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# Why Political Philosophy Matters

## Reading Brian Barry on Social Justice

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**Brian Barry** *Why Social Justice Matters*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005, 323 pp.

When in 1956 Peter Laslett announced that political philosophy was dead, his proclamation was received with a mixture of disbelief and resentment, but underlying concern. Since then, political philosophy has gone from strength to strength; indeed one could argue that this discipline has never been as vibrant as today. Yet, not all is well with political philosophy. As Brian Barry warns us, the discipline of political philosophy is running the risk of becoming the victim of its own success. As debates among professional political philosophers become increasingly sophisticated, the point of political philosophy becomes more obfuscated, lost in the thick fog of technicalities. In his most recent work, Barry aims to reverse this trend. *Why Social Justice Matters* is therefore not only an outstanding work on social justice, but also a powerful and indispensable reminder of the point of political philosophy.

### The Malaise within Contemporary Political Philosophy

Barry's *Why Social Justice Matters* is the culmination of an intellectual trajectory that started in the 1960s, when political philosophy was in the midst of its most severe crisis. In order to fully appreciate the significance of Barry's most recent tour de force, we must therefore go back 50 years, and assess the intellectual context within which his engagement with political philosophy began.

The story of the death of political philosophy in the 1950s has been told many times before.<sup>1</sup> As the story goes, political philosophy was proclaimed dead by Laslett when he wrote: 'For the moment, anyway, political philosophy is dead'.<sup>2</sup> Laslett blamed the philosophical tradition of logical positivism for this state of affairs, although in hindsight the role of logical positivism in bringing about the death of political philosophy has probably been overstated. Instead it is more accurate to say that logical positivism propelled utilitarianism to become the dominant paradigm in Anglo-American political philosophy after the 1950s and 1960s. What apparently killed political philosophy was therefore a cocktail of logical positivism mixed with utilitarianism; both ingredients were necessary, but neither of these two traditions could have done it on their own. As Brian Barry rightly argues, the revival

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of political philosophy depended on a decline in the appeal of utilitarianism.<sup>3</sup> This process of reinvigoration took hold in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Barry played a central role in breathing new life into political philosophy. His DPhil dissertation at Oxford, under the supervision of H.L.A. Hart, was the first incarnation of what later became his widely acclaimed *Political Argument*.<sup>4</sup> In this book Barry provides us with a most clear and innovative conceptual analysis of all the key concepts in moral and political philosophy, including justice, equity, equality, public interest, democracy, liberalism, freedom and natural rights. In a sense Barry goes through all the concepts that logical positivists had dismissed as nonsensical, and shows that they can be meaningful outside of a utilitarian paradigm. It is impossible to overstate the significance of the publication of *Political Argument* in 1965, as this book did more than any other work at the time to bring political philosophy back to life. As Philip Pettit rightly says: 'Barry's book is reasonably identified as marking the end of the long political silence of analytical philosophy'.<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to Laslett's predictions, all indicators would suggest that political philosophy today is in a good state of health. There is a myriad of philosophy journals specializing in moral and political philosophy, and political philosophy is taught in virtually every philosophy department around the world. In fact any suggestion that the discipline is dying, or even merely in crisis, is generally received with scorn and ridicule. And yet, an argument could be made that political philosophy today is suffering, being suffocated by its own success. At any rate, this seems to be the view of Brian Barry:

The problem today is the opposite of the one I diagnosed back in 1961. I occasionally have a nightmarish feeling that 'the literature' has taken off on an independent life and now carries on like the broomsticks bewitched by the sorcerer's apprentice.<sup>6</sup>

To fully understand Barry's alarming premonition, it might be instructive to draw a parallel between recent developments in political philosophy and analytical philosophy over the last 50 years. The overspecialized nature of analytical philosophy is bemoaned by a growing number of people in the field, including D.W. Hamlyn, and most recently Richard Rorty.<sup>7</sup> Even Scott Soames, in his authoritative two-volume, 900-page history of analytical philosophy in the 20th century, admits that analytical philosophy is done by specialists primarily for other specialists,<sup>8</sup> a truth that leads Rorty to speculate whether anglophone philosophy no longer has any relevance to anything else in the intellectual world, and to mourn the good old days when philosophers used to think that the point of their discipline was to attain a synoptic vision – to see how everything hangs together.

