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The State and the Citizen

An Introduction to Political Philosophy

J. D. Mabbott

Routledge Revivals

The State and the Citizen

First published in 1948, *The State and the Citizen* traces the development of the idea of the State as the ultimate source of authority. The author then proceeds to suggest the proper ends and limitation of State action. He analyses the conceptions of State unity and corporate loyalty and ends with a discussion on the relations between States and other associations, and between one State and another. This short and lucid introduction to political philosophy is an essential read for students and scholars of political philosophy, philosophy, and political studies.

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An Introduction to Political Philosophy

by J. D. Mabbott

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

First published in 1948
by Hutchinson University Library

This edition first published in 2021 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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A Library of Congress record exists under LCCN: 67086982

ISBN 13: 978-1-032-12043-0 (hbk)
ISBN 13: 978-1-003-22277-4 (ebk)
ISBN 13: 978-1-032-12045-4 (pbk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003222774

THE STATE AND THE CITIZEN

AN INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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HUTCHINSON UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
LONDON

HUTCHINSON & CO (*Publishers*) LTD
178–202 Great Portland Street, London W1

London Melbourne Sydney
Auckland Johannesburg Cape Town

First published 1948
Reprinted 1952, 1955, 1956, 1958,
1961, 1962, 1963, 1965
Second edition 1967
Reprinted 1970

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This book has been set in Times, printed in Great Britain by offset-litho on Smooth Wove paper by Anchor Press, and bound by Wm. Brendon, both of Tiptree, Essex

ISBN 0 09 043301 7 (cased)
0 09 043302 5 (paper)

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PREFACE

In this book I attempt to bring out the general principles of politics. Any such attempt meets with two difficulties. Firstly, it is not easy to separate political philosophy from social psychology, from economic organisation, and from the historical study of political institutions. The reader may well expect to find Group Personality, Communism, Democracy, Representative Government and International Organisation fully discussed here. If so, he will be disappointed. The reasons for these omissions are indicated in the Appendix. The second difficulty is that a political philosopher may be tempted to regard the peculiarities of his own civilisation (e.g. of 'Western Democracy') as permanent principles, when they are only local prejudices. On this, I can only say that I have tried to show that the principles are permanent by giving the arguments for them. In politics, as in ethics, I cannot agree that local variation in standards must involve relativity in values. This does not mean that the principles here defended are immediately applicable or should be immediately imposed all over the world. It may even be the case that only in Western Europe, in the British Commonwealth, and in the United States of America have historical conditions been such as to make their application possible within any foreseeable future. Nevertheless, if the Balkans or China or the USSR are debarred, for the present or the indefinite future, from following or even from recognising these principles (by reason of their historical development, their moral traditions or their special local difficulties), I cannot avoid the conclusion that, in the

field of politics at least, they are condemned to lasting loss and sacrifice.

My debts are mainly obvious. However much I have diverged from their conclusions, I have found in the writings of T. H. Green and B. Bosanquet an invaluable starting-point for modern political theory. I regret that I did not have the chance of seeing *States and Morals* by T. D. Weldon before completing my own work. Though our methods diverge and some of our conclusions differ, I believe we are discussing the same problems and regard them as important for the same reasons. I have been helped by the generations of my pupils and above all by Mr M. B. Foster, who read most of this book in manuscript and has enabled me to clear up some of the obscurities in it.

J.D.M.

St John's College, Oxford
December 1947

(A)
From Hobbes to Hegel

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I

THE USE OF AUTHORITIES

The aim of this book is to work through partial and one-sided theories of political obligation towards a more complete view. In the present section the chapters entitled with the names of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Hegel do not attempt to be fair and exhaustive accounts of the views of the philosophers concerned, still less to provide a history of the subject. They select points of permanent value and interest with the aim of advancing the enquiry.

This method may require a word of defence. Why not omit the more partial or erroneous views? No scientist would devote chapter after chapter to the phlogiston or the flat earth theory when he knew the right, or even a better, answer. It is just here, however, that science and philosophy part company.

The philosopher does not discover new facts. His concern is our everyday view with its common landmarks, duty, obedience, law, desire. He does not set out, as the scientist does, grasping his compass, towards lands no man has trod, nor return thence bearing strange treasures and stranger tales. He is rather to be pictured ascending the tower of some great cathedral, such as St Stephen's, Vienna. As he goes up the spiral stairway, the common and particular details of life, the men and tramcars, shrink to invisibility and the big landmarks shake themselves clear. Little windows open at his elbow with widening views. There is conscience; over there is duty; there is conscience again looking quite different from this new level; now he is high enough to see law and liberty from one window.

And ever there haunts him the vision of the summit, where there is a little room with windows all round, where he may recover his breath and see the view as a whole, and the Schottenkirche and the Palace of Justice in their true relative proportions, and where that gargoyle (determinism, was it?) which loomed in on him so menacingly at one stage in his ascent shall have shrunk to the speck that it is.

We shall be told that no one reaches the top. A philosopher who ceases to climb does so only because he gets tired; and he remains crouched against some staircase window, commanding but a dusty and one-sided view at best, obstinately proclaiming to the crowds below, who do not listen, that he is at the summit and can see the whole city. That may be so. Yet the climb itself is not without merit for those whose heads can stand the height and the circling of the rising spiral; and, even at the lowest windows, one is above the smoke and can see proportions more clearly so that men and tramcars can never look quite the same again.

