Political Philosophy and Empowering Citizens

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This paper defends the idea of empowering citizens by means of teaching them political philosophy. First, I explain and define empowerment as an experience leading to the development of critical and philosophical capabilities. Several challenges to using philosophy to empower citizens are then discussed and rejected. This group of challenges is called the ‘divorce theory’, because, according to them, philosophy and politics should be distinguished, as if divorced from each other, so that they can live happily side by side, but not together. Finally, empowerment is normatively defended and distinguished from paternalism, and examine the relationships between empowerment through political philosophy and deliberative democracy.

Political philosophers used to reflect upon what they were doing more often than they do nowadays. It seems reasonable to argue that this was partly so because they felt insecure during the rise of behaviouralism (Ricci, 1984; Strauss, 1988, 1962; Riker, 1962; Almond, 1966; Wolin, 1969), whereas political philosophy is now acknowledged as a legitimate child in the family of those studying politics. However, for some of us, the challenge to what we do derives from reality, from the experience of teaching students and writing our papers and books. Do we make an impact on our society? Are we able to transform public opinion? This is especially troubling when we face very controversial policies (such as the war in Iraq), when we believe that democracy is becoming unstable or when liberal values are continuously challenged. The wishes of those theorists to empower citizens is therefore not only a scholars’ position but also a political one. In this paper, I want to defend their position. First, I define the notion of ‘empowerment’ of the citizens through political philosophy. I then defend it against claims in favour of separating academic research and teaching about politics from politics itself. Finally, I defend empowerment by analysing its contribution to deliberative democracy and by claiming that empowerment is not a paternalistic attitude.

Philosophy, Capabilities and Empowerment

Whenever political philosophers teach and write, they become engaged in two projects. One is the immediate and more trivial goal of solving certain moral and political dilemmas. For example, if we write about whether the state should subsidize the arts, or about the circumstances in which a war is justified, we contribute towards finding answers to these questions. However, there is a further project, which has to do with the aggregation of all the little projects of contributing towards answering questions. It is like a grand picture whose components are all...
the papers and books that philosophers write and all the seminars and classes that philosophers teach. This grand picture, this big project, is not so much academic as social and political: when political philosophers teach, write and research, they can help to empower citizens. They help their audience not so much to know the right answer to certain questions, but to benefit from being autonomous, rational, more critical, more attuned to political events and to better comprehend politics. Notice that the grand project entails a collective effort. Jones who teaches issue $X$ cannot, by herself, realize it; however, the aggregation of Jones teaching issue $X$ and Smith teaching $Y$, and so on, builds up to meeting the grand project’s challenge.

At this point, I would like to refer to interviews I have made with four groups: unemployed people who were active in social justice campaigns; environmental activists; high school teachers; and university students. I asked all these people if they could remember occasions in which they felt that they were ‘empowered’, and what they sensed during those events. Three elements were common to all answers. First, a sense of trust. There was always somebody who fully trusted them and their abilities to change things, whether this was finding a decent job, making an impact on environmental policies or being able to pass the exams. Second, they all mentioned an experience similar to learning a new language. They pointed out that they had learnt new ways of conceptualizing politics, which enabled them not only to understand but also to analyse economic, social and political issues, as well as their own situations vis-à-vis the authorities, or why they were poor, and so on. They often said that after being empowered they examined political events or institutions that had been there before, but now they could see things that they could not see before. Third, they all thought that they were empowered because they experienced a capability to be autonomous, whereas before the event that ‘empowered’ them they had been manipulated to hold opinions that were not authentically their own.

In general, it seems fair to say that all these people were talking about a combination of ‘understanding’ and ‘becoming critical’. They were empowered because they could better understand what was going on in politics or the economy, or in the texts they were studying, and this understanding was immediately and intimately related to becoming critical of what they saw. By ‘critical’, I do not necessarily mean that they were against something; rather, I mean that they were able to rationally and critically scrutinize, closely examine and analyse whatever they realized about the world. ‘Critical’ thus implies not taking things as they appear to be prima facie.

However, what does it mean for a philosopher to make her audience, for instance, more capable of criticizing? The answer lies in the concept of ‘capabilities’, which has been discussed by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum and, in the context of democracy, Elizabeth Anderson. I want to explain my position on the basis of their works.

A person’s capabilities are ‘parts of the state of a person, in particular the various things that he or she manages to do or be in leading a life’ (Sen, 1993, p. 31). Relating capabilities to ‘functioning’, Sen and his colleague Dreze write:
The life of a person can be seen as a sequence of things that constitute a collection of ‘functionings’ – doings and beings the person achieves. ‘Capability’ refers to the alternative combinations of functionings from which a person can [effectively] choose. (Dreze and Sen, 1995, p. 35)

Hence, the notion of capability is essentially one of freedom – the range of options available to a person in deciding what kind of life to lead.