Like analytical philosophy, political philosophy has also witnessed a 'technical' turn, becoming overtly preoccupied with issues of an increasingly specialized nature. The issues debated by professional political philosophers in specialized journals have become sophisticated to the point of alienating the non-initiated, being written by specialists for fellow specialists. For sure, many of those technical debates are not inconsequential, and the source of progress in the discipline, but as in the case with analytical philosophy more generally, there is the risk of missing the forest for the trees.

## The Imperative of Social Justice

Barry wrote *Why Social Justice Matters* in part as a response to the malady of the overtechnical specialization infecting contemporary political philosophy, and in part to remind us

why it is no longer a choice to take social justice seriously. Over the years Barry has become increasingly frustrated by the growing gap between what professional political philosophers write about in learned journals, and what he considers to be the 'real' issues in politics. Barry singles out for criticism the way political philosophers have been debating equality: 'The hunt for "the currency of egalitarian justice" was as unsuccessful as the hunt for the Holy Grail. The problem in both cases is that there is no such thing' (p. 22). Barry chastizes political philosophers for wasting their time debating the wrong issues. And when occasionally they deal with the right issues, such as inequalities in education, health and wealth, they consistently get it wrong.

Barry's chapters on the unacceptable levels of inequality in education, health and wealth are not only informative and interesting to read, but provide also a role model for the next generation of political philosophers to follow. By drawing from a mix of sources, ranging from academic literature to newspaper articles, Barry is able to make political philosophy refreshingly relevant; it is not simply a case of what policy-makers can learn from professional political philosophers, but more importantly what political philosophers can learn from people who deal with the issues in question on a daily basis.

A recurring theme in Barry's analysis of education, health and wealth is the idea of cumulative advantage and disadvantage; those who are born in uneducated, unhealthy and/or non-wealthy families are almost certainly going to experience the same fate as their parents, and reproduce the same conditions to their offspring. Likewise those who benefit from this inequality will continue to profit (not only metaphorically) from it, generation after generation. This is what sociologists refer to as 'social mobility', although a more accurate name for it would be 'social immobility' or 'class stagnation'. Recent evidence suggests that only the USA has less upward social mobility than the UK among western nations, with a middle-class child being 15 times more likely to stay middle class than a working-class child is likely to move into the middle class. Quoting a study completed in 2002, Barry makes the point that social mobility has in fact declined: 'those born in 1970 were more likely to stay in the quartile of the income distribution they had been born into than those born in 1958' (p. 61).

In terms of education, the statistics on the discrepancy in quality and access to education between social classes makes for more depressing reading. We are told that, in the UK, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge take only 9 percent of their students from low income families, while private schools, which account for only 7 percent of the school-age population, provide half or more of the entrants to elite universities. In 2002, only 15 percent of children whose parents are manual workers went to university, compared to 81 percent of the children of professionals. In the United States, the top quartile of families (in terms of income) was ten times more likely than the bottom group to send their children to college.

And of course it is not simply a case of getting a college education. In fact, by the time a child is old enough to apply to college the damage has been long done. The quality of public education in both the UK and the USA is often abysmal, especially in working-class neighbourhoods. In both countries money can buy school quality, either in terms of moving house to a more expensive district with a successful school, or by being able to pay fees to a private school. The fact that in the UK private schools are subsidized to the tune of an average of £2,000 per pupil per annum by the taxpayer adds insult to injury. In the US, because most schools are financed primarily by property taxes, rich communities have

good schools, while poor communities have shockingly bad schools, with levels of spending per child varying from more than \$8,000 per student to less than \$4,000. It will not come as a surprise to anyone that the segregation by income and class in America has a racial counterpart, with the vast majority of African American kids having access to the worst education. This goes a long way towards explaining why at the age of 17 the average black child has roughly the same numerical and reading skills as the average white child at the age of 13. Barry devotes an entire chapter to the impact of inequality and injustice on the African American communities in the United States, appropriately entitled 'The Making of the Black Gulag'.

