

BERNARD P. DAUENHAUER

Elements of Responsible Politics



CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHENOMENOLOGY

ELEMENTS OF RESPONSIBLE POLITICS

CONTRIBUTIONS TO PHENOMENOLOGY
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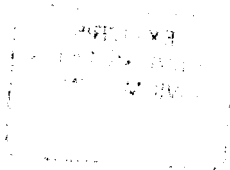
The purpose of this series is to foster the development of phenomenological philosophy through creative research. Contemporary issues in philosophy, other disciplines and in culture generally, offer opportunities for the application of phenomenological methods that call for creative responses. Although the work of several generations of thinkers has provided phenomenology with many results with which to approach these challenges, a truly successful response to them will require building on this work with new analyses and methodological innovations.

ELEMENTS OF RESPONSIBLE POLITICS

by

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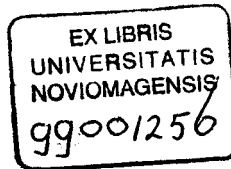
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To the memory of

Edward Goodwin Ballard

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Preface

This collection of essays draws together work done during a period of more than fifteen years. In the course of these years much has changed, including much about politics. Patterns of political activity have been transformed. Ways in which we had been accustomed to construe politics have been substantially modified and sometimes replaced. Some apparently intractable conflicts have been resolved. Other, apparently more manageable, conflicts have shown shocking durability. A number of political doctrines once considered indefinitely serviceable have lost all relevance. And the material and technical resources at our disposal look strikingly different than they did just a few years ago. Practical politics of whatever stripe encounters at every turn ever more grave environmental degradation.

But, or so this collection assumes, not everything political has changed. Some political issues, both “theoretical” and “practical,” remain persistently trenchant. Questions like the following demand ever renewed consideration. What is the point and worth of belonging to a political community? What entitlements and responsibilities follow upon such membership? Or even more fundamentally, what conditions are required for there to be politics at all?

Taken together, the essays collected in this volume propose a way both to understand and to engage in politics which is properly responsive both to perennial political issues and to the peculiar exigencies of our era. Some of them present criticisms of widely held, warmly cherished ways of addressing political matters. Others propose constructive alternatives.

This collection, to be sure, does not contain a comprehensive political doctrine applicable to all issues nor does it propose a definitive solution to any particular one of them. But it does claim to specify elements that are always pertinent to dealing responsibly with any political issue, conceptual or

practical. In specifying these elements, this collection in effect presents a case for a distinctive mode or orientation of thought and action as that which is most appropriate for responsible politics. In so doing, it itself thereby enters the political lists.

I make no pretense that these essays articulate a “view from nowhere.”¹ They all arise within the context of a long, well-developed tradition of Western thought about the conditions and objectives of the complex ways in which people order their interactions with one another. Unsurprisingly, this tradition is not all of a piece, not a seamless whole. In many respects, it keeps available a multiplicity of voices discordant with one another. More often than not, it poses problems rather than giving answers. But in doing so, it nonetheless circumscribes in a helpful, if not precise, manner the field in which reflection on political thought and practice takes place. It also furnishes valuable concepts and distinctions with which to articulate this reflection.

Not a few contemporary thinkers either explicitly or implicitly denigrate this Western tradition. They claim to subvert, overcome, or replace it. I grant that this tradition is not perfect. But neither is it a disaster. It can and has undergone changes, some of which are arguably for the better. It can and does provide sustenance for fresh, benign reflection.

But even though the Western tradition provides both a reasonably well-developed conception of the domain of politics and valuable conceptual resources with which to articulate political issues, it has also spawned two widespread competing, and dangerous, paradigms for both political discourse and practice. Both paradigms, by what they emphasize as well as by what they slight, deform both discourse and practice. One of these paradigms promotes a rationalistic politics, a politics of vision. Utopian thought of various kinds exemplifies this paradigm. But not all political rationalism, as the example of Hegel shows, is utopian. The other paradigm promotes a voluntaristic politics, a politics of will or might. Conventionalist and contractualist thought exemplifies this latter paradigm. Not only are these paradigms at odds with each other. Each also contains its own internal fatal flaw. Neither can simultaneously preclude both tyranny and anarchy, the twin antitheses of responsible politics.

This collection of essays points toward a “third way,” an alternative to both rationalism and voluntarism. This “third way” does not require a com-

plete repudiation of either rationalism or voluntarism. Rather, it salvages from each of them what gave them their plausibility.

The “third way” I develop in these essays owes a great deal to many contemporary thinkers, each of whom in his own way has rethought and thereby revived the tradition. Prominent among these thinkers are Heidegger, Gadamer, Ricoeur, Marcel, and Sartre. But I must single out for special mention Merleau-Ponty. It is his influence which is most pervasive here.

