

ALEX TUCKNESS
AND CLARK WOLF

**THIS IS
POLITICAL
PHILOSOPHY**
AN INTRODUCTION

WILEY Blackwell

THIS IS POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY



THIS IS PHILOSOPHY

Series editor: Steven D. Hales

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

There is no consensus in political philosophy about the order in which to introduce topics; and we realize that the order we have chosen may diverge from the order that some instructors will prefer. For this reason, the chapters in our book are designed to be substantially independent and can be used in any order. Although we occasionally refer to arguments from previous chapters to help students see connections, these references are not necessary in order to understand the material. Our goal is to create a flexible tool that can be used in a variety of different ways. Some may teach straight through. Others may want to pair this book with classic texts or case studies.

There is, however, a logic to the order of the chapters. Part I (Chapters 1–4) examines four core values that represent goals, or potential goals, of government: happiness, freedom, equality, and justice. In Part II we look at topics related to the nature of political authority: democracy and the conditions for legitimate government, the obligation to obey the law, and the legitimacy of political violence (including the topics of war and punishment). Part III (Chapters 8–10) looks at more specific questions: Who counts (Chapter 8) explores questions regarding who deserves justice, for example questions about animal rights, environmental ethics, and abortion. Chapter 9 looks at the relationship between religion and politics, including a discussion of multiculturalism. Chapter 10 addresses problems in political ethics.

Our overall approach is to try to move from examples and cases to philosophical investigation of the questions those examples and cases raise. Our hope is that the book will prepare students to have more thoughtful responses when the issues are discussed in class. Our goal is to introduce the central issues in political philosophy in ways that students will find both engaging and challenging.

PREFACE

Politics and philosophy initially seem a strange pairing. Philosophy is logical, rational, and abstract. Politics is often thought to be about power, connections, and persuading people however you can, regardless of whether the arguments are logical (or even true) or not. But this doesn't tell the whole story. Imagine the following conversation:

- JUSTIN: You should support affirmative action policies.
SOPHIE: Why?
JUSTIN: Because I want you to.
SOPHIE: Why is that a reason for me?

Political arguments don't normally proceed like this, because merely asserting your wants is not a very persuasive way to explain your political views. In the real world, Justin is more likely to say something like: "Because affirmative action promotes justice and equality." When he merely says what he wants, there is not much to argue about. When he makes a claim about justice and equality, there is plenty to argue about. He must persuade us that justice and equality are good things and that affirmative action does in fact support them.

Political philosophy is about taking seriously the reasons people give for claiming that political positions are good, right, or true and asking whether the reasons they give are good ones. Are they better than the reasons for thinking the opposite? Perhaps we are all sometimes persuaded by bad arguments. But most of us like to think that we know the difference between a bad political argument and a good one. We don't like to think that people are manipulating us successfully with bad arguments. In this sense, studying political philosophy is like studying self-defense. People often throw around terms like "justice" and "equality" without defining clearly what they mean

by them, without explaining why we should value them, and without considering their implications. By arming yourself with philosophical understanding, you can avoid being misled.

We think that the best way to introduce political philosophy is to begin with real political debates and to show how philosophy sheds light on those debates. For this reason we begin each chapter with a political discussion between Justin and Sophie. We picked these names because Sophie is related to the ancient Greek word for wisdom (*sophia*) in the word “philosophy,” which means “love of wisdom.” The name Justin comes from the Latin word for justice (*iustitia*), arguably the most important term in political philosophy. As you watch them argue, you will see political philosophy in action. In the book as a whole we will try to use examples and illustrations to make the ideas clear and interesting.

