Introduction

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All political argument employs political concepts. They provide the building blocks needed to construct a case for or against a given political position. Is development aid too low, income tax too high, pornography violence against women, or mass bombing unjust? Any response to topical questions such as these involves developing a view of what individuals are entitled to, what they owe to others, the role of individual choice and responsibility in these matters, and so on. These views, in their turn, imply a certain understanding of concepts like rights, equality and liberty, and their relationship to each other. People of different political persuasions interpret these key concepts of politics in different ways. This book introduces students to some of the main interpretations, pointing out their various strengths and weaknesses.

Older texts on political concepts sought to offer neutral definitions that should be accepted by everyone, regardless of their political commitments and values.¹ Unfortunately, this task proved harder than many had believed. For example, a common argument of this school was that it was a misuse of the term 'freedom' to suggest that people who lacked the resources to read books were unfree to read them. What one ought to say was that such people were unable to read them. Individuals were only unfree to read books if they were legally prohibited or physically prevented from doing so. However, as Ian Carter shows in his chapter, this is not an issue that can be settled by attending to actual linguistic practice, no matter how carefully. Most theorists do distinguish between freedom and ability, but many dispute the view that a lack of resources is necessarily a matter of inability rather than unfreedom. For instance, some people would argue that the uneven distribution of such resources typically results from unjust social arrangements that could and should be rectified and as such has implications for judgements about the extent of a person's freedom. States can provide free education and libraries, say, rather than leaving the provision of schooling and books solely to the market. They contend that deliberately withholding such public provision would constitute a form of coercion, similar in kind to state censorship. In this dispute, disagreement over the

correct use and meaning of freedom is firmly related to differences in people's normative and social theories. It is these differences rather than straightforwardly linguistic ones that lead them to diverge in their views of whether individuals acting in a free market could ever coerce others, and so on. Though all parties in this debate might agree that being free is different to being able, some may still detect a lack of freedom where others only see inability.

These sorts of disagreements about the meanings of terms have led many commentators to argue that political concepts are 'essentially contestable'.² According to this view, it is part of the nature of these concepts to be open to dispute, and disagreements over their proper use reflect divergent normative, theoretical and empirical assumptions. Even so, these theorists would still maintain that competing views represent alternative 'conceptions' of the same 'concept'. In other words, in spite of their disagreements about how the concept might be defined, they are nonetheless debating the same idea. As a result, it also makes sense to compare different views and to argue that some are more coherent, empirically plausible and normatively attractive than others. With differences of emphasis, all the contributors to this volume broadly adopt this approach. Some, like Rex Martin, Richard Bellamy, David Owen and Catriona McKinnon, contrast two or more different views in order to defend a particular account. Others, like Andrew Vincent, Ciarán O'Kelly and Alan Cromartie, explore difficulties in all accounts. Still others, like Andrew Mason and Anthony Coates, explore a particularly important conception of a given concept, indicating both its appeal and problems. In some cases, as in Bill Jordan's and Emilio Santoro's chapters, the authors concentrate on the theoretical presuppositions of current policies that are guided by a particular understanding of a concept. In others, as in David Boucher's and Jonathan Seglow's chapters, authors compare how different conceptual underpinnings might generate different policy recommendations.

No book will cover all political concepts, and this one is no exception. While aware of many regrettable, if inevitable, omissions, we have attempted to include a broad range of the main concepts employed in contemporary debates among both political theorists and ordinary citizens.³ Each concept tends to relate to the others in various ways but not all the authors would agree how they do so.⁴ Consequently, we have not grouped the chapters into sections. However, the first three chapters tackle the principal concepts employed to justify any policy or institution, the next seven can be roughly related to the main domestic purposes and functions of the state, the following four concern the relationship between state and civil society, and the final three look beyond the state to issues of global concern and relations between states. While not an exhaustive survey therefore, we have tried to offer a wide selection of the concepts used to discuss most dimensions of politics.

Notes

- 1 Two well-known examples of this genre are T.D. Weldon, *The Vocabulary of Politics* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1953), and F. Oppenheim, *Political Concepts: A Reconstruction* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1981).
- 2 The classical account of this thesis is W.B. Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concepts', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 (1956), pp. 167–98. A text that employed this thesis to analyse various concepts, including freedom, is W.E. Connolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1974).
- 3 For a more historical approach, see R. Bellamy and A. Ross, *A Textual Introduction to Social and Political Theory* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1996).
- 4 Students interested in looking at how the main contemporary political philosophers have related these concepts to each other might care to consult W. Kymlicka's excellent *Contemporary Political Philosophy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, 2nd edn).