Several authors have compiled lists of basic capabilities – for example, to read and write, or to escape preventable illnesses. Focusing more on education, Nussbaum lists three capabilities that are essential to the ‘cultivation of humanity’: the capacity of critical examination of oneself and one’s traditions; the ability to see oneself not simply as a citizen of some local region or group but also, and above all, as a human being bound also to other human beings by ties of recognition and concern; and the ability to imagine oneself in other people’s shoes (2000, pp. 8–10). Implied Sen’s theory in the democratic sphere, Anderson discusses ‘democratic equality’ as a capability to function as an equal citizen (1999, p. 317).

Following Sen and, perhaps even more so, Nussbaum and Anderson, and referring again to the interviews I have mentioned, empowerment can now be described as the human ability to use one sort of capability, or one type of freedom, to boost other kinds of capacity or freedom. Teaching political philosophy empowers because it enables those taught the freedom to achieve what I have elsewhere called ‘political literacy’, ‘political awareness’ and ‘political consciousness’ (de-Shalit, 2000). ‘Political literacy’ is the level of knowledge about normative politics (for example, being familiar with different notions of equality or justice); ‘political awareness’ is when one is aware of the moral dilemmas involved in politics; and ‘political consciousness’ is when one acknowledges that the moral dilemma is political and should be solved within the realm of the political. These are three levels of critical reflection on politics that can be taught using political philosophy, and they should be a means to boost the capacity of self-government and the capacity to make better use of the opportunities that one faces in the political sphere (de-Shalit, 2000).

To see why such capacities help, consider somebody who is given a chance to defend himself in court, but does not know the law or the court’s procedures and norms, and hence cannot use the opportunity. The same is true of political rights and opportunities. It is not enough if citizens are officially allowed to have such rights. If they enter the political arena with no skills and tools, they will waste their time and energy, and eventually give up, become frustrated and alienated, and cease participating. These citizens need to know how to conceptualize, theorize, criticize and put forward arguments that may modify public policies. With regard to this, the political philosopher has a crucial role in empowering citizens and preventing ‘political poverty’ or, as it is sometimes called, ‘voice poverty’.¹ Note that her role is not to offer answers to all questions and dilemmas; rather, it is to encourage people to raise philosophical questions and to teach them how to tackle such questions.²

Indeed, when political philosophers teach political philosophy, they should not just aim to solve a query or a jigsaw by applying principles of scientific investigation. They should first encourage their students and audience to wonder and help them
express this wonder in words and construct their questions. Then they should respond to their students’ curiosity with methods and skills that should help their students find out whatever they wish, and only then should they meet perplexity with information, argument and theory. All this is meant to make the audience more capable in political terms. This should come about, first, because people are supplied, as in every branch of science and study, with reasons and are educated to think rationally. But it should be achieved also because people are supplied with critical tools and are educated to demand justifications, to doubt and to think of alternative accounts.

Is there anything special here about political philosophy? Surely, instruction in any field will empower citizens. And yet political philosophy as a critical evaluation of institutions, policies and their rationales is crucial, because it is about the very institutions and policies that determine the way people live and that make a decisive impact on their well-being. In that sense, teaching political philosophy empowers in a very practical and political sense: it paves the path for citizens to participate effectively in deliberative democratic processes and institutions, and it enables them to approach moral and political questions from the perspective of ‘considered judgements’ through a process of reflective equilibrium. I will elaborate on this in the paper’s conclusion.

**Divorce Theories: The ‘Humble’ and the ‘Narcissistic’ Theories**

Now I want to discuss three (but by no means all) of the rival arguments. I have chosen to discuss these three because I find them rather common among contemporary students of political philosophy. These arguments maintain that it is not the business of political philosophy to attempt to empower citizens and that political philosophy cannot be political in any practical sense: it is political only in the tautological sense that it discusses politics, just as philosophy of language discusses language and axiology is the study of values. So philosophy and politics should be distinguished, as if divorced from each other, so that they can live happily side by side, but not together.

**The ‘Humble’ Argument**

Some people doubt whether normative political theory is viable at all, and they therefore doubt whether political philosophy can empower. They claim that political philosophy, like many other branches of philosophy, is about – and cannot achieve more than – conceptual clarifications. We do argue normatively about politics, but it would not necessarily be a philosophical argument. To some extent, this approach characterizes what is often called the ‘formal approach’ in political theory, an analytical approach, often involving game theory and rational choice theory. This approach’s premise is beautifully summarized by Keith Dowding:

> Philosophers, if they need be nothing else, must be consistent. And if one can show that one set of concepts is inconsistent with another, then something must give. Or, perhaps worse for the endless musing cycle,
what if we can show that two competing concepts of, say, equality are identical? End of debate. (Dowding, 2001)

Take, for example, the concept of rights. Formalists apply social choice to rights and analyse rights for consistency. For example, Hillel Steiner (1996) raises several doubts about our notions of rights, in view of the fact that rights clash with each other. Rights, he claims, should not clash with each other; otherwise they are not ‘rights’ – an absolutely fundamental principle, demanding so much. Such a principle, such a guide for policy, cannot clash with another one.

Political philosophers want to ‘comprehend contemporary debates’, to ‘understand’; and if they want to ‘appraise’ a theory, it is actually by ‘knowing’ it and its history (Van Hees, 2001). However, at best, they can reach conclusions in the form of very cautious predictions: ‘if $X$ then $P$ and if $Y$ then $Q$’. Obviously, if this is how formalists regard political philosophy, they cannot see how what they do is so intimately related to normative evaluations of institutions.

