What “Doing Political Philosophy” Means: A Review of Engaging Political Philosophy by Robert Talisse

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1. Introduction

When you think about textbooks that provide “an introduction to political philosophy,” what do you imagine? It may, for example, summarize the contents of great works from ancient Greece and Rome to major contemporary political thinkers, and introduce them chronologically. It may be a textbook based on the methodology of “history of thought.” It seems that such textbooks are relatively widespread. In recent years, however, the number of textbooks that summarize and introduce views of political philosophers on various modern-day issues such as war, terrorism, poverty, environmental problems, human rights protection, multiculturalism, nationalism, immigration, refugees, etc., has increased. Textbooks such as these are said to be oriented toward “problem-solving.” Some of these textbooks may focus on the development of contemporary political philosophy—especially after John Rawls’s “revival” of political philosophy.

However, let us imagine the questions beginners of political philosophy are concerned with in the first place. They might not have any doubt about details of the discourses of specific thinkers or solutions to specific problems; rather, they might be concerned with the question “What is political philosophy?” or “What does it mean to do political philosophy?” But indeed, adequate answers for these fundamental questions have been given in neither “history-oriented” textbooks nor problem-solving-oriented ones. The American philosopher, Robert Talisse’s Engaging Political Philosophy is a remarkable textbook because it does not take either a historical or a “problem-solving” approach. Rather, it leaves readers thinking “What is political philosophy after all?”

2. The Structure of the Book and a Brief Overview of the Contents

First, I introduce the rough structure of the book as follows and make a brief overview of the contents.

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Part I comprises chapters 1 and 2 outlines the premise of the book. It explains the discipline of political philosophy, discusses what it means to do political philosophy, and clarifies the book’s methodology.

We are born into the world as a “social existence.” In other words, the social institutions surrounding us play a major role in defining who we are. Among such institutions, what is particularly important for us is the “state.” Therefore, one of the main subjects of political philosophy is concerned with the state. In particular, it is an attempt to clarify, from a normative point of view, why the state exists. In contemporary Western societies, the existence of the state is generally justified in light of the idea of “liberal democracy.” Consequently, a normative justification of the state is inseparable from an interpretation of liberal democracy.

Then, in Part II (chapters 3 to 6), Talisse examines four basic concepts constituting liberal democracy. On the one hand, liberal democracy fundamentally commits to the view that each person is treated as free and equal, while on the other, according to the famous formulation by the sociologist Max Weber, the state claims a legitimate monopoly of violence. Therefore, the state is trying to impose legitimately some restrictions on each of us. If so, such a state is incompatible with the idea of a free and equal individual. This provokes an important question: Why can free and equal individuals justify the state that tries to constrain their liberty and even coerce their subordination? In other words, “Why not anarchism?”

Therefore, in chapter 3, Talisse at first considers about how liberty should be interpreted. According to him, there are three major philosophical accounts of liberty: a negative conception, a positive conception, and a civic standing conception of liberty. However, because any of these conceptions is insufficient, he argues that a “hybrid” interpretation might be preferred in which liberty is the absence of interference among autonomous social equals.

In order to comprehend the conception of liberty, it is essential to interpret the ideas of autonomy and equality. In other words, the various fundamental concepts that constitute liberal democracy are not separate and isolated ones; rather, they are deeply related to each other. Consequently, it is crucial to show their consistent interpretation, which is one of the main purposes of this book.

Given the “hybrid” interpretation of liberty, how can it be compatible with the authority of the state? This is the main theme of chapter 4. Put differently, what conditions must be met in order for the state to have authority over the lives of its citizens (that is, on what grounds are we as citizens obliged to obey the state and its orders)? In truth, it is not so easy to explain why you have a duty to subordinate your own will to the state’s authority. Thus, there is a point made in philosophical anarchists’ arguments that no state can claim legitimate authority. So, Talisse suggests the idea of “deflated authority.” It is, in a sense, a conditional authority. It means that people have a prima facie duty to obey the state, which is reasonably just and sufficiently democratic. Then, to understand the concept of authority clearly, it is important to grasp the concepts of justice and democracy appropriately.

Chapter 5 is devoted to a consideration on the concept of justice. Justice involves the core of the liberal commitment to the equal concern of individuals. The ways that individuals interpret equality and consider how to allocate goods and opportunities out of this liberal commitment is directly related to the extent that people have liberty. It is especially important to distribute the resources that are necessary for democratic citizenship equally because the question of how we can authorize and justify the state is inseparable from an interpretation of democracy. Consequently, at present, it might be said that justice prevails when materials and social resources necessary for participation in democracy are distributed equally. The question that needs to be answered, however, is “What is democracy?”

