Agendas, Arguments, and Political Theory

John D. Harman  
Saint John Fisher College, jharman@sjfc.edu

Deborah Vanderbilt  
Saint John Fisher College, dvanderbilt@sjfc.edu

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John Harman, St. John Fisher College
Deborah Vanderbilt, St. John Fisher College

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 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. 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.

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. 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. 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 analogy 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 third 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

John Harman is professor of political science at St. John Fisher College. His research interests are in political theory. He has published articles on Plato, Hobbes, and contemporary issues. He is a retired Naval Reserve Captain.

Deborah Vanderbilt is associate professor of English at St. John Fisher College. Her research interests are in Chaucer and other medieval subjects, grammar, and the history of English. She grew up in Japan, speaks Japanese, and won Fisher’s Teaching Excellence Award in 1999.
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 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. 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 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
“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 Sea-...
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.


References


