Political Theory and Social Policy

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Preface

As individuals we stand in many and diverse relationships to one another. We bargain and we contract; we give or we receive orders; we are variously manager, supervisor, unionist, colleague, controller, worker, hireling, labourer, neighbour and citizen; in these roles we request, deny, cajole, entice, implore, excuse, explain or thank one another. To some other persons we stand in a special relationship like that of daughter, son, brother, sister, mother, father, friend or lover. Throughout these diverse relationships it is possible to ask one question: in what form of political community can we as individuals approach one another as free and autonomous persons?

I take this to be the central question with which the western tradition of political theory confronts us. Nor is the question merely theoretical. The political movements of liberalism and socialism have both been preoccupied with the problem of how human autonomy could develop in modern political and social conditions. For us (by which I mean those ordinary citizens of liberal democracies with only limited access to the corridors of power, who will, I suppose, constitute the bulk of those who read this book) these conditions are those of the welfare state. For us the question is: what does the welfare state contribute to the development of human autonomy?

This central problem of political evaluation has been answered in different ways. Some have seen the mechanisms of a redistributive tax-transfer scheme and the state supply of education and health services as steps down the road to serfdom. Others have seen the welfare state as providing a set of institutions through which individuals can realise the positive freedom that comes with identi-

fyiing individual interest and the public interest. Yet others have seen the economic security provided by the welfare state as a necessary condition for the full enjoyment of the traditional civil and political liberties. And again others have seen the principle of satisfying needs, on which the welfare state supposedly rests, as pre-figuring a form of social organisation in which persons are freed from the constraints of private property.

In what follows I have tried to offer an account of the relation between the welfare state and individual autonomy, and to show how the value of autonomy is connected with other values like justice, welfare and democracy. I begin by offering an account of normative political theory which I see as the enterprise of constructing a set of principles capable of justifying some forms of political arrangements relative to others. I then propose an account of what it means to say that a political arrangement is good for persons, and in the subsequent chapter give my understanding of the place of autonomy in the scheme of human goods. Chapter 4 explores the institutional question of what arrangements might secure individual autonomy; the claim I make is that a reform of income maintenance and educational programmes, with which we are already familiar in the welfare state, is sufficient to secure a minimally adequate level of autonomy. However, there are welfare considerations above the minimum, and Chapters 5 and 6 are taken up with the question of the principles upon which that welfare should be distributed, and a discussion of the fact that much current welfare state activity takes the form of in-kind programmes. The next chapter provides an account of rights that is intended to show how the concept of a right, so extensively used in popular discussions of politics and social policy, can be understood in a fashion consistent with the earlier theory I developed. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss specific problems in the functioning of resource-allocating mechanisms in the welfare state. The final chapter proposes a set of principles by which democratic responsibility for decision-making in the welfare state can be allocated.

Even if the argument were persuasive at each step it would not by itself settle the question of how we should evaluate any particular welfare state. A normative political theory provides a framework in which we can organise our thoughts; it does not provide a battery of instant diagnostic checks by application of which we can pass judgement on the health of the body politic and declare it fit or unfit.

What, then, is the point of constructing such a theory? Why should we try to arrange our thoughts into general and coherent principles? One reason, of course, is simply to satisfy our intellectual curiosity and to exercise our minds on problems that have vexed those with vastly more capabilities than we have. Passion for the intellectual problems that politics raises is no more to be deprecated than any other sort of passion. There is, however, a more practical answer. We have to share a political community with those with whom we have our varied social relationships. Our relationship with most of our co-citizens is mediated through the state, with its power to allocate income, wealth, status, opportunities, burdens, benefits, rights, obligations, and even life and death. Unless we can explain to others how and why we think the state's powers can be used in some ways and not in others, we do not have a reciprocal political relationship with our co-citizens. We confront them merely with the brute force of power or the haphazard contingency of circumstance. To fit our particular opinions into a broader theory is to hold a political position, such that we can explain the grounds of our actions and judgement to those of our co-citizens who choose to question us. Perhaps one can lead a happy life if one is never confronted by the test of having to justify one's political stance and one's position in the world; but it is doubtful whether it could ever be a valuable life; or, at least, so the political theorist whom I'm imagining supposes.

University of York
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To Jane