

*This is part one of a few reflections on Bertrand de Jouvenel's Du pouvoir (On Power) on the relationship of philosophy and power. The following excerpts are my translations from the original French. An important point in understanding what follows is that Jouvenel uses the capitalized term "Power" to specifically denote political power.*

Strangely, one tends to mistake the true nature of the relationship between thought [*la Pensée*] and Power [*le Pouvoir*]. Thought need only ably criticize the existing order and established authority for its passion for order and authority to be misunderstood.

Rich in ideas of the beautiful, the harmonious, and the just, thought collides with and is appalled by all of social reality. ... However, watch how the master builders of Paradises handle it: the Platos, the Mores, the Campanellas. They eliminate conflicts by eliminating differences: "that they never know, and that they never have the desire to learn what it means to act alone and not in concert with others, nor to form such a habit; rather, that they all move together to the same ends and that they never have anything but a common life..." (Plato, *The Laws*, XII). Property is held in common; magistrates allocate to the citizens what they need. Uniform clothing, meals in common, common lodging...

Such are the rules of the ideal republics dreamed of by the philosophers, a vision which could entrance our ancestors at a time when they were clearly unrealizable fantasies. As those clouds have drawn closer we search them attentively for liberty, and we find none at all. All those dreams are more restrictive, burdensome, and oppressive tyrannies than any yet evidenced in history. In every aspect, order is obtained at the price of universal registration and regimentation. (pp. 165-166)

Jouvenel here describes an older form of political philosophy that was totalitarian. Plato wrote the *Republic* around the 4th century BCE, Thomas More published his *Utopia* in 1615, and Tommaso Campanella published his *The City of the Sun* in 1623. The dates are important, as these political treatises were written prior to the widespread emergence of political liberalism.

One finds a marked difference in contemporary liberal political philosophy. The rigid regimentation is gone, and there is space for individual preferences in the larger whole. I will briefly look at the works of John Rawls and Phillippe Van Parijs as examples of how very different they are in contrast to the older works.

John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* is arguably the most influential work of political philosophy of the 20th century. At the core element of Rawls's theory is the idea of pure procedural justice: "[t]he role of the principle of fair opportunity is to insure that the system of cooperation is one of pure procedural justice" (76.) That is, "pure procedural justice obtains when there is no independent criterion for the right result: instead there is a correct or fair procedure such that the outcome is likewise correct or fair, whatever it is, provided that the procedure has been properly followed" (75.)

In Rawls's idea of justice as fairness, "society is interpreted as a cooperative venture for mutual advantage. The basic structure is a public system of rules defining a scheme of activities that leads men to act together so as to produce a greater sum of benefits and assigns to each certain recognized claims to a share in the proceeds" (74.) A range of societal inequality is permitted as long as the lot of the least in society improves as the well-being of the well-off increases; that is, the outcome "is just if and only if they work as part of a scheme which improves the expectations of the least advantaged members of society" (65.) Building on the idea of pure procedural justice, "[t]he intuitive idea is to design the social system so that the outcome is just whatever it happens to be, at least so long as it is within a certain range" (74.)

Rawls goes on to define a set of criteria by which to measure the well-being of the least well off in society. While interesting in their own right, my purpose here is more narrowly focused on the role of individual liberty in Rawlsian thought. There is not the strict regimentation of the ancient philosophers; within limits people are free to pursue their own choices, and "[t]he justice of a social scheme depends essentially on how fundamental rights and duties are assigned and on the economic opportunities and social conditions in the various sectors of society" (30.) Note carefully that "rights and duties are assigned;" this is a necessary consequence of Rawls's desire to build a set of social institutions that lead to just outcomes by the very way the social institutions work, without having to require certain virtues or behavioral traits on the part of the citizens.

Phillipe Van Parijs built on Rawls's system of thought, but he took it a step further. A 1971 law in Hawaii set a one year residency requirement before one could receive welfare benefits; as cited by Van Parijs, Hawaii senator Wadsworth Yee stated in support of the law that "There must be no parasites in paradise." (101.) Van Parijs noted that Rawls had supported a similar move in California to not extend welfare benefits to surfers in Malibu. In contrast, Van Parijs argued that "a defensible *liberal* theory of justice, that is, one that is truly committed to an equal concern for all and to nondiscrimination among conceptions of the good life, does justify, under appropriate factual conditions, a substantial *unconditional basic income*" (102, emphasis in the original.) This income is granted "without either a means test or a (willingness to) work condition" (102.) Van Parijs acknowledged the ethical controversy that had arisen around his argument due to the absence of the means and work tests.

Note that Van Parijs reduced Rawls's conditions of rights and duties. For Van Parijs, under certain conditions (which he addresses elsewhere) a person could receive State benefits without doing anything at all. The central notion here is the liberal neutrality of the State: it is not the business of the State to say what one's idea of the good life should be. Thus one might find his good life as an industrious hard worker, while another found her good life surfing all day, and the neutral State not only must not discriminate between these radically diverse ideas, but provide the means to support both. For Van Parijs a basic income is a right simply because one is a citizen.

Concluding, the totalitarian conditions cited by Jouvenel in earlier political philosophy have been radically rethought in contemporary liberal philosophy. Particularly important is the shift away from societal outcome oriented ideas of justice exemplified in the ancient philosophies to the procedural and institutional ideas of justice of contemporary thought. Totalitarian control and

individual conformance has given way to liberal individual expression. Doubtlessly, and rightfully so, we who live in these times would think it horrendous to live in any of the historical or contemporary totalitarian regimes, much less the rigid systems of the three cited philosophers.

It might seem that the problem of political power has been contained by liberal ideas. How the contemporary liberal political philosophies of Rawls, Van Parijs, and others fare within Jouvenel's thought will be taken up in subsequent parts.

Bertrand de Jouvenel. *Du Pouvoir: Histoire Naturelle de Sa Croissance*. (Paris: Hachette, 1972), pp. 165-168. English version available online at <https://archive.org/stream/onpoweritsnature00injouv>.

Phillipe Van Parijs. "Why Surfers Should Be Fed: The Liberal Case for an Unconditional Basic Income." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Spring, 1991), pp. 101-131.

John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

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