The Review of Politics 78 (2016), 285–286.
© University of Notre Dame
doi:10.1017/S003467051600005X

Symposium on Ronald Beiner, *Political Philosophy: What It Is and Why It Matters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. lv, 304.)

Introduction

Robert Sparling

University of Ottawa

Every so often the field of political philosophy witnesses an attempt to determine the exact nature and dimensions of its activity. In the worst of cases, such efforts are dreary salvos in disciplinary turf wars; in the best, they help clarify the philosophical stakes and set the scholarly agenda. The latest book by Ronald Beiner deserves to be classified among the agenda setters, for it offers a powerful and remarkably concise statement about what our discipline is meant to accomplish: "Political philosophy exists in order to confront human beings with a range of the most intellectually ambitious accounts of the standard by which to judge what makes a human life consummately human" (xxi–xxii). The book consists of essays on twelve political thinkers whom Beiner considers to be among the most important of the twentieth century. Focusing on one key text from each author, Beiner assesses these philosophers' respective contributions to the grand conversation about the nature of the human good. No mere survey of twentieth-century political thought, the book is rather an extended commentary on the state of political philosophy today and a spirited defense of a kind of activity that Beiner thinks under threat.

The thinkers included—Arendt, Oakeshott, Strauss, Löwith, Voegelin, Weil, Gadamer, Habermas, Foucault, MacIntyre, Rawls, and Rorty—are mostly canonical, though some are less in vogue than they used to be while others (like Löwith) have never really had the status Beiner argues they deserve. Beiner makes the case, however, that they all merit inclusion because they offer grand—indeed, "epic," his preferred term—accounts of the human good. This might seem a surprising description of some of these authors (Foucault, for instance, would surely have balked at the characterization), but Beiner argues that there are often "subterranean" political philosophies of ambitious scope in thinkers who do not necessarily think of their own work as articulating a "vision of the good." Indeed, he devotes a chapter-length prologue to Weber and Freud, two writers, he argues, who, in spite

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467051600005X Published online by Cambridge University Press

of not conceiving of their projects in this way, offered grand normative claims that place them in the category of political philosophers.

Beiner's selection of authors will likely not inspire fierce opposition since he does not present it as comprehensive. What will prove provocative are not his omissions or inclusions, but his explicit exclusions. Isaiah Berlin, for instance, is explicitly excluded because his moral pluralism denies the very possibility of judging between rival visions of the good (xvi–xxii). On Beiner's view, such a position is opposed in principle to the very activity that is the heart and soul of our discipline, the rational debate about competing conceptions of the good. For Beiner, Berlin's version of pluralism reduces the great tradition to a mere spectacle rather than a living set of competing propositions about how we ought to live.

Beiner's book is an extended apology for intellectual ambition: he praises authors who take metaphysically bold positions, even when he finds those positions troubling. Beiner himself, however, for all the boldness of his definition of our field, adopts a relatively modest posture in his readings, keen to retain a certain openness to the clashing metaphysical stances of the authors he interprets. Thus he does not approach his study with his own fully fleshed-out account of the good, or with a set of preestablished criteria for truth. The nature of truth itself is, after all, a central subject of political philosophy. But throughout, Beiner defends, more as a regulative ideal than a metaphysical dogma, a type of rational monism that he thinks a necessary condition for the rendering of philosophical judgments. And he judges—indeed, the unusually forthright manner in which he delivers his assessments of these difficult and influential authors will make this a highly controversial work even among those who are sympathetic to the definition of political philosophy it proffers.

In this symposium, six political theorists of widely varied philosophical sympathies comment on Beiner's view of our discipline and his reading of some of its most important twentieth-century practitioners; Ronald Beiner's response follows.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S003467051600005X Published online by Cambridge University Press