

# And Lofty Flows the Don

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*The Cunning of Unreason: Making Sense of Politics* by John Dunn (Basic Books, 349 pp., \$30)

“But what is philosophy good for?” Wonder aloud about the sources of right and wrong, speculate offhandedly about the meaning of life, or (most ominously in the young) sign up for a college philosophy class, and you can count on confronting such a question, typically put by friends and family in a tone at once mocking, chiding, and a little worried. And yet the question is a fair one, even a philosophical one. It is a fair question, because philosophy lacks an obvious payoff or a plain practical value. Philosophy is rarely beautiful like literature, or gripping like history, or solid and useful like economics and the natural sciences. And it is a philosophical question, because philosophy’s very purpose is to articulate a reasoned account of the world, a curious and noteworthy part of which is the practice of philosophy itself.

“But what is philosophy good for?” It is also an ancient question. It was answered classically in *The Clouds* by Aristophanes, who depicted Socrates suspended in a basket aloft, blathering on about heavenly spheres and invisible substances and nasty insect anatomy, confounding others without putting forward views of his own, indifferent toward the competing claims of justice and injustice, oblivious of the requirements of politics and day-to-day existence, and unconcerned about the impact of his opinions and conduct on the opinions and conduct of others, particularly that of his own students. No less classical was Plato’s reply on his teacher’s behalf. Far from corrupting the young by occupying them with worthless or impious matters, philosophy, in Plato’s account, is the best and the most practical of activities. Better than its great rival poetry, philosophy sheds light on the crucial question—what is a good life for a human being?—to which a truly practical man or woman would devote most time and thought.

John Dunn is no Platonist. But his new book is animated by the Platonic conviction that philosophy is necessary to make sense of politics, even as the arguments that it develops—always eloquently elaborated and suffused with learning—provide support for the Aristophanic suspicion that philosophical study is a prescription for making nonsense of politics.

nn is best-known as the author of an influential book on the political thought of John Locke. He is also a founding father, with his colleague Quentin Skinner, of the so-called Cambridge school, which champions an approach to the study of political theory that lays special stress on the significance of historical context to the formation and the interpretation of arguments and ideas. The Cambridge school teaches that the proper understanding of arguments and ideas requires that they be read with a full and supple knowledge of how words were used by the thinker and his contemporaries; with a grasp of the background notions that always in one way or another shape values, direct judgments, and color conclusions; and with an appreciation of the social and political circumstances to which thinkers were responding and which they sought to influence. All this is sensible enough. And yet the details can distract and the accumulation of historical knowledge can get out of hand—as, for example, in Dunn’s work on Locke.

A major thesis of *The Political Thought of John Locke*, which appeared in 1969, and a short work, *Locke*, which appeared fifteen years later, is that from beginning to end the eighteenth-century English philosopher’s thought is informed by a “deeply Puritan pattern of sentiment.” But the portentous conclusion that Dunn draws—that little of Locke’s political thought is relevant today because of the “the intimate dependence of an extremely high proportion of Locke’s arguments for their very intelligibility, let alone plausibility, on a series of theological commitments”—is unwarranted. Moreover, it betrays three errors typical of the Cambridge school’s method.

For a start, Dunn’s approach does not merely proceed from the sober assumption, bolstered by common sense and experience, that an author is molded by his times. Rather, in the guise of respecting the flow and force of history, Dunn propounds an absolutist and decidedly unempirical view, that thinkers are prisoners of the historical epoch in which they write, and are forever unable to break the mold, and to see beyond the contemporary horizon, and to transcend their time. Dunn’s approach also defines context too narrowly—overlooking, for instance, the fact that an author’s world is in part formed by his readings of, and meditations upon, thinkers from others times and places. And the method covertly substitutes historical erudition for textual analysis, inferring an author’s meaning more from the tendencies of his time than from the logic of his argument.

The errors induced by the preoccupation with history blind Dunn to the contemporary significance of a large number of Lockean arguments, particularly arguments about the fundamentals of morals and politics. In fact, Locke’s teachings on individual rights, consent, the separation of powers, executive prerogative, the right of rebellion, toleration, and education for liberty have roots that extend well beyond his “theological commitments” and his “deeply Puritan pattern of sentiment.” Since they are based in views that are still widely shared—about the natural freedom and equality of all human beings, the relation between reason and the passions, and the capacity and limits of the human mind—and since they are elaborated with subtlety and rigor, Locke’s moral and political teachings remain not only intelligible and plausible but, contrary to Dunn, pertinent and illuminating.