Indeed, this collection taken as a whole amounts to a commentary on and extension of Merleau-Ponty’s achievements. Because each of these essays is self-contained and because his influence is so pervasive, a reader who starts at the first page and reads straight through will find some repetition. Given the nature of this volume, this repetition is unavoidable. And it has the merit of keeping each essay fully intelligible in itself.

Given the recent, startling collapse of Communism as a political force, it is not necessary to dwell on the sharp opposition between the “third way” toward which I point and the rationalist collectivism which orthodox Communism propounded. But it is probably useful for me to complete the stage setting for these essays by pointing out just what it is about contemporary individualism that sets it so much at odds with this “third way.” For the search for a “third way” is prompted in large measure by the conviction that individualism leads to political irresponsibility. Whether rationalistically or voluntaristically interpreted, individualism promotes a depreciation and even a trivialization of concern for the community’s well being in favor of attention to one’s private interests. As a consequence, under neither interpretation can individualism cope successfully with such urgent contemporary global problems as pollution, population size and distribution, and species-threatening weapons.²

Both rationalist and voluntarist politics, whether championing collectivism or individualism, have regularly been presented as definitively established doctrines. The “third way” I propose denies that it makes sense in politics to seek either a practice or a theory which is definitive. As Merleau-Ponty saw, there is no perfect political practice or thought. The cautions and recommendations embodied in these essays all deal with how we are to engage in politics responsibly in the absence of a perfect politics. It follows, then, that these essays, whether taken singly or together, invite response. They are contributions to a conversation whose termination would necessarily be a disaster.

I have divided this collection into four parts. Part I, fittingly, contains essays devoted to making explicit Merleau-Ponty's own contributions to contemporary political thought. These essays provide a crucial point of departure for the rest of the studies in this collection. Whatever merit or lack thereof the reader finds in the other essays in this volume, I hope that the essays in this part will make clear to him or her just how important Merleau-Ponty's contribution is to efforts to develop a responsible politics.

The essays in Part II deal with questions concerning what it is to be an agent. They seek to articulate at least the minimal conditions for political agency and responsibility. In effect, they contribute to what one might call, in a Ricoeurian vein, the philosophical anthropology that underpins responsible political thought.

The two essays which make up Part III set forth crucial features of the basic orientation, namely hope, that I claim is required for maximally responsible political thought and practice. This specific sort of hope is political rather than religious or "familial." It undercuts both optimism and pessimism. There is, I admit, nontrivial overlap between these two essays. But I include both of them because in "Hope and Responsible Politics" I provide important support for the concept of hope that I propose which I do not repeat in "The Place of Hope in Politics." On the other hand, the latter, and later, piece presents a stronger and more precise case for the importance of hope in politics.

It is true of all political thought that, sooner or later, the "proof of the pudding is in the eating." Accordingly, Part IV presents some of the ramifications of the general position I develop in Parts II and III. On the one hand, I will show how the orientation I propose would affect the way in which some perennial issues in political thought are dealt with. On the other, I will spell out some of the implications of my proposal for criticizing some contemporary alternatives.

Several of the essays collected here have not been previously published. And I have made nontrivial revisions of some of those that have already appeared. In the remarks introducing each of the four parts I will indicate which are the new essays and which are the revised ones.

Part I

The four essays which make up Part I set forth the principal and most durable features of Merleau-Ponty's political philosophy. Unquestionably, there are important differences between his political reflections prior to his complete rejection of Soviet-style Marxism in mid-1950 and his later thought. But there is also substantial continuity between them. Some of the same elements in his general philosophical orientation which once made Soviet Marxism attractive to him figured in his subsequent repudiation of it. Nonetheless it remains true that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in general changed in crucial ways throughout his career. Unsurprisingly, some of those changes affected his political thinking.

The first of these four studies, "Renovating the Problem of Politics," appeared initially in *The Review of Metaphysics* in 1976 and was reprinted in *Crosscurrents in Phenomenology*, edited by Ronald Bruzina and Bruce Wilshire in 1978. In it, I draw upon Heidegger's work as well as on Merleau-Ponty's. At the time I wrote this essay studies in English of Heidegger's political thought were in their early stages and discussion of it on the Continent was much less intense and informed than it is today. The extent of Heidegger's reprehensible involvement with Nazism was largely unsuspected. Nonetheless, I take it that it is permissible to try to salvage parts of a thinker's work without thereby endorsing the whole of it. In that spirit, I have made revisions in this essay to acknowledge the deep problems that recent scholarship has shown Heidegger's work to contain while still proposing that what I extract from that work remains of substantial import for responsible political thinking.

