

Introduction to Social & Political Philosophy

what is Social and Political Philosophy?
perhaps it is best to begin with the distinction between
'political philosophy' and 'political science'
political science is a firmly empirical study of the structure and workings of political institutions:
the state and its familiar parts: legislative, executive, judiciary, civil service, etc
political science has almost as long a history as political philosophy
there is not much of it in Plato
but much of Aristotle's *Politics* is political science
it was based on a study of over a hundred Greek city-states

the central topic of social and political philosophy is

Justice

Plato's central concern in the *Republic* is justice

δικαιοσύνη

dikaiosyne

(pronounced: de-cow-eye sue-knee)

this Greek word has a broader meaning than our word 'justice'
encompassing any kind of right treatment of others
(see *dikaiosyne* handout)

so what is justice?
when we think of justice we first tend to think of criminal cases and of punishment
as in "criminal justice system"
this sense of justice is what philosophers refer to a **retributive justice**

but retributive justice and the problem of punishment are a small part of a much larger concern
there is the broader concern with the organization of society
and the distribution of the wealth and goods of a society
this sense of justice is what philosophers refer to as **distributive justice**
social and political philosophy focuses on this broader conception of justice
examines issues concerning the relationship between the individual and society
and the political question concerning the best form of government

given the relative scarcity of wealth and goods how are they to be distributed?
is it just that the wealth of society should be held in the hands of a very few
the champagne glass economy of global capitalism

or should everyone receive the same?
should the person who works hard at an unpleasant job receive no more than the person who refuses to work and watches TV all day?
should the person who uses wealth to the benefit of others receive no more than the person who spends all their money on gambling and debauchery?
if a class of people has been treated unjustly and deprived historically on the basis of the color of their skin be given more than an equal share or is this an injustice too?

but more than the distribution of wealth and goods is at issue
distribution of privileges are equally important
who will vote?
will everyone's vote count the same?
should the opinions of an illiterate who does not even have a clue about the issue have the same say as someone who has studied the issues for many years?
should everyone be allowed to drive?
should everyone receive exactly the same treatment before the law or should some people receive special treatment?

enjoyment of society's gifts is also an issue
should everyone receive the same education?

there are also questions of status
should there be social classes?

these are all concerns of justice
and our answer to these questions depends upon our conception of justice

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Aristotle begins his *Politics* with the claim that "man is a political animal"
what he meant by this is not that everyone is a politician
but that man is a social animal
we cannot avoid living in a world with others
"no man is an island"

we live in a world with others
not just those friends and family and others whom we encounter in our everyday lives
but with untold numbers of others we will never encounter
what we do affects countless others
and those others, of course, affect us in what they do
there is a sense in which we are clearly dependent upon one another
even the most antisocial hermit lives in this world of interdependence

for example, we depend on others not to attack us without reason
as they similarly depend upon us
to live in society is to be bound by certain obligations
duties to others whom we will never know

and they too have duties to us

we also claim certain “rights” for ourselves
the right not to be attacked as we walk down the street
the right to speak freely about the critical issues of the day
the right to believe in whatever religion we want
or not to believe

as a social animal man is thus inescapably political
whether consciously or unconsciously his very life involves a political stand

social and political philosophy is thus also concerned with a number of abstract claims
about “rights,” “duties,” “privileges,”
and demands for “justice,” “equality,” and “freedom”

social and political philosophy is concerned broadly with the relationship between

society vs the individual

at least ideally, politics is continuous with morality
our political duties and obligations are often the same as our moral obligations
our claims to certain “moral rights” are often claims to political rights as well
particularly those very general and absolute rights
the product of the Enlightenment and modern philosophy
which we call “human rights”
the virtues of government are ideally the virtues of individuals
government should be just, temperate, courageous, honest, humane, considerate, and reasonable

the key to a successful society is cooperation
if people do not cooperate
the success of society requires some authority
to bring individual interest in line with public interest
this authority is generally called the state
in general we might say that the function of the state is to protect justice
but what is justice?

Our concept of the state and the extent of its power and authority
depends upon our conception of human nature
on the question of to what extent human beings are capable of living in cooperation
at one end of the political scale
there is little confidence in human beings being able to live peacefully without force
and thus, in order to live in peace and stability, are willing to surrender individual rights
and live in a strong **authoritarian** state
at the opposite end of the scale there are **anarchists**
those with great confidence in individuals and deep distrust of government

authority vs anarchy

between the extremes there are a range of moderate positions
Democrats and Republicans both believe in a government that is at least partially run by the people themselves but has sufficient power to enforce laws over individual interests

same central problem:

finding a balance between the need for cooperation on the one hand
and individual rights and interests on the other
in other words, the problem of justice

one could also differentiate political views according to a scale between

totalitarianism vs freedom

but this should not be confused with the familiar opposition between

Left vs Right

Communism Socialism Progressive Liberal Democrat vs Conservative Republican Neo-Con Fascism

notice that the extremes at both ends of this scale are totalitarian systems

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it has been said that the central task of social and political philosophy is:

“to provide a *justification* for coercive institutions”

these institutions range in size
from the family, to the nation-state, to world organizations such as the United Nations

they are essentially institutions which sometimes employ force
or the threat of force to *control the behavior of their members*
in order to achieve either minimal or wide-ranging goals

need to show that the authorities within these institutions have a right to be obeyed
and that their members have a duty to obey them
need to demonstrate legitimate authority

Socrates and Plato interested in justifying the city-state
after 17th century most social and political philosophers focused on justifying the nation-state
more frequently in 19th and 20th centuries: attempt to justify more wide-ranging institutions
including various forms of world government

he notes that it is not enough to simply claim such an authority
nor is it enough if that claim is accepted by many or even a majority of citizens

thus there is a need for rational justification

of course there can be brutal regimes with no concern for justification
but to the extent that the power of the government depends on
“a sufficient number of their members *freely* acknowledge their claims to be legitimate authorities”
then there is a need for rational justification

thus the central task of social and political philosophy:
to show how these claims to legitimate authority can be *justified*
thus it is a problem of justice

some philosophers argue that none of these claims to legitimate authority are justified—and thus
recommend some form of *anarchism*

Sterba argues that Wolff is wrong in his assumptions
and that most defenders of legitimate authority do not take the position Wolff gives to them
he is arguing against straw men in other words

Sterba’s book endeavors to show that the different political theories differ in terms of
the ideal by which legitimate authority is justified

welfare liberals like John Rawls contend that the ultimate moral reason for acknowledging someone as a
legitimate authority is justified in terms of fairness

libertarians like John Hospers and Robert Nozick
contend it is justified in terms of liberty

feminists, like Susan Okin, contend it is justified in terms of androgyny or a gender-free society

socialist like C.B.MacPhearson, Kai Nielson, and Carol Gould
contend the ultimate justification is in terms of equality

communitarians like Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Sandel
contend it is provided by the common good

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