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Jonathan Wolff. *An Introduction to Political Philosophy.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. x + 237 pp. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-289251-5.

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An Introduction to Political Philosophy

This work is precisely what it claims to be in its title: a textbook designed to be used in introductory political philosophy courses. Whether or not someone teaching such a course will want to think about adopting this text will depend on how well the approach taken by the author corresponds with the particular instructor's preferred method of organizing, conceptualizing, and teaching an introductory course.

Wolff takes a thematic rather than a chronological approach to the topic, although one would gain a good appreciation of the history of western political philosophy by reading this book. The book is divided into six chapters, each focusing on what he identifies as a "central problem" of political philosophy. The problems he addresses are: "The State of Nature," "Justifying the State," "Who Should Rule?," "The Place of Liberty," "The Distribution of Property," and "Individualism, Justice, Feminism." Each chapter builds on the previous one(s). While the author claims each chapter also stands on its own, reading the chapters independently or in other than the book's order would most likely undermine the coherence of the work.

Within each chapter, Wolff discusses how selected political philosophers have approached the fundamental question raised in the chapter. He takes a fairly analytic approach by looking closely at the arguments presented by the philosophers both from the point of view of the consistency of their positions and from the perspective of how satisfactory their answer is to the basic question posed in the chapter. His analyses are well founded, but an introductory student might get lost or confused by the analytic and, at times, highly sophisticated nature of some of the critiques.

As is customary in a text of this sort, the choice and interpretation of philosophers are fairly mainstream within the context of western liberalism. One should also add that the context is more precisely Anglo-American western liberalism, since few, if any, contemporary continental writers are discussed in the text. Of the expected philosophers, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau each received attention in the appropriate chapters, although Locke and Rousseau are covered more thoroughly than Hobbes. For example, one might expect to find Hobbes both in the chapter discussing the justification of the state as well as in the one focusing on state of nature. However, Hobbes' justification of the state does not appear in the former. The Utilitarians, especially J.S. Mill, are discussed in a good amount of detail in the relevant sections. Wolff does give libertarian and anarchist writers more attention than some might like, and he may not satisfy some readers in his fairly cursory discussion of Marx and socialism. While he does take on the critique of western liberalism presented by contemporary feminist writers in the final chapter, it is somewhat telling that this is the shortest chapter in the book. One gets the feeling that he felt obligated to include such a discussion, but ultimately he thinks that liberalism can accommodate feminist critiques.

While Wolff begins the work in a relatively even-handed manner, by the end of the text, his own positions become clear. For Wolff the purpose of political philosophy is to "seek justice." While he does acknowledge that there are other ways of conceiving of the task of political philosophy (such as contemplating the nature of good citizenship), he tends to reduce the other approaches he mentions to a search for justice in another guise. In this context, it is not surprising that while Plato's political philosophy is covered in the early chapters, Aristotle is notably absent from this book.

It also become clear by the end of the text that Wolff's own approach to political philosophy is heavily influenced by the work of John Rawls. Rawls (and his critics) receives detailed attention in the chapter on the distribution of property. Given the complexity of both Rawls' arguments and the critiques of his position, this section might well be beyond the grasp of many students taking

an introductory course. At the conclusion of this section, Wolff writes, "But whether or not Rawls's principles of justice are correct, he has done political philosophy the great service of providing a means by which the debate can be continued" (p. 195). It also is clear that Wolff thinks that Rawls has, in fact, gotten it just about as correct as is possible and that the criticisms do not, ultimately, stand up. Because of this orientation, if one is not as enamoured with Rawls as is Wolff, or if one feels that Rawls may be too difficult for students in an introductory course, this text would be a highly problematic choice.

If one is comfortable with the overall approach and framework through which Wolff approaches political philosophy, this may well be an appropriate text to use. However, if one thinks that political philosophy may have other questions to pursue beyond the quest for justice, this book would be very unsatisfactory. It also would not be a good text to choose if one want to address more thoroughly the critiques of western liberalism that certainly do exist. Finally, it should be noted that this book is clearly aimed at a British audience. The examples and illustrations are all from a British cultural, political and historical perspective. Students in the United States, and quite possibly in other English speaking countries, would not have much of a frame of reference through which they could understand the "real world" examples Wolff often uses to clarify an abstract point. For this reason, it is doubtful that the book would work well in American universities.

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