SETTING FIRE TO PAPER UTOPIAS: WHAT IS THE ROLE OF IDEALISM IN POLITICAL THOUGHT?

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Cruelty, folly and lasting modernisation. About his individual happiness. Such an endorsement crushed. In such fearful times, the factory worker artefacts were destroyed and ethnic minorities were dead—no one really knows. Historical and cultural the end of the 1960s, tens or hundreds of thousands it itself, legitimizing violence amongst its citizens. By properly concluding with Mao's death in 1976. In the was still unofficially in action during 1972, only sounds monstrously naive. The Cultural Revolution have enjoyed doing because it was repetitive and which he had been assigned that she herself wouldn't into garden'. Reinforcing this fantasy of China as (the very young and the very old, and the "usual" feeling refreshed by 'the news that people of all ages (the very young and the very old, and the "usual" able-bodied) were working together to turn desert into garden'. Reinforcing this fantasy of China as a selfless paradise, he repeats an anecdote from an American friend, Jumay Chu, who had visited China that year:

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With the benefit of hindsight, of course, Cage sounds monstrously naive. The Cultural Revolution was still unofficially in action during 1972, only properly concluding with Mao’s death in 1976. In the meantime, Mao’s writings impressed Cage deeply. He praises Mao’s ‘wear-headedness’ and describes feeling refreshed by ‘the news that people of all ages (the very young and the very old, and the “usual” able-bodied) were working together to turn desert into garden’. Reinforcing this fantasy of China as a selfless paradise, he repeats an anecdote from an American friend, Jumay Chu, who had visited China that year:

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young, rich or poor, talented or otherwise, and so on. From 'Original Position', we are then asked to consider—with Rawls's persuasive guidance—the basic structure of the social institutions that we would reasonably agree to, pursuing our rational self-interest in an arranged society. His presumption is that reasonable people would agree on a utopia of liberal egalitarianism, a society that would take care of us no matter what hand we were dealt in life, a place that was preeminently fair, if a little dull. (Which raises the question, memorably made by the demolisher of all utopianism, do we actually want to live in an ideal society?)

Broadly, Rawls's critics fall into two sorts: those who dispute his theory, and those who dispute his approach. The former sort are essentially involved in the ongoing renovation of Rawls—annexing, trimming or polishing certain aspects of his theory, an ongoing endowment of distinctive concepts of analytic political philosophy over the last forty years. The latter sort of critics include those that I’ve already described, who argue that Rawls’s approach is aloof from political reality, a liberal vision with troubling distortions of fact. After all, the individuals who populate Rawls’s 'Original Position'—rational, self-interested, stripped of social identity—are nothing like the people who really populate this planet, embedded in cultural and social histories, caught in gender categories, and guided by feelings and instincts and folk wisdom. To Rawls’s credit, he was well aware of this issue and drew a distinction between theory and non-ideal theory. Only the latter was obliged to consider the facts of the world, taking seriously the issues of feasibility and practical impact. Ideal theory, on the other hand, was based purely on moral principles from the bottom up; this was its moral strength and, of course, its pragmatic weakness. Yet, as long as such utopias are not applied 'as is' upon the world, then what does it matter if they aren't sensitive to the facts of the world, taking seriously the issues of feasibility and practical impact? After all, facts about the world only ever seem to limit our moral horizons, and rarely ever extend them. But what sense is there in developing a theory of justice with no ambition of applying it to the world? How is it that analytical political philosophers can work day and night to sculpt ideal ethical systems, competing with their colleagues for moral superiority, yet claim to have no interest or responsibility for how these systems are implemented, nor if their systems are still attractive when put into practice? By making the ideal/non-ideal distinction, political philosophers have simply outsourced the issue of implementation to whoever might be interested (social scientists? policy analysts? politicians?). This doesn’t seem to satisfy the range of activities that political theory should be engaged in.4