It is to Barry's credit that he does not limit himself to exposing the problems, but he also suggests policy solutions: 'I propose that we should regard the demands of social justice as being met to the extent that there are equal educational attainments at the age of 18' (p. 47), where 'equal' should not be understood rigidly as 'identical', but as 'equivalent':

For example, in the British context, similar (university entry level) scores can be counted as an equal level of attainment regardless of the subject in which they were received. In the United States, the parallel is graduation from equally well-regarded high schools with equally impressive records. (p. 47)

Later on he spells out what this policy entails in even greater detail:

The first demand of social justice is to change the environments in which children are born and grow up so as to make them as equal as possible, and this includes (though it is by no means confined to) approximate material equality among families. The second demand . . . is that the entire system of social intervention, starting as early as it is feasible, should be devoted to compensating, as far as possible, for environmental disadvantages. (p. 58)

Barry anticipates possible counter-arguments to his position. One popular justification for inequality is that educational attainments are genetically determined, therefore the changes in the environment stipulated by Barry will only result in an expensive waste of resources; we are told over and over again that IQ is largely inherited, therefore we should just accept that some people are simply more gifted than others. Barry is outraged by any attempt to justify inequalities on pseudo-scientific lines, and rightly so. He devotes a whole chapter to dismissing the myth of IQ tests, 'The Abuse of Science', where he starts by pointing out that the strong correlation between IQ and academic attainment should not come as a surprise to anyone, since IQ tests focus on abstract questions and puzzles, which happens to be the kind of puzzle-solving ability found in particular academic subjects. In other words, a child who goes to a good school, studying certain academic subjects, will have more practice in the sort of reasoning being tested by IQ tests. But apart from this, Barry challenges the genetic basis of the theory of meritocracy by suggesting that the real difference between the attainment level of two separate individuals is not down to 'innate intelligence', but to 'the norm of reaction', that is to say, to the way a given genotype reacts to a given environment. Thus, 'there is also a sense in which the differences [in IQ] depend on the environment, in that the different environments could also be described as causing the differences in IQ, given the different genotypes' (p. 122).

In dismissing the myth of IQ as an indicator of 'innate ability', Barry does not pass on the opportunity of taking a dig at political philosophers:

I am not aware of a single political philosopher (and I have read a lot of them) who discusses issues involving equal opportunity without assuming that it makes sense to

ascribe to each person some measure of 'native ability' or 'native talent', understood as cognitive ability or talent . . . they all take it for granted that it [native ability] is there somewhere. The popular conception of equal opportunity as equal educational inputs to children with the same 'native ability' clearly presupposes the existence of such a thing. (pp. 123–4)

Apart from the issue of 'native ability', political philosophers find themselves at the receiving end of Barry's annoyance with the way they deal with the issues of health and wealth. Regarding health, Barry is baffled by the fact that political philosophers only discuss health care, not health. As for wealth, Barry feels that political philosophers seem to be concerned only and exclusively with earned income, neglecting unearned income altogether:

It is one of the great mysteries of our time that, when political philosophers address themselves to the topic of social justice and money, they almost invariably focus on one question: the justifiability or otherwise of unequal earnings, which they tend to equate with earnings from paid employment. (p. 186)

Barry's point is that economic inequalities are discussed as if wealth were of no significance in itself, yet this is very far from the truth; earnings are only one source of income, and unearned incomes are much more unequally distributed than earnings, thus wealth is a crucial ingredient in the overall income inequality within any rich country.<sup>9</sup>

## **Inequality, Not Poverty**

One of the key issues being debated by egalitarian political philosophers today is whether the goal that is most at heart to egalitarians is the eradication of poverty, or the suppression of inequality. In chapter 13 'Pathologies of Inequality' Barry summarizes his position in the following terms:

I do not in the least deny that poverty, defined as lack of basic necessities, is a great evil . . . I want to insist, however, that the whole idea of a standard of poverty unrelated to the incomes of others is nonsense. There is a commonplace view (accepted without question, for example, by Rawls) that, as long as you stay in the same place materially, you cannot be made worse off by falling further and further behind the majority of your fellow citizens. Against this, I maintain that becoming relatively worse off can make you absolutely worse off, in terms of opportunities and social standing. (pp. 172–3)

