

MY ENGAGEMENT WITH SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THEORY

Over the past decade¹ I have found myself increasingly concerned with social and political problems and more and more immersed in the theoretical issues raised thereby. In large part this has arisen from environmental involvement, especially on forestry and nuclear matters, and the realisation that the basic problems mostly lay with social and political arrangements.² It thus became important to try to determine what those really were, and how they might be changed, what the alternatives were.

But in part also my legitimate intellectual movement from logic and metaphysics³ to a wider perspective which includes social and political philosophy as major area of concern has come about as a result of reflection on the unsatisfactory and fragmented state of philosophy and its surrounds. It became increasingly hard (in particular for someone trained in analytic philosophy with a heavy Oxbridge orientation) to avoid noting, especially when confronted with wider philosophical and social issues, that one's philosophical education and

¹In 1972 I presented and circulated a paper, 'Is there a need for a new, and environmental ethic?' which played an influential part in the rapid growth of environmental philosophy in New Zealand and Australia (on the latter see D. Mannison and M. McRobbie in Environmental Philosophy). Such an excursion into ethics was not without precedent. My research work in fact began in ethical theory, with a thesis on moral scepticism, and I thought about and wrote on deontic problems in the sixties.

²The point is explained in detail in work cited in the accompanying curriculum vitae (where all otherwise unreferenced work is listed). In the case of forestry see for example 'Destructive forestry in Australia and Melanesia' and 'World rainforest destruction - the social factors'; as to nuclear see 'Nuclear power - some ethical and social dimensions' and 'The ethics of nuclear war, and political fall-out'; and for the general argument see 'Social theories, self management and environmental problems'.

³This does not mean that I have entirely abandoned these areas. Logic is, I believe (with Anderson, and so with the mainstream of Australia's most significant philosophical movement), the central part of philosophy, and many conceptual problems in applied philosophy will continue to require return to logical ground in order to find satisfactory solutions. A sound training in logical theory is essential for deeper solutions for some of these problems.

I should add that I never have been a very pure logician. I moved into logic in order to try to solve severe conceptual problems first in the philosophy of science and then in metaphysics. Now that these problems are largely solved (to my satisfaction at any rate) I can presumably move on to other things.

practice offered only a somewhat limited set of tools and techniques for tackling wider philosophical concerns and, worse, but few instruction as to how to apply these analytic techniques more widely. Nor had the inadequacy of such an education and the sort of philosophy to which it led gone unremarked.

It was charged that philosophy had abdicated several of its proper responsibilities - for example, to organise knowledge into some more coherent whole or world-view, to elaborate a social theory and influence social criticism, even to afford intellectual leadership - and had become excessively analytic and specialised, and therewith narrow and sterile (concerned, e.g., merely with linguistic niceties, conservative commonsense and/or scholastic logic-chopping). It was charged that academic philosophy not only had become excessively timid and accordingly lost intellectual excitement and appeal, but also had lost relevance to and touch with the important intellectual issues of the times and had failed in the business of addressing a larger audience with philosophical interests. These charges, which have a solid foundation, did not come from within academic philosophy but were most evocatively made by people outside philosophy (though with some knowledge of it) or by those in the margins of academic, professionalised, philosophy. Thus Durrant, an outsider, has powerfully expressed a part of the charges:

... philosophy itself, which had once summoned all sciences to its aid in making a coherent image of the world and an alluring picture of the good, found its task of inordination too stupendous for its usage, ran away from ... [the] battlefronts of truth, and hid itself in recondite and narrow lanes, timidly secure from the issues and responsibilities of life.¹

Philosophy began to change in the Seventies, some philosophers naturally changing with it. We aimed to address a wider range of socially relevant topics - and also sometimes a wider audience - for example, to get beyond the

¹W. Durrant, The Story of Philosophy, Second edition, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1926, p.v. Durrant though (or perhaps because) a leading populariser of philosophy in North America, is not usually at all well regarded by academic philosophers.

sterile examples of previous texts on moral philosophy to live issues, from minor cases of promising and truth-telling to abortion and euthanasia, genetic engineering and the treatment of animals, violence and nuclear war. But the analytical methods used for the most part did not change, the widening of horizons in applied philosophy proceeded from a narrow and inadequate logical (argumentative) and metaphysical base. The applied expansion went with theoretical stagnation: mainstream theoretical philosophy sat in the doldrums.¹

Nor has the applied transformation gone far enough. Significant issues have been left to theologians and journalists.² And there has been insufficient effort by philosophers (even those addressing relevant issues) to integrate their work with that of other (social) sciences that shed light on the issues, to overcome discipline fragmentation by synthesis. For it was not merely that philosophy itself was fragmented and often irrelevant, it had also become largely isolated from other disciplines and had ceased to be properly informed by them - or to inform them.

