



BOOK REVIEW

Jonathan Floyd (2019). *What's the Point of Political Philosophy?* Medford, MA: Polity Press

Daniil I. Kokin

Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

During a conversation with scholars concerned with political philosophy, it is highly likely to hear that only political philosophers themselves are fond of reflecting upon their subject. It is far more fascinating to discover the field through vivid examples, key concepts, notable authors, or relevant political events that bother us. Numerous introductory books on political philosophy usually introduce the subject to a reader exactly this way. This concerns both monographs and collected papers. Take, for example, *Oxford Very Short Introduction* written by David Miller (2003), or Blackwell's *Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Goodin, Pettit & Pogge, 2007). However, the audience may vary: some books are made for students to “ease their sufferings” (Mansfield, 2001), as well as for politicians (Swift, 2019), or for the general public (Parvin & Chambers, 2012), or, of course, for scholars themselves (Estlund, 2012). However, all these introductions have certain drawbacks.

Jonathan Floyd's new book *What's the Point of Political Philosophy?* is special in this context. Although it is considered as introductory reading, it proposes an original and vivid approach. It is relatively short, written in a simple and lively language, has great examples, discusses current cases, and includes ideas and arguments from key figures in political philosophy. Finally, this book is universal, that is, everyone can find something useful for oneself.

The aim of the book is to provide “an original but accessible account of our subject” (p. 4). Political philosophy has three main tasks or points: to analyze ideas, to critique them, and to attempt to order them in the best way possible. The fourth point is “to reflect upon these very points” (p. 3). The author distinguishes three groups of potential readers that can have their points of the book. Scholars can “push forward our understanding of the nature, methods, and purposes of our field” (p. 4). Students can use it as the subject guide and methodological

advice. The general public can use it to understand what political philosophy “involves” and “why it matters” (p. 5).

Floyd tries to foresee and answer the possible pushbacks his book might cause. Does this book change the world? It is quite obvious that political philosophy does not play a visible role in the “contemporary public climate of opinion” (p. 9). By saying that people rely on experts in different spheres, Floyd believes we need experts in politics as well, who are none other than political philosophers. He considers politicians, “gurus and columnists, or maybe think tanks” (p. 10), have nothing to say about the nature and importance of the core ideas that shape our political realm. The main point is “about the wider understanding of key political ideas” (p. 11) in society, which is why he clarifies that the goal he is pursuing is enlightenment, not coercion. Floyd realizes that his book is just “a drop in the ocean” and he hopes that it triggers a chain, comparing it with a “drop of blood in a sea of sharks” (p. 14). Political philosophy, he concludes, has more point “when more people are aware of it” (p. 14).

The book consists of three chapters, each of them discovers the particular point of political philosophy. Floyd writes that the book’s structure is simple. However, it is only partly true. Floyd does not show his cards right away and keeps his reader intrigued, thus motivating her to read it to the end while making things more complex. The first chapter, which explains what political philosophy is, has eight sections. At the same time, perhaps the hardest “how-to” chapter has only three parts (introduction and conclusion do not count), each representing a task (or, more precise, a way of doing political philosophy). Finally, the last chapter explaining why doing political philosophy is divided into five essential parts. It is noteworthy that the first and last chapters are divided into more subsections than the how-ish one. Floyd hopes that through this book he would be able to alter the role of political philosophy in the “wider public imagination” (p. 9).

The first chapter is devoted to answering the question what political philosophy is. Starting with simple accounts and coming to the big question “Political philosophy is a subject concerned with [...] what?” (p. 16), Floyd provides a number of the subject’s definitions. He aims to formulate here the proper definition of political philosophy. By giving some of the examples, Floyd, first of all, elaborates the working definition of political philosophy, saying that its primary business is “prescription and proscription”, “rather than understanding, explanation, comparison, prediction” (p. 17). Through a three-stage argument (premise, deduction, further deduction), the author comes to the two options: conceptual and institutional approaches. He also adds to this puzzle a blurring of two quite separate domains: normative and descriptive, which is clearly arguable. Floyd realizes that all these distinctions eventually create a total terminological mess. That is why he offers to consider definitions that describe the subject “in terms of specific problems, each of which combines both concepts and institutions” (p. 22). Floyd tries to discover the rationale behind selections of the set of chosen relevant problems. The essential role in this enterprise is given to interpretation. There are problems, tasks, concepts, or even thinkers that define the subject. But what unifies those things? How to find the golden mean in defining political philosophy, making it neither too narrow, nor too broad? To determine the scope

and borders of the subject, Floyd defines philosophy through its organising question, namely “How should we live?”, which has “both sufficiently inclusive and sufficiently exclusive” (p. 32) focus and starting point. He thinks that political philosophy should be separated from moral philosophy (“How should I live?”) on the one hand and social science (“How do we live?”) on the other. The question of separation is one of the hottest topics of the disciplines, and I think this kind of argument needs more elaboration. After that, Floyd emphasizes the importance of subordinate (or second) questions to the organising question while also acknowledging the role of alternative questions. In the last section, Floyd explains why answers to the organising question have different forms. He is sure that it should be principles, not precise policies, although they are inseparable because the “whys” always follow the “hows” (p. 40). What principles or combinations of principles answer the organising question best? Floyd concludes that all considered definitions complement each other and attempt to answer the organising question.