In a quest for relevance, Dunn has increasingly turned, over the course of the last two decades, from the history of political thought to contemporary politics. Seeking to reach out beyond the confines of his discipline to address a broader audience, he has published a number of books aimed at thoughtful and engaged citizens who are dissatisfied with the politics of the day and desire a deeper understanding of the decisive issues. *The Cunning of Unreason*—whose provocative title becomes by book’s end merely baffling—is Dunn’s most ambitious such effort. It begins with grand, speculative questions: What is politics? Why is there any politics at all? Will politics ever come to an end? It moves on to an examination of how politics has come to take its characteristically modern form, by which Dunn means the nation state that combines representative democracy and capitalism. And it concludes with reflections on whether we have available, or can hope to develop, a form of political judgment that is of any practical use.

Notwithstanding the abstract and nonpartisan character of the questions around which Dunn’s book is loosely organized, the real driving force of his argument is his anguished effort to come to grips with the demise of socialism as a viable political alternative. Though many passages in his book are despairing, Dunn struggles to be cautiously pessimistic. Our situation is bad, he believes; but if we follow his lead and learn to think about politics as he proposes that we think about it, then we might still avert the worst.

Dunn’s speculations on the first principles of politics are prompted by the opinion, which he announces at the outset, that what needs explaining is how far politics in our age has fallen. But instead of inspiring confidence in the speculations that will follow, his overwrought and ill-considered preliminary observations provoke doubts about the practical judgment that orient his inquiry. “Politics,” he writes,

has come to be a vaguely degrading and highly specialized occupation: the trade of Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson, of William Hague and Michael Howard, and until quite recently at least one of the trades of Jonathan Aitken: also, of course, the trade of Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich, of Benjamin Netanyahu and Yasser Arafat, of General Suharto all too recently and, alas, still of Saddam Hussein as I now write. And vaguely degrading? Well, on the evidence of this list alone, plainly a career wide open to all but unmentionable talents and an occupation blatantly unfit for gentlemen—let alone gentle women. And this last was a complaint pressed from the beginning not merely against the cultural styles of conspicuously brutal and autocratic regimes but also very much against the impact of democratization on the personnel who lead or govern a political society.

Indeed, Plato warned 2,500 years ago that democracy, notwithstanding its manifest attractions, is an imperfect regime in which governing depended on the art of pandering to the people’s passions. So why does Dunn—a historian of political thought no less!—carry on about how politics has only recently become “vaguely degrading”? And what of Dunn’s

invidious comparisons and odd contrasts? For all of his considerable flaws and various blunders and misdeeds, does Bill Clinton really belong on a continuum of disrepute with Saddam Hussein?

And what possesses Dunn to imply that the robust presence in contemporary global politics of schemers, scoundrels, and thugs reflects some sort of new development? It would be tedious to list even a few highlights from the virtually unbroken history of political wickedness. Curiously lacking in perspective, Dunn's disdainful remarks proceed as if there hasn't always been plenty of moneygrubbing, backstabbing, and power-seeking; as if savage cruelty and bland indifference had not proved to be deeply rooted and tenacious tendencies; as if as long as there have been gentlemen (however defined) they have not doubted whether politics was an undertaking fit for them; as if lovers of justice have not regularly and for good reason chosen to pursue it without the benefit of political office.

Dunn's sweeping judgments suggest that his speculative inquiries are not altogether free and disinterested. Still, to get to the bottom of our need for politics and why we cannot hope to overcome it, he considers four theories. The first, which he calls original sin or moral error, declares that we have politics because "there is a way in which human beings should behave but in which most of them conspicuously fail to." The second claims that "politics occurs among human beings because of, and only because of, historically created conflicts of interest between them." The third asserts that politics arises from "the force and idiosyncrasy in human judgment." And the fourth of Dunn's candidates for the foundation of politics is the logic of collective action, which suggests that "politics comes from, and is endlessly reproduced by, the logical relations between actual and possible human actions."

One could take issue with Dunn's elaboration of these theories—for example, his treatment of original sin as if it exhausted the religious point of view and as such was unworthy of consideration by serious people. Or one could object that the theories that he adduces as independent attempts to identify the source of politics were never intended for that task, but are really his own contrivances summoned to play an explanatory role for which they are imperfectly suited. Or one could point out, as Dunn once in a while does, that each of his theories, when properly articulated, seems to capture part of the truth about why our lives are inescapably political.

But the real objection to Dunn's long-winded theoretical excursion is that the why of politics is not so terribly puzzling. We have politics because human beings, like the proverbial old couple, cannot live with each other and cannot live without each other. Which is to say, more abstractly and ponderously, and as has been pointed out by numerous thinkers on any number of occasions, the satisfaction of human desires, material and moral and intellectual, requires the cooperation of other human beings, but life with other human beings frustrates the satisfaction of desires by producing conflict over scarce goods. Much more could be said.

For the purpose of making sense of politics, however, the practical question concerns what comes next: how our collective lives ought to be arranged, to secure the goods that are necessary and to achieve the goods that make us happy and enable us to flourish.

