This type of critique, which emerged in the 1960s with the expressive but disorganized and ahistorical politics of the New Left, is flourishing today within the nascent multiracial, multiclass, and often female-led social movements dealing with daily life.

These movements represent a kind of epiphany of a new industrial and consumer politics. So-called Not-in-My-Backyard neighborhood groups concerned with toxics (some of whom are affiliated with the Citizens' Clearinghouse for Hazardous Wastes and the National Toxics Campaign) are one expression of this new form. From challenging where and how toxics are dumped, they have quickly moved to question why certain dangerous products and processes are used in the first place.

By expanding the arena of protest, including linking up with local plant workers who are the first to suffer the effects of hazardous production, these movements are laying part of the groundwork for a new political discourse. Such a discourse, combining "green" ideas with community and workplace empowerment, requires a vision not just of nature less degraded but of society more livable and less hazardous, more peaceful and equitable; where a different set of social relations would coincide with a different conception of the production system itself. □

BOOK REVIEW

Political Philosophy: Cogito Ergo So What?

Josh Henkin

The Conquest of Politics: Liberal Philosophy in Democratic Times by Benjamin Barber. Princeton University Press, 1988, 220 pp.

Perhaps no other discipline has undergone as great a revival in recent years as moral philosophy. Countless volumes appear annually focusing on a vast range of ethical dilemmas. From busing to bioengineering, pornography to pedagogy, no issue manages to escape our moral compass—or our philosophers' pens. Indeed, one renowned theorist recently published a four-volume collection, some fourteen hundred pages long, on *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law*; another writes essays on such topics as "Can a Liberal State Support Art?" or "Is Wealth a Value?" Still others set their philosophical sights even higher, attempting to define (and defend) conceptions of equality, liberty, justice. Large tomes have appeared bearing titles such as *A Theory of Justice* and *Social Justice and the Liberal State*. The influence of these books has begun to match their ambition; dog-eared copies now line many a dormitory bookshelf.

Although some of the reasons for the growth of moral philosophy are a function of dynamics internal to the university, others have more to do with the world "out there." Technological advance proceeds apace, providing us with once unimaginable opportunities both to save and to kill millions, even billions, of people. With enough resources to feed the planet, the gap between the possible and the actual is all the more glaring; with enough nuclear energy to destroy it, the decisions we make are more portentous than ever.

Technology, moreover, continually presents us with new and confounding moral dilemmas. Surrogate motherhood, once the cutting-edge ethical issue, already seems passé. Now, in California, there is a court battle over an embryo. The couple, having finally succeeded with in vitro fertilization, is getting divorced. The mother wants to give birth to the child; the father is suing to prevent her. Meanwhile the embryo remains in the freezer.

Another reason for increased interest in moral philosophy has to do with the precarious foundations of morality itself. Ours is an age of immense skepticism, an age in which ethical relativism reigns supreme. Political morality, or the morality of state power, has come under particularly close scrutiny. Two centuries ago political morality meant simply the divine right of kings. Since then, all sorts of moral and political theories—utilitarianism, natural rights, consent, tacit consent—have been promoted by various thinkers only to be shot down by others. In recent years, in particular, the possibility of finding bedrock, of constructing solid moral foundations, has seemed ever more difficult. We live, after all, in an increasingly small and self-conscious world: we are aware, as never before, of cultures different from our own, and therefore of the contingency of our way of life. Morality to some seems like cultural hegemony to others.

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It is in response to these developments that a growing number of scholars have begun to focus on moral questions, and on the nature of morality itself. Among the more interesting of these thinkers are philosophers such as John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and Bruce

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Ackerman. All three attempt to lay out theories of justice that overcome ethical relativism; these theorists are "foundationalists" who try to find a neutral moral base, an Archimedean point, a perspective beyond perspective.

Benjamin Barber, writing in *The Conquest of Politics,* argues that these foundationalists, and others like them, are committed more to "philosophy" than to political reality. So concerned are they with abstract truth that they end up spinning theories that are intellectually impressive but politically irrelevant. What's more, Barber claims, these thinkers are are part of a larger problem: the general "conquest of politics by hubristic philosophy." In other words, as political philosophy has developed, the adjective has been devoured by the noun.

This, Barber contends, is a dangerous development. Dogmatic and absolutist principles don't help the political decision maker. They only obfuscate matters, since today's political problems are too complex to admit easy solutions. In short, Barber argues, politics is best tackled by engaged citizens acting in concert, not by detached philosophers in ivy-coated buildings.

Rawls and Nozick, in particular, incur Barber's wrath. In *A Theory of Justice* (1971), Rawls argues that the appropriate "principles of justice" would be chosen by men and women existing in a hypothetical "original position." In the original position, people operate under a "veil of ignorance," unaware of their particular circumstances in life. They realize that they have interests and desires, but, stripped of their particularity, they do not know what their *specific* interests and desires are. The decisions that are made in such circumstances are fair because, by definition, they are unaffected by people's individual concerns and prejudices. Moreover, Rawls contends, in the original position people would choose two specific principles of justice—the first one guaranteeing everyone "equal basic liberties," and the second one, the "difference principle," allowing for inequalities (of wealth, status, and so on) only to the extent that these inequalities improve the lot of society's worst off.

