

Chapter Eleven

HOW TO DO POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

1. PEOPLE LIKE ME, who have been trying to do philosophy for more than forty years, do in due course learn, if they're lucky, *how* to do what they've been *trying* to do: that is, they do learn how to do philosophy. But although I've learned how to do philosophy, nobody ever told me how to do it, and, so far as I would guess, nobody will have told you how to do it, or is likely to tell you how to do it in the future. The *most* charitable explanation of that fact, the fact, that is, that nobody tells philosophy students how to do philosophy, is that it is impossible to *explain* to anybody how philosophy is to be done. The only way to teach people how to do it is by letting them watch, and listen, and imitate. The *least* charitable explanation of the self-same fact, the fact that we don't teach you how to do philosophy, is that those of us who have learned how to do it struggled so hard to get where we *now* are that we're now selfishly reluctant to give you some of the fruit of our struggle for free: we think you, too, should suffer. Probably there's some truth in each explanation.

2. But however all that may be, let me now give you some tips about how to do philosophy, in no particular order. After I've given these preliminary tips about how to do philosophy in general, I'll turn to some tips about political philosophy in particular.

3. My first piece of advice is that you should try to be as clear as possible about exactly what you *think* you're achieving when you present an argument. To be more precise: when you present an argument (now see Figure 1), try to be as clear as possible whether you think the argument goes against something your opponent holds, and only in *that* way supports your own position (if you have one), or, instead, whether you think the argument supports your *own* position, without going against that of your opponent (if you have one), except in *that way*, that is, by way of supporting a position that rivals hers (see the difference between the rows in Figure 1). Also, try to be clear about how *decisive* you think the argument in question is, that is, and if it is an argument going against

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	Decisively	Nondecisively
Supports my position	Proves	Doesn't Prove
Attacks her position	Refutes	Doesn't Refute

Fig. 1. Two-by-two matrix that classifies considerations or arguments

your opponent, whether it *refutes* her position, or *merely challenges* it, or displays a weakness in it. And, analogously, try to be clear whether a consideration that in your opinion favors your own position *merely favors* that position of yours or decisively *establishes* it. (See the difference between the columns in Figure 1.) So we've now got a fourfold classification of types of argument in philosophy, or, for that matter, a classification of types of argument in philosophy and in everything else.

4. Note that I said *try* to be clear about which box contains your argument: not—be clear. If I'd said the latter, then, if you thought you were not quite clear about some matter, but that you could *try* to be, then, if I'd said *be* clear, and you wanted to follow my instruction, you might not *try* to be clear, for fear of violating the instruction to *be* clear. I am not saying that clarity is a necessary condition of anything worthwhile in philosophy. Philosophy is a very hard subject, so hard that it can be very hard to be clear about what I've suggested you *try* to be clear about, that is, *exactly* what you're doing, *exactly* what the force of a consideration that occurs to you is. Sometimes one senses that a consideration has *some* sort of bearing on a controversy, without knowing either to which row or to which column it belongs, and it is nevertheless worthwhile bringing the consideration forward, if only because it may provoke a discussion that leads to a clearer idea of the polemical significance of the consideration, that is, into which box(es) in our matrix it falls. One should aspire to clarity, but one should not avoid possible insight for the sake of avoiding unclarity. A bad way never to make a mistake is to shut up and say nothing.

5. Another tip: When you're doing philosophy, don't be afraid to sound dumb, or simpleminded. If, for example, what somebody says sounds to you so obviously mistaken that you conclude that you must be missing something, keep alive in your mind the alternative conclusion, which is that *they* are missing something, or seeing something that isn't there, even if they are the teacher. Some of the most successful philosophical interventions that I've witnessed have been a matter of pointing out that the emperor's not wearing any clothes. This is a subject in which seasoned

professionals can make huge mistakes, equivalent in size to a chemist forgetting that molecules consist of atoms—which is not, of course, a mistake that any chemist would ever make.

