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Book Review

THINKING ABOUT THINKING

Michael Freeden: *The Political Theory of Political Thinking: The Anatomy of a Practice*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xi, 345.)

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It is well known that a central task of political theory is bringing to light the unacknowledged, sometimes unconscious, assumptions that underlie acts of political expression, especially those in political texts. Michael Freeden moves this process up one level, examining the conceptual apparatus that political theorists bring to this task. While they are fully attuned to hidden dimensions of their subject matter, he believes they do not fully recognize their own assumptions or the role these play in their analyses. Accordingly, while activities such as advocating higher taxes, restrictions on various social practices, or specific defense measures are examples of thinking *about* politics, Freeden is interested in conceptual aspects of the reasoning employed in the thought processes these activities involve and how different aspects relate to one another. He believes that ambivalence, contestability, vagueness, are essential aspects of political thinking and so also of how politics itself is conceptualized.

Common understandings of politics focus on single dimensions or attributes. Examples are David Easton's "authoritative allocation of values," or the subtitle of Harold Lasswell's well-known work, *Who Gets What, When, How*. Similar reductionism affects theorists who proceed from other directions, e.g., Carl Schmitt, who focuses on demarcation and control of boundaries, or Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who view politics as "the imposition of a contingently articulated order on the deeper contingency of social relations" (60). Following Wittgenstein, Freeden rejects the idea of a single essence of politics. Rather, he appeals to a kind of family resemblance. A set of related attributes are involved in any instance of political thinking, although all are not necessarily present in any single case, certainly not in specific or unambiguous forms. The term "anatomy" in the subtitle of the book indicates Freeden's concern with tracing connections between different variants of political thinking, with detailed attention to exactly how specific conceptualizations fit together and are mutually implicated in specific accounts.

Freeden believes that political concepts are generally "essentially contestable." A notion such as justice is internally complex, involved with numerous different dimensions, which cannot be reduced to single, noncontroversial

46 formulas. Thus people will emphasize different aspects of justice, depending
47 on their interests. This is one reason disagreements over subjects like justice
48 are often irresolvable, as people who mean different things by “justice” talk
49 past one another. Freedene is especially concerned with processes of ranking
50 or assigning value, through which particular entities receive precedence
51 over others, in specific conceptualizations of political concepts that thinkers
52 employ as well as in the practice of politics itself. For example, the conceptu-
53 alization of justice with which a theorist works deeply influences what he or
54 she pays most attention to and so shapes the resulting analysis. Because of
55 mutual affinities between different conceptualizations, value assumptions
56 permeate the thought processes of political theorists, in ways that Freedene at-
57 tempts to uncover.

58 Through what appears to be a combination of ordinary-language philoso-
59 phy and examination of political texts, people’s opinions, and the practices of
60 different cultures, Freedene isolates six features of social conduct that consti-
61 tute the political. In simple terms these are: (a) determining the locus of ulti-
62 mate decision-making; (b) distributing material and symbolic goods;
63 (c) marshalling or withdrawing public support; (d) managing or undermining
64 stability; (e) policymaking; and (f) wielding power (34–35). Because of a com-
65 bination of the breadth and the vagueness of these features, borderlines
66 between them are anything but hard and fast. For instance, as Freedene
67 notes, wielding power “cuts across” the five other categories (34). The bulk
68 of his book is devoted to illustrating multitudinous different ways in which
69 the concepts can be traced out and interlink with others. He devotes a
70 chapter to each category, while being clear that his accounts are not definitive.
71 Different instances and illustrations of each category are possible.

72 In the resulting, enormous accumulation of detailed discussion, readers
73 will be struck by specific analyses and examples, of course depending on
74 their own inclinations and interests. I was particularly impressed by
75 Freedene’s analysis of the arrogating function of politics, in chapter 3. In the
76 classification noted above, this falls under (a). Its main concern is decisions
77 that must be presented as final or definitive, while recognizing the uncertain-
78 ty and contingency that underlies them. Freedene’s tour of the terrain of polit-
79 ical decision-making creates a rich context for common notions, such as Max
80 Weber’s “monopoly of legitimate force.” Similarly Freedene provides a stimu-
81 lating analysis of rights claims as conversation stoppers, in a subsection of
82 chapter 4: “Rights: The Ranking Device *Par Excellence*.”

83 In sum, then, in shedding new light on how different conceptualizations of
84 political concepts fit together in diverse overall approaches to thinking polit-
85 ically, Freedene makes a valuable contribution.

86
87 —George Klosko Q1
88 University of Virginia
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