Part I

CORE VALUES IN POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

1

HAPPINESS

- SOPHIE What are you reading about?
- JUSTIN Lying, cruelty, murder, and betrayal.
- SOPHIE About why these are bad things, I assume.
- JUSTIN That's what is interesting about the book: I think the author is saying that in politics these aren't necessarily bad.
- SOPHIE That sounds crazy. Give me an example where cruelty and betrayal are good.
- JUSTIN Here's one from the book. Back during the Italian Renaissance there was a man named Cesare Borgia. He became powerful because he was the illegitimate son of the pope. A territory he controlled was in chaos and turmoil. So first he sent in one of his men to restore order, using as much cruelty as was necessary to get the job done. The man restored order, but was hated by the people because of his cruelty. Then Borgia himself came to town and pretended to have had no idea about the cruelty his officer had used and had that very officer cut into two and his body left in the town square for all to see. Borgia both restored order and avoided a reputation for being cruel.
- SOPHIE What are you reading? That sounds like a show on cable.
- JUSTIN The book is Machiavelli's *The Prince*.
- SOPHIE So you think being "Machiavellian" is a good thing?
- JUSTIN I didn't at first, but the more I have thought about it, the more I agree. In politics you don't do anyone any good

unless you get results. Sometimes getting results means you have to lie or even kill.

SOPHIE I disagree. People who say they are going to do evil to bring about good are just rationalizing. If you do evil it changes you; you become more evil. You'll keep going further and further.

JUSTIN What else should Borgia have done? The region was in lawless chaos, and lawless chaos would have killed far more people in the long run. Politicians who go around trying to be merciful actually end up being cruel. The pain that these measures prevent outweighs the pain that they cause.

SOPHIE I don't think one person's pleasure cancels out another person's pain. And besides, what about the rights of the people who were brutalized? If you intentionally inflict pain on an innocent person you are violating her rights, end of story.

JUSTIN Nothing in politics really benefits everyone equally. We don't have any choice but to make tradeoffs. We have to pass laws asking whether the costs to some outweigh the benefits to others. Everyone's happiness is relevant.

SOPHIE There has to be more to the public good than that. Some people find pleasure in humiliating others, but I don't think that should count as a reason for letting them do it.

JUSTIN But the pain of the person being humiliated would be greater than the pleasure of the one doing the humiliating.

SOPHIE Maybe, maybe not. You can't know that for sure. Anyway, the desire to humiliate others is wrong no matter how happy it makes the person who's doing the humiliation. We should protect people's rights no matter what.

Doing Political Philosophy

- 1.1 In this dialogue Justin and Sophie are discussing an issue in political philosophy. One of the most important questions is what values governments should promote. Is the point of government to increase happiness? What if promoting happiness conflicts with promoting freedom? In Aldous Huxley's book *Brave New World* people are happy and content, but the contentment comes from a society where people are genetically modified and brainwashed so that they will happily accept a life with very

little liberty. Bouts of boredom or anxiety are remedied through easy access to psychedelic drugs. People live lives of comfortable, meaningless amusement. There is more happiness and less pain in a world like that than in ours, but would we really say that such a world is better? In this chapter we will explore debates about whether the purpose of government is to increase happiness.

Happiness, Welfare, and the Aims of Government

Political philosophers look for ways to evaluate political institutions and the behavior of the people who shape those institutions. Are presidents better than kings? Is it better when governments leave people free to organize their own lives, or should governments constrain people's freedom, so as to prevent them from making mistakes? 1.2

Whether it is institutions or actions that we evaluate, it is natural to consider whether they make people happy or unhappy. It is hard to conceive that a government could be good if it caused widespread suffering and misery. In the same spirit, it seems that any nation in which citizens are all happy and content must be doing something right. This chapter will examine the view that the goal of government is to make people happy. We will also consider the closely related view that the goal of *politicians* should be to promote the happiness of people who are affected by their choices. 1.3

To some philosophers, the view that government should promote people's happiness has appeared to be so obviously true that it hardly seemed necessary to provide reasons for it. But happiness is more complicated than it might initially seem: what is it for people to be happy? Can we be wrong about our own happiness? Is it possible to know in advance which institutions will promote happiness? How should happiness be measured? If we can't gauge happiness directly, are there other standards we should use to measure well-being? 1.4

If You're Happy Do You Know It?

If political institutions are better when they make people happy, then we need some way of judging whether people are happy. But we are often bad judges of other people's happiness. Worse, we may not even be reliable 1.5

judges of *our own* happiness. If you think you're happy, could you be wrong? Those who advocate a *subjective view of happiness* say that you can't possibly be wrong about your own state of happiness. If we define happiness in terms of experiences like pleasure or satisfaction, a person who is experiencing these things knows it. Suppose a person's body were wasting away because of a terrible disease, but the pain medications were so good that she reported feeling happy. (Perhaps the medicines also keep her from realizing what is happening to her.) On the subjective view, she is happy.

