
IS THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH THE PRIMARY TASK OF A POLITICAL PHILOSOPHER?

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Abstract

Especially in his latter writings, John Rawls suggested that the primary task of political philosophers is not the discovery of truth about our most important normative social and political values. In his opinion, the proper aim for a political philosopher (and the standard of correctness for his ideas, arguments or theories) is reasonableness, not truth. In his rightly celebrated book *Rescuing Justice and Equality*, G.A. Cohen questioned Rawls's view about the primary task of political philosophy and tried to prove that searching the truth about our most important social and political values (and especially about justice) is the primary task of political philosophy or, at least, that searching the truth is not an illegitimate aim for a political philosopher. My primary objective in this article is to question Cohen's case against Rawls.

Keywords: justice, political philosophy, reasonableness, truth, G.A. Cohen, John Rawls

1. Introduction

Especially in his latter writings, John Rawls suggested that the proper answer to the question from the title of this article is the negative one. The primary task of political philosophers, Rawls suggested, is not that of discovering the truth about our most important normative social and political values. Rawls was not, of course, some sort of a Nietzschean. In other words, he was not suggesting that the political philosopher is or may be entitled to pursue falsity rather than truth, to lie in his teeth or to 'defend' theses about which he/she knows (or at least he/she thinks) that are untrue. This would be, undoubtedly, unethical and unacceptable. What Rawls suggested was that the proper aim for a political philosopher (and the standard of correctness for his ideas, arguments or theories) is reasonableness rather than truth [1]. In any case, Rawls's main objective as a political philosopher interested to answer the question 'What is social justice?' was not that of discovering the ultimate, universal and unquestionable truth about social justice, but that of identifying the most reasonable and workable principles of justice for a democratic society (a society characterized, among other things, by the fact that his citizens endorse conflicting reasonable comprehensive conceptions of the good). So, in defending

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his principles of justice, Rawls didn't claimed, as many first supposed, that they are the true principles of justice, but only that, most probably, they are the most reasonable and suitable to govern the basic structure of a democratic society [1, p. xlvii].

However, some philosophers – such as Richard Arneson, G.A. Cohen and many others luck egalitarians – strongly disagree with Rawls about the proper primary task of political philosophy. Moreover, I think that is fair enough to say that, in fact, almost all contemporary political philosophers are in strong disagreement with Rawls in this matter. In their opinion, the primary task of a political philosopher should be the pursuit of truth, not of reasonableness. Daniel McDermott resumed very aptly their (and his) view in this matter. “Political philosophy – McDermott has claimed – is not about getting things done – it is about discovering the truth.” [2]

Unfortunately, McDermott didn't offer any argument for this very confident assertion (or, if he did offered one, I didn't saw it). Like most of the other philosophers who asserted such an idea, he appears to assume that the truth of this assertion is or should be simply evident for everyone. There is, however, a political philosopher who explicitly argued for such a claim. I am referring, of course, to G.A. Cohen. In his rightly celebrated book *Rescuing Justice and Equality* [3], Cohen questioned Rawls's view about the primary task of political philosophy and tried to show that searching the truth about the most important of our social and political values is the primary task of political philosophy (or, at least, that searching the truth is not an illegitimate aim for a political philosopher). My primary objective in what follows is to question Cohen's case for this largely accepted idea among political philosophers. But, before that, let's first look to Cohen's argument.

2. Cohen's argument

Cohen's argument is very short and simple. Nevertheless, it is the best and most straight argument that can be advanced for seeking the truth about our social and political values as being the primary task of political philosophers. The argument is this: “The late Rawls holds ... (a) that *the* aim of political philosophy is to reach a consensus on reasonable principles, not to discover truths, and that b) whether there are truths about, e.g., justice is a question that his philosophy suspends. But these positions are in tension. For unless, in contradiction of (b), one expressly denies that there are such truths, how can the specification of the aim of political philosophy provided by (a) be other than arbitrary? Why, that is, should a political philosopher not seek truths if it is not excluded that there might be truths about, for example, justice?” [3, p. 307, Cohen's emphasis]

As it can be easily observed, Cohen's argument for seeking the truth about justice or about other social values is, essentially, his conviction that there is (or at least that there might be) a truth about these values. And, of course, Cohen seems to think, if there is (or at least if there might be) a truth about justice or

about other normative values, the political philosopher has a duty to seek it. More exactly, seeking this (possible) truth is his 'first' or most basic duty. So, since, as we all know, Rawls was only an agnostic about the existence of mind-independent moral truths, i.e. he didn't claim or show that there are no such truths, but only that we have neither a compelling proof nor a compelling refutation of their existence, he was not entitled to suggest that the proper aim for a political philosopher is reasonableness rather than truth. His position was, as Cohen preferred to say, arbitrary.