On this point, the critics are undoubtedly correct: the discipline of political theory, as a whole, needs to focus more on real politics. But should we therefore more round the arms of realism in its purest form is profoundly conservative. It has nothing to say about the future, nothing to say about the injustices it finds, nothing to say at all except for what the status quo really looks like. Indeed, whenever 'realists' make prescriptive claims, even when they are modest, revealing their detachment from perfect realism, smuggling in prescriptions under the banner of description. It happens surprisingly often: 'realists' slide from observations about the plurality of social life, or the essential contestability of political concepts, into proposals for agonistic pluralism or deliberative democracy. This is to say, if their observations are wrong, nor that their proposals aren’t attractive; it is to say that a different sort of argument is required. The fact that we do sometimes disagree is no reason to claim that we ought to sometimes disagree, just as the fact that we do

sometimes act self-interestedly is no reason to claim that we ought to act as such. Perhaps there are good reasons for acting these ways in certain situations (or for choosing to resist the temptation), but such reasons cannot be derived alone from the existence of this phenomenon. A utopia orientates change; it gives us bearings in the messy world of real politics. Even though it is a 'not-place', a fragment of the imagination, the utopia can indirectly shape the world by guiding non-ideal policy and motivating political action; while the dystopia plays the same role in reverse, a warning rather than an invitation. As Raymond Geuss remarked, 'An imagined threat might be an extremely powerful motivation to action, and an aspiration, even if built on fantasy, is not nothing, provided it really moves people to action.' Yet, as a realist, warns against taking this too far, against formally surrendering to the large-scale forces of imagination, fantasy and mythology. It is not inconsistent, he argues, for a realist to admit the influence of religion upon the real world, yet to simultaneously deny the plausibility of religious claims about truth and morality. This is the fleet-footedness that advocates of idealist principles need to cultivate, the ability to recognize what is admirable and what is absurd about their dreams.6

Consider one of the more successful idealist projects of recent history, the human rights regime. It promotes the rights that humans have simply by virtue of being human. As a diagnosis of the human condition, the narrative of the human rights regime is a near-ridiculous, an existential tautology which wilts itself into being. At the same time, however, it is sensible to recognize that the human rights regime has had a substantive and often positive impact on the world, especially by providing us with a language and a set of institutions that can constrain the powers of the state—that wondrous yet terrible invention. In this sense, we might commit to human rights for purely practical reasons, like Pascal wagering to believe in God. Moreover, by tinkering with the human rights regime's tangible manifestations, we can reinforce the positive impacts of rights and curtail the negative—for yes, there are times when even rights go bad. By slipping between these perspectives, between idealism and pragmatism, between the prescriptive and descriptive, one can develop a more sophisticated attitude toward the political. I chided John Cage for his fulsome endorsement of Mao Zedong, yet who knows what worryings might arise from a position of realism in politics, a position that recognizes the limits to what worrying commitments we hold today. Is it sensible, for instance, to have unqualified support for humanitarian aid when some organizations are tainted by ulterior motives and questionable impacts, and when others are accepting funds from states which regard the humanitarian sector as a new source of soft power? Or what about the unconditional relativism of certain post-modern theories, which are beginning to look suspiciously like apologia for complacency in the face of global injustice? By recognising the different roles that political ideas can play, it is possible to applaud an idea's merits without offering unqualified endorsement, or to criticize its faults without rejecting it completely. After all, there are different ways to navigate by. To sum up, there are distinct ways in which an artist or theoretician can engage with the political. First, one can use their imagination to create utopias, to concoct possible worlds that are not responsible to the limitations of the here and now. This is utopianism at its most pure. Second, one can engage theoretically with the real world, with an emphasis on feasibility, in which case the utopia should only serve as a compass bearing, a distant star to navigate by. This is non-ideal normative theory or prescriptive theory. Third, one can attempt to stand outside of ethics and focus purely on description, examining the decision-making and analytical devices that inform political behaviour. This is pure realism or descriptive theory. And finally one can roll up their sleeves and 'do something real', dirtying their hands in the pursuit of what one believes to be right. This, of course, is political action.
Most importantly, though, the artist or theorist should be aware of slippage between these roles; they must keep track of which hat they have on when. It is fine to be an idealist, a pragmatist, a realist, or an activist, and it is better still to be all four—but confusing these categories can be a dangerous game. People who presume to embody all in a single proposition are likely to be fools or would-be tyrants.