- 1.6 Those who advocate an *objective view of happiness*, by contrast, would claim that people are sometimes wrong about whether they are truly happy. Suppose that a person is content to live a life devoted to video games. When asked, he honestly and sincerely says he is happy. Then he leaves virtual reality for actual reality and decides that having friends he sees with his own eyes is far better than his life before. He then looks back on his previous life and no longer sees it as a time of happiness. In principle, the same judgment could be made by someone else, that he is not happy even though he thinks he is. If a slave claims to be happy, should we believe her?

The Pursuit of Happiness

- 1.7 Philosophers often distinguish between things that are valued *intrinsically* and things that are valued *instrumentally*. A thing is valued *intrinsically* just in case it is something we want for its own sake. If you want something *instrumentally*, you want it because you can use it in order to get something else you want—perhaps something you want for its own sake. For example, suppose Sophie wants to be rich. If she wants money *for its own sake*, then she values it intrinsically. If she values money because she can use it to get things she wants, then she values it *instrumentally*. We might also ask whether money *has* intrinsic value—that is, whether it *should* be valued for its own sake—or whether its value is essentially instrumental.
- 1.8 Happiness, one could argue, is something that everyone wants. Even people who like depressing movies may go to them because they enjoy the sadness. An important school of thought in political philosophy, *utilitarianism*, takes the claim that happiness is the highest good as its starting point. In fact utilitarians would claim that nothing is good unless it is part of a person's happiness, or unless it contributes to a person's happiness. According to utilitarianism, happiness is the only thing we should value intrinsically. Everything else has only instrumental value.

UTILITARIANISM: Actions and policies should be judged according to the aggregate amount of happiness or well-being they produce. Actions are morally better the more happiness they produce.

According to utilitarianism, we should seek to *maximize* happiness. It is a popular theory: most economic theories of policy choice *assume* that the goal of policy is to promote the happiness or well-being of the people who are governed by them.

The view that we *should* promote happiness is sometimes associated with a very different view: the view that people *do* pursue happiness, but their own happiness, not the happiness of everyone. This view is often called ^{1.9}

PSYCHOLOGICAL EGOISM: People exclusively pursue their own happiness in all their voluntary actions.

Psychological egoism claims that each person acts on the basis of what she thinks will bring her the most happiness. She may be wrong, but even foolish things are done for the sake of what we think will bring us happiness. Notice that this is a claim about human psychology and motivation, while utilitarianism is a normative theory—a theory about what people *should* do. Some philosophers have tried to put these two views together. The nineteenth-century British philosopher Jeremy Bentham defended them both. But if psychological egoism were true, then utilitarianism would seem to be irrelevant. Why would we develop theories about what people should do if these people are already determined to act in a certain way anyway?

Whose happiness?

Subsequent philosophers have noted other problems that arise if one tries to combine utilitarianism and psychological egoism. What I think will bring the most happiness to me is different from what will bring the most happiness to everyone. If I can steal something and get away with it, I might admit that the happiness I get is smaller than the pain others will feel but still think that stealing will maximize *my* happiness. If promoting my own happiness and promoting the happiness of everyone conflict, then the psychological claim and the normative claim are also in conflict. ^{1.10}


There are different strategies for reconciling these claims. One is to note that human beings have not only self-interest but also sympathy. Sympathy (or empathy; for present purposes we use them interchangeably) causes us ^{1.11}


to feel pain at the pain of others or pleasure when others feel pleasure. Through education and other forms of socialization we can encourage people to develop this sympathetic faculty. So pursuing your own happiness will often involve doing things that are good for other people too. While this strategy can reduce the gap between what is good for me and what is good for the world, it does not bridge it completely.

1.12 Scientists who study human motivation reject psychological egoism: human motivation is much more complicated than this simplistic theory would imply. Utilitarians reject it too: many contemporary utilitarians say that, while people generally do pursue their own happiness (including the happiness of those they are sympathetic to), this is not an iron-clad rule. What is central to utilitarianism is the normative claim about what people *should* do, not the psychological claim about what people's motives are.

