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Author(s): Dale Hall and Tariq Modood

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DISCUSSION

PRACTICAL POLITICS AND PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY: A NOTE

BY DALE HALL AND TARIQ MODOOD

Are philosophy and politics worlds apart? Gordon Graham's "Practical Politics and Philosophical Inquiry" argued that practical recommendations about political life cannot follow as the conclusion of a philosophical argument. In a note on that article John Liddington criticized Graham's reasoning, while agreeing with his main conclusion that philosophy can "neither imply nor take the form of recommendations about . . . politics". Replying, Graham restated his argument slightly, but did not accept its lack of cogency.¹ We believe that there is more to Graham's argument than Liddington brings out, but that Graham's case, both in its original and modified versions, cannot be upheld.

Graham's view is that philosophy can be no part of a reasoned consideration of political issues, because even cogent philosophical criticism is irrelevant to practical men deliberating about how they should act and may be disregarded without irrationality ("Practical Politics", pp. 237-40). He thinks it is impossible that philosophy can ever require us to revise whatever practical beliefs we may have, however philosophically untenable they may be. He denies not only that philosophy can establish specific positive conclusions about what is practicable or desirable in political life, but also that it can ever undermine our beliefs or actions in even a negative way by showing that they are incoherent, inconsistent or without justification. No practical recommendations, either positive or negative, may follow as the conclusion of a philosophical argument. Consider one of his examples (p. 235). If someone opposes legislation making the possession of pornography an offence because he believes that there is an important distinction to be observed between self- and other-regarding actions, we might think that a successful philosophical criticism of the alleged distinction, showing that it is confused, would constitute a good reason for revising his opinion of the Bill. If we can show agents that their beliefs and actions are groundless or without justification, in that they rest on philosophically untenable notions, we seem to have offered an argument that has at least the important negative implication that they cannot do *this* for *those* reasons. Yet this is precisely what Graham denies. He argues that philosophical proof and practical persuasion have no necessary connexion (pp. 237-8), and that philosophical and practical reasoning have different characteristics and are conducted in different manners (pp. 234, 238-41). *Qua* philosophy, then, philosophy cannot lever the world of practice.

Graham's first point is that a philosophical argument can never amount to a reasoned engagement in politics because it "does not follow from the fact that a man has . . . been supplied with . . . a valid proof" [that his beliefs are groundless] that he is "persuaded by that demonstration" or

¹Gordon Graham, "Practical Politics and Philosophical Inquiry", *PQ*, 28 (1978), 234-41; John Liddington, "Graham on Politics and Philosophy", *PQ* 29 (1979), 153-6; Graham's "Reply to Liddington", p. 157 of the same volume.

“takes it seriously” (p. 237; “Reply”); a man may follow a cogent philosophical criticism of his political beliefs and yet may refuse to alter them. According to Graham, if anyone does change their practical beliefs after a philosophical argument, it can only be as a contingent result of the argument, there being no necessary relationship between following a philosophical criticism and reconsidering one’s political beliefs. This view is quite unsatisfactory, and in any case it does not imply that philosophy cannot recommend. It fails to establish that philosophy cannot recommend because, as Liddington has shown (p. 154), it neglects the important distinction between recommending and persuading. An agent’s refusal to accept certain conclusions does not show that they are not recommended by an argument. Clearly, Graham is in difficulties if he defines recommendation in terms of success in actually changing men’s opinions, for that is a usage quite without foundation.

He evidently thinks his difficulties are only verbal, for his “Reply” says that they can be avoided by just substituting the phrase ‘take seriously’ for ‘be persuaded by’ in his original argument. However, this is still unsatisfactory. The question at issue is not whether philosophy can guarantee to be taken seriously but whether it can recommend. What fails to be taken seriously may nevertheless be a recommendation in that it does undermine or explode our beliefs. The defect of Graham’s case is that it supposes that the philosopher must be able to control the behaviour of those agents with whom he argues in order to be said to recommend. Moreover, what both Graham and Liddington fail to note is that no argument, philosophical or practical, can guarantee to be taken seriously. Even an appeal to self-interest, in the practical maxim that smoking damages one’s health, is not sure to be taken seriously. Graham’s thesis is also unsatisfactory in that it is not the case that it is contingent whether we take a proof seriously if we acknowledge its validity and accept its premises. If we follow a proof in which these conditions are met, the connection between seeing the proof and taking it seriously is internal and necessary, for we cannot then intelligibly refuse to accept its conclusions. The notions of proof and seriousness in this sense are connected logically, in that a proof cannot systematically fail to be taken seriously and still be a proof, and if someone always fails to take proofs seriously he cannot be said to understand them. Graham tries to resist this argument by claiming that practical men always have reasonable non-philosophical grounds for refusing to accept the conclusion of even a cogent philosophical demonstration which criticizes their political beliefs (p. 238). They can rationally disregard any such conclusion, and continue to act and believe as before, on the grounds that a shortage of time prevents their refuting it, that they suspect the argument is vitiated by an unresolved ambiguity, or that they lack confidence in their own reasoning powers. But there are two crucial difficulties here. First, these putative objections are in principle satisfiable in any particular instance; and, second, they presuppose that the agents do understand what would count as a satisfactory proof. Far from being non-philosophical, the possible objections are parasitic upon the idea of what would be a cogent philosophical argument.