I should, perhaps, hasten to stress that many political philosophers do believe that we can still do normative arguments in philosophy. However, I do not want to take sides. Instead, I maintain that, even if the humble argument’s premise – that political philosophers can, at best, clarify concepts – is true, this clarification exercise can still contribute a lot to the understanding of political matters and thereby become relevant in a process of empowerment. In that sense, it can even be considered political.

My claim is rather simple. Perhaps philosophers do not become political or engaged in politics when they clarify concepts. Nevertheless, their clarifications do become relevant and can even help, and in two ways. First, clarifications often do make things clearer to people, who by virtue of this very fact either change their views or become more self-assured with regard to a policy that they now understand better. Second, in cases of disagreement, such clarification can prepare the ground for agreement, or at least for two or more sides that agree on what precisely it is that they disagree about. We often misunderstand each other because we use concepts and generalizations that can be interpreted in diverse ways.

Actually, the contribution of conceptual clarification is often more sophisticated. Certainly, in many cases, different conceptions of concepts may be in use. In such cases, conceptual clarifications involve both analysing the various ways in which concepts are understood and, possibly, finding an agreed conception of the concept. The conceptualization of disagreements in politics would be a great move forward, because, even if it does not eliminate misunderstandings, it may at least prevent them from degenerating into enmity.

To see how such clarification can help keep the debate focused but also help the protagonists move forward, consider first academic debates. For example, Brian Barry describes how both opponents and advocates of the idea of ‘impartiality’ seemed to him right, which implied that they were using the concept of impartiality in more than one way. According to him, if we clarify these arguments about impartiality, we will see that these people agree about more than they disagree on (Barry, 1995, p. 91). Or consider actual political debates, such as around contested notions – for example, the ‘right to national self determination’ or refugees’
‘right to return’. A conceptual clarification could point to different ways of meeting such rights and prevent political fiascos.

Of course, I am not blaming philosophers for the collapse of peace talks; nor am I claiming that such talks collapse only due to misunderstanding or lack of imagination with regard to certain demands and their meaning. However, it is often the case that a conceptual clarification could have revealed to the two sides an area of agreement and allowed them to accept each other’s demand. A political philosopher who elaborated, explained and justified such an approach would have done something that is relevant and indeed political. Admittedly, this would involve more than a simple clarification, but it need not reach the stage of a straightforward normative argument: the philosopher would not put forward a general directive that tells agents what they should do or how they should behave; rather, she would explore the various alternative conceptions and consider why some of them might lead to agreement and others might not. Earlier, I noted that all those interviewed about how they had been empowered mentioned learning a language and being offered new concepts and conceptions to better understand politics. In that sense, even the philosopher who limited herself to conceptual clarification would still be doing something political. And so the formalists’ claim that political philosophy is not ‘political’ seems not to hold water.

**The ‘Narcissistic’ Argument**

The narcissistic argument (and I am not claiming that people who hold this view are narcissistic themselves) embraces two theories. The first is what I call the ‘purity’ theory: philosophy is philosophy and politics is politics. Hence, political philosophy cannot be democratized, because its ideal is, in fact, detachment. For example, according to the ‘early’ Michael Oakeshott (1978 [1933]) (although it could be claimed that he later slightly changed his view), if philosophy becomes engaged in political practice it unequivocally ceases to be philosophy. Political activity is behaviour rather than reasoning. The world is changed only through the day-to-day activities of individuals and their experience; hence, it is absurd to claim that political philosophy can change the world. Theorists who imagine otherwise err twice: they betray theory (philosophy) because they fail to do it in the proper manner, and they actually damage the practices they refer to, assuming that the world can be changed by theory (Oakeshott, 1978 [1933], p. 9). Unlike things in the world, philosophy proceeds by examining coherence in the world of ideas. Thus, philosophical knowledge is getting to know the world of ideas and being able to distinguish incoherent from coherent pictures of it. Coherence thus becomes the criterion of truth. So, as philosophy (and theory) are categorically, and in their character, so distinct from practice, they are not relevant to practice.⁴

Without delving deeply into Oakeshott’s theory, let me point out that the position according to which philosophy at the service of practice ceases to be philosophy is not an empirically grounded reflection. Instead, Oakeshott offers it as an ideological viewpoint: it serves as a precondition for philosophy to remain an elitist exercise. Now, if this is a normative position rather than a definition, so it should be treated. So notice that Oakeshott writes this in his *Experience and Its Modes,*
published in 1933, the year Hitler came to power. Amazingly, he was quite sarcastic and cynical in the opening to the book:

Philosophy is without any direct bearing upon the practical conduct of life, and ... Of course, some so-called philosophers afford pretext enough for this particular misunderstanding. Nearly always a philosopher hides a secret ambition, foreign to philosophy, and often it is that of the preacher. But we must learn not to follow the philosophers upon these holiday excursions. (Oakeshott, 1978 [1993], p. 1, emphasis added)

