

Book Review: Political Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide for Students and Politicians

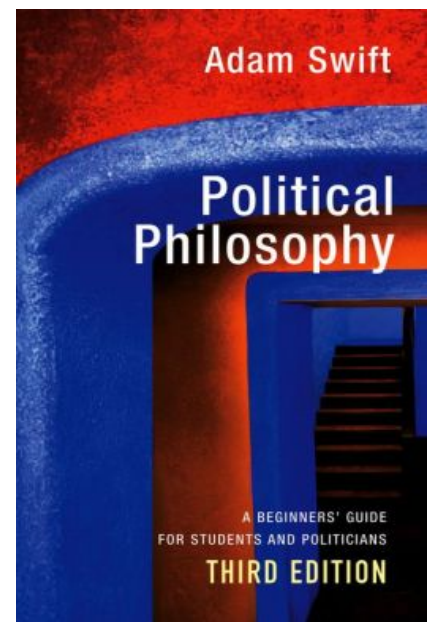
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*This new edition of **Adam Swift**'s highly readable introduction to political philosophy includes new material on global justice, feminism, and method in political theory, as well as updated guides to further reading. This book aims to bring the insights of the world's leading political philosophers to a wide general audience, and employs plenty of examples in an attempt to equip readers to think for themselves about the ideas that shape political life. This is a fluent and well written introductory text for students of political philosophy and it serves as a very good jumping off point for studying the issues involved in more depth, writes **Steven Harkins**.*

Political Philosophy: A Beginner's Guide for Students and Politicians. Third Edition. Adam Swift. Polity Press. October 2013.

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Adam Swift's *Political Philosophy* is targeted as an introductory guide to the topic for students and politicians. The book examines political philosophy by focusing on the concepts of social justice, liberty, equality, community and democracy. This newly published third edition has been updated to include discussions on global justice and gender equality, and these chapters provide the focus of this review.

Globally there are 500 million people who are medically obese, while [900 million people do not have enough to eat](#). Social justice and inequality have become the defining political issues of the modern era and scholars like [Wilkinson and Pickett](#) and [Danny Dorling](#) have been exploring the effects of the latter in creative and interesting ways. This book serves as a strong introduction to a range of philosophical perspectives on these issues.

Swift has an accessible writing style which is ideal for an introductory textbook and the structure of the book – examining political philosophy through a series of concepts – is refreshingly original. Many of the standard textbooks on political philosophy are structured in a way that examines individual political philosophers in isolation to each other, beginning with Hobbes and moving on to Locke, Rousseau, and Marx etc. As Swift points out, academic political philosophy was either 'the history of political thought' or 'quasi-technical linguistic analysis of the meaning of political concepts'. This was changed, he argues, following the publication of John Rawls' *Theory of Justice* in 1971, and because of this the book begins by examining social justice.

Swift presents a critical discussion where philosophical contributions are examined through concepts like social justice. This approach presents radically different philosophical contributions as part of the same conversation and

this approach is useful because it captures why many these texts were written. For example Friedrich von Hayek's [Road to Serfdom](#) (1944) was a response to a developing intellectual movement towards a more collectivist economic policy. More specifically it was 'written in some haste' following the publication of the Beveridge report (see page 79 of Cockett's [Thinking the Unthinkable](#)). Despite an additional section exploring global justice, the role of the state in delivering social justice is the central concern of Swift's chapter on the topic.

Swift argues that Hayek sees the concept of social justice as a "mirage", or the kind of confusion that philosophers call a "category mistake". According to Swift, Hayek's concern with social justice is that it 'implies a centralised authority making people do things they might not want to do, interfering with their freedom...'. Swift concludes that Hayek's attempt to 'sever the link between individual agency and aggregate distributive outcomes fails' because he 'misses the fact that individuals can act politically, in concert with others, to prevent outcomes that, as individuals, may indeed be beyond their control'. Hayek's philosophical outlook may have missed this possibility but in practical terms this was exactly what he was actively working on.