The most impressive aspect in Barry's argument is perhaps the way he forces us to see relative and absolute deprivation as intrinsically linked. This is particularly important not only for the way opportunities are defined, but also in terms of its economic ramifications. Opportunities do not come cheap, as every politician is no doubt aware of. But the cost to the taxpayer of providing adequate opportunities, for example in terms of education and health, are not fixed, instead costs fluctuate depending (among other things) on the general level of inequality; the greater the inequality across society, the greater the cost of providing those opportunities. This is in no small part because the bar delineating the cut-off point for social inclusion keeps rising. Strictly speaking, having perfectly aligned teeth or a private means of transportation, being able to exchange gifts or buying a round of drinks at the pub, are not basic necessities. Yet in societies marked by vast inequalities in standards of living, these are the sorts of issues that can no longer be ignored.

For all these reasons, Barry feels that tackling inequality across society is as important as

abolishing poverty, if not more so. To press home this point, Barry presents empirical evidence showing that crime is related to inequality and poverty (pp. 178–80), as well as arguments suggesting that inequality has deleterious effects on the functioning of democratic political systems (pp. 180–2). Recent evidence from the USA and the UK, which came to light after Barry published his book, add further support to Barry's line of argument. The US census bureau said the number of people living in poverty in 2004 rose to 37 million, up from 31.1 million in 2000 when President Bush won the election. The number without health insurance rose to 45.8 million. Yet the problem here is not only one of poverty, it is also one of inequality. A report from the leading labour federation found that increasing numbers of working Americans feel they are being left behind, 70 percent complaining their standard of living was slipping. The fact that another survey of the biggest US companies found that the average payout for chief executives rose 13 percent in 2004 to \$10.5 million speaks for itself.<sup>10</sup>

Sadly, but perhaps not altogether surprisingly, the situation is no better in the UK. A publication called *Focus on Inequality* from the Office of National Statistics shows that the absolute cash gap between rich and poor has widened since 1997, the year when Blair and the Labour Party came to power. Another report, this time by the Department of Health, shows that the difference in life expectancy between the richest and the poorest in society has continued to grow since 1997. What is even more disturbing is the fact that, if you are poor, you are more likely to lose your baby in childbirth or in its early years: in 1997, infant mortality rates were 13 percent higher for the poorest groups than for the average of the population as a whole, but by 2003 the difference was 19 percent. Finally, research by the Sutton Trust shows that there is less social mobility in the UK compared to other countries – with the exception of the USA.<sup>11</sup>

## **Inequality of Opportunity**

The reason why Barry feels so strongly about inequality is because it undermines any possibility of equality of opportunity being realized, even though our present society fails to see or recognize this. The idea of equality of opportunity is generally defined as nothing more than the right to choose and be chosen. Barry finds it scandalous that this way of understanding equality of opportunity has become common currency in everyday life, since this is making ludicrous assumptions about personal responsibility and meritocracy, which combine to legitimize all sorts of objectionable inequalities.

The problem with the way equality of opportunity is understood today is that it promotes a conception of equality of treatment that is the exact antithesis of what it means to treat people as equals. Modern society promotes personal responsibility as the most basic and essential of all individual virtues. The notion of personal responsibility is behind all the values most admired in our society: effort, sacrifice, achievement and success.

The virtues of personal responsibility, and of meritocracy in general, are to be blamed for the proliferation of the credo 'you only have yourself to blame', which has resulted in the fact that all sorts of inequalities, far from being challenged, are not only consolidated but also legitimized. Personal responsibility and meritocracy are a malicious myth, or as Barry says: 'what we have here is an ideology: it cloaks the status quo with legitimacy through a process of mystification' (p. 40).

Barry is suspicious of personal responsibility, and more generally of the idea of merit-

ocracy, exactly because of the initial lack of equality of opportunity, or in other words because different courses of action are not equally open to anyone to take. The chronic inequality in resources between different candidates over a lifetime makes a shambles of the idea that anyone can achieve any goal, if only they put their minds to it. Barry defines a resource as 'things external to themselves that people own or to which they have access – things with the characteristic of enabling them to achieve their ends, or at least of improving their chances of doing so' (p. 21). Barry goes to great length to remind us that there is much more to resources than simply money: 'another form of good fortune is to have parents who command a large vocabulary, plenty of books around the place, and a home environment that encourages curiosity, intellectual agility and the acquisition of educational qualifications' (p. 21).