The second chapter is devoted to explaining three constitutive tasks of political philosophy: these are analysis, critique, and ordering. Floyd notices that these tasks are “complementary, not competitive” (p. 44). Analysis is aimed to clarify concepts understood as “particular variable-ideas and problem-ideas” (p. 46). Variables are ideas we want to control, problems are ideas we want to avoid. However, Floyd claims that we also can analyse principles as well. He provides numerous examples of this kind of activity, such as analysing the concept of equality that breaks up into either formal (focusing on racism, religious intolerance etc.), or substantive (similar chances) equality of opportunity (the same options), and equality of condition (equal amount of goods).

Regarding the second form of activity, critique, Floyd holds that the key claim of this way of doing political philosophy is understood in three variants: “Dangerous implications, inconsistency, suspicious roots” (p. 59). Problematic implications can be either wrong assumptions or negative consequences of a given view. Inconsistency implies that a principle has two or more incompatible ideas or commitments within it. “Suspicious roots” means that the origins of the idea (or set of ideas) can be misleading because of its history, and thus rejected. The author considers Marx’s claim about the ruling class and Nietzsche’s idea of genealogy as examples. Floyd concludes that although critique does not answer the organising question, it greatly contributes to it.

Ordering, as the third stage in the process of political philosophizing, is aimed “to build on earlier critical work by telling us exactly which answer to our subject’s organising question should guide us” (p. 74). It has two criteria: to be convincing and to be meaningful. Floyd calls the standard way of ordering as mentalism or “thinking about thinking” (p. 76). This form of the ordering process is composed of two steps: extraction and elimination. Extraction, meaning deriving principles from our normative thoughts, has three forms: impartial choices of the ideal state, considered judgements, intuitive choices of abstract principles. However, extraction is problematic because it may lead to incompatibility of many normative principles. Elimination is a key stage, aimed to leave us with only one answer on political philosophy’s organising question.

The role of elimination is paramount: Floyd states that it is “three-quarters” of our argument. It is similar to critique but is used “as a means of undermining particular ordering” (p. 81) of a set of principles and also engages feasibility constraints: “Because we cannot achieve such things, we ought not to pursue them” (p. 83). The result of ordering our thoughts is flexible in three ways. First, it can be either universal and timeless or just local and contemporary. Second, it can be more or less idealistic, and, finally, individually or collectively established. However, it all “ultimately depends on the content of the normative thought we work with” (p. 84). It is possible to use various methods to prove our way of ordering. Here Floyd employs the findings from his previous book (Floyd, 2017) by offering the alternative way of ordering called normative behaviourism. Its key feature is that normative principles are based not on thoughts and normative commitments but the practice of people, on their behavior.

The final chapter starts with exploring the reasons why one might want to do political philosophy. The first reason is intrinsic interest. A person can just find the subject curious, intriguing, and fascinating in many ways. Second, doing political philosophy can be motivated by the wish to orient yourself “in the face of confusion, complexity, and conflict” (p. 96). Finally, one can have in mind the goal of making a society she lives in a better place both in theory and practice. For through doing political philosophy you spread ideas, arguments and thoughts making people think about the way they would like to live. In the final sections, Floyd reflects on how much influence political philosophy has today in real politics. The key thought here is that political philosophy influences our lives in numerous, sometimes unexpected, ways. He claims that rather than trying to educate the leaders, “we should think about reaching thousands, millions, even billions of people” (p. 125). The overall idea of the last chapter is to show that the key point of political philosophy is to change the world by orientating individuals and by benefiting societies through the production of ideas and arguments.

The book might leave a mixed impression. The reader can think that there is only one true answer to the organising question. However, I believe that political philosophy is not only about searching for truth in the political realm. It is also about elaborating valid and reasonable positions, arguments, and principles that are relevant for the particular *Zeitgeist*, and do not relate to the organising question in any way. As the work might be of interest for scholars, they can easily notice some inaccuracies across the quotations and references. For instance, some definitions of political philosophy are taken out of context (McAfee & Howard, 2018), some concepts are used terminologically inaccurately (Rawls’ reflective equilibrium), some books have only a part of their names (Blau, 2017). However, it does not make Floyd’s overall argument less valuable or less valid, for it remains clear throughout the book.

Floyd hopes that after reading this book one would want to read more political philosophy. Whether he succeeded in explaining the point of political philosophy is up to the reader, who, I believe, will enjoy this book, either by agreeing or disagreeing with the main argument or by reflecting upon the role of political philosophy. In other words, after finishing the book, the reader will not remain indifferent to its points, regardless of the group s/he belongs to.

References

- Blau, A. (Ed). (2017). *Methods in Analytic Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Estlund, D. (Ed). (2012). *The Oxford Handbook of Political Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Floyd, J. (2017) *Is Political Philosophy Impossible? Thoughts and Behaviour in Normative Political Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goodin, R. E., Pettit, P., & Pogge, T. (Eds). (2007). *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*. Second Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Mansfield, H. C. (2001). *A Student's Guide to Political Philosophy*. Wilmington, Delaware: ISI Books.
- McAfee, N., & Howard, K. B. (2018) *Feminist Political Philosophy*. Zalta, E. N. (Ed). *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/feminism-political>
- Miller, D. (2003). *Political Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parvin, P., & Chambers, C. (2012). *Political Philosophy: A Complete Introduction*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.
- Swift, A. (2019). *Political Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide for Students and Politicians*. Fourth edition. Cambridge: Polity Press.