Hayek worked with a group of similarly minded intellectuals under the umbrella of the Mont Pelerin Society in order to shift the post-war political consensus away from collectivist economic policies. The Volker fund provided funding to promote Hayek's work in the U.S. as part of a program where 'Conservative think-tanks collected donations from corporations, to convert their anti-government instincts into credible research' (see William Davies' essay "[The Making of Neo-Liberalism](#)"). This movement was central to the development of contemporary neo-liberalism which is seen by critics as a movement which favours elite interests.

John Rawls contribution to the social justice debate deals with the problem of vested elite interests by linking justice to the concept of 'fairness'. In order to 'find out which principles of justice are fair', Rawls places people 'in an original position, behind a veil of ignorance'. Swift explains that this 'thought experiment' is designed 'to help us think about what would happen if people are deprived of all knowledge that might serve to distinguish them from one another'. Swift explains this concept in a typically accessible way, 'If I don't know which piece of cake I'm going to get, I'm more likely to cut fairly than if I do'. Swift offers the reader a clear outline of the core concepts of Rawls arguments before examining Robert Nozick's critique. This debate is the starting point for many politics students looking at issues of social justice and highlights once again the impressive structure of this book where philosophical contributions are tackled as part of a conversation on social justice.



'If I don't know which piece of cake I'm going to get, I'm more likely to cut fairly than if I do'. Credit: [Transparent Reality](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Robert Nozick was a colleague of Rawls at the philosophy department at Harvard and he published [Anarchy, State](#)

and Utopia (1974) in response to Rawls conception of justice as fairness. Swift argues that in this book Nozick produces 'the most coherent and systematic articulation of libertarian principles'. Swift explains Nozick's position as being about 'people's right to self-ownership, and their right to hold property'. Echoing Hayek's position on the role of the state, Nozick argues that it should 'not meddle with the distribution of resources so as to produce some ideally "fair" distribution'.

This updated edition of Swift's book also provides a brief discussion on how these philosophical positions can be applied to the concept of global justice. The common thread binding these different theories of social justice in this chapter is that they all provide differing justifications for inequality, a topic which Swift dedicates another full chapter to examining.

The notion of equality, Swift argues, is politically 'out of touch with the individualistic, aspirational values of today's voters'. Swift points out that philosophically 'a possible world in which people have equal amounts is one in which nobody has anything'. Despite these objections to the concept, Swift points out that 'with the exception of a few racists' contemporary politics and political philosophy is carried out within an 'egalitarian plateau'. Swift attempts to explain this paradox whereby 'few believe in equality, but everybody agrees about the importance of 'treatment as equals''. Swift moves this discussion on by examining the concept of equality of opportunity and discussing gender inequality which has been added to this latest edition.

This is a fluent and well written introductory text for students of political philosophy and it serves as a very good jumping off point for studying the issues involved in more depth. Swift also provides lists of further reading at the end of each chapter and these are annotated with useful comments giving tips on which chapters to focus on. In the spirit of useful recommendations and sticking with the topic of inequality, Pierre Rosanvallon's book *The Society of Equals* (2013) is an invaluable resource on the topic and it has recently been translated into English.

Swift concludes this chapter on equality by expressing his hope that 'more politicians realized that arguments for redistributive policies have nothing to do with envy or levelling down – indeed nothing to do with distributive equality at all – and everything to do with improving the lives of those whose lives most demand improvement'.

Steven Harkins is an ESRC funded PhD candidate based in the in the Journalism Studies Department at the University of Sheffield. He is also a tutor and occasional lecturer in the same department. His PhD research focuses on reporting poverty and inequality in the UK press with a particular emphasis on the relationship between journalists and their sources. He holds a BA (Hons) in Journalism and Politics from the University of Stirling and an MSc with distinction in Media and Communication research from the University of Strathclyde. [Read more reviews by Steven.](#)