Barber critiques Rawls in what have become familiar terms. He questions the neutrality and coherence of the original position, and he notes that the two principles of justice are not the inevitable outcome of decisions made under the veil of ignorance. But he offers particularly trenchant criticism of Rawls's failure to focus on the fundamental problems facing people today. "Terms suggestive of modern man's political dilemmas—racism, alienation, nationalism, citizenship, socialization, emancipation, indoctrination—are hardly to be found" in *A Theory of Justice,* Barber writes. Instead, Rawls offers examples that are often trivial and apolitical, such as choosing between a trip to Paris and a trip to Rome. How much help is a political philosophy that claims that from the standpoint of the theory of justice "the choice between a private-property economy and socialism is left open"? After all, Barber maintains, given the interdependence of political and economic institutions, and given that capitalism may bear some responsibility for the history of injustice in the West, "positing this kind of impartiality is like developing a geometry in which the question of whether parallel lines meet is left open."

Nozick, in Barber's estimate, is, if anything, less in touch with reality than is Rawls. In *Anarchy, State and Utopia,* Nozick offers a theoretical justification for the "minimal state," whose sole function is "protecting all its citizens against violence, theft, and fraud, and [enforcing] contracts, and so on." Redistributive taxation is illegitimate, Nozick claims, because it violates the individual's natural right to self-ownership and consequently constitutes a type of forced labor.

Barber finds Nozick's argument absurd because it starts with the assumption that the existence of the state needs to be justified. In other words, according to Nozick, we must first "prove" that anarchism is not, as political theorist Robert Paul Wolff once put it, "philosophically true." For Barber, philosophical truth is wholly irrelevant; *political* truth is what matters. As a result, he argues, one need not engage Nozick in philosophical debate; one simply has to examine the consequences of his theory—the sort of society that would result from it. And when one looks "at the world of the 1980s and the triumph of absolute right and the market mentality over public good and community," one realizes immediately that Nozick's minimal-state construct is seriously misguided.

Nozick implies that the minimal state might produce political results not to his liking but still insists that a more interventionist state would be unjust. Yet "[i]n politics," Barber argues, "consequences are central, not peripheral; and if consequences are repellent, the prudent course may be to reappraise premises." The political world, Barber maintains, is anything but pristine: our choice is rarely between justice and injustice, but between greater or lesser forms of injustice, between consequences that are more or less tolerable, acceptable, or legitimate. As Barber writes, quoting Brecht, "It is a fearsome thing to kill, but it is not granted to us not to kill."

There is a great deal to recommend in Barber's overall approach. Much of political philosophy *is* detached from political reality, and many philosophers would do well to exchange analytic rigor for political relevance—to focus less energy on abstract truth, more on the exigencies of a complex world. Barber is most convincing when he argues that political consciousness is different from philosophical consciousness, that cloistered detachment from active, democratic self-government renders the philosopher incapable of making wise moral decisions.

Still, Barber is seriously mistaken to consign philosophy to political insignificance. He himself is compelled to admit as much. He acknowledges, for example, that Nozick's book "is reputed to have sat invitingly on the desks of Ford administration staffers in the mid-1970s" and that it has become "a kind of *locus classicus* of the Reagan era's aggressive free-market privatism." Barber also bemoans the influence liberal political philosophy has exerted over our culture—a culture that has "alienated men and women ... from their fellows" and left them "vulnerable ... to meaninglessness and authoritarianism."

Indeed, philosophy *should* influence politics. Barber may be right to claim that we are citizens first. But part of being a citizen—indeed, of being human—is being a philosopher. Maybe not a hoary philosopher of the academy, but a philosopher nonetheless: someone involved in moral debate, in discussion about what constitutes justice and the good life.

Barber's hesitancy to engage in philosophy seems to stem from his single-minded focus on consequences. Consequences should certainly play a significant role in moral decision making, but Barber takes the additional step of implying that nonconsequentialist concerns are rarely worthy of serious consideration. He argues that "[t]o be political is . . . to . . . make judgments without guiding standards or norms," to evaluate conduct "on the basis of its effects rather than its intentions." And he adds that, if the consequences of making a particular decision are more tolerable than the consequences of not making it, the decision should be made "*regardless of its philosophical status* [emphasis added]."

This is a strange position coming from someone who speaks of justice and moral legitimacy. It is generally acknowledged, for example, that a law enforcement officer, responding to a murder, may not execute an innocent individual in order to calm a lynch mob and prevent the deaths of several people. Similarly, it is not acceptable for a doctor to kill an innocent patient, removing her organs, in order to save five other patients. People may not be used simply as instruments toward some desirable end. After all, *how* we act is at least as important as the consequences of our actions.

Barber would respond, I suppose, that hypothetical examples about law enforcement officers and doctors don't get at the complexities of moral decision making in the nuclear age. When millions of lives hang in the balance, moral purity is impossible: we must frequently, through decision or indecision, sacrifice the innocent in order to prevent dire consequences.