Doing most of the work behind the notions of personal responsibility and meritocracy is the presumption that at some prior stage in their lives everyone had the opportunity to make choices that would have made them succeed. It is this presumption that is the target of Barry's tirade:

Thus, what made the difference between the candidate who was successful and the others was that he or she made superior choices from a set of options that was equally open to all of them: chose the right subjects to study, worked harder, and so on. (p. 39)

Unfortunately this is not the world in which we live. As Barry explains, inequality of opportunity begins before conception, thus the advantages of some newborns and the disadvantages of others are the most reliable indicator of future success or lack of success: 'morally arbitrary inequalities begin before conception, since the health and nutritional status of the mother at the time of conception is critical' (p. 14). Exposure of the mother to a toxic environment, and her own use of tobacco, alcohol and drugs, increases as we go down the social hierarchy. If we add to this home environments lacking in educational resources, inadequate schools, poor quality of intellectual stimulation and emotional support in the home, it is hardly surprising that upward social mobility (another key theme in Barry's work) is a fantasy beyond the reach of the vast majority of people.

In the last analysis, Barry's position on social justice can be summarized by way of recapitulating his views on equality of opportunity. Contrary to the views being championed under this banner, which tend to define equality of opportunity in terms of personal responsibility and meritocracy, Barry is keen to establish a link between equality of opportunity and equality of resources. He defines the concept of opportunity as follows: 'an opportunity to do or obtain something exists for me if there is some course of action lying within my power such that it will lead, if I choose to take it, to my doing or obtaining the thing in question' (p. 20). Notice that Barry talks about a course of action 'lying within my power', and not simply 'depending on my will', since taking advantage of an opportunity usually requires more than will power:

. . . people have certain mental and physical capacities at any given time and that no 'effort of will' can overcome the limits imposed by these capacities. I shall also assume that people cannot, by an 'effort of will', completely transform their personalities. (p. 137)

It is the background resources at our disposal that more times than not will determine whether a certain course of action is within our power or not.

## What is the Point of Political Philosophy?

If there is one predominant lesson we learn from reading Barry, it is that political philosophy is more than an academic discipline. To write about political philosophy is to engage, at the theoretical end of the spectrum, in political activism. The point of political philosophy is not merely to create an arena where professional academics and students can play an increasingly sophisticated intellectual game, which is as highly stimulating as it is increasingly insignificant. Instead political philosophy ought to strive for three main goals: to locate the nature of the social and political problems inflicting our societies; to set the agenda for future social policies; and to indicate solutions to these problems.

One such problem, discussed at some length in *Why Social Justice Matters*, is the realistic possibility that unbridled capitalism will bring about the end of humanity, and all this much sooner than people think:

It is quite possible that by the year 2100 human life will have become extinct or will be confined to a few residual areas that have escaped the devastating effects of nuclear holocaust or global warming on a scale that has in the past wiped out almost all existing life forms.

In chapters 19 and 20 of *Why Social Justice Matters*, appropriately entitled 'Meltdown?' and 'Justice or Bust', Barry focuses on the threats posed to humanity by resource depletion, overpopulation and global warming.

This is not the first time that Barry has taken an interest in environmental matters, especially in terms of its impact on intergenerational equity,<sup>12</sup> but this time he backs his views with an impressive battery of empirical data taken from scientific sources. There is a long discussion of the disastrous effects if global warming is allowed to increase by 2°C above its historic average (this target may already be a foregone conclusion), and the pressure of overpopulation on the limited precious resource of fresh water, which is already a source of conflict and will be so increasingly more in the future. The tragedies of New Orleans and Central Europe in the summer of 2005 are further proof, if such was needed, that hurricanes, heavy rainfall of catastrophic proportions and record temperatures have reached unprecedented levels, and will only increase with global warming. In the end, global warming will have a cataclysmic impact on the Antarctic, in fact the greatest threat to humanity comes from the sea, due to the release into the atmosphere of enormous quantities of carbon dioxide and methane hydrate – a super-greenhouse gas – that are currently frozen under the oceans.