3. Some sceptical remarks on Cohen's argument

There are many kinds of philosophers who would not be convinced by Cohen's argument that seeking the truth is indeed the primary task of a political philosopher. Among such philosophers are, for example, sceptics or nihilists about moral truth. These philosophers would say, undoubtedly, that the main problem with Cohen's argument is its very foundational premise: the idea that there is (or at least that there might be) a truth about justice (and other normative values). The truth about moral truths, these philosophers would say, is that there are no moral truths. And if they are right, Cohen's argument is, of course, irremediably damaged. If there are no truths about justice or about any other normative value, it cannot be that the first task of a political philosopher is to seek truths about our normative political and social values. If there are no such truths, seeking them would be, of course, at least a foolish thing to do (or try) by a political philosopher.

However, like most of us, I do not think that there is something wrong with Cohen's premise. At least the idea that there *might* be a truth about justice (and other normative values) is, it seems to me, perfectly legitimate. Even the idea that there *is* a (universal valid) truth about justice (and about all other normative values) is, to my mind, a perfectly legitimate conviction, one that is not at all contradicted by the fact of cultural differences of opinion regarding the truth about our normative values. However, in spite of this, I also think that Cohen's argument is unconvincing, or at least not fully convincing. More precisely, I think that the (possible) existence of moral truths is simply not sufficient to prove that the first duty of a political philosopher is to seek these (possible) truths. It seems to me that we need at least an additional premise in order to really justify this conclusion. The premise I have in mind is that there is in our power to discover, beyond any doubt, or at least with great confidence, these (possible) truths. If we have such a power, then Cohen's argument is indeed a very good argument for seeking the truth as the primary task of a political philosopher. If, however, we do not have this power, the strength of this idea is at least seriously weakened.

The question is now this: do we really have such a power? Do we really have a method of philosophical inquiry about which we are entitled to think that is indeed reliable in discovering the (possible) truth about justice or about any other normative value? I think not.

Over time, political philosophers adopted various methods in their inquiries. But, to my knowledge, only philosophers who adopted a particular method ‘dared’ to claim that they have discovered universal and absolutely valid truths in their inquiries. I am referring, of course, at those political philosophers who adopted deductive (Cartesian) foundationalism as the method for constructing and justifying their theories. I am referring, in other words, at those philosophers who claimed, like Descartes and many other modern philosophers before them, that their theories are deduced from ‘necessary’, ‘self-evident’ and ‘self-justifying’ truths. Such political philosophers are, for example, Ludwig von Mises [4], Murray Rothbard [5] or Herman Hoppe [6]. And the reason why only philosophers who adopted Cartesian foundationalism as their method of inquiry ‘dared’ to claim that they have discovered universally and absolute valid (moral, social or political) truths is that, if feasible, Cartesian foundationalism is the sole method of philosophical inquiry which really entitle us to be confident that, by carefully applying it, we can discover the truth about our normative values. But, as many philosophers have showed [7-11], Cartesian foundationalism is not a feasible method of philosophical inquiry. In moral and political philosophy, one of these philosophers was, by the way, John Rawls. As Rawls remarked in the final chapter of *A Theory of Justice*, the main problem for Cartesian foundationalism in Moral and Political philosophy is that “while some moral principles may seem natural and even obvious, there are great obstacles to maintaining that they are necessarily true, or even explaining what is meant by this. (...) There is no set of conditions or first principles that can be plausibly claimed to be necessary or definitive of morality and thereby especially suited to carry the burden of justification” [12].

