

*Political obligation in
its historical context*

Essays in political theory

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Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	page ix
1	Introduction	1
	<i>The historicity of the question</i>	
2	The identity of the history of ideas	13
3	Consent in the political theory of John Locke	29
4	The politics of Locke in England and America in the eighteenth century	53
	<i>The historicity of the answers</i>	
5	Practising history and social science on 'realist' assumptions	81
6	From democracy to representation: an interpretation of a Ghanaian election	112
7	<i>'Hoc signo victor eris'</i> : representation, allegiance and obligation in the politics of Ghana and Sri Lanka	157
8	Democracy unretrieved, or the political theory of Professor Macpherson	206
9	The success and failure of modern revolutions	217
	<i>Conclusion</i>	
10	Political obligations and political possibilities	243
	<i>Notes</i>	301
	<i>Index</i>	345

1

Introduction

This book is concerned with a mildly eccentric venture, an attempt to recapture intellectually a sense of the shape and character of one of the central theoretical problems in human existence. This problem — roughly, how far human beings have good reason to see and feel themselves as morally constrained by political organisations (villages, parties, armies, states) and morally committed to sustain these in the face of hazard — has never been easy to confront directly. But very drastic historical pressures, both intellectual and social, have made it extravagantly more difficult for us to confront it than it was for the great European thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to do so. In response to these pressures, all too intelligibly, the problem has been shrunk, truncated or trivialised; and purported solutions to it have come to rest more and more blatantly upon parochial cultural pieties or institutionally routinised intellectual habits. Since no one today appears to be in a position to offer (and since it may even be true that no one today *could* be in a position to offer) a clear and decisive universal solution to this problem, there are evident attractions to the view that both academic modesty and political delicacy dictate that we should leave its full theoretical enormity discreetly unmentioned. Modesty and delicacy are fine values; but in this instance their sway is not without peril. The world is not becoming politically any easier to understand. The ritual reassertion of parochial political traditions in resolute mutual incomprehension can hardly be expected to provide a sound basis for enhancing our political understanding, while the view that a deepening political incomprehension of what is happening in the world will furnish us with the soundest guidance on how to act upon it puts a dismaying level of trust in the dexterity of providence. Our own credulities have their charms; but the same can scarcely be said by anyone for the credulities of *all* their fellow human beings.

This book records a protracted and, it must be admitted, an as yet somewhat faltering effort to recapture a measure of intellectual control over this problem. Its strategy depends for whatever effect it can secure on the cogency of the conception of the *nature* of the issue which is set out in the final chapter. The arguments of this last chapter in effect repudiate the idea

Introduction

that a theory of political obligation could in principle offer valid universal *solutions* to this problem of practical reason. But they do so in a manner which does not obviously license (and which certainly does not depend upon affirming) the presumption that rational value for human beings is a function either of socially imposed dogmatisms or of individual whim. At least at the level of intellectual intention, they reject both cognitively painless styles of relativism (which are readily interpreted and perhaps correctly interpreted as nihilist) and cognitively arbitrary styles of moral absolutism (which fail to acknowledge – and which are indeed incompatible with a recognition of – the profound historicity of the human condition). They presume that ethical appraisal is in part a fully cognitive activity, that it is irretrievably a part of the human condition to be exposed to the vicissitudes of politics and that what it is rational for human beings to do in relation to the political domain depends both upon ethical understanding and upon practical judgement of social and political causality.

The remainder of the chapters in the volume explore the grounds for and the implications of these presumptions from a variety of different angles. Being written over nearly a decade and a half, they naturally show some variation in intellectual judgement and considerable shifts in intellectual taste. One group, a set of exercises in and reflections upon the history of political theory, develops some of the implications of Collingwood's observation that 'the history of political theory is not the history of different answers to the same question, but the history of a problem more or less constantly changing, whose solution was changing with it'.¹ The problem whose history of continuity in difference I here seek to isolate is usually titled the problem of political obligation. A valid theory of political obligation can only be a theory of the nature of the conceptual space which constitutes the continuity of the problem. But in recognising the immense degree of historical individuation of the problem as a problem of practical reason, it precludes the discovery of universal *solutions* to this. In exploring the historicity of even the profoundest reflection on this question in the past, these chapters may help to show why cognitively more strenuous versions of relativism, so far from implying an ethical and epistemic nihilism, may be a condition of establishing the rational authority of value in human existence.