How he could think that, for example, a work that argued against fascism was a holiday excursion is, at least, a puzzle. But he goes on:

When philosophy is sought it is sought for its own sake. It depends for its existence upon maintaining its independence from all extraneous interests, and in particular from the practical interest. To popularise philosophy is at once to debase it; ... [Philosophical thinking] is something we engage in without putting ourselves in competition; it is something independent of the futile attempt to convince or persuade. (Oakeshott 1978 [1933], pp. 1–2, 3,7)

My reason for disagreeing with Oakeshott in this text is also normative. Anybody keen on philosophy must be bothered by Oakeshott’s very technical way of looking at philosophy. Political philosophy loses its soul by being defined this way. Or, if it is not political philosophy that loses its soul, it is we human beings who lose our souls and our humanity by regarding political philosophy so detached from historical events such as the Nazi regime. I find Karl Mannheim’s position much more humane. Towards the conclusion of his book Ideology and Utopia, which was written in the same year Oakeshott’s book was published, he writes: ‘in certain areas of historical-social knowledge it should be regarded as right and inevitable that a given finding should contain the traces of the position of the knower’ (Mannheim, 1936, p. 236). His position was that we must not do political philosophy as if either the authors or the objects of our inquiry were non-human beings. He was right: political philosophy is not merely about institutions; it is about how these institutions affect real, flesh-and-blood people, who are to be governed and whose lives depend on the values and principles that political philosophy scrutinizes. Thus, Oakeshott’s position on that matter is to be dismissed. I will soon set out a non-normative argument as to why Oakeshott’s position is wrong; but as it refers to the second narcissistic theory, let me first describe the latter.

The second theory of the narcissistic argument is a ‘conservative’ theory. It is the claim that the philosopher’s traditional role of revealing the essence of things, which is beyond their appearances, may disappear if she deals with the world of appearances as these are manifested in politics. Notice that, unlike Oakeshott, these critics do not reject applied philosophy altogether. They simply regret the decline of traditional political philosophy and the rise of new, applied approaches. They suffer from a great sense of loss.

Leo Strauss, for example, is worried that the good old type of philosophy is fading away and its status deteriorates. Thus, Strauss views with suspicion any attempt to tie political philosophy with everyday matters. The traditional aim of political
philosophy is to know the nature of things, the best political order and human nature. He has little interest, for example, in showing people how to change the existing political order (Strauss, 1988, pp. 11–12).

Strauss blames the heritage of Machiavelli and Hobbes: political philosophy abandoned questions of virtue in favour of ‘those lower standards on which actual societies act’ (1988, pp. 11–12). So people assume that the best regime, or justice, are not necessarily identical with the good. The good, these people believe, exists only in the best circumstances; imperfect circumstances therefore prompt demands to reform the political order but not to establish the good (p. 21).

Notice how apolitical the motivation to engage in political philosophy should be, according to Strauss. The philosopher should be interested in truth, in full and universal knowledge, rather than in improving society. This does not imply that reasoning of a sort cannot be applied to real-life politics; but this would be ‘political thought’, to be distinguished from ‘political philosophy’. Strauss distinguishes between the two in terms of the obligation of political philosophy to replace opinions about the political fundamentals with knowledge about them. In fact, this is what motivates political philosophy, he claims – the desire to achieve knowledge, not attaining a certain political order or a critique of a policy.

Even the texts that political philosophers and theorists examine differ, according to Strauss. Political thought finds itself in legal texts such as laws and law books or in public speeches (Villa, 2001, p. 279; Strauss, 1964, p. 20). But this is not political philosophy, says Strauss. In fact, detachment from the ‘immediate environment’ and texts is a precondition of the philosophical approach to politics, he argues.

What is wrong with Strauss’s approach? One answer relates to Benjamin Barber’s argument that an approach such as Strauss’s does not even make political philosophy a better philosophy, not to mention a better understanding, of politics. It is merely the conquest of politics by philosophy. Instead of philosophy serving politics, politics is pressed into the service of philosophy (Barber, 1988, pp. 4, 11).

The second answer is that Strauss, like Oakeshott, commits a categorical mistake when divorcing politics from philosophy, as if the two were indeed separable. Of course, analytically speaking, we can separate the two. But the separation is only analytical. In real life, although politics and political philosophy are not the same, each cannot exist without the other. Notice that Strauss and Oakeshott do not claim that philosophical arguments do not rely on, or derive from, facts (a claim that could be made, even if controversial). Rather, they claim that the project of political philosophy does not rely on, and is not aimed at, politics. However, this pictures political philosophy as if it is autonomous from the political realm, which is deceptive. As Richard Flathman claims (1989, p. 4), even if philosophy is not passive, it is primarily reactive, in the sense that its materials and issues (and hence its possibility and its limits) are, for the most part, given to it, not created or constructed by it. So we reflect, philosophically, about politics because there is politics, which informs, relates to and responds to these reflections. Otherwise, it would have been as if we reflected upon a non-existent matter.