1.13 Utilitarianism gets its name from the word “utility,” which comes from the Latin word for “usefulness”: *utilitas*. This seemed to be an apt name, because utilitarians say that we should choose things because they are useful for bringing about happiness. According to utilitarians, happiness is the only intrinsic good. Everything else is only instrumentally valuable.

Can you measure pleasure?

 1.14 **Jeremy Bentham**, one of the first utilitarian philosophers, thought that utility is happiness and that they both can be reduced to *pleasure*. According to Bentham, pleasure is the only thing that is good *in itself*. Other things may be *instrumentally* good, but only if they bring pleasure. This view is sometimes called *hedonism*, a word based on the Greek word for “pleasure”: *hēdonē*. Hedonism is one answer to the question of what human **well-being** consists in. Utilitarianism can be described as maximizing utility, maximizing happiness, or maximizing pleasure (and minimizing pain). Bentham sees all of these as meaning the same thing.

 1.15 In **Bentham's** version of utilitarianism, there is a clear sense in which the ends always justify the means. I can't know if lying or stealing are wrong until I first figure out whether, in a given case, lying or stealing will increase or decrease overall pleasure. One potentially confusing aspect of Bentham's terminology is that, instead of only talking about utility as that which is useful for bringing about pleasure (or happiness), he also used “utility” and “happiness” as synonyms. So for Bentham maximizing utility and maximizing happiness are the same thing.

By identifying happiness with pleasure, Bentham meant something fairly specific. He was targeting the sensible experience of pleasure. He also included, as part of utility, the avoidance of pain, by which he meant, again, an internal subjective experience. His idea was that we could add up the pleasures, subtract the pains, and then arrive at an estimate of the total amount of utility that a decision would likely produce. 1.16

This may sound odd. It is obvious how you add up numbers, but how do you add up pleasures? Bentham's strategy was to quantify them, or at least treat them in a way similar to the way we treat numbers. For any given pleasure or pain we can, at least roughly, assess its intensity. 1.17

Imagine someone asking: "On a scale of 1 to 10, how much does *this* hurt? OK, now how much does *this* hurt? OK, 58 more of these and we will have the scale calibrated."

We can also measure its duration. We can add or multiply these together to get an estimate of how much pleasure or pain something would bring.

There are many assumptions implicit in Bentham's view: not only does he assume that we can assign numbers to pleasures and pains, so that the numbers reflect the value or disvalue of these experiences, he also assumes that one person's pain or pleasure is the same as another's and that it makes sense to add up or multiply different people's numbers in a grand total. As later utilitarians have insisted, these are controversial assumptions. 1.18

Other difficulties with this view are associated with uncertainty: we're never certain what the consequences of our choices will be. But if we're not certain, how can we know which of our actions will maximize utility or happiness? A common strategy is to say that we should maximize *expected utility*. That is, for any action, we should qualify the value of that action by the probability that it will bring about the good results we hope for and by the corresponding probability of bad results. 1.19

To get an idea how expected utility works, consider what happens when I buy a lottery ticket. I might win, but I am much more likely to lose. If I want to determine the expected utility (or expected value) of buying the ticket, I should figure out the pain of buying a losing ticket times the high probability that I won't win, added to the pleasure of winning multiplied by the (very low) probability that I will win. If the expected utility of buying a ticket is positive (perhaps this is unlikely?) then I should buy the ticket. 1.20

Focusing on expected utility means that, just because something produced good effects, it does not follow that I acted rightly. I might have done 1.21

something foolish and just gotten lucky. Similarly, things might turn out badly even though I did the right thing, perhaps I was just unlucky. If you chose the action with the highest expected utility, there is at least a case for the view that you did the right thing.