The second group of exercises is academically more heterogeneous but perhaps also more distinctive. While the first group investigated the contextual rationality of political thinking, the second considers from a variety of standpoints the contextual rationality of political action and the roots of this rationality in the nature of man and of human society. Some of the standpoints are geographically and historically very particular indeed. Others are, at least in affectation, considerably loftier and less determinately located. But all of them seek to hold in mutual relation ethical appraisal and causal understanding. The view that these two modes of thought have been permitted to drift decidedly too far apart is now becoming in some circles an

Introduction

intellectual commonplace, though in other — and still perhaps wider — circles it remains a matter of firm conviction that one or other of these modes is, in relation to human existence, cognitively the only available option. But the attempt to pursue, academically speaking, in broad daylight *both* modes of thought at once remains relatively unusual; and the measure of intellectual recklessness (or insensitivity) which their joint pursuit demands makes it easy to see why this should still be the case. The intellectual costs of such prudence may be relatively slight in some zones of academic inquiry; but in relation to politics they are, have always been, and will always remain prohibitively high.

'The identity of the history of ideas' takes as a starting point a dissatisfaction with the range of genres prevalent in the mid 1960s in the historical study of human thinking, stressing the bifurcation of analytical energy and interest then apparent between philosophers and historians and arguing for the view that this separation had had and was continuing to have a decidedly malign effect on the intellectual quality of the products of both. Since 1968 the implications of the line of thought behind it have been patiently explored and very greatly clarified and extended in the work, in particular, of Quentin Skinner.² In the historiography of political theory at least, some parts of the arguments which it contains have now become relatively commonplace³ — more especially the stress on the categorical impropriety of anachronism and the need for and difficulty of distinguishing the intellectual autobiography of the historian from the intellectual biography of past thinkers. The stress on the historian's obligation to maintain this distinction as clearly as she or he can manage plainly implies a more crudely realist conception of the status of the past than is offered by such an influential hermeneutic thinker as Gadamer.⁴

In the present context these methodological injunctions to practising historians are of less importance than two other aspects of the arguments which it advances. The first of these, somewhat hastily set out in this instance and exceptionally difficult to develop with precision at greater length, is the stress on the exceedingly delicate and complex relations between the historical site in which an elaborate piece of reasoning is worked out and the precise content of that piece of reasoning. The directions in which epistemology has developed in American and English philosophy since the early and mid 1960s have underlined very sharply the importance of the claim that: 'To abstract an argument from the context of truth-criteria which it is devised to meet is to convert it into a different argument.'⁵ But this development has not, unfortunately, provided uncontentious guidance on how to formulate considerations of this character in a clearer and more decisive manner. It may well, however, be thought by now to have provided rather powerful epistemological grounds for doubting the felicity of the preponderant development of political philosophy, over roughly the same time span, as the very abstract analysis of a small number of supposedly timeless ethical concepts.

Introduction

These developments in epistemology (the work in particular of Quine, Feyerabend, Kuhn, Rorty, and even in some ways of Putnam and Davidson⁶) have undoubtedly brought distinctively historicist and distinctively rationalist perspectives on human cognition into much more urgent and dynamic relations. Strikingly relativist styles of theory have been sustained by aggressively rationalist forms of argument, while more realist positions have been defended by increasingly cunning and historically particular analysis of instances of theoretical argument. The view that ‘historical specificity and philosophical delicacy are more likely to be attained if they are pursued together, than if one is deserted for the other at an early stage of the investigation’⁷ no longer appears as resolutely intellectually philistine as it perhaps did in 1968. Indeed, the prospect of establishing firmer intellectual control over the somewhat tumultuous heritage of recent epistemology appears now to depend largely on the more strenuous pursuit of this particular wager. Finally (and at a less intellectually demanding level) it seems worth underlining a single more pragmatic consideration, perhaps predominantly aesthetic in implication but arising out of the attempt to see historical and philosophical constraint and potentiality in relation to one another. To write the history of ideas as the history of an *activity*, thinking, which is intrinsically both difficult and exciting is certainly no closer to a common intellectual intention amongst historians of ideas today than it was in the late 1960s. There remain good reasons for at least attempting to write rather more of it in such terms, partly simply because history so written would be more interesting and humanly more alive, but partly also because history so written would be truer to its ostensible subject matter, more adequate to the real thinking men and women on whose lives it is parasitic,⁸ and, by virtue of being truer to its subject matter, decidedly more revealing about such profound issues of social understanding as the nature of ideology and the character and limits of intellectual freedom.