The other three pieces of which Part I is composed concentrate exclusively on Merleau-Ponty. The second essay in the part, "One Central Link Between Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language and His Political

Thought,” ties my reflections on silence and the restraint involved therein to these two parts of Merleau-Ponty’s work. It was published in *Tulane Studies in Philosophy* in 1980. The third, “Merleau-Ponty’s Political Thought: Its Nature and Its Challenge,” was included in *Phenomenology in a Pluralistic Context*, edited by William L. McBride and Calvin O. Schrag, published in 1983. I have not significantly revised either of these two essays. The final piece in Part I, “Merleau Ponty on Politics, History, and Violence,” was written in 1989 and has not been previously published.

Renovating the Problem of Politics

Robert Sokolowski in *Husserlian Meditations*, writes:

Heidegger situates Husserlian themes within the wider context of the question of being, but he does not sufficiently consider the context of political philosophy. And even the question of being appears different if the political context is taken into account. Heidegger advances beyond Husserl by ... raising the issue of publicness in a more appropriate way than Husserl, with his stress on the discourse of science, was able to do. But Heidegger's conception of the public is not adequate for political life; in terms of the kinds of human association distinguished by Aristotle in *Politics* I.2 – family, village, city – Heidegger's thoughts are most appropriate for the village, not the city. A village is not based on any kind of constitution or "social contract."¹

Given the discoveries during the decade of the 80s of the depth and extent of Heidegger's involvement with the Nazis, Sokolowski's comment can now be seen to be strikingly mild.² But these discoveries notwithstanding, one has no justification for regarding Heidegger's thought as wholly discredited. Even his thought about political matters remains of value.³

In this paper, I will argue that Heidegger, along with another student of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, have contributed substantially to the renovation of the problem of politics. Neither of them, to be sure, has provided a comprehensive theory of politics. But each, despite his own limitations, flaws, and in Heidegger's case, reprehensible political judgments, has bequeathed to us much of substance for our efforts to make sense of politics.

Their contributions are of two sorts. First, they have destroyed, in Heidegger's sense, the metaphysical base that has dominated Western political thought since Plato. And second, they have provided insights into and clues pointing toward elements that any defensible politics must embody. In so doing they open a way for us to retrieve and renovate what is sound in the political thought that developed under the sway of metaphysics.

I

Western philosophy, from Plato onward, has been marked by at least a tension and at worst a cleavage between the demands of what is to be thought and the demands of what is to be done or achieved. An especially acute form of this tension appears in the relation between speculative thought and political conduct or statecraft.⁴ Philosophy since Plato is supposed to deal with knowledge, certainty, and truth. But politics is concerned with power, which rests on opinion.⁵ One simply cannot have certitude concerning what his political action will bring about. This tension between the demands of what is to be thought and the demands of what is to be done mirrors that found already in Greek tragic figures, e.g., Creon and Antigone.

At issue, of course, from the outset is the question of the legitimacy of the exercise of political power. What entitles one man to command and requires another to obey? Plato's resolution of this issue consisted in locating the source of legitimate authority beyond the sphere of power, beyond men. Plato has the philosopher turn away from the *polis* and then return to impose upon human affairs the standards he had *seen*.⁶ Whether Hannah Arendt is right or not in holding that Plato announces the philosopher's claim to rule not so much for the sake of the *polis* and politics as for the sake of philosophy and the safety of the philosopher,⁷ it is the case that for Plato the source of the right to command must transcend the realm of human history.

Aristotle already saw the danger of tyranny lurking in Plato's exaltation of the expert, the philosopher, and in Plato's conception of statecraft along the lines of fabrication. Nonetheless, in defending the intrinsic supremacy of the contemplative realm, Aristotle established the right of the thinker to independence, but left unclarified the foundation of the right to command. He rejects Plato's resolution of the tension between what is to be thought

and what is to be achieved in politics. But he can hardly be said to have provided a *new* resolution.⁸

In post-classical times repeated attempts have been made to definitively resolve this tension either to the advantage of philosophy, by dissolving the tension, or to the advantage of politics, by transforming the tension into a cleavage. The approach which gives philosophy the decisive word rests on the claim that there is some knowable, anterior, fundamentally ahistorical order which serves as standard, criterion, or guiding principle for political conduct. The problem of politics, then, is basically one of translating an ahistorical order into the worldly affairs of men. The other approach, which gives politics the decisive word, denies such a knowable anterior order. But it claims for men a prior, radically non-political, freedom on the basis of which they construct the *polis* on their own terms, at their own discretion, and for their own purposes.

In reality, at the level of reflection, the politics-favoring approach has tended to collapse back into the philosophy-favoring approach. But at the level of practice the philosophy-favoring approach has tended to collapse back into the politics-favoring one. What I want to call attention to here, however, is that on both of these approaches, the realm of politics is a derivative realm. And the legitimacy of conduct in this realm is determined by principles which do not, in the final analysis, belong to it.