The heart of Graham’s case, however, lies in his second argument, in his attempt to separate practical from philosophical reflection by a particular characterization of practice (pp. 238-40). Although Liddington fails to notice this, Graham’s main strategy is to characterize practical and philosophical reasoning in terms that are mutually exclusive, by arguing that whereas the latter transcends particular matters for more abstract and

general reflection, and always invites continuing criticism of its conclusions, the former must exclude much from consideration in order to resolve urgent, limited questions conclusively. Graham can maintain this contrast, however, only by exaggerating certain features of practical life to an unreal degree, for practice is a more complex realm of experience than he allows.

His argument that the urgency of practical life circumscribes reflection, by necessitating the exclusion of many factors from consideration, is an oversimplification as it stands. The deliberations of, say, the Wolfenden Committee when considering what recommendations to make about homosexual law reform were certainly practical, but consisted in reconciling and seeing the limits of different principles, rather than eliminating factors from consideration in order that "the question in hand may be settled" (p. 239). Nor must practical problems always be answered conclusively, in a way which excludes further questioning. Graham is preoccupied by the fact that practical reasoning concerns decisions relating "to actions which must be taken in time" (p. 238). He says, "Our reflections upon the anti-pornography Bill cannot go on for ever because there is coming a time when we shall have to vote", as if there could not be any continuing problem about pornography, our reflection having to end with the voting. However, it is misleading to treat actions as irrevocably conclusive, as "fixed and final" (p. 239), categorical commitments which can no longer be subject to practical reflection once performed; for, obviously, further reflection may always convince us that we should act differently in future or should make amends for what we have done. Moreover, practical thinking and argument is concerned as much with men's beliefs, feelings, attitudes, judgements and evaluations as with their immediate actions, and frequently it seeks to affect not so much their decisions as their appraisals of the world. So that even if we cannot reverse a past action, and even if the question of acting differently or making amends does not arise for some reason, moral argument may convince us that we did wrong and so lead us to feel remorse, certainly a practical attitude. For the moral agent, even his past actions are matters of concern and reflection; and so a father, whose children have grown up, may reappraise his early relationship with them, wondering if he ought to have acted as he did. Such reflection is characteristic of practice and, of course, many of its stages may be philosophical. More generally, though, the whole strategy of Graham's second argument is misguided, for features such as the exclusion of factors from consideration and reservation of judgement cannot identify a species of reasoning or mode of discourse, but make sense only in the context of a particular form of discourse. All arguments exclude some things from explicit consideration, and the appropriateness or otherwise of their exclusions is determined by the character and purpose of the argument in question. Similarly, continual criticism is a necessary part of all reasoning, and so can delimit no single area or mode of thought.

The converse of Graham's characterization of practice as essentially uncritical is a view of philosophy as continually critical. He believes that all philosophical judgements are "reserved" in the sense that anything we conclude today can be criticized tomorrow (p. 239). Hence, to act upon a philosophical conclusion, for example, that the notion of tacit consent is incoherent, must be contrary to the character of philosophy; for it must "ignore all future attempts to resuscitate Locke's theory" and presume the philosophical argument to be settled. Graham's view might be that the philosopher can conclude neither that a notion like tacit consent is coherent nor that it is incoherent, because future objections may prove him wrong.