6. Let me now turn to political philosophy, and, in particular, to that form of political philosophy which is an argument about principles, that is, general statements about right and wrong. Here my first tip is that when we discuss principles, as we so often do in political philosophy, and we assess their implications, then there are three questions that we should not confuse with one another, questions that are regularly confused with one another even by advanced practitioners, advanced practitioners such as . . . I can't read what I've written here. There are three questions in political philosophy that are in fact distinct but that are not distinguished as often as they should be, to the detriment of both clarity of statement and rigor of argument within our discipline. The three distinct questions are: (i) What is justice?;¹ (ii) What should the state do?; and (iii) Which social states of affairs ought to be brought about?² Some simply confuse two or more of those *questions* with each other. Others see that the *questions* are distinct but they take for granted that the answers to some pair of them, or to all three of them, are identical. They take for granted, for example, that it is constitutive of the normative status of the state that its business is to promote justice.

Let me make some pair-wise contrasts across the three questions. First, question (i) is not the same question as question (ii), if only because not everything that the state should do is something it should do in the service of justice, or, at least, and this weaker claim suffices to establish the distinction between questions (i) and (ii), the very *concept* of justice is not the concept of what the state should do. Conversely, not all justice is to be achieved by the state: or, if you prefer, the very concept of justice does not ensure that all justice is to be achieved by the state. Question (ii) is not, moreover, the same question as question (iii), if only because question (ii) places a restriction, and question (iii) does not, on the agency whereby whatever is to be brought about is to be brought about. And finally question (iii) is not the same question as question (i), since justice is not the only reason why it might be right to bring about this social state of affairs rather than that one. Social states of affairs can have, and lack, virtues other than that of justice.

¹That is: what are the correct principles of justice—not: explain the *concept* of justice, which is a *further question*, to which my discussion of questions (i), (ii), and (iii) is a contribution.

²One might add question (iv): Which social states of affairs are better than others, whether or not they should be brought about? But distinguishing (iii) from (iv) would import too much complication into our discussion.

Consider, for example, the view associated especially with Harry Frankfurt, but also, to a degree, with Joseph Raz, which says that equality is a false ideal and that what really matters is that everyone should have *enough*.³ According to this view, many who are drawn to the ideal of equality are drawn to it because they confuse the false desideratum of equality with the true desideratum of sufficiency. The sufficiency view disparages equality and says that what matters is not that people be equal, but that everyone have *enough*. Enough for what?—well, there is some obscurity here, but it doesn't matter for my present purposes. Never mind for *what* the relevant enough is supposed to be enough. My present complaint is not about *that* vagueness but about this one: are we to take the Frankfurt sufficiency thesis as answering question (i), and therefore as saying that economic *justice* is complete if everyone is assured a decent, and possibly quite high, minimum; or is it an answer to question (ii) which says that the responsibility of the *state* in economic justice ends when everyone has enough; or is it, once again, a slightly different answer to question (ii), one which says, differently, that the responsibility of the state ends with ensuring universal sufficiency, whatever *justice* in particular may or may not be; or is the Frankfurt proposal an answer to question (iii), which asks what distributional states of affairs are normatively *preferable* to each other, an answer which says that certain minima are *all* that count, and that equality is not even normatively *preferable* to inequality?

What justice is, what the state should do, and how social states rank normatively, are, I say, distinct questions, and it is controversial what the relationships among the answers to those questions are. Some would say that the state's sole business is justice, and others might say that its sole business is something that they consider to be the sufficiency *part* of justice, and so on. People proceed as though these distinctions don't have to be made when they counterpose one principle to another without specifying in which of the three contexts that I have distinguished they are setting the competition between competing principles. Great masses of literature ranging from the discussion of luck egalitarianism across to the trolley problem fail to make the needed distinctions at pertinent points.

Take another example, the so-called leveling-down objection to egalitarianism. The leveling-down objection says that it is a mistake to favor equality, because favoring equality commits you to leveling down when the alternative to equality is a Pareto-superior inequality.

The objection is characteristically stated as flatly as that, with no specification of who *you* are or of any wider frame in which the question is

³[See Frankfurt, "Equality as a Moral Ideal," and Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, chapter 9.—Ed.]

	Equal Distribution	Unequal Distribution
A has	5	8
B has	5	6

Fig. 2. The Leveling-Down Objection

set. But it makes a difference whether we are in question (i)-territory or in question (ii)-territory or in question (iii)-territory here. For while it might well be grotesque for the *state* to mandate a leveling down in circumstances where the equal 5/5 distribution and the unequal 8/6 distribution in Figure 2 exhaust the feasible set, whereas, that is, it may be grotesque for the *state* to make everybody worse off, it does not follow that there is no *injustice* in the 8/6 inequality, and, partly for that reason, it does not follow that no one should seek to bring the 5/5 world about.

