Agendas, Arguments, and Political Theory

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If teaching is not the oldest profession, it certainly has a long historical pedigree. The frustrations teaching evokes likely have an equally long pedigree. One sees in Plato's *Republic*, for example, Socrates' frustration in trying to convey to Glaukon the aims of the educational scheme he is presenting to his interlocutors in Book 8. His evident difficulties relaying this information have doubtless struck sympathetic chords in the breasts of countless generations of teachers. Frustration has certainly been the case for the present authors, particularly in teaching the analysis and understanding of secondary commentary on classic texts; when reading such articles, students express puzzlement about the long debate over seemingly trivial points.[1] Many come away from such classes convinced it is not worth investing time in understanding classic texts because the discussion of them centers on apparently arcane and obscure grammatical, historical, or technical questions. This essay presents an approach with which the authors have had some measure of success in helping students "see the point" of this especially difficult dimension of analyzing and understanding texts and authors. Our approach teaches students to identify and appreciate the "agenda argument" often put forward by such commentators. An "agenda argument" is a contemporary scholar's effort to address a current problem or issue through critical reflection on an iconic text or author in the field. The term "agenda" is appropriate because it clarifies that the scholar has an interest in an underlying general claim through discussion of the technical points being debated. In other words, the scholar has a larger agenda in mind that guides the selection of issues and determines the use of points in the text.

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Agenda Arguments

Nearly 20 years ago, John Gunnell (1988, 71–87) detailed the history of the split between political theory and the rest of the discipline.[2] He attributed the split in large part to the efforts of émigré political scientists circa World War II to fix blame on some aspect of contemporary society for the rise of totalitarian ideologies. While Gunnell's purpose was to locate the origins of a disciplinary quarrel, his effort helps illustrate what an agenda argument seeks to accomplish. Specifically, in such arguments authors attempt to deal with an issue of contemporary concern (in the case of many of those discussed by Gunnell, responsibility for the rise of fascism or Stalinism) through the medium of an argument about the meaning of a major figure in political philosophy or thought.[3] Often such larger-issue arguments do not appear to be the major focus of the analysis. Instead, the reader is initially confronted by what appears to be a much narrower dispute over the correct interpretation of a passage or detail from some aspect of the work of a classic figure in political thought. It is only upon reflection on the significance of what is at issue that the broader argument appears.

That Gunnell and others discussed the appropriateness of such agenda arguments to the discipline of political science is not an issue here. Decades ago the practice might have been novel or unique. It is hardly so today. The practice has become so widely established in political theory as to render much of what is written almost unintelligible without appreciating such arguments. In this, however, political theory is not unique. Such arguments also appear in other disciplines—literary criticism, for example.

The reference to literary criticism—a discipline which has had a significant impact on current intellectual debates—invites comparison between some other concepts employed there and what we have called agenda arguments. Specifically, it might be suggested that such arguments are nothing more than what other disciplines refer to as "subtext." While the concept of a subtext is similar in some ways to an agenda argument and is an important feature of the conversation in several disciplines, there are important reasons for distinguishing it from the latter.

Subtext versus Agenda Argument

In literary studies, subtext often describes an alternative, often deeper level of meaning intentionally constructed by the author through the subtle use of language. Chaucer's "Miller's Tale" in *The Canterbury Tales*, for example, is on the surface an obscene fabliau but in the subtext a satire of courtly love conventions of his time. However, subtext is also used in at least two other senses. In much literary criticism, subtext defines content which is not announced explicitly by the characters (or author) but is implicit or becomes understood by the reader. Jill Mackey (2001) describes, for example, how "films such as *Fried Green Tomatoes* or *The Bostonians*, films that appear to be about heterosexual relationships, 'offer a suggestive, albeit tantalizing glimpse of what we might call lesbian desire'" (Mackey 86, citing Whatling 1994, 186). Finally, a third kind of subtext, the most difficult to present to students, represents an analog to the term "agenda argument" as we are using it in this paper. Critics writing on literature differ, *via* analysis of the text, on which school of interpretation—feminist, Marxist, new historicist, and so on—offers the most valid reading. Even within schools of literary criticism, critics argue over how best to apply the approaches and assumptions of such schools of criticism to texts.