Moreover, unlike in the case of other branches of philosophy, where our reflections and ideas about a matter do not necessarily become part of it, in politics it is
the case. A philosopher’s theory about politics, especially if she publishes or teaches it, becomes part of the public discourse and thus part of politics itself.

Moreover, Strauss should acknowledge that reflection is not conducted by philosophers alone. Indeed, it is bizarre to claim that politics itself does not involve contemplation, as if it were all action and behaviour, and as if such behaviour could be autonomous of any philosophical reflection. In that sense, although politics and political philosophy are analytically distinct, they cannot be autonomous from each other. In fact, the idea that politics is autonomous from political philosophy is also morally repugnant, so much so that it does not fall under any definition of democracy (we often think of dictators as the only leaders who make political decisions without having to consider their moral aspects).

The reason Strauss turns a blind eye to philosophical contemplations within politics is that he distinguishes between different levels (or qualities) of reflection: ‘To judge soundly one must know the true standards’ and ‘political philosophy is the attempt truly to know ... the nature of political things’ (1988, p. 12). However, he is wrong, because he argues that the ‘true’ standard derives from some external world, a world of ideals. Instead, he should be looking for this standard here, in our world. By this I do not mean that he should derive the standard from what already exists; however, his starting point should be our thoughts, ideas and practices, as well as our quandaries. This applies to law, public speeches and the like, what Strauss calls in bète noire ‘political thought’. Because they all reflect, but at the same time construct, our notion of the ‘political thing as it is’, and because laws and speeches help us in our discussion of political things, they cannot be accorded an inferior status.

At this point, some commentators might still insist that political philosophy cannot be squeezed into frameworks and prescribed patterns. It has a life and a drive of its own. Above all, they distinguish between politics and the philosophical investigation of politics on the basis of their different sources of authority.

Two such arguments are put forward. One, like the humble theory discussed above, is that philosophers cannot be pretentious. Gordon Graham writes: ‘There may be and have been men who were, as it happens, both kings and philosophers, but qua philosophers they will not be better kings and qua kings they will not be better political philosophers’ (1978, p. 240). The reason is not sociological, in the sense that usually success in these two spheres of life would require different sorts of talents. The reason is epistemological. Practical reason must be of a kind that enables us to direct our thoughts to the resolution of a specific question in a conclusive fashion. The opposite is true of philosophy. There is no claim or conclusion in philosophy that we cannot reasonably question (p. 239). Thus, these are two very different sources of authority: a philosophical argument is good when it contributes to opening the discussion, and a political argument is good when it closes the discussion. Put very simply, practical reason cannot logically follow the conclusion of a philosophical inquiry. But Graham has to rely on empirical evidence about the narrow-mindedness of political debates to support his claim; and although some debates might be such, many other debates are open and thought-provoking. Moreover, even if most politicians tend not to listen to them, philosophers can win the ears of others, such as members of
non-governmental organizations, activists, party members, bureaucrats, as well as a few politicians.

The second argument about different sources of authority is more straightforward. How can recommendations about policies and institutions derive from philosophical arguments, the philosophers claim one sort of authority for their conclusions (such as logic, consistency and truth), and the people claim another sort of authority for their decisions (the majority’s will)? Furthermore, the fact that policy X may be philosophically just or right does not imply that that is the (only) reason why it should be implemented, if it all. This argument is often associated with Michael Walzer (1981, pp. 384, 386; although it would appear that since the publication of his article he has revised his views on that matter). He concludes:

philosophical validation and political authorization ... belong to two entirely distinct spheres of human activity. Authorization is the work of citizens governing themselves among themselves. Validation is the work of the philosopher reasoning alone in a world he inhabits alone or fills with the products of his own speculations. (Walzer, 1981, p. 397)

Walzer does not subscribe to the view that philosophers should be detached from politics. Indeed, he believes that they have to withdraw, but only in order to return (p. 380). However, they are likely to find themselves frustrated when they returns. The truth they know is singular in character: there is no place for compromise, whereas politics is all about compromise. Truth-oriented knowledge is inapplicable to politics.

Walzer is right to say that in politics we sometimes decide upon a policy not due to its righteousness but because of other reasons. For example, I can vote in favour of a policy \( Z \) because I am indifferent about it, but you and I agreed that if I vote in favour of \( Z \) you would support policy \( Q \), about which I care a great deal. However, is it not the case that if, for example, I am shown that \( Z \), which I am going to support due to this agreement, is morally wrong, then I should withdraw my support for \( Z \)?

Now, what about cases in which policy \( Z \) is shown to be right? Although this, admittedly, is not a sufficient reason for adopting the policy (in democracy, we also need a majority backing it), we should remember that political philosophy is not about predicting what policies the state would adopt; it is about what policies it should adopt. So \( Z \) being moral or right is at least a reason for supporting \( Z \) and implementing it.