The state, Dunn observes broadly, is the solution devised by the modern world to the problem of balancing cooperation and conflict. For him, the two big puzzles about the state are why rule in it “should be so deep, pervasive and insistent,” and why we feel that “it has become so hazardous or futile for us to resist rule at all comprehensively.” Here, too, one could quarrel with Dunn, in this case with his characterization of our situation as one in which politics has overstepped its boundaries and ruthlessly subjected us to invisible but pervasive forces of domination. Has there ever been a time in which individuals are as free as they are now, at least in the liberal democracies, to go where they like, to choose their work, to buy and sell as they please, to select a mate, to rear their children as they deem right, to believe and to worship or not to believe and not to worship?

To call attention to our many freedoms is not to deny the weight of conformist pressures, or that we live in an “increasingly intercommunicative and interactive world ... in which politics affects more human lives more deeply than it has ever done before.” It is to insist, rather, that one must nevertheless distinguish the ways in which the modern state expands the range of choice from the ways in which it constrains the range of choice. Even in its role as the great regulator—of food and drugs, of airwaves and airspace, of production and pollution, of welfare and social security and health care—government also enhances the exercise of individual rights.

True, as a result of technology—from radio and telephone to railroads and automobiles and airplanes, to computers and the Internet—government now performs vastly more functions than it could in Locke’s England or Plato’s Athens. But many of the functions that government has assumed in the last two centuries take burdens off our shoulders: while others are ensuring that our meat is fresh, our water pure, our garbage collected, our mail delivered, our streets safe, and our borders protected, we can cultivate our careers, spend time with our children, or go hiking or golfing or wine-tasting or volunteering in soup kitchens. In liberal democracies, the problem could seem to be not too much rule, as Dunn would have it, but too little reflection on how best to make use of a degree and a kind of freedom that, on a large scale, is unprecedented.

To make wise use of our freedom, to distinguish the ways in which we are made more free and less free by the modern state, requires what Dunn calls “political understanding.” Political understanding has two parts: the understanding of our own values and their implications, and the understanding of the forces that have brought about existing political arrangements. Dunn says many tried-and-true things about the importance in judgment of delicacy and nuance, and about the appreciation of one’s limits. But then he says this:

The avowed goals of the present rulers of Tehran are not those of their counterparts in Baghdad, Jerusalem, or Cairo. Those of the contenders for authority in Washington DC differ from those of their counterparts in Havana, Mexico City, Westminster, Paris, Madrid, Athens,

Belgrade, Tokyo, Seoul, Jakarta, or Beijing. But, seen with a little historical distance, the differences are on balance less striking than the similarities.

What? From what conceivable historical vantage point could the differences between the United States and Cuba, or the United States and Iraq, or the United States and China, seem less striking than the similarities? This is not a matter of patriotic feeling, it is a matter of clear thinking. Indeed, it is from the heights of theory, and not from the depths of history, that the differences between democracy and dictatorship fade into insignificance. (Heidegger gave an example of this in 1935, when he declared that “from a metaphysical point of view, Russia and America are the same.”)

Nor is it historical distance, but a distinctively partisan perspective, that allows Dunn casually to characterize Margaret Thatcher as a tyrant: “Even in her own eyes, she effectively identified the British state with herself (following broadly the precedent set by Louis XIV, if on somewhat different assumptions).” Dunn spills rather a lot of ink to reach the fairly commonplace conclusion, at least among professors disdainful of the people, that the best way to understand the electoral triumphs of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan is that voter preferences “increasingly center on the perceived requirements for agreeable and dependable consumption.” That Thatcher and Reagan rallied their fellow citizens at a crucial moment in history, that they gave voice to neglected but worthy aspiration, and that they effected reforms that contained some portion of justice, are all theoretical possibilities that Dunn turns his back on almost before he has perfunctorily noted them.

So what intellectual reward does Dunn’s meandering quest for political understanding—at times hasty and vague, at times detailed and pedantic, frequently belaboring the obvious and just as frequently taking the controversial as axiomatic—finally yield? There are some fine moments: Dunn’s sympathetic restatement of Hobbes’s doctrine of consent, his insistence on the centrality of judgment, his heartfelt plea to resist the lures of reductionism:

I take the fact that human beings do value not as a blunt biological fact about the members of a particular species but as a key prerogative of that species, an aspect of its very special relation to the realities which surround it, and an index of its capacity in principle to respond deeply and accurately to these realities. It is important, in this view, that human beings are not merely open to depravity and folly but also capable at their best of resisting both: capable of acting well. Any vision of politics which omits these characteristics or portrays them simply as consequences of other and supposedly stabler and more fundamental properties of the members of the species will, in my judgment, deform our understanding of politics rather than enhance it.

