work

had clarified the nature of possible accounts and had dispelled certain myths about the possible contours of the concept of freedom. Raz's work, for example, had challenged the notion that authority and autonomy can only be reconciled via the idea of consent. More generally, she felt that we have in general been stuck in a Rousseauian 'all or nothing' mentality when it comes to freedom and democracy. Just as Raz and Sen had pointed the way to conceptions of freedom which allow one to be more or less free, rather than free simpliciter, so we needed to make progress on conceptions of democracy which allow for accountability and democratic control to be exercised over time and by degrees. Deliberative democracy represented an important step in this direction although some theories of this kind assumed too much about the prior attainment of social equality, and so worried too little about real inequalities of power in deliberative processes. Voting does have the merit of giving each an equal say, whereas processes of voice or deliberation risk allowing the louder voices to count for more.

Garry Runciman likewise insisted that the idea that there has been no or very limited progress is untenable. On the empirical side, we have learned a great deal from some of the major thinkers of the twentieth century; economists, for example, are not going to go back to Marx any more than physicists are going to go back to Aristotle. On the normative side, although a different notion of progress is involved, there has been progress in reconceptualising what are still the same fundamental issues—which is why we still do, and need to, re-read the classic texts.

Partha Dasgupta pointed out that empirical and normative theoretical advance had been mutually reinforcing. For one thing, we have a better understanding of all kinds of problems and possibilities relating to markets. For another, returning to the problem of conflicts between oughts, empirical work has helped us to see a particular variable or ought as prior in some instances. A notable example is Robert Putnam's excellent book on social capital in Italy, which supplied a powerful message that civic engagement may be good for disciplining local government. Of course, Putnam groped at some seemingly laughable measures, and subsequent work led to important changes in the conceptualisation of social capital; but empirical study gave Putnam's contention force—empirics made it something more than a tract on civic friendship.

Onora O'Neill described two areas in which there had also been progress, though more was badly needed. First, in writing about human rights and justice, we no longer automatically take an intrastatal perspective. With the fall of communism, this conceptual progress was somewhat derailed by a temporary shift of focus to questions of transition from communism. But a focused effort to think in another way is now returning and gaining momentum. Second, deliberative democracy has encouraged us to view reason as communicative rather than as a solitary or abstract activity. The techniques now used for minimal consultation of the public, such as polls, were originally developed for essentially commercial purposes and then—mistakenly—deployed for a very different kind of choice. Consider the great difference between democratic

political decision-making on the one hand, and public responses to questions like ‘do you like Mr Kipling’s cupcakes?’ on the other. Democracy is in any substantial sense not simply about consulting the public, but about consulting their considered judgements. One specific implication of starting to think in this different way is that we can begin to see that the arguments for freedom of the press with which we are currently operating are hopelessly out of date. We cannot continue to operate a twenty-first century media culture on nineteenth-century assumptions that journalism is justifiable as self-expression. We need to consider serious changes to the way the media is constructed and regulated that recognise the fact that its aim is communication; although there are some good reasons to be pessimistic about whether much can be done with the media as it stands. None of this is to say that deliberative democracy is the right way to go. A more plausible and fruitful agenda is that of developing methods to bring about greater transparency and institutional responsiveness.

Raymond Geuss concluded by naming five issues on which he personally would like to see progress. First, and most importantly, we need to work out how much human control and what kind of control we can realistically aspire to have over the economy. Crudely speaking, the management of the economy has become increasingly the major criterion of success for a government, but at the same time the range of means that is considered acceptable for a government to use has decreased (John Dunn analyses this problem with great penetration in his recent book *The Cunning of Unreason*). Second, how can we cope with environmental degradation, depletion of natural resources, overpopulation? It is hard to avoid the conclusion that, one way or the other, we are going to have to change radically our attitudes towards nature, consumption, and the good human life—and especially our commitment to unlimited economic exploitation of the world. Are there realistically accessible ways of rendering this transformation less rather than more humanly destructive? Third, since the 1840s we have been waiting for monotheistic religions to collapse under the weight of their own gross implausibility, but they show no signs of doing that. How can we root out (monotheistic) religion? Fourth, is there anything we can do to increase our understanding of practical judgement and associated phenomena so as to improve our practice? We need a better sense of how negotiation, coalition-building, and so forth, take place—a lot of progress has been made there by game theory and other formal kinds of analysis, but much remains to be done. Fifth, much work remains to be done on how we are to understand the persistence of cultural diversity. How are we to understand the robustness of some cultural phenomena and the fragility of others? Is a general or systematic account at all possible in this area?

THE DISCUSSANTS

Partha Dasgupta is the Frank Ramsey Professor of Economics at the University of Cambridge, Chairman of the Faculty of Economics and Politics and Fellow of St. John’s

College, Cambridge. His latest book is *Human Well-Being and the Natural Environment* (2001).

Raymond Geuss is Reader in Philosophy at Cambridge, and author of *The Idea of a Critical Theory* (1981), *History and Illusion in Politics* (2001) and *Public Goods, Private Goods* (2001).

Andrew Kuper is a member of the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences and Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. He was the 1999–2000 visiting Henry Fellow at Harvard. His widely cited ‘Rawlsian Global Justice’ appeared in *Political Theory* (October 2000).

Melissa Lane is University Lecturer in History at Cambridge, specialising in ancient and modern political thought, and a Fellow of King’s College. Her work includes *Plato’s Progeny: How Socrates and Plato Still Captivate the Modern Mind* (Duckworth, 2001) and *Method and Politics in Plato’s Statesman* (Cambridge, 1998).

Peter Laslett is a Senior Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and founding editor of *Philosophy, Politics & Society*, published periodically since 1956. He is coeditor of, most recently, *Ageing in the Past*.

Onora O’Neill is Principal of Newnham College, Cambridge, and was recently appointed a Life Peer in the House of Lords. Her most recent books include *Bounds of Justice* (2000), *Towards Justice and Virtue* (1996), and *Constructions of Reason* (1989).

W. G. Runciman is a Senior Research Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, and President of the British Academy. He is the author of the multi-volume *A Treatise on Social Theory*.

Quentin Skinner is the Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Cambridge. His most recent books are *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (1996) and *Liberty Before Liberalism* (1998).