Let me try to give some color of plausibility to those judgments. Imagine a peaceful anarchy, a state of nature with no state, in which manna falls from heaven and gets shared equally because the sharers think that's the right way to deal with manna from heaven.⁴ Now suppose that an extra piece of irremovable and unredistributable but destructible manna falls on Jane's plot. Jane says: "Like, I don't want this extra manna, I'm going to make a big bonfire with it to which you're all invited, because it's not fair, it really *sucks*, for me to have more than you guys do." If you think Jane is being *merely* foolish, then you might well claim that the leveling-down objection applies not only against the proposal that the state should *enforce* equality but also against the claim that *justice* favors equality. But I for one would not think that Jane is being foolish. I would think that she is simply a remarkably just person, and I think we should commend her for being one, and perhaps reward her with the extra manna. Or even if we should not precisely *reward* her with the extra manna (since that *might* contradict the very principle of equality upon which *she* acted!), we might nevertheless let her have it. Justice can be mean and spiteful, but it's still justice even then: we shouldn't confuse different virtues. Portia was careful not to combine different virtues when she recommended that mercy season justice.⁵

In the foregoing scenario, Jane doesn't enjoy her initial surplus at anybody's expense, and that's why many think it would be foolish for her to

⁴Nozick himself said that equality might be the right distribution for manna from heaven, although he signally and consequentially failed to observe that the raw resources of the planet Earth *are* manna from heaven.

⁵[This example appears, with a bit of the color removed, in Cohen's *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, pp. 317–18.—Ed.]

throw it away. Note, further, that if she *does* throw it away, that will *also* not be at anybody else's expense.

Consider, now, a different example in which extra manna lands on everybody's plot, but 10 units of it on Jane's and only 5 on the plot of each other person. And suppose, further, that only Jane can do anything with respect to whether the manna stays or not, and that if she destroys her own, then everybody else's manna goes too.⁶

In this new example, Jane's having the surplus is once again at nobody's expense, but if she throws it away that *will* be at the expense of others. Now, nobody would deny that, in the *original* example, where she gets extra and nobody else does, Jane has the right to throw her surplus away, and I say that if she *does* throw it away, in that example, then she shows an admirable devotion to justice. But one may question whether she has the right to throw her surplus away in the second scenario, on the ground that Jane would thereby also rob others of something that *they* enjoy at nobody else's expense. Partly for that reason, I would say that if Jane does throw hers away in the second example, then she shows not an admirable but a fanatical devotion to justice. (Or, perhaps, her devotion to justice is admirable in that she is prepared to sacrifice her own interests to it but also fanatical in that she is prepared to sacrifice the interests of others to it.) People who don't agree with me may think that she is fanatical in both cases. But my own admirability/fanaticism judgments are, in my view, quite consistent with my judgment that the second and strongly Pareto-improving distribution is unfair.

Here is a further illustration. Among the reasons that Ronald Dworkin gives for opposing equality of welfare is that if we seek to make welfare as equal as possible then we must reserve an enormous quantity of resources for very handicapped people, such a large quantity of resources that servicing the needs of handicapped people might then exhaust the state's budget.⁷ But this objection to equality of welfare, considered not as a policy but as a specification of the content of distributive justice, falsely supposes that it is a condition of justice that it should be able to be implemented through a reasonable state rule of regulation: there is, in that argument, a conflation of question (i) with question (ii).

It is pertinent to commend, here, a breathtakingly simple phrase that Derek Parfit has introduced for marking a distinction that is now, to the general profit, made more often in discussions about principles than it was before Derek introduced his felicitous phrase. And that is the distinction between desiderata of principle that are laid down as manda-

⁶This example is due to Valentina Urbanek.

