

## A Critical Analysis of Liberal Political Philosophy

*Sirkku Hellsten: In Defense of Moral Individualism. Helsinki: Philosophical Society of Finland, 1997.*

This dissertation presents a probing analysis of several of the core moral and metaphysical premises of contemporary liberal political philosophy. Acknowledging the historical and current diversity of liberal theories, it appropriately focuses particular attention on the writings of John Rawls and their reception, as central to an understanding of contemporary liberalism.

Part I of the dissertation comprises an overview of contemporary liberal theory. It usefully clarifies the terminology in which much of this theory is expressed and isolates the types of epistemological and methodological issue that form the substance of the liberal-communitarian debate. Hellsten offers persuasive reasons for her claim that Rawls's attempt to detach his deontological and contrarian account of justice from any more comprehensive moral doctrine – in an effort to liberate it from any metaphysical commitments – leaves it exposed to many of the criticisms levelled against it by communitarian thinkers. This part of the dissertation contains important discussions of 1) the kind of individualism, and its shortcomings, implicit in the contractarian method, and 2) the respects in which the latter works to restrict individual autonomy. It also advances some grounds for distinguishing teleological moral reasoning from consequentialism.

Part II presents Hellsten's own conception of the moral and metaphysical premisses needed to overcome the deficiencies of deontological liberalism. This highly inventive conception is dubbed 'moral individualism' and its central feature is the insistence that personal autonomy be con-

strued as a project – something to be achieved – rather than an existential presupposition of political theorising. Its being a project *inter alia* implies a concern for substantive as well as formal equality. Current liberal theory, it is argued, is able to sustain its commitment to substantive (welfare) aspects of equality only by reliance on the evidently unwarranted assumption of the absence of restrictions on economic growth. An illuminating set of parallels is drawn between the moral subjectivism of liberal theory and the moral relativism of communitarianism.

Part III traces the historical evolution of liberal doctrine from Renaissance humanism to contemporary methodological individualism. Hellsten claims that a key development here is the inversion of the Aristotelian approach, which imposes limits on property ownership, into the modern liberal one which – from Locke onwards – effectively abolishes these limits. Good use is made of Macpherson's analysis to sustain this claim. This part also contains an acute assessment of the teleological elements in Kant's moral philosophy, and a probing comparison of Rawls's neo-Kantianism with Gauthier's bargaining theory – a comparison which elicits the importance of reciprocity for the former as well as the latter, and its significance in excluding non-contributors from the contractarian scheme. Hegel's critique of Kant – concerning the unsituatedness of his individuals – and its reflection in communitarian thinking, are well presented as is its metaphysical direction. Hellsten makes a strong case for the conceptual need to combine the Kantian metaphysical idea of moral agency with the communitarian demand for an ethical identity realizable only in a political society.

Part IV provides an extended elaboration of the concept of moral individualism. It draws heavily, and to good effect, on Aristotelian resources, discussing various notions of moral objectivity, the relation between theoretical and practical knowledge, the difference between de-

monstrative and dialectical arguments (and the latter's greater appropriateness as an instrument for establishing moral/political truth) and the distinction between pluralism and relativism. It offers a compelling case for using a teleological perspective to reconcile an ethical political theory based on individuals' moral judgement with the metaphysical singleness of the good.

In summary, the dissertation makes an original and significant contribution to contemporary political philosophy. It offers a careful analysis of the deficiencies of current liberal political theory, of the philosophical sources of those deficiencies and of how these might be remedied by a more overt and consistent use of philosophical tools which liberal theorists have allowed to fall from their hands in the course of their journey to the modern world. The dissertation very clearly engages with the most important literature in its field, grapples painstakingly with a whole series of arguments and counterarguments to be found in that literature, and constructively exposes their limitations to lay the groundwork for a distinctive alternative form of liberal political philosophy.

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