‘Consent in the political theory of John Locke’ considers a far narrower range of issues. Negatively, it seeks to establish that the interpretation of the place of consent within Locke’s political theory has been severely distorted by scholars who have failed to heed Collingwood’s cautions and have as a result been led by their anachronistic preconceptions into reading even the text of the *Two Treatises of Government* itself in an inattentive fashion.⁹ More positively, it attempts to use a considerably wider range of evidence about Locke’s beliefs to identify the theoretical problems which the place of consent in the argument of the *Two Treatises* posed for him and, in part at least, to explain why he adopted the solutions which he did adopt to these problems or why he failed to perceive the weakness of some of the arguments which he advanced in the effort to solve them.¹⁰ The main historical conclusion which it advances is that Locke’s understanding of the problematic rationality of political obligation was drastically more intricate than commentators have for the most part presumed. Perhaps more importantly (and

Introduction

certainly more controversially) it also gives grounds for judging Locke's understanding of this issue as, within his own terms, considerably more adequate to the intrinsic *theoretical* complexity of the issue than that of the great majority of thinkers, past or present, who have addressed it.

'The politics of Locke in England and America in the eighteenth century' develops two widely distinct themes. The first of these is negative and historiographical. After providing a somewhat brusque résumé of a considerable amount of research on the intellectual reputation of (and responses to) Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* in the eighteenth century, it deploys this as a critique of the essentially mythological conception of the character of political thinking in England and America during this period which was widely prevalent at the time of writing in 1964. This exercise in demythologising has won something less than universal assent. But little, if any, intellectually cogent criticism has been offered of the validity of the precise claims which the essay in fact asserts, though there have naturally been a number of useful subsequent extensions and minor amendments of what was at best a preliminary and somewhat summary attempt to sketch an extremely complex set of processes;¹¹ and in numerous respects, and quite independently, myth has been supplanted by impressively concrete historical understanding.¹² The most important lacuna in the essay's treatment of its titular subject matter I now consider to be the failure to separate out more clearly the historical vicissitudes of Locke's analysis of property from those of his general theory of political legitimacy and the right of resistance, and more particularly the failure to emphasise the continuing and rather narrowly institutionalised tradition of theoretical commentary on the standing of his theory of property to be found in the writers on natural jurisprudence, stemming from his correspondent, the editor and French translator of Pufendorf and Grotius, Jean Barbeyrac, both in continental Europe and in Scotland. Some traces of this sequence can be identified at various points in the annotation; but its skimpy treatment in the outline of the text as a whole represents a simple error of intellectual judgement.¹³

It is, however, the more positive theme of the essay which is of greater importance in the context of the present volume. What it attempts is to show, admittedly very sketchily, the extremely specific set of intellectual and political goals to which Locke addressed himself in writing his book, the profound impact which these goals exerted upon the character and content of the book itself and the striking degree to which those who did in fact read it (and even think seriously about its implications) in the century and a quarter succeeding its publication failed to grasp what Locke had in fact argued in it, let alone why he had argued as he did. As a historical study the essay attempts, however cursorily, to identify both the situational and biographical rationality of the work's original identity and the subsequent contextual rationality of the responses of its readers over roughly a century, of what it meant to them and why for the most part they understood it so

Introduction

poorly. This genre of historical study of a work's odyssey from inside the mind of its creator out into the necessarily plural and largely uncomprehending world of history is not attempted as often as it might be. It is certainly a dismayingly labour-intensive type of study if it is to be pursued in a more systematic fashion than it is in this instance. But it is also a type of study which, if it were to be pursued more systematically, would offer an extremely rich promise of illuminating the historical modulations of ideology; and it is at least possible that its more proficient pursuit might also help to focus more clearly the intrinsic historicity of both the questions and the answers which constitute the theoretical problem of political obligation.

To insist on the intrinsic historicity of these questions may perhaps be simply to insist flatly on a fact about the history of ideas and to wager more or less intrepidly that the human future will at least in this respect resemble the past. But to insist on the intrinsic historicity of the answers is philosophically more committing. The second group of essays considers at length two main grounds for undertaking such a commitment, the presumption that at least some component of the historical heterogeneity of the values which men espouse represents a constitutive characteristic of human nature and the judgement that power and causality are central terms of political theory. The first of these views, taken on its own, is of course readily compatible with the most cognitively effortless varieties of relativism. The second, taken on its own, is equally readily compatible with (and has indeed been frequently conjoined with) a comprehensively non-cognitive conception of the epistemic status of human values. But if the two views are taken firmly together, they may perhaps serve to establish a meaning for the claim that it is not an obstacle to, but rather a precondition for, the validity of answers to the theoretical problem of political obligation that they should be intrinsically historical. The concluding essay sets out this conception as clearly as I am as yet able. The second group of essays considers from a variety of viewpoints one or other of the two views on which it is jointly based.