This unsplendid isolation is particularly conspicuous in the case of political philosophy, which often proceeds in much the way it did in the 17th century, with little of the import it should be receiving from recent advances in social psychology and ethology and (to the extent that it is well-founded) sociobiology. More generally, the way in which areas have been isolated from one another, and ceased communicating, to the disadvantage to all, is a matter for serious concern. It is not merely that philosophy, for example, can be enriched by taking due account of the social sciences. The

¹This description derives from Passmore.

²Philosophers and other academics should not be led in these areas, but do the leading. One of the roles of the academic community - a role in which philosophy in Australia (much degenerated by too long an incestuous history) mostly fails - is to address a wider public than part of itself. Philosophers may justly complain that there is little competent public discussion of these issues where applied philosophy matters and no reputable intellectual leadership in Australia at present, but they have by and large done little to rectify the matter.

social sciences also can be improved, and much rubbish removed, by taking account of philosophical criticism.¹ Each impacts on the others, in ways that should be taken into account. Moreover the interplay of different parts is fruitful.² There is a richness to be generated if the interaction works well. And such interaction is required to pull much material into a more coherent whole.

Such sentiments on integrating areas and rendering work more informed and holistic have been expressed before. It is one thing expressing them, and another putting them into effect. The tasks involved are difficult. And putting them into effect is not of course a task for just one person, but for several. A start can however be made with interdisciplinary people who willingly cross discipline boundaries, because they need to, and see the need to; by people who are able to adopt the often special methods and procedures of other disciplines and combine them with those of their own. But a start can not in general be satisfactorily initiated just by administrative fiat. A good deal of evidence has now accumulated to show that an administrator cannot simply pull together a successful interdisciplinary research group by hiring people skilled in the different disciplines concerned and putting them in a common setting. Such groups can evolve however by individuals with wide-ranging concerns interesting other researchers or like-inclined people from other disciplines in overlapping or joint problems. And in setting up the conditions for such collaborative research to evolve, administrative inputs are important. It is, for example, an astute move to have a position linking several different departments³ attached to none of them but to a section that sits so-to-speak above them; for in this way the researcher has access to all the departments concerned but is confined to none.

¹New philosophies of nature call for much more than this, indeed for major theoretical reorientation of some social sciences. The point is elaborated in the concluding part of 'Human chauvinism and environmental ethics'.

²Nor will unified or coherent social sciences be arrived at without substantial philosophical imports.

³As the present post does. No doubt other political considerations have also influenced the move.

I think I can justifiably account myself an interdisciplinary person. Firstly, I have considerable experience in collaborative work, an advantage that philosophers, in contrast to experimental scientists, seldom enjoy. The claim is supported by my publication record. While that indicates the extent of my joint activity in research, it does not fully record cooperative activity in organising conferences and workshops, both in logic and in environmental philosophy, in helping found or reestablish organisations (the Australasian Association of Logic is the main example, but the local AAP is another), in establishing publications (e.g. the Environmental Philosophy Discussion Papers serve both Philosophy Departments) and so on.

More significantly, I can also fairly claim substantial experience in interdisciplinary work, as well as in other fields of philosophy. For example, I have worked not only in philosophy departments but in mathematics and in environmental studies programs.¹ Furthermore, my work in forestry, which is continuing, brought me into close touch with people from a broad spectrum of fields, not only forestry, but also economics, geography, demography, botany and zoology. The work, which is well-known locally and referred to in international textbooks, has for the most part been well received by people in those area, except forestry, and has been taken seriously by those who disagree with the often controversial positions developed. My more recent work on environmental problems has led me to communicate and interchange material with sociologists and political scientists in North American and England, and also with people in a variety of fields in Australian Colleges of Advanced Education. Naturally then, much of the resulting work reaches people in a range of fields. My work on environmental problems has also resulted in invitations to participate in conferences in a wide range of areas, on forestry (in several Australian

¹I declined invitations to work in interdisciplinary research groups in Washington and The Hague primarily because they would have kept me away from Australia too long and obliged me to endure northern winters.

states), on energy, on the environment (in New Guinea and USA). I have twice been invited to present papers at Australian Sociology conferences, but been unable to do so because of commitments abroad.

The basic forestry book The Fight for the Forests, and subsequent forestry and environmental papers, already included much that bears upon and is informed by social and political theory. A new book, tentatively entitled Forestry in Australia, now in preparation by a team of people drawn from a wide range of disciplines - which is intended to replace The Fight for the Forests, long out of print - will be even more closely involved with social and political theory. It includes much fuller analysis of social classes and power structures (and models of these) as well as, like earlier work, examination of elites, and types of inequality.