From another angle, it can be said that most post-classical attempts to resolve the classical tension between what is to be thought and what is to be achieved politically either explicitly or implicitly assume the possibility of radical human autonomy. (Machiavelli is an important exception.) Whether this autonomy is claimed for the divinely elected king who makes God's will his own, for the Rousseauian man who expresses the general will, for the Lockean man in the state of nature, or for the Marxian man of the future but predestined classless society, the right to command belongs to the man who transcends, at least in part, the realms of history and politics. Either by reason of his vision of eternal verities or by reason of his radical, natural, pre-political, ahistorical free-will, whatever the autonomous man commands is either what should be commanded or at least what is unquestionably permissible for him to command. Thus the autonomous man in principle either eliminates contingency from the political realm by deducing political conduct from ahistorical rational norms he knows, or grounds political conduct in a will which sets standards at its own discretion.⁹

Thus, on one approach, the classical tension between philosophy and politics is dissolved. On the other, it is converted into an absolute cleavage. But the conceptual quandaries besetting the post-classical theories, and even more the tyrannical or anarchical interpretations which have been justified in the name of each of them, call into question the entire project of handling the classical tension on the basis of some version of a claim of radical human autonomy. Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have, I think, provided devastating criticisms of the notion of radical human autonomy. In so doing, they have in effect undercut all of what Heidegger would call the metaphysical theories concerning the relation between what is to be thought and what is to be done or achieved politically.

There is no need here for a detailed rehearsal of their well-known criticisms. Let me only briefly recall that both of them seek ultimately to provide a unified foundation upon which to ground both speculative thought and deliberated practice. Merleau-Ponty provides this foundation through his notions of *être-au-monde* and chiasm. Heidegger does so through his Dasein analysis and his notion of meditative thinking. What they both show is that man is radically and exhaustively finite and historical. Thus it makes no sense to claim either that he can achieve an ahistorical spectatorial grasp of the world or that some dimension of man, e.g., his free will, is radically independent of the influence of the world. Man is in no sense radically autonomous.

Given such foundations, it becomes impossible to maintain, in the realm of politics, that some political form, ideal, norm, or institution is definitively and exclusively correct either for some specific time or locale or in perpetuity and everywhere. But all theories of politics which are, in Heidegger's sense, metaphysical rest on some such claim. Thus all such theories are in effect undercut. It does not follow that all the elements of these theories likewise collapse. But it does follow that confrontations between political doctrines which are both metaphysical in this sense, e.g., between communism and capitalism, or between communism and liberalism, are confrontations between doctrines both of which are devoid of defensible foundations.¹⁰

It would, of course, be exorbitant to claim that either Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty has provided us with a well-developed new politics. But it would also be wrong to think that the only significant contribution their work makes to the problem of politics is a negative critique of modern political theories. Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have provided elements for a possible

new politics in which the classical tension can be converted from stumbling block to stepping stone.¹¹

II

I turn first to the work of Merleau-Ponty, whose concern with the problem of politics is more obvious, if not more pervasive than is Heidegger's.¹² Let me recall three related parts of his political thought. In *Adventures of the Dialectic*, he writes:

If history does not have a direction, like a river, but a meaning, if it teaches us, not a truth, but errors to avoid, if its practice is not deduced from a dogmatic philosophy of history, then it is not superficial to base a politics on the analysis of political man. After all, once the official legends have been put aside, what makes a politics important is ... the human quality that causes the leaders truly to animate the political apparatus and makes their most personal acts everyone's affair.... In politics, truth is perhaps only this art of inventing what will later appear to have been required by the time.¹³

Second, in this same work, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to argue for a non-communist left which rejects the supposedly exhaustive alternatives posed by the rivalry between what can, for convenience, be labeled liberalism and communism. The noncommunist left, working through a parliamentary structure which is "the only known institution that guarantees a minimum of opposition and truth,"¹⁴ undertakes the constant task "of evading the antagonists' hostility, of springing the traps that one prepares for the other, of thwarting the complicity of their pessimisms."¹⁵ This noncommunist left recognizes that its approach is not definitive solution. But this is so because in politics there is no definitive solution. There are only timely ones.¹⁶

Finally, in "A Note on Machiavelli," Merleau-Ponty claims that Machiavelli was right in holding that for a truly humanistic politics, values and principles are necessary but not sufficient. In fact, "it is even dangerous to stop with values, for so long as we have not chosen those whose mission it is to uphold these values in the historical struggle, we have done nothing."¹⁷

What Machiavelli lacked was a guideline to enable him to distinguish between political *virtù*, that political virtuosity which is excellence in discern-