Future happiness

- 1.22 Bentham also thought that pleasures or pains that are in the future should count less than ones that are more immediate. Suppose that there are two pleasures that are equal in certainty, duration, and intensity but that one will happen tomorrow and the other will happen in three years. Most people would choose the present pleasure over the future one. This is sometimes called *discounting*. You might think that we value now over later because there is some chance (even if it is very small) that the delayed pleasure will not happen (perhaps we will die unexpectedly before then!). But this is not what Bentham means. We might discount for the *uncertainty* of future events, but that is separate from discounting for the very fact that they are *future*. Bentham's view is that, when we have done the math, even after discounting for the fact that things in the future are often more uncertain, we should also discount them simply because they are future.
- 1.23 Critics of discounting worry that it leads to undervaluing the lives of future generations, which can be important in calculations in areas such as environmental policy. Why should the welfare of future people matter less, merely because their suffering will take place in the future? Proponents note that there are many possible future generations. They worry that their happiness will always outweigh ours unless we discount, and that we might make ourselves miserable in the present while trying to improve the lives of people who don't yet exist. Critics of discounting note that we might be indifferent to future disasters if we discount future costs and benefits. Can it be just to take trivial present benefits for ourselves, at great cost to future generations? If we discount, such a choice might make sense; but perhaps that shows why discounting is a problem. These considerations are important for discussions of global climate change and for policies designed to mitigate change. Should we adopt climate policies that may involve present costs, when those who will benefit from them are our distant descendants—people we can never even meet?
- 1.24 Utilitarians also have to consider how to sum up pleasures and pains across future events. Pains and pleasures are often part of a chain of events. To assess them, you have to look at the whole chain. The exercise and

healthier eating necessary to get in better shape may bring you less pleasure in the short run than lounging on the couch watching TV and eating chips, but it may well bring more pleasure and less pain in the long run. Some things produce pain in the short run and even more pain in the long run. Some pleasures do the same. In other cases pain now may bring pleasure later, or pleasure now may bring pain later. For example, utilitarians would say that you have to look at more than just the pleasure that casual sex brings, you have to look at all of the long-term effects. **The Center for Disease control estimates that half of sexually active young people in the United States will have a sexually transmitted disease (STD) by the age of 25.** That is part of the utilitarian calculation.



Pleasure and pain

Utilitarians often recommend that we both maximize happiness and minimize misery or unhappiness. Are these different goals? Are there contexts where the *positive utilitarian* requirement to “maximize happiness” will come into conflict with the negative requirement to “minimize misery”? If some people are badly off, we might maximize happiness by improving their situation. Or we might instead provide benefits for other people who are already quite well off. If the well-off people are more efficient at creating happiness and the badly off people would only be made a little less miserable with our help, we might maximize happiness by devoting ourselves to those who are better off instead of those who are worse off. But many people think that this would be just the wrong thing to do: we should work to improve the situation of those who are badly off before we add extra benefits for people who already are well off. Some people take this to be a decisive objection to positive utilitarianism. 1.25

While most utilitarians assume that you can cancel out pains with pleasures and vice versa, *negative utilitarians* argue that we should minimize misery instead of maximizing happiness. This view has the advantage of focusing our attention on the elimination of suffering, about which there is arguably more consensus than there is about what is pleasant. It has the unfortunate implication that destroying the entire planet instantaneously would be commendable since it would ensure that there is no more pain in the world. Some people regard this as a decisive reason against negative utilitarianism. Others, including **Karl Popper** and **Judith Shklar**, have argued 1.26



that the elimination of pain, suffering, and humiliation should be the first goal of politics. Still others argue that the negative consequences of our choices should be given *more weight* than the positive consequences. Few philosophers defend negative utilitarianism as a complete theory of morality or political choice.

- 1.27 But perhaps the negative utilitarian view becomes more plausible if it is qualified by other principles. For example, we might consider a mixed view that requires (1) that people's rights must be respected; and (2) that, with that constraint, we should minimize misery. But if we add rights to the mix, have we left utilitarianism behind?

Is happiness fulfilling your desires?

- 1.28 A different approach is to identify happiness with desire satisfaction: on this view, happiness consists in satisfying your desires. People who define happiness this way point out that human beings often do desire things that don't seem to be connected to pleasure. Human beings are complex and have a wide range of desires. Sometimes they seek beauty, at other times friendship, at other times knowledge. It is overly simplistic to say that we only want these things as a means to pleasure. Sometimes we want things for their own sakes:

Suppose that Erica and Allie are friends. Erica asks Allie why she chose to be her friend and Allie replies: "I find your sense of humor entertaining." Erica responds: "So if I quit being funny you would quit being my friend?" Allie says, coldly and without sarcasm: "Definitely."