'Practising history and social science on "realist" assumptions' considers the question of what sorts of knowledge of human beings individually or collectively are in principle possible. Focussing on the relations between language and consciousness, it distinguishes two quite different types of knowledge about our species which may be open to us, one which registers a range of distinctively human properties broadly as human beings conceive these and a second which identifies aspects of the human present and attempts to assess aspects of the human future in a theoretical medium from which it has carefully laundered out all, as Charles Taylor has termed them, 'anthropocentric properties'. The history of western epistemology since the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century has lent enormous intellectual impetus to this latter cognitive approach and has on occasion cast considerable doubt on the claims of the former to possess any epistemic status at all. It has been argued recently from a variety of standpoints that

Introduction

such conclusions are both morally offensive and epistemologically absurd.¹⁴ 'Practising history' fully endorses this conclusion; but it also seeks to show that the conclusion does not in any way militate against systematic inquiry into social causality (though it has, of course, many implications as to how such inquiry is appropriately to be conceived). In relation to human beings the successful analysis of social causality always may (and is often likely to) involve the explicit recognition, within the causal theory, of anthropocentric properties. At least above the level of neurophysiology, it is a theoretical error about the nature of man to regard human belief as a causally inert dependent variable. But it is also a theoretical error about the nature of human society to consider human action as though this could occur outside a context of social causality which sets many of the limits of what it is or is not open to a human being to bring about.

At least equally importantly, the grounds for rejecting the moral and epistemological sufficiency of a non-anthropocentric model of man are also grounds for doubting the validity of any ahistorical moral absolutism. A creature which was validly conceived simply as a pleasure-maximising and pain-minimising mechanism could very plausibly be supposed a creature for which the rational content of value was theoretically determined outside history — for example, as the maximising of pleasure and the minimising of pain.* But once the theoretical complexity of language, its centrality in human existence, and its key role in determining the character of human consciousness are fully recognised, such an ahistorical conception of the rational content of human value seems merely the imposition of an arbitrary theoretical whim. As speaker of a language and as holder of beliefs, man is a type of creature in relation to which the fact that it both interprets many of its own properties and shapes some of these as a result of its own interpretations is not merely an externally related matter of fact, but a constitutive characteristic. As a theory of what is rationally of value for such a creature, utilitarianism seems more a decisive exercise in denial than an attempt to take into full theoretical account all the relevant considerations.¹⁵ For such a creature valid answers to all but the most artificially causally insulated problems of practical reason will necessarily be intrinsically historical.

The remainder of this second group of essays consider at varying levels of historical and geographical specificity the implications, in relation to this intrinsic historicity of human understanding, of the concepts of power and causality. They begin with political impotence. 'From democracy to representation' analyses a single parliamentary election in a rural constituency in Ghana, seeking to explain its outcome in terms of the beliefs and sentiments of the relevant actors and to explain these beliefs and sentiments in their turn in terms of the social, economic and political context of this area as the

* The application of what was theoretically determined would always, of course, take place firmly within history.

Introduction

twentieth century has shaped this. It emphasises the absurdity of the weightless cosmopolitan presumptions which lie behind the official constitutional and theoretical categories that define this electoral episode at a national or international level. In the place of such blithe and conscious exercises of free will by a sovereign people, it sets out the dimensions of a single political choice as history has made this available. An evanescent constitutional form (there have been three wholly unconstitutional violent changes of regime in the succeeding decade) and an economy which has been progressively dismembered ever since, together underline with some brutality the political impotence of the denizens of Ahafo Asunafo. It is a fair test for a theory of rational political obligation that it should be able at least to *address* the predicament of the myriads of people in the world today (as at every stage throughout the earlier political history of the human species) whose prospective leverage on the historical process is as slight as that of the Ahafos in the summer of 1969. But to address such a predicament is certainly not necessarily in any sense to discern a rose in the cross of what was then its present.