⁷[See Dworkin, "Equality of Welfare," pp. 242–43, and "Equality of Resources," pp. 299–300.—Ed.]

tory and desiderata of principle that are overrideable but whose presence nevertheless makes a state of affairs, in Parfit's great phrase for that, "in one way better."⁸ The challenge that the leveling-down objection presents against equality is that egalitarian principles mandate that in some circumstances some people should lose even if nobody gains. Yet the egalitarian can say that she would not level down, because equality isn't everything, but nevertheless maintain that equality, as such, is in one way better than its absence: something of value is lost, because there is an *unfairness*, and therefore a kind of injustice, when some have more than others through no relevant fault or choice of anyone. The leveling-down objection is not thereby eliminated, for some would deny that a world in which everyone is blind is in *any* way better than one in which some, but not all, can see. Some who would admire Jane for destroying her extra manna would think her a mere fool if she plucked her eyes out because others could not see. But, however that may be, it is important that those who think that the all-blind world is *in one way* better are not thereby committed to plucking out the eyes of the sighted in a world where some are blind and some are not.

The threefold distinction that I have latterly labored, between what the state should do, what justice is, and what's preferable to what, intersects with the two-by-two matrix introduced in Figure 1 above, and thereby things become *very* complicated: we now have a classificatory matrix with twelve cells in it. I think that's a big reason why people talk past one another in political philosophy. Often, people argue past one another because they don't realize that they're speaking within different cells of the matrix.

Yet, as before, it would be a mistake to be silent about a consideration that you believe bears upon competing principles unless you are absolutely *sure* which contest is in question (about justice, or about what the state should do, or about which social state is preferable), nor, *a fortiori*, need you be certain to which of the twelve cells your contribution belongs in order for that contribution to be worthwhile.

7. *Disquisition on obviousness.* Now, some remarks about obviousness. Some people are poor philosophers because, although they might be clever in other ways, they are wholly unable to conceive how people who disagree with them could see things differently from how they themselves see them. For many years I had a colleague who would greet unusual claims in undergraduate essays with the words "we *know* that's false" (as opposed to, for example, "Oh, that's an unusual thing to think. Why do you *think* it?"). His propensity to aggressive intellectual blindness

⁸[See sections V and XII of Parfit's *Equality or Priority?*—Ed.]

in the course of his pedagogy was matched by published work that was similarly blinkered.

(To be sure, there are highly inspired philosophers, of whom Ludwig Wittgenstein was perhaps one, who are blinded to alternative possibilities by their own deep insights.⁹ If you're at that white-hot level, the present admonition may not apply.)

But why is it so important to understand the possibility of another point of view in philosophy, by contrast with physics, or, perhaps, literary theory? It is because so many philosophical problems are problems only because they arise on the ground of clashes of radically opposed points of view. And the significance and interest of at least many philosophical claims are discerned with particular clarity within a field of apparently inconsistent propositions among which we must choose, where the relevant claim is one contestable option.

Very often in philosophy, moreover, each of the partisans on the opposite sides of a question not only think those on the other side wrong, but think them *obviously* wrong. And each set of partisans, we can infer, is mistaken, because if the other point of view were *obviously* wrong, then it wouldn't have been occupied, as it in fact is, by many deeply reflective people, after a couple of thousand years of widespread reflection. Let me illustrate:

The problem of the freedom of the will

- (1) We often have a real choice.
- (2) All our behavior is scientifically explainable.
- (3) If all our behavior is scientifically explainable, then we never have a real choice.

Not all of (1)–(3) can be true. But anyone who does not experience the strong pull of each is *pro tanto* not suited to philosophy.

Sometimes one simply has to settle for one obviousness against another. E.g., van Inwagen, finding it less hard to affirm the mystery of contra-causal freedom than the counterintuitivity of us lacking real choice.¹⁰

In really deep philosophical problems there are competing apparent obviousnesses. It seems obvious that we are not wrong when we describe the world commonsensically, yet it seems obvious that physics contradicts common sense. In less deep philosophical problems the clash is of plausibilities. I'll lay out some examples here. I won't try to say which propositions have a redolence of obviousness, as opposed to of mere plausibility. I start with a polyad which spells out the example to which I have already made reference.

⁹I owe this point to Alan Ryan.

¹⁰[See van Inwagen, *An Essay on Free Will*.—Ed.]

The leveling-down objection to egalitarianism

- (1) Equality requires leveling down, when leveling up is impossible.
- (2) Nobody benefits from leveling down (or, more generally, from relations between their own good and that of others).
- (3) Something that benefits no one is in no way good.
- (4) Equality is (at least in one way) good.