Liddington has shown (p. 155) how this reasoning implies a radical scepticism about philosophy. If our present judgements on the notion of tacit consent are reserved because they are subject to future criticism, then the possible future criticisms must also be reserved, for to be pertinent criticisms they too must be philosophical. Hence we must be reserved not only about our initial conclusion but also about the grounds on which we should be reserved. The scepticism implicit in this view is that if all philosophical arguments are reserved, then there is no way of deciding whether a conclusion or its criticism is more valid. Such a line of argument would mean that philosophy can establish no conclusions as a basis for action, but only at the cost of suggesting that philosophy cannot conclude at all. Graham's difficulty is in supposing that because Philosophy has no Conclusion, in the sense of a goal or terminus, philosophers never come to conclusions. His argument can be rescued from scepticism,² but only at the price of his main thesis. He may mean, not that we can never reach the conclusion that tacit consent is incoherent, but that such a judgement is only a conclusion in the context of continuing criticism—just as in geometry something is an answer to a question only in so far as it is connected to a proof, so a philosophical conclusion is only so while it is being continually questioned. But this argument cannot by itself establish that philosophy is perverted when acted upon, for though it is in general true that conclusions lose their status the further they are removed from the reasoning that informs them, it does not follow that practical conclusions cannot be based on philosophical reasoning. The latter is only true if we assume what we should be proving, namely, that we cannot act and continue to be critical. Graham must either embrace a scepticism about philosophy along with a radical divorce between philosophy and practice, or explain what is the difference between *thinking that p is incoherent* while being prepared to change your mind in the light of unconsidered objections, and *acting on the basis that p is incoherent* while being prepared to change your mind in the light of unconsidered objections.

Ultimately, then, for Graham, the contrast between philosophy and politics cannot depend on the former's continually critical character, but must rest on the difference between conceptual analysis and evaluation, that is to say, on a form of the fact-value dichotomy.³ However, such a dichotomy must neglect the fact that philosophy may recommend by showing us that if we think this, we cannot think that, or must think that, or may think that. To force us to choose between incompatibles it requires only that we must have some beliefs or reasons for our actions on which it can bear. It is important to note that philosophy connects not just with propositions, but with actions, and its mode of criticism is not to reveal only verbal inconsistency. Conceptual analysis is not concerned simply with what it is possible to think or say without contradiction, but affects our actions themselves profoundly. Consider an analogy: someone who drives through a traffic barrier when the lights are red cannot, if he knows the meaning of the signs, be said to do the same action as another who crosses when the lights are green. He cannot just say, 'I proceeded as normal with right of way', but must at least amend the description of his action to 'I took a chance' or something of the sort. Although he can do "the same thing" in a (misleading) sense, he must understand that he is doing something

²In his "Reply to Liddington", Graham dismisses the charge of scepticism.

³Liddington altogether fails to notice this aspect of Graham's case. However, his own defence of Graham's thesis also relies on a similar distinction between analysis and appraisal.

different. In the same way, someone who learns that his political beliefs are groundless cannot describe or understand them as before. Graham thinks that the clarification of a concept gives no reason for doing anything, say for abiding by a particular concept of liberty. But if we suppose that a man refuses to respect certain principles of liberty because, say, he believes there are no self-regarding actions, then to show him that his objection is not coherent would be to demolish his reason for dissent. It may be objected that philosophy might refute such a man's arguments but cannot prevent his continuing with the same course of action. However, that the man can continue with his opposition does not mean that philosophical arguments are defective or irrelevant in such a case, for no argument, moral, political or any other, can guarantee that the agent addressed will not have reasons for his actions other than those criticized, or even guarantee that he will act rationally at all. Moreover, if he continues with his dissidence it must be for other reasons and hence his dissidence must, logically must, be of a different character. Having understood our arguments, he can no longer just carry on as before. Therefore we cannot know *a priori* that philosophy can never make us revise our beliefs and act differently, for everything depends upon our reasons for holding the beliefs we do. The extent of the role that philosophy can play depends on the kinds of and degree of sophistication of the reasons that agents have for their actions. Moreover, far from its being the case that philosophy is unable to recommend or reject notions like negative liberty, without philosophy nothing could count as the justification of such complex notions.

Graham may feel that such examples are not incompatible with his thesis, for he has one final argument, which says that such discussions are merely "piecemeal" reflections which cannot be really philosophical because they are conducted in the wrong (that is, practical) manner.⁴ He appears to say that because such discussions do not constitute philosophy, they cannot be discussions in philosophy. Taken one way, this amounts to an awful *non sequitur*, taken another it is simply stipulative. If there is an inference it is of the form: 'these discussions do not exhaust (constitute) philosophy, therefore they are not discussions within philosophy'—that is, 'because this part is not the whole, it is not a part'. If this is not Graham's reasoning, then he is just insisting that philosophy must be conducted in a wholly non-practical manner. Of course, this conclusion accords with the way many philosophers understand their enterprise, but it has hardly been universal. Contrary to Graham, we suggest that an argument is philosophical because it raises certain issues or is of a certain character, not because it is offered with a certain attitude. Philosophy's scope cannot be limited just to problems of practical importance; but a sense of practical significance cannot prevent an argument from being philosophical.

University College of Swansea

⁴"Even if my first two objections to the idea of political philosophy of a recommending sort are unsound, the occasional application of philosophical theses to political questions, however persuasive and pertinent they may be, can never constitute philosophy" (pp. 240-41).