Walzer here is obliged to democracy, claiming that if democracy supports a policy that the philosopher objects to, she has to accept it. Of course, he is right that we have to respect democracy. But the notion of democracy has to be extended. Part of the problem with the position he puts forward in this text (as mentioned above, he later revised his position) is that democracy is pictured rather narrowly as a process by which we collectively decide upon policies, the core of which is majority rule. If this is so, perhaps the majority’s will constitutes the main reason for implementing a policy, not philosophical reasoning and the question of whether a policy is morally right. However, rival models of democracy, such as deliberative democracy, which is discussed below, would point to the crucial role of political philosophers and of moral reasoning in democracy. For example, rights are so well
protected in democracies at least partly because philosophers and others can put forward arguments as to why rights should be protected and criticize the authorities when our rights are abused or neglected. Moreover, even when the way the public reflects on policies and their justifications is indeed frustrating, this does not imply that the public would not prefer to be able to reflect better and would therefore be interested in philosophical arguments and standards introduced into the political discourse. Indeed, the most common arguments against politicians and their decisions are about the immorality of their decisions. What are these claims if not philosophical reflections about and within politics?

Of course, the philosopher’s view is only one input into such a debate, and it should be treated on a par with others’ views, in the sense that her views should not count for more because she is a philosopher. However, if these views are convincing and right, perhaps they should count more. It does not matter whether she or any other citizen is the source of this or that view. What matters is the view’s consistency, rationality and truth.

Now, what can we make of the claim that political philosophy and politics rely on different sources of authority? Suppose we do accept that this is technically true, in the sense that the philosopher relies on reason and politics relies on majority support, or the popular will. Nevertheless, even if this is a different source of authority, it is still the same kind of authority. Even the majority does not claim that the state should do what it wants just because it is the majority’s will. Rather, the rationale of majority rule is that, when we are in doubt about what should be done, what is true and so on, we should reduce the element of risk by going with the majority: there is a better chance that the majority is right simply because more people think so. Moreover, the more democratic a society is, the more it distances itself from authoritative reason; and the more closely it relies on the majority as a source of authority, the more interested citizens are in the reasons behind policies. This is so because they develop a democratic culture of transparency. They claim that they are the source of authority, and therefore they want to understand why a policy was adopted. In other words, democratic citizens are not interested only in the procedure that leads to a certain decision; they want to know the rationale behind it. They want to be the politicians’ evaluator, so to speak. To do this properly, they need to be told why this, rather than that, policy was chosen and they need to develop a capacity to evaluate this justification. Therefore, policies that lack a proper rationale are criticized, even if they are in tune with the majority will or endorsed by a majoritarian process. Policies that are reasonable but have not been subject to the majority’s approval are not automatically rejected. The public might claim that politicians who fail to consult the public or to listen to the majority are no longer to be trusted; however, their policies, if thought sound, might not be objected to.

The sources of authority may be different, but both the philosopher and the majority legitimize their position by referring to reason. We should not confuse method with content. Although they vary in methods, the content of the sources of authority is the same – reasoning. In that sense, political life and political philosophy are similar. They are both based on moral disagreements, discourses and deliberation.
At least, this is so in democracies (Dryzek, 2000; Habermas 1989, 1990). Hence, to divorce the two would be a categorical mistake.

**Divorce Theories: Political Philosophy as a Self-Concerned Project**

If so far we have discussed those who do not regard political philosophy as political in the sense that it is part of politics or can have an impact on politics, for Dan Avnon (1995, 1998) political philosophy is not necessarily political even in the more elementary sense that it is about political institutions and their critique. For him, political philosophy might even be a private journey of the author and is therefore about an author (a self) becoming self-aware. So, he would argue that the question whether political philosophy should aim at empowering citizens misses the point about what political philosophy has always been, or, if you want, should be.

Avnon (1995) inspects the Socratic dialogue and detects what he calls ‘double communication’, an approach to the study of political philosophy that leads to the facilitation of self-knowledge. The dialogical situation awakens a discussant to seeing the state of his self-knowledge. This consists of knowing the self as possessor, knowing how the self is seen by others, and refined self-knowledge – knowing one’s most secret self. Avnon claims that a direct form of communication (phrases and arguments exchanged) is limited in its ability to guide one to this level of self-knowledge, which in fact is a sort of an insight that often cannot be expressed by language. Thus, if one wants to reach self-knowledge, one is not likely to do so with direct help from another person. However, something has to be done to start the process whereby one can reach self-knowledge. Socratic double communication can do this because it does not aim to directly inform one about oneself but to gradually lead one to question the right questions so that one reaches a state of mind in which one knows oneself. This, Avnon claims, is Socrates’ technique of enabling his companions to reach self-knowledge.7

Like any other teacher, Avnon contends, the political philosopher should not act as a source of information but as a facilitator. Hence, in the Socratic dialogue, elements of a dialogical situation are applied in order to awaken a discussant to the state of his self-knowledge. The companion assists the seeker to make reasoned moral choices and to reach this self-knowledge. *Inter alia*, Avnon claims, this contributes to the pursuit of wisdom and the good life. This, then, is the goal of political philosophy: an intellectual community and not political community; companionship and not citizenship.