Temkin rejects (3),¹¹ and so do I. Some—for example, Thomas Christiano and Ingmar Persson—reject (1): they believe that a proper understanding of the nature of the case for equality excludes leveling down.¹² I believe that John Broome rejects (2), at least in its general form, because he speaks of an “individual good” which “depends on the relation between one person’s position and other people’s.”¹³ Many reject (4), as is shown by the fact that many press the leveling-down objection against egalitarianism.

The perfectionism controversy

- (1) The state should ensure that people have good lives.
- (2) The state should be neutral. It should not use as a consideration in favor of a policy that some lives are better than others.
- (3) A state which is neutral cannot ensure that people have good lives.

Many antiperfectionist liberals challenge (1). So-called perfectionists challenge (2): how could it not favor a policy that it makes people’s lives better? Dworkin’s Tanner Lectures challenge (3).¹⁴ In his view, the neutral policy *does* make people’s lives better.

The sufficiency controversy

- (1) No one who has enough has a right to complain about her share.
- (2) Among all who have enough, some may have more than others.
- (3) If some have more than others for no good reason, then those who have less have a right to complain.

Frankfurt, Roger Crisp, and Raz reject (3). Paula Casal rejects (1).¹⁵

The luck egalitarianism controversy

- (1) It is unjust if some have more than others through no fault or choice of either those who have more or those who have less.

¹¹ [See Temkin, “Equality, Priority, and the Levelling-Down Objection.”—Ed.]

¹² [See Christiano, “A Foundation for Egalitarianism,” and Persson, “Why Levelling Down Could Be Worse.”—Ed.]

¹³ *Weighing Goods*, p. 181.

¹⁴ [See Dworkin’s “Equality and the Good Life,” in his *Sovereign Virtue*.—Ed.]

¹⁵ [See Frankfurt, “Equality as a Moral Ideal”; Crisp, “Egalitarianism and Compassion”; Raz, *The Morality of Freedom*, chapter 9; and Casal, “Why Sufficiency Is Not Enough.”—Ed.]

- (2) The implementation of principles of justice should lead to a morally attractive society.
- (3) The implementation of the principle formulated in (1) would lead to a morally repugnant society.

Elizabeth Anderson rejects (1).¹⁶ Cohen rejects (2).¹⁷ *Perhaps* Richard Arneson rejects (3)—at the time of composition of this text, I haven't yet had the opportunity to check that out.¹⁸

The basic structure controversy

- (1) Justice is the state's business only.
- (2) Justice is concerned with the activities that shape people's lives.
- (3) Individual choices, in aggregate, extensively shape people's lives.

Cohen and Liam Murphy reject (1). Rawls in effect rejected (3): he did not, at any rate, observe its truth. Andrew Williams rejects (2). (I don't affirm (2) in the writings in which I reject (1)).¹⁹

Are we obliged to help starving people?

Here are three related inconsistent polyads, which concern helping the starving:

Set A

- (1) If a dying stranger is at your door, you have to save her, even if the sacrifice you thereby make is pretty big.
- (2) *Either* (a) nearness makes no moral difference, *or* (b) whether I'm obliged to help someone depends on my capacity to help, not on his capacity to communicate with me.
- (3) There are millions of dying strangers that you could help.
- (4) You have a right to a good life.
- (5) As it happens, you are not made like Mother Teresa, and you therefore can't have a good life if you're always helping strangers.

Set B

- (1) We are not morally disgusting.
- (2) Letting people die is morally disgusting.
- (3) We regularly let people die.

¹⁶[See Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?"—Ed.]

¹⁷[See Section 2 of Chapter 1 of this volume and chapter 7 of *Rescuing Justice and Equality*.—Ed.]

¹⁸[Arneson reports in private correspondence that he would not reject (3).—Ed.]

¹⁹[See Cohen, chapter 3 of *Rescuing Justice and Equality*; Murphy, "Institutions and the Demands of Justice"; and Williams, "Incentives, Inequality, and Publicity."—Ed.]

Set C

- (1) I think I ought to help the starving more than I do.
- (2) If you really think you ought to do something that you don't do, then you feel guilty about that.
- (3) I don't feel (particularly) guilty about not helping the starving more than I do.²⁰

²⁰With thanks to Alan Ryan for excellent criticisms of a forerunner draft.