

### Terence Ball on Reappraising Political Theory

Terence Ball is a leading political theorist who has contributed immensely to the theory of interpretation. Ball, in his work, *Handbook of Political Theory* wrote that 'Interpretation is, so to speak, a kind of triangulation between the text and two (or more) interpretations of it. Hence, we cannot but take others' interpretations into account, reappraising their adequacy and value.' Terence Ball gave his own strategy for interpretation in his prominent work, *Reappraising Political Theory*, published in 1995. An important hypothesis of this book is that if the horizon of knowledge and wisdom is to be expanded ceaselessly, we have to engage ourselves in the task of reappraising, reinterpreting and even reinventing political theory on a continuous basis. His article *Reappraising Political Theory* has been paraphrased below for the readers.

### Need and the Way to Study a Classic

The question arises as to why scholars specializing in political theory continue to write about the classics or the great thinkers, of the past. Why no one had a last word on Plato, Aristotle, Kautilya, Rousseau, Mill, Marx or Gandhi? Why could we not have a definitive work about these classics of politics? Why has there been so much fuss about understanding and/or interpreting these great texts in the right context? Why should we read or bother to revise them or their interpretations instead of going straight to the text and see the articles and books about the great political thinkers in order to survive as academicians in the age of publish or perish?

These were often repeated yet unsettling questions to which one could hardly provide satisfactory answers except for the eternal value of the classics for understanding the most fundamental questions regarding the origin and nature of man, society and state. One would also argue about the perennial fascination of classic works for succeeding generations of scholars, each of which reads them anew and from their own point as well as the world view. Further, these classics comprise political and literary traditions, which one renews and enriches by reading, analyzing and criticizing textually as well as contextually.

However, these answers could never fully satisfy any one. Firstly, scientifically minded political scientists complained that the worship of long-dead thinkers was impeding the development of genuinely scientific theories of political behaviour. Nowadays, however, such criticisms come more often from quarters that one would normally expect to be sympathetic to the historical study of political thought. Among them are advocates and practitioners of analytical political philosophy, some of whom see a sustained and systematic interest in the history of political thought as an antiquarian distraction and an obstacle to our thinking for ourselves in more modern and, presumably, more fruitful ways about the pressing political concerns of our own time. They tend to favour not the historical study and interpretation of old texts, but the application of economic, rational choice and game-theoretic models and theories to questions of freedom, justice, political participation, and other concerns. Or, if they do study classic works, it is to either look for insights or for fore-runners and ancestors who share their views. Thus (to mention merely two of the many examples),



Hobbes became a proto-rational choice theorist and the Hobbesian state of nature a model of decision making under conditions of perfect rationality and imperfect information; and Kautilya became a guide to a perfect art of statesmanship and administration.

A second set of objections comes from proponents of multiculturalism in the modern curriculum. We should not, they say, be in the thrall of old books by dead white men, since these canonical texts tend to preserve and legitimize the power of living white males, and to marginalize the views of women, blacks, gays and other minorities. The imperative need, they feel and argue, first is to deconstruct this canon in order to show how it functions to empower some while disempowering or oppressing others; and then to discard, or at least delegitimize and move to the margins, the very idea that there are classic works in political theory that have made a careful study by both sexes, regardless of race or nationality or sexual preference.

Such sweeping criticism has, usually, provoked protest from defenders of the great books and the timeless truths that they teach to the fortunate few. The disciples of late Leo Strauss have been particularly vocal on this score and have also succeeded in conforming closely to the stereotype or caricature created by postmodern critics of the texts comprising the canon.

### *The Inescapability of Interpretation*

Consider first the matter of method. There is in modern academic discourse much ado about one's method or approach to the interpretation of texts. Being aware of, and attentive to, matters of method is no doubt necessary, and to proceed methodically is surely an admirable trait for a scholar (as indeed it could be for a motor mechanic or a carpenter or anyone who practices a skilled craft). The danger is that these means have a way of becoming ends in themselves: method becomes methodology, and a driving force in its own right. Hence, Terence Ball feels that ours is for better or worse an age in which method precedes matter and sometimes pre-empts substance. If one's enquiries are to be both intelligible and legitimate, one must conform to the norms of one's own age and culture, and ours requires that one to begin by describing and defending one's method or approach.

Any reappraisal or interpretation of a text, theory, philosophy—textual or contextual—has to begin with a belief that interpretation is both inescapable and necessary. Next, several strategies of interpretation compete for attention and even, one might say, allegiance as to be considered and even debated. One may find several of these strategies to be mutually compatible, in as much as each answer to quite different but entirely legitimate interests. Therefore, one may have to look for a problem-centred and multi-method approach to interpretation, leading to reappraisals and, at times, revisionist critiques or interpretations.

Disputes over interpretation are almost certainly as old as the human species itself. Although unwritten, the first 'texts'—omens and portents, animal bones and entrails—had to be 'read' and their meaning made clear. Later still, the singers of tales told and retold stories whose meaning was interpreted and reinterpreted from one generation to another. With the advent of the written word came new and even more intractable problems of



interpretation, and along with it, there also emerged a written record of the sorts of difficulties faced by interpreters, commentators and critics. Aristotle's *Poetics* is perhaps the most famous, if not the earliest, example of the genre. It could not be said any more that questions of interpretation were merely pleasant pastimes enjoyed by the idle and affluent because lives were often at stake in the interpretation of legal and religious texts. What counts as a capital crime, or as heresy or blasphemy, is a matter of interpretation not only of legal or religious texts, but of the intent of the accused. Thus, questions of interpretation constitute what Terence Ball has called 'deadly hermeneutics'—deadly in as much as people's lives, liberties and happiness hang in the balance.