Of course, the idea that the teacher does not dictate knowledge to the pupil, but only leads the pupil to the state of mind that will allow her to gain self-knowledge, is appealing. Alas, this process does point to a very isolated community of those who know how to reach a superior state of mind, a sort of a caste of political philosophers and their students, an elitist process that takes place within an *inaccessible* group of scholars. Moreover, the mechanism of double communication involves leading the philosopher’s companion to a state of mind by *not* using
words and by not raising the issue itself; rather, it is about insight, abstract learn-
ing. Obviously, this psychological process requires a highly charismatic teacher.
Rather than a highly autonomous pupil who does not need the teacher to tell him
what to think but arrives at insights himself, we have an image of a pupil who
needs a teacher to lead him, rather like a patient and his psychoanalyst. Avnon
quotes Plato’s image of ‘the man who will give him the ability and the knowledge
to distinguish the life that is good from the life that is bad’ (Plato, Republic, 618c1–2;
Avnon, 1995, p. 321). Evidently, this is far from being a democratic approach. The
very essence of academic research and teaching should be to break these unspo-
ken ‘takeings for granted’, pinpointing the very problems philosophers see in society,
and putting all these into the form of an open and free dialogue, accessible to as
many people as possible. Gone are the days of the closed monastery with its omni-
scent priests who kept their knowledge secret. Today, closed circles of philosophers
and their companions would immediately, and rightly, be condemned as excluding
the ‘other’.

Political Philosophy, Empowerment and Deliberative Democracy

What is common to all the theories discussed so far is that they go hand in hand
with a mentality of an escape into the inner fortress of one’s true self, as described
by Berlin (1969, p. 139). This ‘escape’ is an anti-political move, a manner of (not)
coping with a world that has ‘proved to be’ exceptionally cruel or unjust: in a world
where a person seeking happiness or justice or freedom can do little, because she
finds too many avenues of action blocked to her, the temptation to withdraw into
herself may become irresistible. So people who cannot face problems of real life
search for comfort in the inner fortress. There they can be protected from the
outside world and its difficulties. What they cannot have they teach themselves
not to desire. Thus, if politics is too difficult to correct, if getting engaged in poli-
tics via philosophy is just too demanding, say, because people would not listen,
political philosophers withdraw into their internal fortresses. This appears as a
retreat from participation and democracy.

But let us return to the idea of ‘knowing oneself’ and distinguish between two
interpretations. Having ruled out the Socratic process, we could endorse a form of
self-knowledge that is directed towards genuinely communicative action and is
compatible with democracy. This interpretation, I believe, follows John Dryzek’s
work (see, for example, Dryzek 2000) on ‘discursive democracy’, a model of de-
mocracy that emphasizes deliberation rather than majority rule or free elections as
the core of democracy. His discursive democracy is distinct from the regular delib-
erative model in that it emphasizes discourse about values and norms rather than
just deliberation about interests. Any model of democracy that relies on legal pro-
cedures is limited in its capacity to serve as a genuinely pluralistic and inclusive
system of public life. Hence, limitations on the discourse should be as few as pos-
sible (several manners of deliberation are legitimate: humour, emotion, testimony
and even storytelling and gossip) (2000, p. 167), because the main goal of the dis-
course is to create a mechanism for mediation between different, even opposing,
worldviews. In his very optimistic view, the very fact that people enter the dis-
course will lead them to reflect, accept the other, and so on.
How is this model related to self-knowledge? Notice that Dryzek’s model of discussing politics is not only communicative but also (unlike Avnon’s interpretation of Socrates’ purpose) very verbal and linguistic. It is a rather intensive and dynamic process, and because it is so open it is also a very challenging one (for example, rational arguments facing non-rational ones). Picturing discursive democracy as ‘not an exclusive gentleman’s club’ (2000, pp. 168–9), he distinguishes this model from the condition often imposed by liberals such as Rawls on participation in public debate. Rawls, discussing his notion of ‘public reason’, specifies a set of commitments that citizens must make before entering democratic deliberation. This rules out much of the population, says Dryzek, and this must be wrong if our goal is to understand each other. Surely, those entering such an open and flexible deliberation must first be able to reflect upon their views, to be open to examining themselves – to be able to reach self-knowledge, knowing oneself in a very critical way.

This must be the basis for a truly fruitful discourse about common norms, values and policies. The aim of the participants in such a discourse is not consensual agreement. ‘In a pluralistic world’, Dryzek writes, ‘consensus is unattainable, unnecessary, and undesirable’ (2000, p. 170). However, participants do aim at workable agreements, and therefore they must be able to know what values they can compromise on, what they can accept, what they cannot, and the like. Needless to say, they need a capability of self-expression, they need to comprehend politics and they must have those democratic capabilities discussed above. In other words, they need a rather sophisticated level of self-knowledge for this discourse to succeed. This self-knowledge is equivalent to being empowered, as described above. It relates to empowerment in another way. Earlier, I mentioned ‘reflective equilibrium’. When we practice moral and political philosophy, we often apply a mechanism of reflective equilibrium, a process that establishes a balance between intuitions and theory. More precisely, it means that we ‘test’ various parts of our system of moral beliefs against other beliefs that we hold, seeking balance between personal and impersonal view and coherence within the widest set of moral and non-moral beliefs (see Daniels, 1996, p. 2). We find this coherence, which involves logical consistency and simplicity, by shifting to and fro, continuously revising and modifying our theories and intuitions. Such revisions are very important: reflective equilibrium means that, if a theory is appealing in that it fully explains and justifies many intuitions, but at the same time contradicts other intuitions, often we will change these other intuitions rather than modify the theory. Failing to make either of these changes would imply dogmatism.