True enough. But what's disturbing about Barber's argument is his assumption that moral principles are therefore pointless. The appropriate response is not to throw out moral principles, but to recognize that exceptions must be made in certain circumstances.

Take Michael Walzer's discussion in *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977) of the decision to bomb German cities during World War II—a decision that resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of innocent people. Here Walzer, who has just dedicated 250 pages to arguing that justice *in* war is distinct from the justice *of* war (that countries must—

and do—accept limitations on how they engage in battle), is caught in a bind. He has argued that the intentional killing of civilians is unacceptable, yet he recognizes that the seemingly imminent triumph of nazism represented such a threat to the safety of the whole world that "one might well be required to override the rights of innocent people and shatter the war convention." In the end, he asserts, some of the bombing was probably justified.

Still, Walzer articulates his position under great moral pain. "This is not an easy argument to make," he writes, "and ... we must resist every effort to make it easier.... If one is forced to bomb cities ... it is best to acknowledge that one has been forced to kill the innocent."

For Walzer, political exigency occasionally calls on us to make exceptions to moral principle; but it certainly doesn't demand, as Barber would have it, that we abandon moral principle altogether. La Rochefoucauld's words are instructive for the political decision maker who must at times reject moral convention: "Hypocrisy is the homage that vice pays to virtue."

Such a response probably wouldn't satisfy Barber, since he does not see where philosophical principles lead us even in the more mundane decisions of daily politics:

> Do we permit fetuses to be killed or take from women the right to control their own bodies? ... Do we bust up neighborhoods in order to integrate schools or jeopardize equal educational opportunity to preserve neighborhood solidarity? ... Do we build a single artificial heart or fund ten thousand hospital beds? ... Show me a decision that does not involve trade-offs; show me the trade-off that formal criteria can help us evaluate.

But Barber must recognize that it is impossible to make such decisions without invoking moral—hence philosophical—arguments. How can we even speak of "justice" if we do not hold principles about what's just and what isn't? Philosophy, broadly construed, does a great deal more than Barber acknowledges. The jurors in Bernhard Goetz's trial, for example, determined Goetz's fate based on whether they thought a "reasonable" person would have shot the youths who allegedly tried to mug him on the subway in New York. This is only one plausible philosophical standard, and it has to be argued for against other contenders. After all, Goetz could have been judged on his "sincerity" (his guilt being a function of whether *he* genuinely believed he was acting in self-defense), or on the principle that vigilantism is permissible (his guilt being a function of whether the *particular* punishment he meted out was reasonable), or even on the basis of the repugnant but frequently articulated claim that a more lenient standard be applied to him since the youths he was attacking were Black and Blacks commit a disproportionate number of violent crimes.

In short, the most Barber can legitimately argue is that philosophy is insufficient, not that it's unnecessary. In that case, however, he is knocking down a straw man, since no political philosopher claims to provide a magical mathematical formula that gives a precise answer to every political dilemma. Philosophers are no more responsible for failing to come up with such a formula than are biologists, linguists, or plumbers.

Finally, it is worth examining what Barber offers as an alternative to philosophy. Democracy, he claims, is philosophy's antidote. Democratic participation "integrates us, making individuals into citizens and creating from disparate parts a single people." When successful, democracy transforms "common weakness into social equality, common dependency into social mutuality, common exploitation into social cooperation, and common fear into social security." Instead of abstract philosophy, we have "common judgment"; instead of moral principle, "common sense."

We should, of course, take common sense seriously; but we shouldn't follow it reflexively. After all, the mere fact that something is common doesn't automatically mean it makes sense. Yesterday's common sense is often today's prejudice, and today's common sense will no doubt appear foolish tomorrow—provided that it doesn't destroy us before we get there. It is strange that Barber—who is supremely concerned about the impact of "propaganda," "advertising," "alienation," and "indoctrination" on society—can so blithely posit faith in common sense, as if these forces affected only our philosophy and nothing else.

Philosophers are no more responsible for providing a precise answer to every political dilemma than are biologists, linguists, or plumbers.

Perhaps Barber thinks that common sense will indeed be reliable once we live in a more genuinely democratic age. But beyond endorsing "civic education" and "styles of political participation that go well beyond occasional voting," he is curiously silent as to how one brings about this democratic transformation. In fairness to Barber, he has addressed this issue in more detail elsewhere, particularly in *Strong Democracy* (1984). But the question remains how one creates genuine democracy in a world that, as Barber writes, is characterized by "multinational corporations, ... irredentist nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and the constant threat of nuclear oblivion." It was a lot easier being Tocqueville 150 years ago.

Even if Barber's more harmonious society were to arise, philosophical conflict would not disappear. The question would remain: who should prevail in democratic debate? Not, one hopes, the people who scream the loudest. Better those who convince their fellow citizens, who make the most morally compelling arguments. In that case, the problem is not, as Barber would have it, that philosophers are too "plentiful." What we need is better philosophy, not less of it. □