As for the question of whether art belongs to any particular category, the answer is emphatically no. Artists can, should and will do whatever they want, which includes dismissing the topic of politics altogether. Certainly, from a historical perspective, it is possible to see artists slipping into any of these roles. The artistic equivalent of non-ideal theory, that muddled middle ground between idealism and reality, is propaganda or didactic art, compromised as it is by political and communicative considerations. The history of art is, of course, brimming with examples of the utopian and the descriptive, perhaps due to art’s traditional emphases on the imaginative and the figurative. The latter role especially, the role of the ‘artist as witness’, has generated some of the more canonical examples of political imagery. (I’m thinking of the usual suspects: Goya, Käthe Kollwitz, Picasso’s Guernica, and so on—not entirely unmotivated by normative concerns, but at least free of didactic propositions.) In this descriptive role, art has perhaps been surpassed by photojournalism, but the representation of political ideas, decoupled from normative clairvoyance, remains fertile ground for artistry, trading ideological structure for the human form.10

As for political action, for implementing real change in the world, it seems to me that the artist—and indeed the political theorist—has not a lot to offer. That isn’t their point, their strength, their function. While some have tried to bridge the divide between art and agency—situationism most obviously—it is an awkward straddle, usually requiring one role to usurp the other. Furthermore, art and political theory have a slow turnaround time, an elite audience, and an elitist conceptual language; it is not the stuff of widespread change. The young Adolf Hitler, a working artist and aspiring architect, understood this fact, regretfully. Artists or theorists with an interest in political activism are best to engage in political activism—this is simply the most efficient application of energy.

Because, in the final analysis, the real political work is done by the world, by a messy mélange of political agents with mixed motivations, by individuals and states and ideologies which all shape one another, by contingency, chance and unintended consequences. In this practical sphere, our most direct influence is as normal citizens who vote at elections, join public protests, donate money to charities, boycott certain products, enter the civil service, or ignore the whole ignoble mess and retreat like Matisse to paint flowers and fruit bowls. Dissident artists are really just dissidents; art just the vehicle for their dissent. As artists and theorists, the best we can do is tinker with ideas, refining them and replicating them, and the world will either respond or it won’t.

1. Curiously, this more cynical interpretation of the word emerges some time after More coined it, first attributed to Roger North in 1734 who declared, ‘Young men, for want of experience, [...] create Utopias in their own imagination, and calculate according to their present fancy.’

2. In The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism (1909), Marinetti’s feverish hymn to the prospect of a merciless mechanical age, he declared: ‘We will glorify war—the world’s only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman. We will destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind, will fight moralism, feminism, every opportunistic or utilitarian cowardice.’ Unfortunately, he got what he wanted. See Günter Berghahn (1996), Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944, Providence, Rhode Island: Berghahn Books.

3. Curiously, an Associated Press report of protests in Wall Street on 29th April 2010 mentioned that one of the placard-holding protestors had a jewel-engraced skull with the words ‘Financial Terrorists’. Conversely, such skulls can also be seen in the window displays of European jewellery stores. Such is the ambivalent influence of Hirst’s For the Love of God.


7. I am not one to declare that you cannot derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’. Indeed, I think that, in a broad sense, all normative claims derive from facts about biology, psychology, culture, geography, and so on. However, I do endorse David Hume’s original wariness of people who slip unreflectively between is-talk and ought-talk, a far subtler distinction. See Richard Joyce (2007), The Evolution of Morality, Massachusetts: The MIT Press; and Kwame Anthony Appiah (2008), Experiments in Ethics, Harvard: Harvard University Press.

8. Geuss, ibid.

9. Pascal decided that it was better to believe in God for the prudential reason that the small chance of spending infinity in Hell outweighed the earthly benefits of atheism. Similarly, we might choose to believe in human rights for fear of what the world would be like without them.