As it is well known, in Rawls’s opinion, the best we can hope for our opinions, ideas or theories is to justify them in a coherentist manner, by putting them in a ‘reflective equilibrium’. In other words, by accommodating our considered judgments and the principles that would ‘account for’ these judgments until there is no conflict between them. Putting our considered judgments about justice and the principles that would ‘account for’ these judgments in reflective equilibrium was also what Rawls has tried in his philosophical inquiry about the nature of justice. As Rawls described his strategy from *A Theory of Justice*, his aim was much more modest than that of proving that his theory is deduced from ‘self-evident’ or ‘necessary’ truths: “[t]he aim throughout was to show that the theory proposed matches the fixed points of our considered convictions better than other familiar doctrines, and that it leads us to revise and extrapolate our judgments in what seem on reflection to be more satisfactory ways. First principles and particular judgments appear on balance to hang together reasonably well, at least in comparison with alternative theories” [12, p. 579-580].

But, as Rawls was most probably aware, and as philosophers like R.M. Hare [13] or Richard Brandt [14, 15] highlighted, reflective equilibrium is not a method of philosophical inquiry about which we are entitled to be confident that is able to discover the truth about our normative values. Since, among other

things, reflective equilibrium is a method of justification which starts not with established truths, but only with our most firmest, considered or reasonable (but fallible) judgments, all we are entitled to claim about the opinions, ideas or theories constructed and justified in this manner is that they are *reasonable*, or at most the *most reasonable*, opinions, ideas or theories. It is no surprise then that Rawls never claimed more than reasonableness for his theory of justice, or that he openly recognized that none of his assertions is “proven in any strict sense” [12, p. 509], not even the conditions he imposed on the adoption of principles of justice by the parties from original position. Even these conditions, Rawls insisted, must be regarded only as simply “reasonable stipulations to be assessed eventually by the whole theory to which they belong” [12, p. 506]. So, again, it is no surprise then that Rawls was sceptical about the search of truth as being the primary task of political philosophy. His scepticism in this matter was, most probably, a direct consequence of his scepticism about the power of political philosophy to discover the truth about social justice or about any other moral, social or political value. Or, expressing the same idea in different words: his scepticism about searching the truth as being the primary task of political philosophy was, most probably, a direct consequence of his fallibilism, i.e. of his conviction that political philosophers have no way of justifying their convictions, ideas, or theories in a conclusive way (and, consequently, no right to claim more than reasonableness for these convictions, ideas, or theories).

In saying this, I do not want, of course, to deny that Rawls was sceptical about the search of truth as being the primary task of political philosophy also for other reasons. It is no doubt that his agnosticism about the existence of moral truths was also strongly contributory to his scepticism about searching the truth as being the primary task of political philosophy. But, if my previous remarks are ‘reasonable’, agnosticism is not the sole reason of Rawls’s scepticism in this matter (as Cohen’s argument seems to suppose).

Now, Cohen is in strong disagreement with Rawls about the best method of doing political philosophy. For example, as an “Oxford type of philosopher”, Cohen does “not think that philosophy can move as far away as Harvard people think it can from pertinent prephilosophical judgment” [3, p. 3]. He also thinks that the proper method of moral and political philosophy is, in fact, a method strongly criticized by Rawls: intuitionism or, as Cohen calls it, “radical pluralism”. As Cohen describe it, “[i]n this conception ... we determine the principles that we are willing to endorse through an investigation of our individual normative judgments on particular cases, and while we allow that principles that are extensively supported by a wide range of individual judgments can override other judgments that contradict those principles, individual judgments retain a certain sovereignty” [3, p. 4]. Moreover, Cohen emphasizes, in his “philosophically conservative view, that is the only way to go” [3, p. 4].

Let’s suppose, at least for the sake of argument, that Cohen is right on this point, and that radical intuitionism/pluralism is indeed ‘the only way to go’ for political philosophy. The question is now this: is radical intuitionism/pluralism a

method of philosophical inquiry about which we are entitled to be confident that is truth-conducive? Again, the correct answer to this question is, I think, the negative one.