It is this final kind of subtext that is always of interest to academics, the creators and the proponents of positions within schools of thought. It is this level of subtext that often underlies the most interesting and worthwhile arguments in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506061166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

secondary criticism. And it is this kind of subtext (or what we term "agenda argument") that is nearly always impenetrable for students reading on their own, whether in literary criticism or in political theory.

Subtext in Introductory Political Theory

One objective of the Introduction to Political Theory course that we have developed over several years is to instill in our students an appreciation of the distinctive ways that authors of classic political texts deal with issues that remain of concern today. A second objective is to give students some experience with the way contemporary scholars critique these authors (and each other). This involves having them read a selection of articles that contest themes or topics in the original texts to which they have been exposed—in our class, Plato's *Republic* and Hobbes's *Leviathan.* It is in the context of this second objective that we introduce the concept of the author's agenda argument. To illustrate we use two articles that critique Hobbes's *Leviathan*—"Hobbes's Bourgeois Man" by the late C. B. Macpherson (1973) and "Hobbes on Public Charity & the Prevention of Idleness: A Liberal Case for Welfare" by John W. Seaman (1990).

Macpherson's essay is nominally about the question of whether Hobbes's political doctrines, elaborated largely in Part II, were consistent with his "materialist" account of human nature in Part I of *Leviathan*[4] Macpherson contends that a proper appreciation of Hobbes's materialism provides the key to understanding Hobbes's political doctrines as well. The key to such an appreciation lies in recognizing the distinctively bourgeois nature of both his materialism and his resulting conception of the state and society.

> It is the fact, remarked by a few writers . . . , that Hobbes's morality is essentially a bourgeois morality. When this is followed back it can be seen that Hobbes's analysis of human nature, from which his whole political theory is derived, is really an analysis of bourgeois man; that the assumptions, explicit and implicit, upon which his psychological conclusions depend are assumptions peculiarly valid for bourgeois society. Considered from this point of view, his materialism falls into place understandably. It is not necessary either to minimize its place in his thought or to make it the whole explanation. And this approach may afford a new view of the strength and weakness of his political thinking and of its relevance today. (239)

Macpherson claims that vanity and "vainglory," which play a prominent role in Hobbes's account of human nature, are characteristic preoccupations of a particular social stratum that emerged as influential with the rise of capitalism. This stratum is the upper middle-class bourgeoisie, and he dates its rise to the Renaissance. Similarly, Macpherson argues that the competitive drive for power that Hobbes makes a central feature of his account of human nature is also nothing more than the motivation of participants in a capitalist market economy, in contrast to "pre-capitalist societies" (240). He continues to note that such elements in Hobbes's theory of human nature led directly to the absolutist prescriptions in his theory of the state—the vesting of all power in a monarch who needed to inspire fear and awe to keep his subjects from despoiling each other.

Certainly, many elements of Macpherson's account are suspect: the claim that capitalist society existed during the Renaissance, that such elements as Hobbes makes part of human nature are unique to a capitalist mentality as opposed, say, to a feudal aristocratic mentality. Nor does a close reading of *Leviathan* yield any insistence on the primacy of markets or the role of money on Hobbes's part. The characteristic centrality of *freedom* from government interference that marks most capitalist thought is likewise completely foreign to Hobbes's account of the state.[5] Yet to pursue the argument in such terms would be to entirely miss the point of Macpherson's essay. For his aim is clearly to exploit the qualms most feel over both Hobbes's description of human nature and the nearly tyrannical authority he gives to government and to transform those qualms into an argument against contemporary capitalist democracies. Macpherson drives home the underlying purpose of the argument in this passage near the end of the essay.