Allie thinks of herself as a seeker of pleasure. Her commitment to the friendship is only as deep as the pleasure it brings her. This seems to be a shallow view of friendship. Friends value each other and value their friendship for its own sake.

- 1.29 Desire fulfillment, like hedonism, starts with the subjective perspective of each person. Both are nonjudgmental in that, if a person wants something or finds pleasure in something, then, all else being equal, all of us have a reason to help them get it even if we think it is a bad idea. Just as hedonists must find a way to compare pleasures, so desire fulfillment theorists need a way to compare the fulfillment of desires. Many of the same considerations apply: a person's well-being may depend more on the satisfaction of one big desire than on satisfying many small desires.

There are a number of objections to the desire satisfaction approach as well. The hedonist will respond that what people desire will often bring them great pain. Perhaps it is better to give people what they don't want, if that will spare them pain or bring them pleasure in the long run. A child may desire the chance to play in the busy street, but satisfying that desire is a bad idea. Desire theorists respond by noting that a child who is killed by a car will give up a whole lifetime of desire fulfillment opportunities, and that desire theory justifies thwarting some desires so that even more desires can be fulfilled over the long term. 1.30

A different version of the desire satisfaction theory says that we want to satisfy people's informed desires, not their actual desires. By informed desires we mean that people understand the basic facts of what will happen if they go down a particular path. Suppose I prefer eating the steak to eating the chicken, but, unbeknownst to me, the steak contains food poisoning. In that case my informed preference would be different from my current preference. Perhaps, in that case, the best way to promote my happiness would be to give me what I believe to be my second choice. But is it right to prevent people from getting what they want, because we know or think we know better what would be good for them? Such a line of thinking might work best if we could be confident that a person's preferences would change with new information. Can we ever be confident about such a change in judgment? 1.31

Some versions of utilitarianism talk about satisfying the preferences of as many people as possible as an alternative to talking about pleasure and pain. This allows them to talk more easily about the fact that sometimes people have a preference for sacrificing their own pleasure for the good of others. 1.32

Virtue theorists hold that people should act in accordance with good qualities of character (virtues) like courage, compassion, justice, and others. Virtue theorists would point out that preference satisfaction approaches have the same problem that pleasure theories do: if people are of poor character, then it might not be good to satisfy their preferences. Some people cultivate a love of dog fighting and prefer to watch animals inflict pain on each other. Aren't we justified to prevent the satisfaction of bad preferences like this one? 1.33

Lastly, critics of desire satisfaction theory argue that it gets things backward. We desire things because we already think they are good in some way. Desire theory puts it the other way around. It claims that things only become good because we desire them. This makes it mysterious or arbitrary why we desire some things and not others. 1.34

Do the ends justify the means?

- 1.35 Utilitarianism's claim that one should maximize happiness (or well-being, etc.) implies that the means of achieving happiness are not intrinsically important, only the outcomes are. Critics claim that there are some cases where the end—the goal pursued—doesn't justify the means used to achieve it. In Dostoyevsky's classic novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of the characters says:

Tell me yourself, I challenge you—answer. Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last. Imagine that you are doing this but that it is essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that child beating its breast with its fist, for instance—in order to found that edifice on its unavenged tears. Would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? (Dostoyevsky, 1958 [1880], p. 226)

What would you say? Those who emphasize the public good often argue that the good of the whole outweighs the good of the few. Utilitarianism in particular would say that in this case the happiness of a whole society outweighs the happiness of a single child. Perhaps the knowledge that a child is suffering would make it impossible for people to enjoy their utopia, but human beings are often quite accomplished at ignoring the suffering of others when they are having a good time.

- 1.36 In Dostoyevsky's case, the tradeoff is between the welfare of one child and the welfare of the rest of the society. In other situations, the conflict is between welfare (the public good) and some other value. Let's take a moment to examine potential conflicts between the public good and some of the other values.

Nozick's experience machine

- 1.37 Robert Nozick, in his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, came up with a famous example designed to test whether what we value is the subjective experience of desire satisfaction or something more objective. It can be paraphrased thus (cf. Nozick, 1974, p. 42):

Suppose that you had the opportunity to hook up your brain to an *experience machine* that would cause you to experience an entire lifetime of incredibly pleasurable sensations. You would spend the rest of