As its name readily suggests, and as Cohen highlighted, radical intuitionism is a method of philosophical inquiry which relies heavily on our intuitions in particular cases. But, if there is something sure regarding our intuitions in particular cases (including our normative intuitions) is that they are often very different, if not contradictory. Even open-minded, careful, insightful and well intentioned philosophers do not share the same particular intuitions about our most important moral and political values. This is, by the way, one of the main explanations of their very different, even contradictory, theories about the adequate principles of social justice. And this is also, I think, a sufficient reason to doubt that intuitions are indeed reliable indicators of truth or that radical intuitionism is really a truth-conducive method of philosophical inquiry (even it is not at all a sufficient reason for not listening or trusting, at least provisionally, our most considered intuitions or, as “experimental philosophers” think [16-18], for excluding the appeal to intuitions from philosophical inquiry). In fact, neither Cohen speaks about truth when he describes the main result of applying radical intuitionism in Moral and Political philosophy. What we will reach by applying this method, Cohen says instead, are “our deepest normative convictions, which being our deepest, we find it difficult to defend (except against attack)” [3, p. 4]. What may seem even more puzzling for a defender of the idea that moral and political philosophy must try to discover the truth about our values, is that Cohen seems to concede even that “our deepest normative convictions” may not be, after all, statements which could be true or false but, as emotivists have long argued, only “noncognitive expressions of emotion or of attitude” [3, p. 4].

In order to save the idea that truth is the primary task of political philosophy from my previous remarks, some of us may be tempted to think that, in spite of what Rawls and Cohen have said and tried to prove, there are, in fact, ‘other ways to go’ for Political philosophy, ways which do not depend so heavily on intuition as radical intuitionism or reflective equilibrium. Unfortunately, there is no such a way. Whatever the so-called “experimental philosophers” or even some traditional philosophers might say about the respectability of the appeal to intuition, this appeal is inevitable in normative political theory, as well as in other areas of Philosophy [19-22]. We simply cannot construct and defend a theory about the ultimate principles of social justice, for example, without appealing to intuition. Moreover, we have good reasons to think that intuition is, in fact, the sole justifier for such principles. Some of us will disagree, no doubt, with such an idea. Most probably, they will say that there are also other ways to ground an ultimate normative principle. We can ground such a principle, for example, on facts. However, those who are still very confident in such an idea have a very difficult, if not an impossible mission. The mission I have in mind is that of disproving Cohen’s ‘fact-insensitivity’ thesis: the thesis that „a principle can respond to (that is, be grounded in) a fact

only because it is also a response to a more ultimate principle that is not a response to a fact; accordingly, if principles respond to facts, then the principles at the summit of our conviction are grounded in no facts whatsoever” [3, p. 229].

4. Conclusion

Let me conclude this paper by saying what I think I have realized by making the previous comments and observations on Cohen’s argument. I will proceed, of course, from the (possible false) premise that my remarks are ‘reasonable’, that they didn’t missed anything important about Cohen’s argument, and that they do not contain any mistake or error of judgment or argumentation.

If my observations are indeed correct, I think that they make a good case for the Rawlsian thesis that reasonableness, not truth, is the proper aim of political philosophy. It is possible, however, for some philosophers to doubt this idea, even if they agree with all my comments and observations. Truth, these philosophers might say, remains the proper ‘regulative ideal’ for Political philosophy, even if the discovery of truth might well be beyond its powers. The simple fact that reaching the truth about our normative values is a goal (most probably) beyond their powers doesn’t show that pursuing this goal by political philosophers makes no sense. I have nothing to say to such philosophers other than that, in my opinion, the most ‘reasonable’ option for Political philosophy is to focus its efforts only on attaining what is indeed in its powers, and that it should not create unreasonable or even false expectations about the truth-value of its inquiries.

My questioning of Cohen’s argument has had, however, another, more modest, objective. This objective was that of showing that Rawls’s position about searching reasonableness, not truth, as being the task of political philosophy is not at all arbitrary, as Cohen expressly suggested in his argument. If my comments and observations on Cohen’s argument are indeed correct, then there is no question that I have successfully accomplished at least this objective. This is because these comments and observations show that Rawls has, in fact, a response to the question from the end of Cohen’s argument. This question was, I remind you, “Why ... should a political philosopher not seek truths if it is not excluded that there might be truths about, for example, justice?” Rawls’s answer would be, I think, the following: because we have reasonable reasons to think that reaching these (possible) truths is not an attainable goal for political philosophers.

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