This should also begin to reveal how my work on apparently diverse areas is interrelated, and not a result of compartmentalisation. Most obviously, my work on forestry, which directly involves a range of environmental problems, in a very practical way, leads directly into areas of social and political theory. It is less obvious, but nonetheless a fact, that work on environmental problems, value theory and logic is not disconnected, but joined by several connecting ways. For example, relevant deontic logic has shown how the key moral matter of moral dilemmas and conflicts of value can be treated. The logic of obligation is important in rejecting arguments that there is a significant separate "morality" for nation states or for public representatives of these which exonerates them from normal responsibility. Differently, logic provides the basis of decision theory, which is important in structuring environmental problems. And so on, to look at some of the more straightforward connections.¹ There are larger connections. Social and political theory necessarily presupposes

¹Explanations of these connections are much expanded in "The logical basis of the social sciences".

a metaphysics, and this in turn a logical theory.¹ Philosophers of very different persuasions, for instance Hegel and Mill, have agreed about this.

Of course work in logic, such as that in probability theory and on statistical inference, sometimes speaks directly to other areas in the social sciences. My own work on universal semantics is of interest to linguists, and 'Universal semantics?' was abstracted in Sociological Abstracts, as have been several of my philosophical papers, on for example metaphysics, limits to knowledge and animal intentionality. Work on the recent history of logic and of philosophy of science in Australasia has led me into some sociological as well as historical investigations. Logical pursuits have also lead me into political science and economics. Because of my interest in applied logic I came to take over supervision of B. Embury's doctoral dissertation on voting theory, a thesis in the Department of Political Science. My interests also involved me in work with a post-doctoral fellow on preference and decision theory and social choice theory. Regretably no joint work issued from this enterprise, but I did publish some papers in the area, and emerged with further ideas for research jotted down: these ideas, mainly for further impossibility and limitative results in social theory, have yet to be followed through.

My present research in social and political theory has (like a conic section) double foci. One focus (F1) is a book tentatively entitled The Philosophic Reach of Environmental Problems and intended to supersede Environmental Philosophy in main respects, on the ethical, social and political dimensions of environmental problems.² The central problems yield a now rather familiar list: for instance, those of human and animal populations, disappearing species, vanishing rainforests and other habitats and ecosystems, treatment (and rights) of indigenous peoples, of animals and of plants, cities and

¹A substantial start in explaining these deeper connections is made in 'Social theories, self management and environment problems' and in Exploring Meinong's Jungle and Beyond, chapter 9, §12.

²Here environmental is used in the wide sense, of which the ecological is only a quite proper part.

neighbourhoods, landscape transformation or destruction, mining, pollution, nuclear and energy issues, and so on. The underlying problems have significant features in common and common social and political sources. Before the integrative task is tackled in detail however, an analytical approximative approach is being followed. Discussion papers on several of the topics listed are being researched or written, and discussion papers on others will follow, before the whole thing is pulled together.

The other focus (F2) is a book on what might be called New Age Social Organisation, investigating alternatives to prevailing social, economical and political arrangements. Major alternatives considered in detail include left-leaning and right-leaning anarchisms, which will involve a careful examination of the extent to which social arrangements and political organisations can be self-managed and self-regulating.¹

While it is ambitiously hoped that the investigation will not only result (ideally) in a more philosophically-adequate left-leaning anarchist theory than has so far been produced, that is only part of its purpose. Another very important part of the enterprise is to give some better understanding of the range of alternatives to present (monopolistic capitalist and state socialist) arrangements that there are and that could be tried. A further part is, by considering alternatives, to shed light on the prevailing systems (their structures, institutions, etc.), in particular to bring out more clearly their underlying assumptions,² the extent of their necessity, to give a better idea

¹In several respects the term 'anarchism' is unsatisfactory and will have eventually to be replaced, perhaps by a neologism, since no available term delineates the types of socio-political arrangements envisaged.

It should perhaps be remarked, in case it is thought that I have no academic background in political theory, that my university education did include courses and seminars in the area. Furthermore I have more recently acquired a good working knowledge of the anarchist literature, and am well advanced in the process of obtaining a grasp of organisation theory and the necessary parts of social psychology.

²Some of these assumptions are rejected or varied in an assessment of alternatives. Thus, as a much better idea of euclidean geometry was obtained with the elaboration of hyperbolic and Riemannian geometry, and similarly of arithmetic with the formulation of nonstandard arithmetics, so also a much better appreciation of mainstream social theory should be achieved by investigating nonstandard social theories and assumptions. This method of variation of assumptions is a fruitful one as regards many scientific theories.

of the values they write in, of their desirability or undesirability, and so on. Although my enagement has two main foci, naturally there are also other and smaller endeavours under way: the attached curriculum vitae gives some indication of these - but only some. For example, the trilogy of papers on the meaning of life, nihilism, and the ultimate existence question is to be arranged into a book which will probably also address such related issues as the quality of life.

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