The focus of 'Hoc signo victor eris' is somewhat wider. It sketches a comparison between the bases of effective political allegiance for the electoral politics of Ghana and of the island of Sri Lanka, seeking to explain these in terms of the beliefs, sentiments and practical situations of the inhabitants of these countries. It also considers the very different external limits on the scope of electoral politics in the two countries which have been set by the unconstitutional intervention of the armed forces or by popular revolt. In conclusion it counterposes the political ends which the beliefs of their inhabitants give them good reason to value, with the claims of the incumbent state powers in each society, underlining the gross discrepancy between the types of action which the former give their citizens good reason to perform and the types of action which the latter presume them to be obliged to perform. Whatever else might be true, it argues, the citizens of these countries cannot, at least, plausibly be supposed to have as rational obligations the set of political obligations which their rulers presume them to have. Yet it is also little, if any, more plausible to presume that the obligations in relation to politics which they do rationally possess can be identified convincingly without fully recognising the presence of the social and economic structure and the cultural substance of each society both within the internal scheme of belief which furnishes each of them with good reasons for doing anything and within the external causal context which restricts narrowly for them (as it does for all men) what it is within their power to bring about.

'Democracy unretrieved' discusses the relation between ethical theory and the causal constraints of social and political reality from a very different perspective. It considers the cogency of Professor C.B. Macpherson's influential theoretical analysis of liberal democracy, not as a historical account of the origins and development of liberal ideology but in its more ambitious

Introduction

guise as an assessment of the practical prospects of liberal democracy as a form of state. In this respect the analysis which Macpherson advances is at least as inadequate as his purely historical account of the development of liberal thought is inept. Moreover, the inadequacy of his analysis in this respect is of considerably greater importance than its purely historical deficiencies. By isolating a theoretical characterization of society which articulates rather few of its causal properties and by evaluating these properties as though they constituted an adequate *summary* of the properties of such societies as a whole, Macpherson gravely misjudges both their ethical merits and demerits and their practical strengths and weaknesses. What he has to offer on his own account, in consequence, is simply a relaxed ideology in lieu of a serious political theory. Such a failure is distinctively more surprising (and correspondingly more instructive) in the case of a theorist whose analysis starts out from a conception of social causation than it would be in the case of theorists whose thinking concentrates narrowly on the abstract analysis of a small number of ethical categories. It serves here to underline the central importance in political theory at all times of an explicit and convincing analysis of what precisely is causally and evaluatively at stake in politics. The key weaknesses of Macpherson's thinking lie in his quest for an epistemically (and thus morally) improper degree and style of theoretical simplicity in political theory. To be valid a political theory can (and indeed must) be both rigorous and conceptually elaborate. What it cannot be is at the same time theoretically simple and decisive in its practical implications.

'The success and failure of modern revolutions' considers the most interesting and intellectually puzzling aspect of the relation between theory and practice in modern politics. In a number of contexts in twentieth-century history it is apparent that the beliefs of revolutionaries have had a decisive practical effect. It does not seem likely in the great majority of cases that these effects were, even very broadly, what was intended by the agents themselves. Those who devote their lives to the practice of revolution, professional revolutionaries, have what are plainly epistemically the most ambitious theories of political obligation (of what exactly is politically to be done and why) which are extant today. Such theories stand at the opposite extreme of ambition, both intellectually and politically, from those which incumbent political authorities everywhere in the world seek to inculcate in their subjects or which the majority of the latter seem inclined to credit of their own accord (however large the discrepancies between these two may be in particular instances). When the explicit or implicit causal component of such revolutionary theories is considered systematically, it is difficult (at least without opting for a cognitively effortless relativism which destroys the epistemic status of all theories) to absolve them of the charge of epistemic presumption. In itself this verdict remains both valid and important. But two considerations, both underemphasised in the essay itself, need to be added to

Introduction

it, if its implications for the theory of political obligation are to be assessed correctly. The first is simply that it is essential to recognise the part which such beliefs play within political causality – to grasp the degree to which, by being believed, they change the world and make history. The second, equally ambivalently, is that it is a merit of such theories as theories of political obligation that they should include, as they do, an explicit causal theory of what can or cannot be caused politically to occur, even if it is a more specific and a practically more important demerit that, as they are actually espoused, these theories are in most instances to such a large degree false.

‘Political obligations and political possibilities’ attempts to draw the moral of these thoughts. Whether men (as they at the time historically are) do have rational political obligations, it argues, depends on four types of consideration: on what they do value and believe; on what they have good reason to value and believe; on how the social and political world then is; and on how it then could be *caused* to become (where ‘could’ implies *historical* causal possibility and not merely logical possibility). Only if all of these considerations are seen in relation to one another can the issue of the rationality and character of political obligations be adequately investigated. To see why this is the case is to see how to restore the concept of political obligation (though not necessarily, of course, of the obligations of their subjects to obey incumbent state powers) to the centre of political philosophy. It is also to see how it can be conceived in a manner which is neither (in conceptual terms) culturally parochial nor ethically nihilist.