Another feature of this long history of ideas is the periodic and recurring call to 'get back to basics'—to the text, the author, the author's intention, or whatever—and eschew interpretation altogether. This is the call made with almost predictable regularity by fundamentalists in law and literature as well as in religion. The law or the scripture, they say, has become encrusted with interpretation, each successive layer of which skews or distorts the original or true meaning of the text and/or its author and in the case of holy scriptures, the author. The first task must accordingly be to undo the damage done by earlier commentators. It is in this context that Luther claims interpretation to be the scum of holy scripture and calls for a return to the straight road of scripture, unadorned and undistorted by commentary or interpretation. He explains in the preface to his translation of the New Testament that his own preface is necessary only because earlier interpreters 'have perverted the understanding of Christian people till they have no inkling of the meaning of the gospel... This distressing state of affairs calls for some sort of guidance by way of preface, to free the ordinary man from his false though familiar notions [and] to lead him into the straight road. The irony Ball feels is, that Luther's fulmination against interpretation is itself inescapably interpretive, in as much as it amounts to a defense of one kind of interpretive strategy against other alternatives.

Even now, in one version or another, variations on Luther's complaint can be heard not only from religious fundamentalists, but from judges, lawyers and literary critics. In the United States, some conservative jurists have called even for a return to the original intent of the Founders. And among literary critics some, such as Susan Sontag, take their stand against interpretation.

But surely it is as absurd to be against as it is to be for interpretation, much less to love it, as Professor Fish professes to do. Whether one likes or dislikes interpretations is quite beside the point, for one really has no choice in the matter. The decision to interpret or not to interpret is not an option open to human beings, but a requirement that comes, so to speak, with the territory of being human. For our language-using and meaning-seeking species, interpretation is inescapable. Heidegger put the point with absolute clarity when he said that for human beings, interpretation is an ontological category. Also, Gadamer has underscored the point by saying that hermeneutics—the art and practice of interpretation—is a matter not of method but of ontological necessity.

The world we inhabit and the texts we read, says Gadamer, are never raw sense-data or some ideal *objet trouve* but are always already interpreted and invested with meaning.



We are born and grow into a world made meaningful by the language we speak and the traditions we inherit. And these, in turn, supply us with our own culturally and historically specific standpoint or set of 'prejudices' acting as the vantage-point from which we make sense of our world and the creatures, texts, signs and artifacts that comprise the world for us. But Gadamer also insists that this standpoint, far from being static and unchanging, is historically situated and subjected to criticism and alteration. Indeed, the central thrust of Gadamer's hermeneutics is that, while we necessarily begin with our own present-day prejudices, we need not end them unchanged and forever intact. We extend or expand our present horizon of understanding by encountering and attempting to understand prejudices and practices that at first sight seem strange or alien.

By encountering and trying to come to some understanding of the alien and unfamiliar, we gain a better sense of the historically specific limitations of our own parochial horizon. We attempt to make a distant horizon compatible with our own. In thus effecting, or at least attempting, a 'fusion of horizons' (*Horizont verschmelzung*), we at once appreciate our distance from and kinship with those whose perspectives differ markedly from our own. And in so doing, we also come to appreciate our common, if differently expressed, humanity. Thus, the art of interpretation, according to Gadamer, is an essential part of the art of living the life of a human being.

This art, however, is not a luxury but a necessity. We cannot dispense with interpretation or get by without it. As communicating and interacting social agents, each of us must in our daily lives interpret the meaning of the actions, practices, and utterances of other people. Suppose, for instance, I see coming towards me a large man, knife in hand and wearing a blood-smeared smock. How I respond depends on how I interpret the meaning of what I see. Placing that sight in a larger interpretive context constituted by certain customs, conventions, and social roles—this is a meat market, that man is the butcher, and I am a customer—permits me to arrive at a correct interpretation and to act accordingly. Instead of fleeing in terror, if engaged in a series of socially appropriate and recognizable acts like placing an order, making a purchase, paying for it, things remain clearer. Of course, such aspects of the everyday taken-for-granted life are ordinarily unproblematic so far as they are pre-interpreted; that is, we do not see a situation and then interpret it, but see and interpret it as a single seamless activity.

However, matters are much more difficult, if we find ourselves in an alien age or culture with whose concepts, categories, customs and practices we are completely unfamiliar. In such situations we are often at a loss to know what is being done, why it is so or what its meaning may be. We therefore need a translation, which is neither more nor less than an interpretation and, moreover affected by fusing that culture's horizon of meaning, with ours. A good translation or interpretation is one that decreases the strangeness of the sight, making it more familiar and accessible to an otherwise puzzled or perplexed observer. To provide such cross-cultural translations is usually the aim of the anthropologist, among others.

The historian of political thought also finds himself or herself in a situation analogous to that of the anthropologist studying an alien culture. The artifacts or texts produced in political cultures preceding and differing from our own do not readily reveal their meanings