> The continuing strength and the present pertinence of his [Hobbes's] political theory are due to this. For it is not entirely an illusion that in a capitalist society men are free from normal social ties except those imposed by the state. There is an obvious sense in which the individual in capitalist society is freer from social ties than the individual in any society based on status. The greater insecurity of men is a measure of their greater freedom. The social ties in capitalist society are real, being largely determined by the individual's relation to capital, but are not as cohesive as the social ties of other societies. The result is that on the whole a stronger state is necessary to maintain a capitalist society than is needed to maintain a society in which the social relations are more obviously personal, or more obviously purposeful, and so more easily understandable. (248)

In other words, Hobbes's insistence on a strong state reveals the extent to which such a state must remain a basis for capitalism, even when its ruthless Hobbesian nature is obscured—as it is today, presumably—by a veneer of democratic procedures. Absent an appreciation of this ultimate aim—a critique of contemporary capitalist society—Macperson's emphasis on discovering bourgeois elements in Hobbes's thought must inevitably appear to be not much more than a scholarly quirk or an exercise in Marxist exegesis.

To bring the point home to students, we point out such passages and note that Macpherson only makes this argument explicit near the end of the essay. The bulk of the essay is devoted to making the more technical argument concerning the validity of earlier scholars' claims about the relationship between Hobbes's materialism and his political doctrines. This, we note, is often the case with an author's agenda argument. Hints of it will appear in the introduction and more fully developed elements in the conclusion. These are the natural locations for comments designed to point out the broader significance of the more technical arguments in the body of the essay. And it is precisely the significance of an essay that generally constitutes its agenda argument.

To suggest that such an agenda argument is not unique to Macpherson nor Marxists like him, we turn to Seaman's essay. Pedagogically, we have found it essential to pair essays to illustrate the underlying controversy between scholars whose technical arguments may not exactly mesh. When examined in the context of Macpherson's discussion, the nominal focus of Seaman's article—the nature and derivation of welfare policy in *Leviathan*—turns out to be significant primarily as a counter-argument to Macpherson's claims.

The controversy in Seaman's article focuses on the question of whether Hobbes's argument in *Leviathan* made provision for the care of the poor. Seaman cites passages in *Leviathan* that refer to such policies and then remarks on the number of scholars who have overlooked these passages in holding that Hobbes neglected this element of society. Seaman (1990, 107) includes

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506061166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"the usually perceptive" Macpherson (although in a different set of essays) among these scholars (which makes this article useful for introducing students to the idea of a dialogue within the discipline). He remarks that Macpherson overlooked Hobbes's explicit reference to such policies "because of his unargued assumption that Hobbesian individualism and the welfare state are incompatible"(106).

Seaman accepts the extreme individualist characterization of Hobbes's account of human nature that most of the discipline teaches—that people are motivated exclusively by rational self-interest. But he argues that this Hobbesian extreme individualism does not preclude a social acceptance of the responsibility to care for those who are unable to fend for themselves—a welfare state, in other words. He concludes his argument with this observation:

> Hobbes's doctrine provides the basis for a far more (or far less) extensive welfare state than that advanced in the *Leviathan.* Those who wish to recover the natural rights tradition in order to defend a minimalist state and assault welfare policies may therefore want to note the dangers of doing so. Those who wish to defend the welfare state and find it necessary to turn to a non-natural rights doctrine as the basis of liberalism may want to notice the availability of an alternative position in the formidable and rigorous Hobbes. (125)

The significance of his argument, in other words, is that it is certainly possible for even extreme individualists, such as the classic and contemporary apologists for capitalism, to consistently support relatively humane social policies to care for the poor and those unable to fend for themselves. Given his citation of Macpherson early on, this is clearly meant as a direct refutation of Macpherson's own criticism of capitalism's Hobbesian foundations.

Using these two articles (with suitable explanations of Marx's theories, for example), we are able to demonstrate to students the way Macpherson and Seaman critique and defend contemporary liberal democracy through the medium of an otherwise arcane exchange over the proper interpretation of Hobbes's *Leviathan*. This approach and technique can be used with any number of classic texts and commentary.[6] While this is certainly a challenge for some students to grasp, for most it opens a whole new avenue for appreciating an otherwise nearly impenetrable literature and provides opportunities and models for more sophisticated argument.