As we search for reflective equilibrium, we come to realize that we are limited in our analytical capabilities, and what limits us most is our knowledge (political literacy) and our political consciousness. The latter is crucial: when reflecting on moral issues in politics, we should aim to be impersonal, and yet we are limited because of our tendency not to see things in their political context: instead, we tend to take a personal position, or examine things from a personal perspective, involving, for example, personal experiences (Nagel, 1991).

This is where teaching political philosophy is crucial. As discussed in the first section, a good teacher enables her students to be autonomous, critical and reflective. This
should enable them to overcome this psychology, to be able to think critically about
their own position, to use the skills and tools that political philosophy offers in order
to examine other theories, and so on. In other words, an empowered person can
enter deliberations possessing the necessary tools and attitude.

Finally, an important challenge with regard to empowerment must be addressed.
I have described how political philosophy can empower citizens by strengthening
their intellectual capabilities by applying democratic, critical and rational attitudes
to debating political questions, and how this is highly important because it deals
with the very institutions that determine our well-being. Empowerment, then,
means that citizens can learn to cope with difficulties and problems. However, some
people claim that this is a very paternalistic idea. What if the citizens do not want
to be engaged in politics? What if they think that politics is repulsive and appalling?
What if they do want to participate, but politics, they think, is based on non-
rational, emotional ties with one’s friends and community?

My first reply is that it is not so much the philosopher as educator that would
enhance citizens’ capabilities. Naturally, a good teacher could contribute a lot, but
it is the very meeting with philosophical questions that would do the trick. Most
people who study philosophy go through the experience of empowerment as
described above in the interviews I conducted. If political philosophy is widely
taught in high schools and in more university courses, more people will find it
easier to engage in politics and in political deliberations. For example, many gradu-
ates of economics take important positions in the economy and make an impact
on public life. And yet, very few of them are engaged in political debates. It might
be that one reason for this is that they find it so difficult to do so; if they take politi-
cal philosophy, they could be empowered and be able to participate successfully.

My second reply to the accusation of paternalism is that empowerment is about
how political philosophers can help their audience to think autonomously, whereas
paternalism exploits people’s vulnerability to increases their dependence. In that
sense, paternalism is about limiting their autonomy. Moreover, paternalism means
that philosophers ‘play God’ – a sort of hubris. Empowerment, though, means that
they are rather modest and listen to citizens’ claims as well. It means that philo-
sophical debates are meant to continue, that they are open, and therefore never
end with ‘the right answer’; paternalism implies that there are right and wrong
answers and there is no need to further debate them. In fact, precisely because
political and moral issues are doomed to be constantly debated, it is so crucial to
empower citizens, so that they can take part in these debates in an autonomous
manner.

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Notes

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1 International development organizations such as Oxfam argue that voice poverty – not knowing how to express your interests and so on – is one component of the overall experience of poverty. As for education and poverty, see Sparks and Glennerster (2002). I thank Fran Bennet for our discussion of these concepts.

2 It is important to note that although I argue that democracy can be enhanced as and when people become more capable of philosophically reflecting on it, I do not, by any means, subscribe to the view that, because at the moment the majority of citizens cannot do so, there is no point in having a democracy and we might as well have a tyranny of the ‘enlightened’ ones. Such an argument cannot derive from my position.

3 About the distinction between concepts and conceptions, see Rawls (1993, p. 14, note 15) and Hart (1961, pp. 155–9).

4 Interestingly, though, Oakeshott did accept that theory and practice were related in that practice followed theory, and also, in a way, because theory followed practice.

5 Of course, there are other arguments for majority rule. Moreover, many would claim that the argument that the majority is more likely to be right does not stand empirical scrutiny (I elaborate on this elsewhere; de-Shalit, 2000).

6 Many liberal democrats argue that this is the essence of politics. Stephen Macedo writes: ‘Liberal democratic politics is not only about individual rights and limited government; it is also about justification ... understood politically’. And: ‘The moral core of a liberal order is a commitment to public justification: the application of power should be accompanied with reasons that all reasonable people should be able to accept’ (Macedo, 1990a, p. 280; 1990b, p. 40). Waldron adds that citizens in a liberal democratic society demand that ‘the social order should in principle be capable of explaining itself at the tribunal of each person’s understanding’ (1999, p. 61). Interestingly, David Archard (2003) traces the origins of these arguments to Locke and Kant.

7 Avnon describes this as a process of ‘shocking’ the interlocutor into self-knowledge (1995, p. 321).

8 To be distinguished from the ‘hubris’ that anti-Enlightenment theorists ascribe to the Enlightenment because of its belief in universalism. Paul Kelly (2000) forcefully rejects their claims, and I wholeheartedly accepts his thesis.

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