

Five Questions on Political Philosophy

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1. Why were you initially drawn to political philosophy?

When I was 11, I started reading many history books. By the time I was 14, I had decided, possibly as a consequence, that I would go into politics, and hence needed to study law. At 16, however, after having read Emmanuel Mounier's *Introduction aux existentialismes*, I got engrossed in Nietzsche. My earlier convictions were shattered — about what politics should aim at, indeed about what mattered in life. I itch-hiked to Sils-Maria, to Rapallo, to Portofino, some of Nietzsche's fetish destinations. But it did not help much. When the time came to go to university, I decided to play safe and did several degrees at the same time, but philosophy was central. As Kafka put it in his *Forschungen eines Hundes*, which I read and reread at the time, the priority was "to sort out the ultimate ends". Philosophy was supposed to help. And it did.

Once "ultimate ends" were sorted out as much and as little as I thought was possible, my intention was to return eventually to the political questions in which my philosophical interests originated. But before going into political philosophy, I felt a substantial detour was in order, with two main components: philosophy of science and economic theory. After having briefly believed, under French post-68 influence, that Louis Althusser was the next-plus-ultra of philosophical rigor, I was easily persuaded by my Louvain supervisor, Jean Ladrière, that the analytical tradition was a better place to turn to for what I was looking for. My two undergraduate theses were devoted, respectively, to the philosophical foundations of mathematical statistics and to the formal structure of a variety of theoretical models used in the social sciences. My Oxford DPhil thesis, which took off from my Louvain doctoral dissertation on functional explanation and became my first book, was devoted to evolutionary explanation in the social sciences. Along the road, especially during the three semesters I spent at Bielefeld and at Berkeley, I devoted much time to economic theory, neo-classical, Keynesian and Marxian alike.

By the time I returned to Belgium in 1980, the detour was over. I finally read Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, which I had discovered and bought six years earlier when first arriving in Oxford as a graduate student but not read beyond the first page. I then organized, with Jean Ladrière, what was probably the first French-language seminar about contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy and edited the first French-language book about Rawls. Although I found Nozick's *Anarchy, State and Utopia* and Roemer's *General Theory of Exploitation and Class* more exciting, I

soon realized that Rawls's theory had provided me with a base camp which I was unlikely to ever leave.

2. What do you consider your own most important contribution(s) to political philosophy, and why?

One thing I think I have done — at least this is how I understand now what I did — is propose an alternative framework for formulating a liberal-egalitarian conception of distributive justice. The most common framework, shared, among others, by Ronald Dworkin and Amartya Sen, makes distributive justice a matter of correcting unfair inequalities in *endowments*. In Rawls's framework, distributive justice is a matter of access to *social positions* and of expectations of social and economic advantages associated with these positions. In the framework I proposed in my *Real Freedom for All* (OUP 1995), distributive justice is a matter of fair distributions of the *gifts* we receive very unequally in the course of our lives, most of them, under contemporary conditions, through the jobs we occupy. Framing distributive justice in this third way naturally generates a prima facie case for an unconditional basic income. Each of the three frameworks relies on a stylized picture of the world which has advantages and drawbacks. The third one, I believe is the most appropriate one for the world into which we are moving.

Another thing I have been trying to do is provide a systematic treatment of the issues of justice that arise from linguistic diversity. The spreading of a world-wide lingua franca is consistent with justice as fair cooperation, and called for by justice as equal opportunity. Yet the diversity of native languages must be defended, not because, all things considered, it can be relied upon to serve the general interest, let alone because it may constitute a value in itself. If linguistic diversity is to be defended, essentially through a firm implementation of a linguistic territoriality principle, it can only be as a by-product of what is required by justice as equal dignity. So, at least, I am trying to argue in a book in progress under the title *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World*.

3. What is the proper role of political philosophy in relation to political action? Can there ever be a fruitful relation between political philosophy and political practice?

Yes, I believe in the possibility and importance of such a fruitful relation. Among people who are politically active, whether in a partisan or non-partisan mode, among civil servants, among journalists, among students, and in the educated public at large there is, in my experience, a strong need and explicit demand for a discourse that combines a well-informed synthetic interpretation of what is happening in our societies and in our world with an articulate formulation of the principles that should guide us in assessing alternative feasible options for the future.

This is of course a big job. Philosophers cannot hope to accomplish it by constructing far-fetched objections and counter-objections to each other's arguments in the well-insulated rooms of their ivory towers. Doing it properly requires that scholars whose core business is to reflect critically on normative propositions and arguments should interact intensively with demographers and geographers, economists and sociologists, political scientists and lawyers, even biologists and climatologists, in order to understand interdependencies and assess feasibilities and thereby offer a robust interpretation of the present and the past and a vision of the future that stands a chance of not being too naive.

Doing the job properly also requires from political philosophers that they should use a language that can be understood by the audience addressed. This means using plenty of examples drawn from real life — having a “real life” oneself makes them easier to find and more effective to use. It means unfolding philosophical puzzles as the logical destination of trips which have actual debates as their point of departure. It means avoiding all jargon that could not be clearly explained to one's grandmother. It means taking the trouble and the risk of spelling out, be it conjecturally or illustratively, the policy implications of the principles under discussion. It means having both the modesty to stress that political philosophy will not offer political actors a ready-made optimal policy-package and the boldness to claim that it will offer crucial guidance for some of the most difficult choices.

My feeling is that there is a growing demand for political philosophy so practiced — by no means the exclusive preserve of professional political philosophers. Indeed, political philosophy so practiced must beware of not becoming too successful. This fear was on my mind, for example, when in January 2004, in Brasilia's presidential palace, I had to publicly give my philosophical blessing to Brazil's official adoption, unprecedented at a national level, of a universal basic income proposal, just a few minutes before President Lula signed it into law.

4. What do you consider the most neglected topics and/or contributions in late 20th century political philosophy, or in related philosophical disciplines?

Up to the very end of the 20th century, the bulk of political philosophy was conducted with reference to "a society". It took for granted that the nation, the state, the country, constituted the appropriate level. Political philosophy, today, needs to be conceived and practiced in the first instance at the global level.

True, most topics relevant at the domestic level are also relevant at the global level and conversely. But some will become far more salient as political philosophy shifts its focus from the domestic to the global level. Migration and language issues are among them and are for this reason in my view, relative to their emerging importance, among the "most neglected topics" of late 20th century political philosophy.

5. What are the most important unsolved questions in political philosophy and what are the prospects for progress?

I find it hard to talk about "unsolved problems in political philosophy", but I have no difficulty identifying questions which I see as serious problems in my own effort to reach reflective equilibrium.

One of them, perhaps the most serious one, is how to combine a notion of justice as equality of opportunity (whether framed in the language of endowments, social positions or gifts) with a notion of justice as equal dignity. Could one not best be understood as a dimension or precondition of the other? If they need to be kept distinct, which should yield to the other if and when they clash? Maybe other people — including Rawls through the role he ascribes to the social bases of self-respect — have solved these problems to their own satisfaction. I have not solved them to mine. Can anyone help?