But, for the most part, what is true in Dunn can be had elsewhere with a fraction of the fuss, a great deal less hand-wringing and posturing, and many fewer melodramatic intellectual gyrations.

Ultimately, making sense of politics for Dunn comes down to figuring out why capitalism won, and coming to grips with its dispiriting victory.

A great deal of the understanding of modern politics consists in seeing why exactly it is that human beings today feel so effectively discouraged from even attempting bold and optimistic reorganization of the ways in which they produce goods and services: why they feel increasingly hemmed in in the main structures of their working lives and in the systems of ownership and control on which these structures depend. (Hemmed in enough to elect politicians eager to compel them to draw these bonds still tighter, and increasingly uninterested in bothering even to garland them with flowers: cf. Rousseau.)

Thus speaks the weary voice of the academic socialist who, after decades of study, obstinately refuses to confront contemporary politics on its own terms and instead subjects it, in the guise of reason's quest, to his own unexamined ideal. Thus recoils the alienated intellectual who, in the name of the people, scorns the hubbub and the hardball, the dark smoke-filled backrooms and the brightly lit public stages, the grease and the grime that are inseparable from a free people's practice of democracy. Thus laments the unphilosophic sensibility that tries to find someone to blame for the world's resolute resistance to being run in accordance with its own particular construction of the rules of reason.

What causes Dunn to go so badly astray? It is not the aspiration to philosophize about politics. It is the aspiration to politicize philosophy. And to do so in the Aristophanic manner, with one's head in the clouds. The problem with launching political inquiries in the realm of abstract theory—where one can scarcely distinguish between a weak, unreliable, but democratically accountable president and a ruthless tyrant—is that from the outset the thin air and the distant heights blur or render altogether invisible the very phenomena that one seeks to understand.

As Plato's dialogues marvelously illustrate, philosophy is a process of ascent, not a process of descent. It is a form of inquiry that begins on the ground, with what is near at hand. Philosophy does not contrive puzzles about the meaning of existence. It finds in the patient and probing and (where necessary) playful examination of ordinary experience and common opinion perplexities about how we ought to conduct our lives, and it lights our way not by solving or dissolving these perplexities but by bringing their features into sharper focus.

By contrast, Dunn's starting point—the question, what is politics?—is artificial and easily answered. While expending enormous reserves of intellectual energy to confirm the obvious—that politics arises out of our simultaneous need for and contest with other human beings—Dunn suppresses a host of richer and more intriguing questions. A friend appears inattentive

or disloyal and we ask: what is friendship? Romance sets the heart ablaze and consumes all of our careful calculations, causing us to wonder: what is love? Torn between obligations to our family and duty to our fellow citizens, we are provoked to raise the question: what is justice? It is not the way of philosophy to provide remedies or to resolve controversies, even when our fortune and fate seem to hang in the balance. So perhaps the single most unphilosophical aspect of Dunn's book is the conceit that pervades it—that he already knows exactly what justice is, and that all that remains is to understand the enormous obstacles that the modern state places in the path of its realization.

Had Dunn begun down on the ground, he might have oriented his efforts to make sense of politics around the widely held belief that is self-evident to most of his readers and distinctive to our time: the belief in the freedom and the equality of all individuals. The belief may or may not be susceptible to theoretical proof, but as a practical matter it conditions and complicates all that we do and say and think. It steadily breaks down barriers in our minds and hearts by encouraging us to see others as like ourselves and to see ourselves as no different from anybody else, no better and no worse; and it sets us on an alternative trajectory, leading us to conceive of ourselves as isolated kingdoms, sovereign individuals, each his or her own supreme authority.

Had Dunn recognized the primacy of our belief in the natural freedom and equality of all, he would have placed himself in a better position to appreciate the political science of Locke (and Montesquieu, Madison, and Tocqueville). This political science remains the best guide to the principles that undergird liberal democracy. It faces up to the fact that politics never has been for the faint of heart and the pure of spirit, because the exercise of power requires the acquisition and the maintenance of power. It enthusiastically embraces the sovereignty of the people, even as it squarely confronts democracy's disadvantages. It calmly takes note of the considerable extent to which human conduct is driven by self-interest, providing for a form of self-government that harnesses ambition through careful institutional design while creating opportunities for individuals to rise above self-interest narrowly conceived. And it teaches that it is an error to expect salvation, or perfection or happiness from politics, because those who rule are flawed like the rest of us, and because the structures and the imperatives of public life render it an unlikely stage on which to show our best side or exercise our finest qualities.

Had John Dunn taken good advantage of the many and varied practical lessons offered by the study of the history of political theory, he might have grasped that not least of the things that philosophy is good for is preparing us for the defense of politics against the recurrent incursions of bad philosophy.