Democracy is a complex concept, but according to Talisse, by understanding the function of democracy as “public reasoning” based on citizens’ deliberations, citizens can justify the state’s actions and have reasonable grounds for the authority of the state. However, it is difficult to conceive of every citizen engaging in public deliberation about social and political matters. Therefore, Talisse proposes a
“contestatory” version of deliberative democracy. This is a model of democracy in which legislators and public officials are required to establish laws and policies based on their deliberation whereas citizens are required effectively to be social critics who call for their governments to account for whether their laws and policies are justifiable with “public reasons.”

For Talisse, by giving an internally consistent interpretation of the conception of liberty, authority, equality, and democracy in this way, it is possible to explain the legitimacy of the state from a viewpoint of liberal democracy.

3. Brief Comments

If you read this book, you can understand that political philosophy, as Talisse presents it, is “engaging,” but what is “engaging” in this book? In my view, it is the methodology. According to Talisse, there is no neutral philosophical thinking. Of course, we should try to think philosophically from a neutral point of view as much as possible, but it cannot be completely neutral, because our thinking is greatly influenced by the culture, tradition, and customs of the community in which we live. Rather, we should be conscious of that, and consequently, we should be able critically to examine the communities that have nurtured us. For Talisse, this is to “think philosophically.” Therefore, he intends to explore a normative justification of the state in relation to a possibly consistent interpretation of the dominant political ideal in his society—“liberal democracy.”

Although Talisse’s methodology is an important attraction of this book, it also highlights one of book’s limitations. This is because the arguments developed throughout the book are based on a specific cultural context—that of American society. Given this, it might seem a bit of an unfamiliar argument to make for people in other societies, especially in non-Western societies.

For example, the latter half of Chapter 6 refers to “deliberative democracy.” In fact, some theorists often argue that democracy has reached a “deliberative turn.” It is surely reasonable not only that the act of voting underlies the representative system but also that “deliberation” in civil society is increasingly important. I agree with Talisse’s proposal for a modified conception of deliberative democracy, because as he argues public deliberation is, in a sense, bit demanding for citizens (pp. 151-153). However, what I want to point out is that at the root of the idea of deliberative democracy lies an implied “idea of self” that thinks rationally and articulates his or her opinions properly. In my view, such an idea of the self is definitely familiar within Western societies but would be different from the idea of the self that has been cultivated, for example, in the Japanese cultural tradition in which I was raised.

That does not mean that the idea of “deliberation” itself is unfamiliar in Japanese society. As Amartya Sen argues, a tradition of “deliberation” is not an exclusive feature of Western society but can be found in many non-Western societies. In the case of Japan, for example, there is an interesting glimpse of the idea of “deliberation” in “The Seventeen-Article Constitution” created in early seventh century by a person considered to be Prince Shotoku, for example. If so, a conception of deliberative democracy that can be found in the Japanese cultural tradition might be slightly different from the conception practiced in Western liberal democracies.

Therefore, in my view, it seems that Talisse’s book should have contained some normative considerations of “nationality.” To be sure, thinking about “the state” is to interpret a proper relationship between the state and the core commitments of liberal democracy. However, especially in the modern world, the state is substantially a sovereign nation-state. Even if liberalism is based on individualism (pp. 22-23), individuals understand a conception of liberal democracy in their cultural contexts, which are mainly national cultural contexts (even though each person would be separable from such a perspective).
contexts). Then, to be precise, it seems necessary to ask from a normative point of view how to interpret the relationship between the state, an ideal of liberal democracy, and nationality.

However, Talisse is well aware of this limitation of his book. That is why he emphasizes the importance of “doing political philosophy.” Here we should remember the concept / conception distinction as mentioned in this book (pp. 43-45). A “concept” of liberal democracy is different from a “conception” of liberal democracy. No one would deny that both Japan and the United States are committed to liberal democratic values. However, the notion that both societies share the same “conception” of political society is suspect. Rather, it seems natural to me that different societies and cultures have different “conceptions” of liberal democracy.

Talisse’s great accomplishments in his Engaging Political Philosophy are his articulation of what it means to be “doing political philosophy” and then his explanation of what it means to “do political philosophy” in the American cultural contexts in which he in fact lives. In response to this, the readers, in turn, must “do political philosophy” by starting within their own cultural contexts. In my way of saying, we must examine what kind of a conception of “liberal democracy” is derived from the cultural traditions to which we belong by using a “folkloristic” and “anthropological” method. By doing so, you will be able to compete rival “conceptions” derived from the same “concept,” which leads to the cultivation of each “conception.” From this point of view, as Talisse says, this book is not an “introduction” to political philosophy but rather an excellent “primer” to it. I hope that Talisse’s readers will become “engaged” in the world of political philosophy.

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7 In this sense, works of Daniel Bell, who attempts to derive an alternative vision of liberal democracy from non-western cultural traditions (especially Chinese Confucian traditions) are interesting. See Daniel Bell, East Meets West: Human Rights and Democracy in East Asia, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000 and Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.