Barry puts forward the prospect of impending environmental calamities not to shock his readers, nor merely as an excuse to denounce capitalism for edging humanity closer and closer to oblivion, or to hurl abuses on those world leaders who stubbornly defend the excesses of capitalism. Instead there is a much more serious reason behind Barry's alarmist assessment of the way the future is unfolding; namely, to make the point that it is imperative to take social justice seriously, since implementing the egalitarian policies he recommends is possibly the only way to avoid pending ecological disasters of a global scale. In chapter 16 Barry asks 'can we afford social justice', and by way of an answer he poses the more pressing question 'can we *not* afford social justice?' The egalitarian policies of social justice Barry is pushing in this book are not the mere preference of a staunch old-fashioned socialist, but a matter of urgency:

I do not claim the gift of prophecy. However, one thing can be asserted with certainty: the continuation of the status quo is an ecological impossibility. The uncertainty lies in the consequences of this fact . . . But I shall argue that there are some grounds for hope, which include growing discontent in rich countries with politics as usual. If discontent exhausts itself in protest, though, it will be ineffective. A theory of social justice can provide a systematic critique and a programme that follows from it. That is why social justice matters. (p. vii)

## Conclusion

When in the 1960s political philosophy was rescued from its comatose state, the discipline was proclaimed to be on its last legs. Today political philosophy is thriving, yet its high level of analytical sophistication is having the perverse effect of making the discipline irrelevant outside of university lecture theatres. As professional political philosophers quibble about questions that only fellow professional political philosophers care about, the discipline is running the risk of being sidelined by the rest of society. That is why, notwithstanding political philosophy's current good state of health, political philosophers should ponder whether continuing on the present trajectory will only make their discipline increasingly more marginalized and irrelevant. This would be unforgivable, since there has never been more need for political philosophy than today. In *Why Social Justice Matters*, in his incomparable style, Brian Barry indicates the right way forward for political philosophy. This is a book that no student or scholar of political philosophy can afford to ignore. Among other things, Barry reminds us that the question of social justice, which is at the core of political philosophy, is now an imperative that we discard at our peril.

## Notes

1. See R. Plant (1991) *Modern Political Thought*. Oxford: Blackwell. N. Barry (1995) *An Introduction to Modern Political Theory*. Basingstoke: Macmillan. S. Buckler (2003) 'Normative Theory', in D. Marsh and G. Stoker (eds) *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, 2nd edn, Basingstoke: Macmillan Palgrave.
2. P. Laslett (ed.) (1956) *Philosophy, Politics and Society*, series 1, p. vii. Oxford: Blackwell.
3. B. Barry (1990) *Political Argument: A Reissue with a New Introduction*. Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
4. B. Barry (1965) *Political Argument*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Barry (n. 3).
5. P. Pettit (1993) 'The Contribution of Analytical Philosophy', in R. Goodin and P. Pettit (eds) *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, p. 11. Oxford: Blackwell.
6. B. Barry (1989) 'The Ethics of Resource Depletion', in B. Barry, *Democracy, Power and Justice: Essays in Political Theory*, p. 18. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
7. D.W. Hamlyn (1992) *Being a Philosopher: The History of a Practice*. London and New York: Routledge. R. Rorty (2005) 'How Many Grains Make a Heap?', *London Review of Books* 27(2) (Jan.).
8. S. Soames (2003) *Philosophical Analysis in the 20th Century*, vol. 1, *The Dawn of Analysis*; vol. 2, *The Age of Meaning*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
9. It ought to be said that 'wealth' is singled out by John Rawls as one of the five key primary goods which are to be distributed fairly according to his principles of justice: rights, opportunities, income, wealth and the bases of self-respect. At the same time,

Rawls does not discuss the issue of wealth at any great length and political philosophers have not picked up on this issue as much as they should have.

10. David Teather (2005) 'US Poverty Figure Rises for 4th Year', *Guardian* (31 Aug.).
11. Heather Stewart (2005) 'A Nation of Bransons? That's Rich', *Observer* (28 Aug.).
12. See Barry (n. 6).