Conclusion

To return to the example of Socrates's efforts in Book 8 of the *Republic* to teach the "slower" Glaukon what his educational reforms were meant to achieve, we may all perhaps remember what we initially thought when confronted with our own Socratic professors in collegiate classrooms. Putting the fact that Glaukon is a Platonic literary device aside, most of us might recall our Glaukonic bewilderment at "where these professors were getting this stuff." Many of us certainly felt that they were "just making it up," or that we were being treated to individual displays of professorial arrogance, despite assurances from our professors that lessons about the contemporary significance of classic texts were really there. Obviously, at some point most of us got it and became devotees of the genre and participants in the dialogue over these matters ourselves. But it is worth noting that the initial reactions of our students today are the same as our own were. They, too, are often bewildered at "where this stuff is coming from." In the absence of an explanation, many (if not most) often conclude that they are being treated to an impossible and cruel test, in which they are expected to guess what is going on in our minds about Plato or Hobbes, or to remember the convoluted explanations we concoct, but which have little real bearing on more pressing contemporary problems. These suspicions must play an important role in creating a corrosive cynicism in our students that many of us have observed in unguarded moments. Such cynicism serves to justify, in their minds at least, resort to desperate measures like plagiarism and other forms of cheating in a perverse effort to level the playing field.

In addition to being an antidote for classroom cynicism, however, this approach addresses some deeper issues within the discipline. Our students come to the major willing to read the texts that historically define the science of politics. Unfortunately, they (and perhaps some of their professors) confine that reading to the literal interpretation of the text. Stopping at that point precludes the richer understanding of the role such works continue to play both in the discipline and in broader intellectual currents. Indeed, we argue that one cannot genuinely *understand* these texts without appreciating how they can be used to explore and enrich current debates inside and outside the academy.

Too many political scientists whose exposure to political theory in college and graduate school did not advance beyond a literal reading of the text to an engagement with it still see such endeavors (and indeed political theory itself) as arcane and dispensable. Absent the kind of structured and intentional effort we describe here, most students, with rare exception, will never advance to this level of engagement. However, this leap from reading to engaging with texts defines what political theorists do, and to those who have made this leap, these texts are not only indispensable but indeed vital. In the present authors' curriculum, we make this investment early on; in our first two introductory courses, this technique takes a third to a half of our instruction time. We have found that the result of this effort—an increase in the number of students for whom the relevance of classic texts becomes apparent—is worth expending significant classroom hours. Finally, this approach becomes an effective way of inviting students to join in the academic dialogue and an assurance that we, as professors, are confident of their intellectual maturity and ability to do so.

Notes

1. This project grew out of the shared experiences and discussions of the authors in teaching courses in their respective disciplines that attempt to bring students into the professional discourse of the discipline through exposure to articles in professional journals. This might be considered an aspect of what M. W. Jackson refers to as "going deep" in understanding the topic. M. W. Jackson, "Skimming the Surface or Going Deep," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 28, no.3 (September 1995): 512–14.

2. Gunnell stands in a long line of critics who have questioned the relationship between studying historical figures and the "modern" study of politics. Cf., Harry Eckstein, "Political Theory and the Study of Politics: A Report of a Conference," *American Political Science Review* 50, no. 2 (1956): 475–87.

3. While the examples of this sort of argument in political theory are legion, Karl Popper's *The Open Society and It's Enemies, Vols. 1 & 2* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971) and Leo Strauss's *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) are the paradigms.

4. In what follows I necessarily caricature the very rich and fascinating argument

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506061166 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Macpherson presents. My argument is less about the detailed points he makes than the reason someone other than a specialist in Hobbesian thought should take it seriously.

5. Macpherson acknowledges much of this criticism and, indeed, spends much of Section 3 of the article addressing it. Cf. pp. 246–8.

6. We extend this through examination of a similar exchange over the interpretation of Plato's *Republic* in Arlene Saxonhouse's "Comedy in Callipolis: Animal Imagery in the *Republic*," *American Political Science Review* 72, no. 3 (September 1978): 888–901 and George Klosko's "Implementing the Ideal State," *Journal of Politics* 43, no. 2 (May 1981): 365–89.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096506061166 Published online by Cambridge University Press