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Playing Political Philosophy

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Ronald Beiner wants to have it both ways. We know this because, near the end of his book, he tells us that he is a "dualist," someone for whom "philosophy and citizenship are defined by radically distinct purposes: the job of philosophy is to strive unconditionally for truth, and the job of citizenship is to strive for good and prudent judgment about the common purposes of civic life, and each should focus strictly on fulfilling its own appointed end without worrying too much about the other." So there needs to be "a steady appreciation of the fundamental chasm between what we (*as citizens*) need in the world of practice and what we (*as human beings*) need from the world of theory" (224). This, however, would be abhorrent to most of the political philosophers Beiner covers. Because they are not dualists but monists; to them, theory and practice should be one.

Yet even though, or because, they commit this fundamental error, Beiner considers them "epic theorists," purveyors of "epic theories" (xviii). For each advances a "definitive conception of the good," an "ultimate and authoritative view of life" that, like "all great art … pursue[s] an idea to its furthermost limits" (xx, xxi). Of course this means that their theories are "in fundamental competition with each other for the title of being the authoritative articulation of human existence" (xxvi). It is a competition that, to Beiner, constitutes political philosophy at its best. Most of the contestants would see it differently, however. Because if their thoughts are irrelevant to practice then they can serve as no more than moves in a debating game, one whose participants strive, not for truth, but for points. Beiner himself imagines a boxing match: though none of the contestants has yet managed "to come up with a set of knock-down arguments that will defeat all rival views" (xxvi; see also 231) this is no reason for any of them to be "throwing in the towel" (229).

Evidently, Beiner is no fan loyal to one of them; rather, he sees his role as that of a judge. Hence the main purpose of his book: "to draw up a balance sheet for twentieth-century political philosophy" (xxvii). As for the standards Beiner relies upon for awarding points, consider his reasons for excluding Isaiah Berlin from the contest. As a pluralist rather than monist or dualist, Berlin could be said to uphold the idea that every theorist is partly right. The problem with this for Beiner is that it is "too lame" to make for an exciting fight (xxii). Having Berlin and his "insipid" readings around would cause the contest to go "stale," and this would be "disappointing" since it would detract from "intellectual vitality" when what we need instead is to keep ourselves "intellectually

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engaged and awake" (xxi n5, xix, xviii, xix). So Berlin is out, out even though—and here is the crucial point—his position may very well be true (xviii–xix). Evidently, Beiner puts beauty, in the form of spectacle, ahead of truth.

This makes him an aestheticist and, at least as regards political philosophy, it runs the risk of trivializing, as we've seen. It also leads to a problem for Beiner himself. At one point in the book, he asserts that "political philosophers who … are not reflecting in the grandest possible way on the ends of life … *are not fulfilling their job description!*" (233). Now while I have no wish to get him into trouble with his employer, I can't help but point out that this is at odds with Beiner's practice. Because if he is not himself a monist, one who happens to work by comparing and contrasting other monisms in order to arrive at the one he considers the most true and just, but rather a dualist who enjoys judging competitions that have no practical implications, then one has to ask: is he fulfilling his own job description? I believe that there are alternatives to monism, dualism, and pluralism, but it seems that Beiner does not. How, then, can he say that he is doing something other than simply passing the time with an entertaining show?

Beiner's aestheticism also runs a far more dangerous risk. For he recognizes at least one connection between the worlds of theory and practice: it seems that when titanic struggles take place within the latter, such as those between the ideologies of the different countries that fought World War II, theorists get inspired. This leads Beiner to flirt with the idea of putting the spectacle of clashing theories of justice ahead of justice itself. Because while one does not "want to be too quick to say that the world should go to hell just so that theory will raise its ambitions [the fact is that] there does seem to be a relation, perhaps an essential relation, between living in a world where the grandest alternatives are on display, and what motivates thinkers to embrace truly grand theory" (234).

Long ago, when the Middle Platonists were struggling to articulate the principles of their metaphysics, some of them settled on the monad and the dyad, which they associated with the one and the many, respectively. This should remind us that the word "plurality" means not only "many," as in "a large number," but also, strictly speaking, "more than one," which of course includes "two." Dualism, in other words, is a pluralism—a poor man's pluralism, to be sure, but a pluralism nevertheless. Which leads me to suggest that Beiner's approach is not that far from Berlin's after all. Indeed, Berlin has no problem with leaving theory to the monists; he himself aims for unified definitions when it comes to the abstract core of values such as liberty and equality. When it comes to practice, however, he recognizes intractable conflict between a plurality of unities and so affirms the many rather than the one. And this seems to me to be not so very different from Beiner's call for "good and prudent judgment about the common *purposes* of civic life" (my italics). Which is why I would conclude that, though Beiner believes he's defending the theory tradition against the likes of pluralists such as Berlin, he's actually doing the opposite.

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