Moreover, Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau are no strangers. The modern citizen of a western State carries them with him. He is ineluctably Hobbes when he reads of the state of Palestine or remembers the Ireland of 1922. He is Locke when he suspends his thinking and falls back on the contradictory catchwords of all his favourite newspapers. He is Rousseau when his imagination runs away with him and he reconciles these contradictions by short cuts to Utopia. But he is in no danger of becoming John of Salisbury; and the essentials of Plato and Aristotle are so embedded in Greek life and City State that they cannot serve as companions in the first stages of such a quest as this.

2

HOBBES

Three main factors determine the problems of political theory as they come to us today; nationality, individualism and specialisation. It is because Hobbes was the first political theorist to recognise all three that his work may fitly open our enquiry.

Firstly, then, we have that youthful experiment, the nation. In the middle ages political authority was dispersed and divided; and much now thought of as political was claimed by the Church. Ties of varying strength, and none clearly political, attached a man to his guild, city, abbey, manor, baron, king and pope. If you met an Englishman in the street in the fourteenth century and asked him what his country did for him and what he owed to her, he might well be nonplussed. No one did anything for him, but he certainly owed a week's service annually to the baron and eggs to the abbey and so on. Two centuries later he would have known the answer, for by that time political authority had crystallised in the nation.

> Oh, when shall Englishmen
> With such acts fill a pen
> Or England breed again
> Such a King Harry?

It is true that this spirit was born in battle, during the great contests with France. It is true also that, though nations appeared so early, nationality was not explicitly recognised as the basis of State unity until 1919. As nations were born in war, so until the

treaties of Trianon and Versailles emphasised nationality in frontier-drawing, their limits were set by conquest and their authority enforced by arms. We puzzled our early Englishman by questions about his 'country'; we might equally have puzzled a Czech or a Pole in 1900.

In the second place we put individualism, the growth of free criticism, the religious idea dominating the Reformation, that the individual soul is of primary importance, and that by their effect and value for men shall institutions and ritual and priests be judged. The idea was religious, but a gospel of liberty soon widens its range, and when the Church has been attacked the King cannot escape. Nor can he stand on divine sanctions or historical precedents when these have failed his greater cousin in Rome.

Thirdly, there is the specialisation of institutions. Never before had political authority been clearly separated from divine authority. Like the City State, Rome and the Church had been 'universal providers'. The medieval town nestles under its cathedral and its cathedral was its concert room, its museum, its art gallery and its music hall. Rome rendered wonderful service in keeping all these torches alight during the dark ages, but specialisation brings strength. By Hobbes' time all these activities had grown, in England at least, their own institutions. Secular science had produced Gilbert and Harvey; secular drama had found a Shakespeare within fifty years of its birth; secular education was flowering in the grammar schools, secular art and music were finding new subjects and new patrons. The strength of autonomy was infused into the State also, and the political theorist was given his problem clear. Just as irrelevant religious considerations were ruled out from the questions 'What is scientific truth?', 'What are subjects for art?', so also the appeal to revelation or divine authority disappears from politics. Here too Hobbes was a pioneer.

The paradox of politics is the reconciliation of liberty and obligation, and a first free enquiry might naturally light on Contract as a parallel. A contract is freely made but binds its maker; it gives him something of value but at a stated cost. Hobbes casts his political theory into the contract form. He tells us that men were once unsocial, but that they suffered so intensely from the insecurity of this isolated life that they made a contract with each other to give up their rights to a sovereign, some man or assembly of men, who should have power to keep the peace and

guarantee their security. To this, some of Hobbes' critics thought it sufficient to answer that the contract is a myth, that the state of nature never existed nor did men ever give up their rights to a sovereign, that in any case the descent of the sovereignty had often been broken on the sovereign's side and that on the subjects' side the original contractors could not bind their descendants. An amusing specimen of this difficulty in the historical claim is to be found in Edward I's letter to Pope Boniface VIII, in which he lays claim to the throne of Scotland. 'About the time of Eli and the prophet Samuel, a certain man of the Trojan race, Brut by name, a man of vigour and distinction, after the fall of Troy, put in with many Trojan nobles at a certain island then called Albion and inhabited only by giants.' Tracing his line from this source Edward I concludes that 'it is evident that the throne of Scotland belongs to us in full right'.[1]

The right reply, however, to such historical forms of the contract theory is not that Hobbes' history is wrong but that all such history is irrelevant. My obligation to my country cannot be decided one way or the other by the putative activities of a number of missing links huddled round the altars of Stonehenge.

This irrelevance of origin to value causes much difficulty. At all times men have looked for a lofty origin for what they revere. A Greek city must have a hero-founder with a divine parent, and it was this necessity which populated the Greek pantheon and dictated the amours of its members. Even now when science finds the origin of man among the apes or the fishes, or traces morality to taboo, religion to superstition, the Mass to assimilative theophagy, all these discoveries seem to the moralist and the theologian a degradation of their temples. They think the scientist will go on to draw the conclusion that religion is mere superstition and morality nothing but taboo. But this is only their own fallacy turned upside down and the scientist is no more likely to commit himself to these dogmas than to the assertion 'man is merely a fish'. If 'evolution' has any meaning at all, the origin of a thing will never explain it or determine or delimit its value. However society may have originated, its origins are of no significance whatever for political theory.

The contract theory, however, does not lose its value by losing its historical accuracy. Hobbes' story is a myth, and a myth may be a good myth even if its dates are wrong. Archbishop

1. *Annales Londinienses.* Stubbs' Edition of the Chronicles of Edward I and Edward II, vol. I, pp. 113–120.